



Peter Natiello
Colombia Country Director
USAID
U.S. Embassy
Bogota, Colombia

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Dear Mr. Natiello,

We wish to begin this correspondence by first thanking you for all the effort you've made to dialogue with WOLA and our Colombian partners. We appreciate your strong willingness to listen, respond and integrate our priorities, concerns and recommendations into your programming. In particular, we think that USAID's engagement with the Ethnic Commission has helped to advance the integration of Afro-Colombian and indigenous safeguards and rights into the peace process.

Prior to the annual human rights consultation we reach out to all of our partners in Colombia to gain their perspective of what they think is a priority for U.S. economic assistance at this time. Given the current impasse due to the results of the October 2nd plebiscite, I think we are all unsure of what direction the peace process will take. In any event, we think that whether or not there is a peace accord, USAID should continue to support efforts that guarantee a transition towards a sustainable, inclusive and just peace. For a peace to grow from the ground up it is important to strengthen justice, human rights and the full integration of ethnic minorities' rights into programming.

At this moment, we think that it is important to put emphasis on the following key areas:

1) Place victims and ethnic communities' representatives at the forefront of any debates and projects

Communities should be involved in all stages of the project (design, implementation and monitoring stages) rather than be treated as passive beneficiaries. In order to achieve this USAID must strengthen its own dialogue with civil society and help build confidence and spaces of constructive engagement that leads to results between Colombian institutions and civil society groupings. In relation to ethnic minorities, it is imperative that the new contractor chosen to lead the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Program

(ACIP) works integrally to support the Ethnic Chapter of the peace accord and partners directly with the Ethnic Commission. The debate over the plebiscite exposed that deep seated tensions and differences exist between many who voted No and those that voted Yes, as such we think exploring spaces of dialogue between ethnic, LGBT and victims groups and the No voters can help them find common ground. This would be beneficial to advancing peace and reconciliation.

2) *Propel the Colombian government into taking action in cases of inequality, malnutrition and human rights abuses related to LGBTI communities, women and ethnic groups*

At the heart of violence and armed conflicts in Colombia is inequality. It takes many forms—unequal distribution and access to land, resources, basic services, health, infrastructure and education. Historical racial discrimination and gender inequities generate severe obstacles to these groups’ development and full integration into Colombian society. Two regions where this is most widespread are the Departments of Guajira and Choco. Pockets of these inequality spheres exist within all of Colombia’s major cities (Bogota, Cali, Medellin) and economic hubs (Buenaventura and Cartagena). USAID should utilize its limited resources to focus on these areas to empower civil society so it can actively exert its roles of civic engagement, monitoring and accountability of public institutions. Institutions in these areas are plagued with corruption, mishandling of funds and a lack of interest in guaranteeing that the rights and interests of their communities are upheld. In this vein, it is recommended that USAID projects in Guajira go towards addressing malnutrition and corruption. Within these unequal pockets it is important that ethnic minorities, gender and LGBT rights are upheld. The September 26 accord should serve as a guide for USAID programing on these issues.

3) *Strengthen victims' access to justice. Projects should influence public policy in favor of victims' rights.*

Human rights violations continue at an alarming rate because most cases remain in impunity. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace that equalizes the responsibilities among multiple armed and non-armed actors in Colombian society is a step forward towards gaining some justice in a sea of no justice. While USAID does a lot to support the Colombian government’s justice efforts, it is important that the aid is designated in a manner that guarantees public policy results. Participation of victims including IDP organizations in both the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and ordinary justice mechanisms should be prioritized over Colombian institutional workshops and fancy publications.

4) *Protect and strengthen victims and vulnerable groups/organizations (LGBT, defenders, union leaders, land claimants, journalists, indigenous and afro-descendant communities)*

Lack of effective protection for activists and vulnerable sectors remains a major problem in Colombia. USAID receives WOLA's constant electronic urgent actions on cases of concern. The NGO *Somos Defensores* reports that from July to September defenders suffered 63 aggressions (19 murders, 38 death threats, 5 assassination attempts and one effort to steal information). USAID must continue to support civil society efforts to obtain political and collective protection mechanisms for ethnic minorities, trade unionists, women and land claimants. Further, it should consider commissioning an independent study by human rights security experts that analyzes the current protection mechanisms available to activists and communities and, how best to address the bottlenecks that exist and guarantee more efficient and effective responses for recipients whose lives and work depends on these mechanisms.

5) *Projects oriented toward dismantling paramilitary groups and building up rural communities. Demilitarize civil society. Protect environment, archives, and information.*

Key to guaranteeing security for political actors, journalists, activists and demobilized guerillas is the dismantling of the economic, social, political and armed structures that allow for the existence of paramilitary groups. The Commission set up in the peace accord will need support in order to act robustly. For the alternatives to illicit crops efforts to take root, a parallel effort is needed to combat corruption and collusion between authorities (civilian and security forces) and these criminal networks. A big focus of the accord relating to drugs is to focus on the higher ups in the drug-trade food chain while developing the infrastructure, markets, programs, access to land and resources required for rural farmers and other impoverished persons to have a viable economic alternative to the drug trade. Therefore, the judicial and institutional aspect of this must go hand in hand with the empowerment and participation of the leadership, including women, of communities afflicted by the negative impacts of the drug trade. Often, these rural leaders place a premium on sustainable economic development projects that protect the environment so that natural resources and fertile land is available for future generations. They also ask for initiatives that incentivize traditional *campesino* practices of diversified crops rather than monocultures. The idea behind these practices is to guarantee local food security in addition to economic profit.

Lastly, a cultural shift is required in Colombia. For decades violence has served as the prominent tool to resolve conflicts, differences and to gain economic and political power. This will need to change for a pacifistic tolerant society to take develop. Steps that can be taken to achieve this are, first, to demilitarize the society by highlighting the

positive effects of functioning civilian institutions and a vibrant constructive civil society that guarantees that they serve the public good. Second, facilitating the truth telling by supporting the Truth Commission's efforts to obtain important archives within Colombia and the U.S. is required. Lastly, help needs to be offer for civil society and academic efforts to gather, document and best utilize information, as well as support in releasing the information to the general public in an environment where the predominant media is generally hostile to human rights.

We look forward to continuing this dialogue with you as Colombia moves forward with constructing a new post-agreement environment.

Sincerely,

Gimena Sanchez
Senior Associate

