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COLOMBIA

SUCCESS STORY

Farmers Abandon Illicit Crops

Farmers invest time, effort, and money in legal crops



Photo: Programa Colombia Forestal

A farmer inspects his coffee shrub, planted in fields that once grew illegal crops, with his son near Turbó, in Colombia's Urabá region.

“The best part about the program is that there are farmers who now understand agro-forestry. Illicit crops are being eliminated, and we no longer have violence,” said Enrique Rivera Pérez, a participant in a USAID-sponsored alternative crop development project.

Telling Our Story
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Colombia's Urabá region has long suffered from serious security problems. In this tense climate, illegal armed groups often battled each other for control of land to grow illegal drug crops, such as coca. Today, the situation is changing, thanks to the efforts of strong eradication and alternative development programs. USAID's alternative development projects have helped poor farmers and other vulnerable groups transition from the illegal drug economy to a legitimate business economy by sharing technical expertise on agriculture and small business development. Not only have these integrated development programs allowed farmers to earn a legal living, they also help make these communities safer for farmers and families to live.

One of these projects was launched in 2003, in Urabá's northern municipalities of Turbó and Necoclí. The program helped families plant and cultivate new crops where illegal crops had once grown. To help the program's beneficiaries successfully switch to these crops, USAID's program provided expertise and guidance using cocoa and rubber agro-forestry demonstration plots. On these plots, participants learned planting techniques, plant care, and fertilizer applications. They also learned about the economic potential of the plants. After the demonstration phase finished, the plots were turned into plant nurseries that produce several varieties of acacia, melina, and teak, in addition to cacao, rubber, and other crops. The nurseries are spread out over 15 hectares of communally owned land, and they continue to serve as a center for training and community gatherings.

The program also taught families how to pool their resources and invest in income-generating projects by forming cooperatives. Now, the cooperatives have a business model to follow. USAID also put the cooperatives in touch with potential customers in the private sector. The response from businesses was enthusiastic: “We discovered well-organized cooperatives with strong management structures engaged in consolidating their economic activities. The boards were willing to work with the members. That generated confidence in our company to begin working with them,” said one businessman. This agro-forestry program in Urabá alone has reached some 1,500 Colombians in 10 co-ops, who since 2003 have planted a combined total of 679 hectares (1,677 acres) in legal crops where illegal coca plants once grew.