SUCCESS STORY
Coexistence Center Renews Community

Rebuilding communities through social services and conflict resolution

The Citizen Coexistence Center in Aguachica is a place where residents can seek to resolve disputes, request social assistance, and build community.

"The Center is part of the community ... and provides the people with a sense of belonging," says Héctor Manuel Lozano, who works at the USAID-funded Citizen Coexistence Center in Aguachica.

Héctor Manuel Lozano is 35 years old and was born and raised in Aguachica in south César, a region in northeastern Colombia. He works full time at the Citizen Coexistence Center, an organization funded partly by USAID, which helps promote peace and conflict resolution in a community torn apart by fighting. In areas where the central government is weak and often unable to provide services, coexistence centers play a crucial role. They house social and legal assistance offices, dispute resolution bureaus, and recreational and cultural facilities, such as playgrounds, libraries, and auditoriums.

Photo: International Organization for Migration

Long-standing conflicts between illegal armed groups had exacerbated tensions in Aguachica, and the coexistence center provided a place where those tensions could be diffused. It helped people in the community get to know one another and gave them a chance to express grievances or request assistance if they were in trouble. At the center, people even learned about government-run social assistance programs that they did not know they qualified for.

"The Center provides free services, and works with many other institutions, making it an open space with credibility," said Héctor. "The Center is part of the community ... and it provides the people with a sense of belonging."

The staff is known to be attentive and caring — they always follow up with the individuals who have sought services there to ensure that no one "falls through the cracks." When someone arrives with a problem that cannot be solved immediately, the staff helps them identify viable alternatives. "When a person visits the Center, he or she finds staff who are socially sensitive because they have been trained for that purpose," Héctor added.

With support from USAID, Citizen Coexistence Centers around Colombia are helping communities grow and achieve a greater sense of peace and restore a sense of belonging.