

## **Our Community Shows that Coca Substitution Works. Please Continue Supporting Colombia's Peace.**

Briceño, Antioquia, Colombia, July 16, 2020

Dear U.S. Senators, Representatives, and staff:

We write from Briceño, a municipality in the northwestern department (province) of Antioquia, Colombia that has lived through the insecurity of an armed conflict, the violence of the illicit coca economy, and more recently, the hope of a peace process. Our experience as Colombia's "Peace Laboratory"—the site of pilot projects for humanitarian demining and illicit crop substitution as part of the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas—shows what the peace process can achieve, and what can be lost if we don't support it.

In the last week, US congresspeople have shown admirable leadership in public messages in favor of the Colombian people: first, a [letter](#) to Secretary Pompeo calling for protection for social leaders and, second, the House Appropriations Committee's [report](#) seeking to use U.S. assistance to promote the peace accords' implementation, and to support coca substitution as the most effective solution to cocaine production and trafficking.

With this letter, we wish to share some of the experience of Briceño in the hope that American legislators may take further concrete steps to encourage the Colombian government to use voluntary substitution as the priority strategy to diminish coca cultivation, and to respect and accelerate the implementation of the peace accords.



*A farmer cultivates coffee and cassava in a part of Briceño previously dominated by coca.*

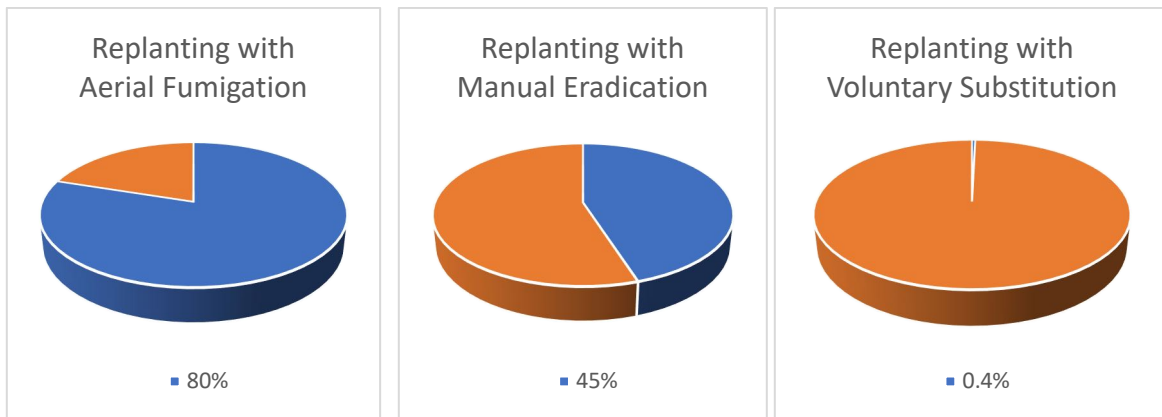
From approximately 2000 to 2017, coca dominated our local economy. As distinct from traditional crops like coffee and beans, it offered us four to six harvests a year, a relatively high price, and easy access to markets via armed groups that purchased coca paste in the territory. Nonetheless, coca also brought a wave of violence, as the FARC and paramilitary groups fought for control of the territory and its illicit economy. As in many rural areas of Colombia, civilians suffered the most in the conflict. In Briceño, we measured more than 9,000 acts of victimization (the majority forced displacement, homicide, or threats)—a number greater than the entire local population.

In 2015, a pilot humanitarian demining program, the first collaboration between the Colombian government and the FARC during their negotiations of the historic 2016 peace agreement, came to the hamlet of El Orejón in Briceño. This area, according to official FARC sources, had approximately eight antipersonnel mines for each inhabitant. In 2017, following the signing of the peace accords, Briceño was also declared the site of a pilot program for the substitution of illicit crops, negotiated as the accords' fourth point. 2,734 families entered the program and pulled out their coca crops with the expectation of help with productive projects and technical assistance, along with a comprehensive land tenure reform, to allow them to transition to a licit economy. With demining and substitution, Briceño took on a leading role as the “Colombian Peace Laboratory,” awakening our hopes for a deeper territorial transformation.

The voluntary substitution agreement promised to provide these families with food security, productive projects, and technical assistance for two years, while simultaneously serving as an example of how to solve the world drug supply problem and transition from coca cultivation to legal economies. Importantly, we participated in the program's construction, adding our voices to a joint effort involving the government, FARC representatives, and international cooperation. We then made the collective decision to pull out our coca, trusting that the help we need to change our lives would arrive. However, three years later, we are still waiting for the majority of the projects we were promised.

These problems notwithstanding, Briceño is the municipality in Colombia where the substitution program has advanced the most. In addition to the government's failure to deliver promised resources to the 99,097 families nationwide who signed voluntary substitution agreements, we are concerned that the government has returned to violent and coercive solutions in areas where substitution has not even arrived. These include forced manual eradication, which during the COVID-19 pandemic alone has caused the deaths of [six farmers](#) at the hands of the Colombian army, and fumigation with glyphosate from aircraft, which has been prohibited in Colombia since 2015 for its damaging health effects but is on its way to a return with the Trump administration's strong support.

Despite the problems we have experienced, **the example of Briceño shows us that substitution works.** In five months, without firing a single weapon, sacrificing a single human life, or creating a single victim, we voluntarily pulled out 99% of the coca in Briceño. And even with the government's failure to live up to the agreement, UNODC officials certify that beneficiaries haven't replanted their coca.



Source: UNODC

We have experienced the alternatives to substitution. In the times of coca, small planes arrived to fumigate our coca fields with glyphosate, which also killed our food crops and poisoned our water. We have experienced forced manual eradication, which brought deaths and injuries from armed confrontations and land mines planted within coca fields. **In each case, when our coca crops were left destroyed, we were given no alternatives to change to other livelihoods. In each case, the great majority of farmers salvaged or replanted their coca.** Our experience is consistent with the findings of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which has documented a replanting rate of higher than 45% in the case of forced manual eradication and higher than 80% for aerial fumigation.

Conversely, according to the same organization, the replanting rate for the voluntary substitution program has been 0.4%. With the productive projects and rural development provided for in the peace accords, Colombia's coca farmers are willing and able to transition to licit crops. Without them, or with coercive approaches to coca cultivation, we fear the Colombian countryside will be caught up in yet another cycle of violence and illegal production.

The Peace Agreement represents a unique opportunity for the Colombian people to take an important step in the fight against the drug problem, extreme poverty, and armed conflict. Our example demonstrates that we can transform our territory, but the accords and specifically the agreed upon times must be respected. The danger of not living up to the agreement is evident in the multiple threats, displacements, and deaths that social leaders have suffered the implementation of the peace accords and particularly the Covid-19 pandemic. We appreciate the recent messages from the American Congress in support of the Colombian people. We know the influence on Colombian politics of the statements and economic aid that reach us from the US. **We ask that you use this power to support the peace process, voluntary substitution, the victims of armed conflict, and our social leaders in the following ways:**

- Help Colombia, through USAID, to fully fund and meet its commitments to the crop substitution program.
- Urge the Colombian government to promptly fulfill its commitments to families like those in Briceño who entered the voluntary substitution program, including the

guarantee of a comprehensive implementation including access to land, licit markets, and structures of community participation.

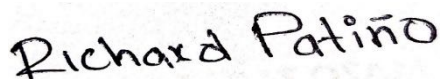
- Direct, through USAID, special social and productive projects to accelerate rural development in territories that have been declared peace laboratories, where locals pulled out their coca three years ago and are still awaiting the next phases of the process of substitution.
- In all messaging to the Colombian embassy and to U.S. diplomats, stress the importance of protecting local social leaders and making sure the masterminds of their hundreds of killings are brought to justice.
- De-fund forced eradication, and specifically de-fund any forced eradication that is not coordinated with assistance to help affected farmers transition to legal crops.
- Fund USAID-led efforts that work with Colombia, with the meaningful participation of local leaders, to increase civilian government presence and basic services in long-abandoned areas of rural Colombia where coca thrives.

Sincerely,



Jhon Jairo Gonzalez Agudelo

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Richard Patiño

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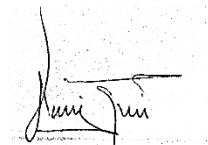
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