



FARC and the Colombian army playing football together. Such cooperation was the heart of this project. Image: EU Delegation, Colombia.

MAKING COLOMBIA SAFE AGAIN

DEMINING MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES

Co-funded by the



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Colombia has seen more than 50 years of armed conflict. The violence has left eight million people dead, displaced or wounded. For years, attempts to sign peace agreements with right- and left-wing armed groups came to nothing. But in 2016 – after four years of talks in Cuba – a deal was reached between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. The deal aimed to lead to a ceasefire, and ultimately peace, between the government and one of the key armed groups in Colombia.

The biggest challenge in the negotiating process was trust: between the parties negotiating in Havana, and across Colombian society. This was especially true as Colombians continued to be killed and injured by some of the deadliest weapons of the conflict: landmines.

The EU's Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) supported a key pilot project dealing with both of these issues at once. The objective of the initiative was to prove that all sides could work together on a practical issue. There would be a clear benefit for local communities – making their land safer by removing mines – while also building the trust necessary for a broader peace agreement. It would prove that both sides could work together, and use that as a means to ensure goodwill for the rest of the peace agreement.

Locals in the lead

The project took place in two remote villages directly affected by the war: El Orejón, in the Antioquia region, and Santa Helena, in the Meta region. The communities are in some of the most heavily mined areas of the country, and have seen many people killed or injured by anti-personnel mines and other unexploded ordnance.

The work began with joint analysis of the situation on the ground. The communities in El Orejón and Santa Helena helped carry out studies to determine the location of landmines. This allowed the project team to establish links to local authorities, building political trust for the work.

Key outcomes



Safer communities

Two rural communities made safe by the clearance of mines and explosive ordnance



Increased trust

Government and FARC personnel worked together, building trust for a future political settlement



Improved standards

New techniques have contributed to the development of Colombian demining standards

Government officials, Colombian soldiers and FARC members then worked together to identify and remove them. This joint effort was crucial. The combination of former FARC soldiers, with their knowledge of where mines had been planted, with the technical expertise of the government, was indispensable. As well as physically removing mines, the project ran educational programmes to prevent accidents, and marked out other dangerous areas for future projects. The project ran community dialogue and verification mechanisms to monitor the work.

Safer communities

The physical objective was to restore a safe environment for locals, and this was a full success. El Orejón, with 80 inhabitants in 25 families, was considered to be an area highly contaminated with anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance. During the implementation of the pilot 11 dangerous areas were identified.



Image: EU Delegation, Colombia

During the first phase in 2015, four areas were surveyed by the Non-Technical survey teams, covering 13,007m². 14,713m² of land were cleared and 33 landmines were found and destroyed. An area of around 42,000m² was also marked. This area was considered a Suspected Hazardous Area (SHA), because of information provided by locals of constant FARC activities in the area, without factual evidence of any explosive items. During Phase Two, in 2016, six areas totalling 4022m² were identified and 5136m² cleared. 14 landmines were found and destroyed.

“ The combination of FARC soldiers and government technical expertise was indispensable ”

In Santa Helena, a village of 100 people, seven areas were identified as SHAs. During Technical Survey activities, operations for one area were cancelled because of a lack of evidence of contamination. Two areas were marked - considered as SHAs - and four areas totalling 20,874m² were cleared. 20 landmines were found and destroyed.

In total, 67 landmines across the pilot projects were destroyed. And the impact of this work was magnified because the regions are poor and the distances large. The danger of stepping on a mine is therefore even greater than elsewhere, due to the difficulty in accessing help.

Increased trust

For those negotiating in Cuba, the project was also important. It managed to establish an effective commitment from local FARC representatives and the government to work together. This will be vital if the peace deal is to be a success. And action followed words: on the ground, quarters were established to coordinate the implementation of the project. Members of FARC, public officials and soldiers lived and worked together.

Juan David Villamarin worked on one of the camps: “Before this work, there was no confidence at all. Not even between the different parts of the government. But the camps we established on the ground helped us to get over these differences.”

All the staff wore the same uniforms, and relations with FARC were good. As members of the technical team said: “We celebrated birthdays and special dates together. When we were sick, we [looked after each other] together.”

“We even had a football team. We were no more FARC delegates or government delegates, we were together, and this was strongly reflected in Cuba at political level.”

KEY

● Project locations



The project also provided new skills to the community, and improved its relationship with government institutions. These have now begun to provide socio-economic, health, education, victim and infrastructure assistance to what had been historically isolated areas.

A key local leader in El Orejón is Eugenia Holguín. She is the president of the local community association, and says that the project has created a big impact. “It changed El Orejón. We were able to have a proper school. The old one was abandoned and people were scared. Now we have a new school, and a new community house as well.”

“In the past, people were scared, and we thought about leaving the town. Our kids saw dead people because of landmine explosions. We could hear the explosions; there was panic. Now, we do not live in fear anymore.”

“Just one road has been left uncleared, although the project workers left signs and markings saying that it is a dangerous zone. They have also trained us about the risks and how to deal with these marked areas. We are hoping for this area to be cleared soon.”

“Wherever my voice is heard, I want you to know that I am deeply grateful for everything done here at El Orejón,” she added.

The significance of this is hard to overstate. The project was effectively

“ The work shows that communities can overcome divisive conflict ”

an entry point for the Colombian state to reach communities who had considered themselves abandoned. And after the experience of the demining work, other government departments began making proposals for health care, education and infrastructure projects.

The work was also a technical success. It helped establish new standards in Colombia, including the use of mechanical demining, the development of environmental rules, and procedures for medical evacuations. Project director Sergio Bueno says the results are clear.

“The pilot projects in El Orejón and Santa Helena have shown that demining is one of the most effective instruments of peacebuilding. It helped not just in the specialist demining operation, but also to strengthen social cohesion.”

Demining in Colombia shows that communities can overcome the legacy of terrible and divisive conflict. The hope now must be that others can follow this powerful example.

Project information

Locations	Antioquia and Meta Departments
Project name	Pilot project for the implementation of the “Acuerdo sobre limpieza y descontaminación del territorio de la presencia de MAP, AEI y MUSE o REG en general”
Implementing partner	Norsk Folkehjelp Forening
Project duration	20/05/2015 - 19/11/2016
Type of project	Humanitarian mine action; small arms and light weapons
EU funding	€3,900,000

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