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Building Nation-Region bonds in Colombia



Fernando Carrillo (Minister of the Interior) addresses Public Policy Program Forum. Source: Instituto de Ciencia Política.

“Decentralization in Colombia is process of no return”

- Fernando Carrillo, Minister of the Interior

Colombia’s 1991 Constitution advanced the country’s decentralization process by incentivizing political participation; providing regions with tools to articulate local and national interests; and acknowledging the nation’s multicultural composition. After two decades of implementation, new measures are needed to bridge the gap between the concept of decentralization and its practical execution.

Since its inception, the **USAID Public Policy Program** has supported the “Colombianization” of key public policy issues through public dialogue and debate. It has also supported a series of reforms to improve decentralization, including the reform of the General Royalties and Municipal Regime Systems, and the development of the *Contrato-Plan* mechanism to ensure nation-region budget and action plan coordination.

In September, the Program, in association with the *Instituto de Ciencia Política – Hernán Echavarría Olózaga* (ICP), an influential local policy think tank, and *Semana Magazine*, the country’s leading policy magazine, organized a high-level forum on *The future of the nation-region relationship in Colombia*. The Minister of the Interior, mayors and governors, IABD and ECLAC country directors, experts, and media, academic, civil society and private sector stakeholders actively participated in the forum.

Participants concluded that in order to effectively address local needs, territories need greater fiscal autonomy and discretionary power. Modern taxation and cadastre systems would be major steps towards a more decentralized governance structure and improved land-use management. It is also critical to improve public management at the territorial level, and ensure transparency and citizen oversight. The lack of institutional structure and relevant tools hinder territorial development. The country needs mechanisms, like *Contrato-Plan*, that assign responsibilities to central and regional authorities and manage the decentralization process.

The forum offered an opportunity to bring together a wide range of actors and voice multiple opinions about Colombia’s decentralization process. While academics maintain that Colombia’s process is advanced, practical experts felt regions lack fiscal autonomy and decision making independence. Despite differing beliefs, all participants agreed that decentralization is a “process of no return” that requires a strong commitment from all actors involved, and it is a critical element for the peace process.