

HUMAN RIGHTS COMPASS

USAID HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM

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Opening panel at V Annual National Personería Assembly
Photo Credit: FENALPER

Personeros Set their Sights at V National Annual Assembly

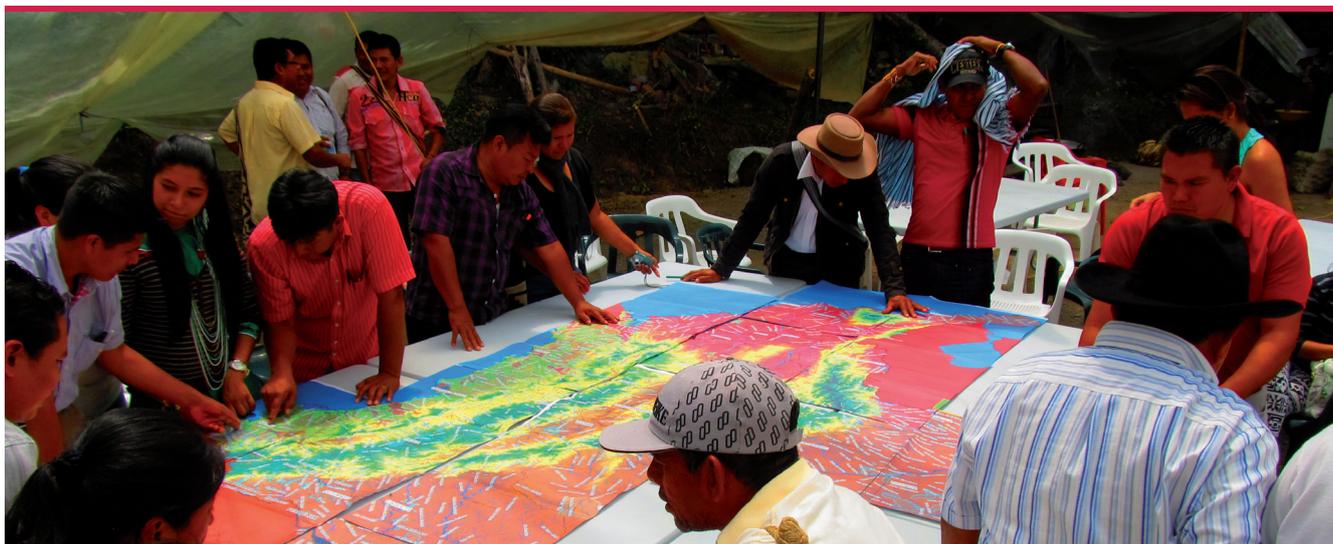
In mid-October, Armenia became center stage to over 1,000 of Colombia's *personeros* who convened at the V Annual National *Personería* Assembly. Made possible with HRP III support to its partner the National Federation of *Personeros* (FENALPER), this year's theme, "Strengthening Local Government through *Personerías*?", looked to reflect on, discuss, analyze, and prioritize *personería* resources and initiatives moving forward to address the often evolving conditions, policies, and processes impacting victims of violence and conflict.

As the government's frontline responders to human rights issues, *personeros* bear the responsibility to raise awareness, provide information, facilitate processes, and advocate for victims regarding policies and processes of complex laws such as the Victims' Law or Law 1257, for example. However, in practice, fulfilling these duties has largely fallen short due to limited resources, limited knowledge of laws and policies among *personeros*, and overall weak organizational structure. In a year punctuated by discussions on peace prospects and post-conflict scenarios, HRP III supported FENALPER to take time out to discuss preparing for what paths potentially lay ahead for them.

An added boost to morale at the Assembly was the participation of President Santos who headed a cadre of high level officials including the Vice President, the Inspector General, the Ombudsman, a member of Congress, and the Director of the Victims' Unit. Underscoring the significance of the Assembly, he also assured his backing of a bill recently introduced with sweeping measures to strengthen institutional capacities for *personerías* at the municipal level.

"For the first time, *Personerías* have a national platform to coordinate national and regional processes to guarantee and protect human rights as well as recover credibility, trust and transparency in public institutions," reflected FENALPER's president Andrés Santamaria on this year's Assembly. With a clearer defined roadmap and with expressed government backing, *personeros* are in a better position than yesteryear to effectively contribute towards a stronger human rights landscape in Colombia moving forward. •

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*Indigenous communities carrying out social mapping
Photo Credit: ONIC*

Pushing Forward Land Restitution For Ethnic Communities

Colombia's ethnic lands and communities are among the most disproportionately impacted sectors with regard to the five-decade conflict and its associated residual violence. Since Colombia passed its Victims' and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448) in 2011, the Land Restitution Unit's (LRU) progress in restituting ethnic lands had essentially stalled in part due to the numerous challenges including limited resources and information, the complex collective nature of these cases, and accurately grasping and documenting differential impacts respective to Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities.

The main challenge, however, lied in gathering respective ethnic communities throughout the regions to gain understanding of the process and undertake the steps to identify and present the required specific information according to the law's provisions.

Recognizing this critical need, in early 2013 USAID's HRP III approached the LRU to explore avenues to improve institutional response addressing these complex and critical issues of collective land restitution. Taking on this challenge, in July 2013 HRP III awarded two innovative grants, co-financed by the LRU, to advance land restitution cases working alongside widely-recognized grassroots partners: *Organización de Naciones Indígenas Colombianas* (ONIC) and *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (PCN).

In July 2013, HRP III grants not only assisted in raising awareness on land rights but also assisted community members in navigating the multi-step and complex land restitution process. In order to gather and consolidate the required documentation, HRP III has been working to introduce critical skills such as how to do social mapping of land risks which includes- when incidents occurred, what actors are involved and/or affected, how

these risks and/or impacts are related to the internal armed conflict etc. In addition, workshops on Law 1448 and related ethnic community-supporting laws were held to fully understand how to access services and resources.

Through this sort of facilitation, the LRU can begin to proceed accordingly in advocating and requesting protection measures before land judges in support of these ethnic community members. Moreover, ethnic communities begin to build their own collective land restitution cases according to law. Through HRP III's efforts and pushing these cases forward towards resolutions, these cases potentially become emblematic cases and set important precedence for future cases.

Erika Botero, from ONIC, reports: "Outcomes from this effort have been super positive. Directly, we have trained 172 indigenous leaders and 722 members indirectly. When working with these communities, you can see that they have not only learned and retained the information, but moreover wholeheartedly internalized its significance so much so that they are being proactive to advance this agenda within their communities."

The notion of ethnic communities and the LRU working together to push forward Law 1448 is nothing short of groundbreaking and an unprecedented feat. As a conduit in driving momentum forward, HRP III has contributed in building and strengthening confidence among ethnic communities to empower themselves to navigate their institutional recourses and reclaim their overdue rights. Ultimately, these efforts should lead to the resolution of land rights for ethnic communities and the strengthening of institutional processes for the protection of those most impacted by conflict. •



Students await start of human rights competition
Photo Credit: USAID HRP III

Students Shine at First Inter-Collegiate Human Rights Competition

TTrue or False: The first human rights declaration was approved by the international committee against human rights violations. Questions of this kind on human rights issues were posed to 25 ninth graders on an outdoor stage overlooking a community of supportive family members and peers this past November 1st. Caucasia’s first Inter-Collegiate Human Rights Competition, as part of an innovative project designed and implemented by USAID’s HRP III grantee *Corporación para el Desarrollo Social del Bajo Cauca* (DSBC), brought together communities with a reason to cheer, motivate, sing, and dance while promoting and learning about human rights all spearheaded by the community’s youth.

Over a six-month period, DSBC worked with 174 high school students, teachers, and parents from eight schools carrying out sessions that delved students into exploring a vast array of topics concerning human rights, leadership, conflict resolution, and civic values and how these important issues pertained to their daily lives, schools and communities. As means to stoke interest and initiate the competition’s selection process, pre-elimination rounds were held in the weeks leading to the event challenging 800 students from these schools. From these, 25 of the brightest students came forward to compete representing their schools.

Beyond an exercise to test knowledge however, the truly powerful message cultivated by the youth’s participation became the sense of community it garnered in a spirit of harmony, peace, and pride. Caucasia and its surrounding municipalities unfortunately have been home to generations of youth raised in an environment where the mere mention of human rights issues bears a great burden of stigmatization. As such, on this day, youth, family, and friends created a safe space for friendly competition and a platform to express their voices for hope

and change. In light of this and as a creative means to express all that they had learned, the afternoon was filled with students performing dances, skits, and revving up the audience with song and cheers.



Youth perform dance routine at human rights competition
Photo Credit: USAID HRP III

On competition day, students took their places before a panel of judges comprised by the municipal *personeros*. Caucasia’s mayor, the governor’s general secretary and education secretary were also on hand along with HRP III in support of the event. The top three students received awards including a tablet, an mp3 player, and books. Brenda Lucia Castillo, 10th grader from Santa Teresita School in Caucasia, eloquently summed up her experience stating, “...in addition to learning what human rights are, I learned that human rights violations just don’t happen to people we hear about in the media, but often we are victims unknowingly, since we have become so used to having our rights violated and this has become the norm. Through this experience, my peers and I learned about human rights violations; who our defenders are; and where to go for help. The competition served as a unique opportunity to promote a culture of human rights among friends, family and community members.”●



Communities Uphold Women's Rights on International Day of the Elimination of Violence against Women

Women's rights forum at Quibdó
Photo Credit: El Universal

According to the UN, violence against women continues to be a global pandemic. Up to 70 per cent of women experience violence in their lifetime. Given this, in the days leading up to and following the Elimination of Violence against Women Day, November 25, USAID's HRP III supported Colombian women leaders in some of the most violent prone areas of the country in collectively carrying the banner for the promotion and protection of women's rights.

Starting on November 21st in Bajo Cauca HRP III, along with Caucasia's Justice House and Family Commissary hosted a forum to provide information on the response *ruta* for cases of violence against women and on Law 1257 of 2008. The initiative targeted women and women organizations in Bajo Cauca (municipalities of Nechí, Caucasia, el Bagre, and Tarazá). In addition, Caucasia's Family Commissary and Town Council were on hand highlighting assistance services available to the community.

While on November 22 in Popayán, Cauca, HRP III in partnership with the governor's office of Cauca, mayor's office of Popayán, and LGBT rights organizations also sponsored a forum to raise awareness on issues impacting the lesbian and trans communities in Colombia and specifically in Cauca to ensure a life free from violence.

In Quibdó, HRP III grantee *Red Departamental de Mujeres* participated in a forum organized by the mayor's office. At the event, the *Red* presented its innovative initiatives, supported by HRP III's grant, to improve assistance and response to the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) affecting women and girls in Quibdó. Initiatives included a baseline focused on the situation of violence against women in Quibdó, the response *ruta* for women victims, as well as an intake protocol for violence against women cases.

In Tumaco, HRP III and grantee *Casa de la Mujer* held three days of events including a workshop on the prevention of and response to violence against women in Tumaco in which 150 women from the municipal women's roundtable participated. Following this from November 26-28, workshops were held focused on advocating for rights of women victims impacted by the armed conflict.

Finally, on November 25 in Chaparral, Tolima HRP III's grantee Universidad de Tolima took the opportunity to highlight the strides taken to address GBV in their communities at their Regional Conference for Women of Southern Tolima. As a result of this grant, women's networks in both Chaparral and Rioblanco received for the first time critical training equipping them with the proper tools to advocate on behalf of their rights. At this conference, supported by the mayors of Chaparral and Rioblanco, participants engaged in discussions addressing violence against women in compliance with Law 1257 and worked with government institutions to develop future initiatives to improve response to GBV in these municipalities.

Summing up her impression of her community's experience, Flor Maria Barrerio member of the Tumaco municipal women's roundtable shared, "... the opportunity organized was one free from pressures from institutions or agendas, it created a space to share experiences and reflect on strategies implemented from others working in the areas of prevention, response, and support being offered to women victims' needs." HRP III was proud to stand by the women who courageously work every day to improve their communities and futures through promoting respect for women and girls. •