

Gabriela Ott
Upper Arlington High School
Upper Arlington, Ohio
Colombia, Factor 17: Good Government

Colombia: A Chance to Better the World

In rural Colombia today, more than seven million people are poor and two million live in extreme poverty (Rural Poverty Portal). My mother is from Colombia, and most of my family still lives there. When I visited, I witnessed poverty and the effects it had on the people. I saw young children in dirty clothes running around selling small packs of gum, trying to make money to afford a decent meal and help their parents. Safety was also a huge concern. I was not allowed to be out past dark and could not even open my car windows fully. Now, as I am older, I understand these rules and why they were put in place. Colombia has been in a four decade long conflict with an anti-government insurgent group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known as FARC). They may lack the military power and popular support to overthrow the government, but this does not stop FARC from wreaking havoc in rural parts of the country. FARC continues to attack civilians and large parts of the countryside are under the influence of these guerillas (Country Reviews).

Colombia has its fair share of issues, but this cannot take away from the natural beauty of the country. At 1,138,910 square kilometers, Colombia consists of magnificent mountains and has coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It lies in northern South America with a population of 46,736,728, growing annually at a rate of 1.04% (CIA World Factbook). Colombia's climate varies, along the coast and eastern plains it is tropical, but it is much cooler in the highlands (Country Watch).

The typical Colombian family consists of a mother, a father and 2-4 children. The father is seen as the traditional patriarch, and the ultimate decision maker. The mother is seen as the center of the family. Both parents may work, but culturally it is expected that the father be the main financial provider (CultureGrams). The diet of an average Colombian consists of many traditional Spanish meals. For breakfast, it is normal to eat eggs, fruit, bread and changua (potato-and egg soup). Lunch is the largest meal of the day. It can have traditional Colombian empanadas (meat turnovers), soups or rice with meat. Businesses will often times close during lunch and families will return home to eat with each other (CultureGrams).

Education is an essential part of Colombian life. The adult literacy rate is 95% and the mean number of years of schooling is 7.1 (CIA World Factbook). Students will often enter school at the age of seven. Public schools are free and very accessible in Colombia, but unfortunately low quality. Most children living in the rural parts of the country often drop out earlier to help families with work. Since about 90% of people in Colombia are Catholics, many kids attend private Catholic schools (CultureGrams). The education expenditure of the GDP is 4.9%. People in Colombia normally live long lives; men are expected to live to 72 years old and women 78 years old. The population growth can also be attributed to a low infant mortality rate of 14.58 deaths out of 1,000 lives (CIA World Factbook).

Health care is changing in Colombia. A once public system is becoming a mixed system that consists of both public and private healthcare options. Private options are more expensive, and very hard to find in rural areas. Urban facilities are also better equipped. Many tropical diseases have been cured or are on the decline, which has also led to the increase of population. Unfortunately, malaria and yellow fever are still affecting rural areas of Colombia. Sadly, violence (usually in connection with FARC) is still a leading cause of death (CultureGrams). Not all of Colombia is farmland, 76.4% of the population are urban or urbanized. The capital of Colombia, Bogota, has a population of 9.765 million people (CIA World

Factbook). The rural and urban populations are often brought together by religion, traditions and attempts to improve their national for all its citizens (CultureGrams).

Rural farmers in Colombia live extremely difficult lives. 2009 figures show poverty affected 46% of the total population, 64% in rural areas of Colombia. Today small-scale rural farms are dwindling because of how hard it is for small farms to produce crops. Most rural families chose to participate in micro-enterprises (Rural Poverty Portal). But protests spread across Colombia in April 2014 due to farmer outrage. These farmers blamed free trade agreements with the European Union and the United States for flooding the market with foods at prices they were unable to match. Small-scale farmers also complained the increasing prices of fuel and production costs that were making their jobs impossible. But, these protests ended after Colombian leaders promised better prices for agricultural products and more access to loans. A FARC spokesman also contributed to the talks, saying they supported the farmers' demands (BBC).

These are not the only issues farmers face in Colombia. While Colombia produces a great deal of coffee and potatoes, it is also a huge producer of cocaine. In fact, Colombia produces 95% of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. In 2015, there were talks of peace with FARC in order to weaken the illegal drug trade and strength the government (NPR). The FARC controlled coca (cocaine) farmers work hard to create the illegal product, and earn on average \$1,000 a year (NPR). This is not all Colombian farmers must deal with, food loss rates are at 94.6% and with the 25% corruption rate it is not easy to see how this problem may be effectively addressed (Global Food Security Index).

These farmers are not at fault, there are many problems beyond their control in Colombia that must be handled in order to secure farmers' fates. Agriculture is only 6.3% of the GDP (CIA World Factbook). Many farmers feel that the government has abandoned them in favor of bigger companies (The *Guardian*). Farmers are feeling extremely conflicted when it comes to their government and what they should produce. Coca farmers are now turning a corner and changing what they grow. Instead of the infamous coca, farmers like Gilberto Olaya are struggling to grow crops like cacao (chocolate). In an interview with the *New York Times*, Olaya says "And you don't see clear policies where the government says, 'O.K., we're going to come to you with the things you need to get by, to earn a decent wage that you can survive on, like you could with coca.'"

The goal of the Colombian government was to drive out FARC, destroy coca plants and bring in civilian authorities to assist with growing legal crops. Implementation of this has been problematic; farmers still complain they do not have basic needs. Many residents still have FARC rebels lording over them and do not have electricity or paved roads (New York Times). Which can also lead to issues when transporting foods and products from remote areas of Colombia.

While 76.4% of Colombia's population is urbanized and the rate of urbanization is increasing by 1.66% annually, Colombia's agriculture is still an important part of the economy. 17% of the labor force are agriculture workers. Some common legal crops grown are coffee, cut flowers, bananas, rice, tobacco, corn, sugarcane and cocoa beans. Not many people in Colombia own cars, most either use public transportation, or bicycles and motorcycles. While major cities, such as Bogota, Cali and Medellin, are paved, many streets are in very poor conditions. Due to difficult terrain, construction and maintenance is very costly. Because of this, most smaller roads are unpaved (CultureGrams).

Life for Colombians is constantly rocked by FARC, especially small rural farmers. FARC controls the coca farmers and the drug trade, due to not only low education, but also lack of financial security with other crops. The need for a higher income and the control of FARC leaves these farmers working for the coca trade. Negotiations are proving difficult while conflict rages on. During peace talks last year, FARC negotiators and the government came to agreements on the illegal drug trade. But, more than a year later,

no change has occurred. Farmers and FARC both argue that there is no legal reason why the plans have not been implemented yet. As tensions begin to rise high and popular support begins to drop, FARC members declared a ceasefire in hope to continue talks. Although FARC has issued a ceasefire, they continue to fund themselves by trading and taxing cocaine. Many citizens worry that this violent group will be reluctant to see their income dwindle (InSight Crime).

It will not be easy to halt 50 years of conflict, and with the nation being on the cusp of peace, tensions are rising. The final negotiations are scheduled to end on March 23, 2016. But there are still several issues that must be addressed. In an attempt to halt coca production, President Juan Manuel Santos issued controversial aerial sprayings on coca fields (InSight Crime). These sprayings lead to harmful health effects; the World Health Organization declared that a chemical in the herbicide could cause cancer in humans (New York Times). Rather than deterring the coca farmers, this only led them to run to FARC forces for assistance. The Colombian government's approach to stopping the illicit parts of their economy have been "eradication first, livelihoods second", which has not worked (InSight Crime). In order to begin a change, total eradication is said to be impossible. There will have to be some tolerance of coca farming in order to get farmers into alternative lifestyles and crops. This way, farmers can maintain a steady source of income while attempting to crossover into other products. Some areas of Colombia are just too remote to enforce legal crop products and still be profitable.

Other eradication projects such as Guardabosques, which was a program that eliminated coca production in national parks, had similar issues. These issues are primarily blamed on sequencing failures by the government. While the Colombian government struggles to resolve this conflict, writers such as Anna Newby and Vanda Felbab-Brown propose a different approach. Their article, which was reprinted on InSight Crime, explains how an alternate sequencing style can change the outcome of Colombian farmers. As trends begin to worsen, they believe alternate livelihoods and human development must come before eradication. This way, farmers have the lifestyle and income they need to be able to willingly change into legal agriculture (InSight Crime). Rural parts of Colombia need mass improvement to be motivated to change. 26.2% of the rural population does not have an improved drinking water source, while 32.1% of the rural population has unimproved sanitation facilities (CIA World Factbook). There must be improvements of living standards for the rural farmers, not only for moral reasons, but in order to get the change the government seeks.

Of course this is all easier said than done. Peace negotiations that resolved the issue with the government's eradication plans and created more opportunity for farmers could change Colombia's history for the better. Small farmers would be able to legally contribute to the economy while still having a decent source of income. This would also insure that the aerial spraying would not occur again, securing health and crops. With coca being properly eradicated and FARC negotiations being dealt with, this would decrease FARC's income and support, thus weakening their whole organization (InSight Crime).

Coca is not only affecting farmers, but the climate as well. Coca contributes significantly to climate change. The tropical rainforests in Colombia are often cut down to make room for coca production. But these forests hold tons of CO₂, and due to the deforestation it releases this CO₂ into the atmosphere. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates an average carbon stock of 194.6 tons per hectare (tons/ha) in South American forests. Unfortunately, the low amount of nutrients in tropical soil prevents regrowth. Thus, after a crop of coca is gathered, farmers then cut down more trees and continue the CO₂ releasing process (State of the Planet).

In addition, government actions such as manual eradication and aerial spraying continues the displacement of coca. Studies show that tropical deforestation accounts for fifth of global CO₂ emissions. Colombia has about 60 million hectares of forest, but in a six-year period (2000-2005) Colombia lost 235 thousand hectares of forest. The tropical forests are sadly the perfect location for coca cultivation. The

growth allows farmers to easily hide their coca, and the remote locations make it almost impenetrable. Also, coca grows the best in wet lowlands, making the forest the perfect environment for growers (State of the Planet). Coca not only affects the social, economic and political spheres of Colombia, but the climate change as well.

Other issues occurring in Colombia are the effects of the drought in 2014. This drought caused the deaths of more than 20,000 fish and animals in Casanare, Colombia. Rio Meta Waterkeeper, Rio Pauto Waterkeeper and Rio Cravo Sur Waterkeeper are three organizations in Casanare Colombia who have been attempting to help the water issues. They advocate for clean water as a basic human right and want to educate the public on how rapid expansion of big business agriculture and livestock are hurting the environment and small farmers. Reservations in Colombia dry up due to the excessive use from unregulated industries that are causing death of wildlife from dehydration (EcoWatch).

Immediate action must take place to help these farmers and the Colombian society. Although the Colombian government stopped aerial spraying, it must never be used again. The spraying not only hurt crops, but also antagonized the coca farmers. Peru and Bolivia, the world's two other cocaine-producing nations, have been able to eradicate coca by hand, not chemical herbicides (The Big Story). The government should attempt to turn their focus from eradication to helping improve living standards of the farmers. By improving their living standards, they will be not only more motivated to change their crops, but in a better place in life. Two professors of international affairs at Georgia Institute of Technology, Michelle Dion and Catherine Russler, agree that focusing efforts initially on poverty reduction and developing local public infrastructure will help eradication plans. They also believe that poverty significantly affects coca production, due to the fact that cultivation is more intense in regions of moderate poverty (Cambridge Journals).

Perhaps, an organization such as Heifer International could intervene and help with small farmers. Heifer International works to end poverty and hunger around the world. An ultimate goal of Heifer is to help people suffering from poverty become self-sustainable. Heifer has already worked in over 125 countries, but has no current projects in Colombia. But they do have five projects in Ecuador and three in Peru, neighboring countries of Colombia. In Ecuador, Heifer's projects are working to improve women's empowerment, increasing income, helping social capital, nutrition and the environment (Heifer International). If Heifer could start projects such as this in Colombia, it would drastically change the lives of small farmers. An increased income for Colombian farmers would allow them to live more comfortably and save enough to willingly change their crops. Forcing eradication without offering alternatives to small farmers is a process that is proven to not work. A project on environment and social capital also relates to the need in Colombia to save the rainforest, and increase tourism.

If Heifer were to start a project in Colombia, it would be crucial to create a program that addresses the unique challenges to the country. Heifer's amazing work in Ecuador has helped increased tourism and improved farm-to-market products. Although tourism is an eventual goal for Colombia, it is more important to focus efforts on helping rural farmers. In Promesa, Heifer is working to increase food security with crops such as cacao and coffee (Heifer International). A program similar to this would benefit farmers attempting to switch from coca to a legal crop.

Now, bringing in outside help could potentially be very dangerous, especially when meddling with FARC. Many organizations, universities and corporations helped with funding and implementing the Heifer programs in Ecuador. With the combined backing and protection of the government and large corporations in Colombia, they could better ensure the safety and well being of Heifer workers. This would be the ideal opportunity to ease tensions between farmers who feel abandoned and switch loyalties from FARC to the greater good of the country. Also, it would give a chance for big companies in Colombia to support their community. Acting For Life also contributed with efforts in Ecuador. Acting

For Life is an organization dedicated to defeating poverty. Acting For Life has already set up projects in Colombia working for better food security and developing rural villages and communities (Acting For Life). With the combined efforts of Acting For Life and Heifer International, local projects like this could significantly improve rural farmers' lives.

Programs such as these would also give citizens and other farmers a chance to step up and help their community. By setting a citywide donation, urban citizens could donate old clothes or appliances to help developmental efforts thus creating an opportunity for Colombia's large urban population to support the rural families. Also, bringing in ex-coca farmers to speak. This would give a first hand understanding and inspiration for struggling farmers. It would also provide the opportunity to create a stronger network of farmers across the country.

FARC peace negotiations are also essential to helping Colombia and its citizens. This is one of Latin America's longest running insurgencies and needs to be put to an end. The war with FARC has claimed over a quarter of a million lives (Financial Times). In order to reach a peace agreement, there needs to be compromises on both sides. FARC wants to demilitarize the countryside, which the Colombian government finds unrealistic and a deal breaker in peace discussions. Another issue with gaining peace with FARC is disarmament. FARC states that it will not disarm until all of provisions in the future treaty are complete. This would take an estimated ten years to finally disarm the rebels, leaving Colombia at the hands of FARC leaders and their opinion of when the treaty's agreements are truly completed (Quarterly Americans). A peaceful resolution is what Colombia desperately needs and wants. Other than simple compromise, Colombia's leaders need to be open minded to change, while firm handed in negotiations.

There are already many organizations working in Colombia to help the deforestation issues in Colombia. Organizations such as World Land Trust work together with Buy an Acre Fund to protect the Choco Rainforest. This group works through donations and is in urgent need for funds. They work not only to help the forest, but also protect the endangered species that inhabit Choco Rainforest (World Land Trust). Although this is a great program, lack of funding prevents it from creating a large-scale impact in Colombia. Deforestation and protection of Colombia's endangered species are important to things that need to be kept safe. If organizations such as Rainforest Alliance and the local Nature Foundation in Colombia could increase efforts it could really help deforestation and the animals. Both groups have worked together to create the Cachalu Biological Reserve. At 1,800 acres, it is a relatively small reserve, so increasing the land of the reserve would allow for more protection of Colombia's land (Rainforest Alliance).

Not only would land reserves help protect Colombia's natural beauty, but also it could help create an ecotourism industry. Tourism in Colombia would help improve the economy and image of the country. An increase of tourism could also help with investments in rural economies, giving both Colombians and the outside world a chance to intertwine. Improvements to infrastructure and airports from tourism income are helping improve Colombia's international reputation. Juliana Berger, Kathryn Roberts and Paula Herrera, members of the Lauder of 2013, call the transition in Colombia "Terrorism to tourism," in their article (Wharton University). These attempts to entice tourists and improve the country are an important step in moving away from their dangerous status.

Colombia is a gorgeous country, but like any other place on earth, it is not perfect. Violence and rising dilemmas with FARC create a challenge for Colombia's government to overcome and conquer. But the nearing date of peace talks give hope for a new age in Colombia, not only for the governments but the small farmers struggling under the thumb of FARC. These small farmers may be portrayed as cocaine dealing crooks, but are actually real human beings struggling to make a living for their families. If the proper action is taken, these farmers have a chance at a better life, which will end up improving

Colombia's economy and politics. Assisting the small farmers will increase their living standards and make them more willing to change their crops from coca to cocoa.

Once the coca production is under control and safe, it can give way to officials being able to get a handle on deforestation. Without coca producers cutting down the tropical trees for coca farms, the remaining forests can be protected and preserved. Protecting these tropical forests not only maintains Colombia's beautiful land, but also can help the global climate crisis. Reducing the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere not only helps Colombia's climate, but also is a positive step forward to addressing our global warming crisis.

As Dr. Norman Borlaug said, "If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace." It is time for Colombia to reach a long awaited peace, a peace that will not only help lessen climate change, but improve the lives of the citizens of Colombia. Peace in Colombia will hinder the world drug trade and create a more stable country. Peace for Colombia would improve tourism and allow Colombia to be more accessible by doctors and other professionals, helping Colombia's sick. Colombia may be only one country, but peace in Colombia would affect people all over the globe, a small step to a better world for all.

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