

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
RURAL ZONES: A REAL CHALLENGE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF COLOMBIA
SOCIETY

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Statement of
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Good afternoon and thank-you, Commissioner McGovern and Commissioner Smith, for inviting me to testify today.

Both the pandemic and the recent protests have revealed concerns about food security and the pattern of rural development in Colombia.

Colombia is a country with enormous differences between people and between regions, such that certain areas, especially the periphery and rural areas, present very unfavorable conditions for their population. Therefore, it cannot be said that opportunities and development are balanced between rural and urban areas and regions. That should be one of the biggest concerns if we want really to advance on peace and reactivation.

Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that the rural areas have traditionally been the scenario of many of the most significant problems that the country has faced throughout its republican history, high levels of concentration and informality in land ownership, poverty, armed conflict, natural disasters, dispossession, displacement and an evident lag in the growth of the agricultural sector, which contributes to deepening these problems.

Awareness about the situation of rural areas has increased in recent years. However, this has not been accompanied by a tangible advancement in the implementation of policies that put rural areas on a path to prosperity.

Despite the fact that the majority of Colombia's economic activities is concentrated in urban areas, and that urban development has become a lead driver for growth, as a society Colombia maintains important rural characteristics.

56% of the population lives in towns with fewer than one million inhabitants that have strong interrelations with economic, social and cultural rural activities. Indeed, according to the Mission

for Rural Transformation, about 31% of the population still lives in rural or dispersed rural municipalities and of the total population living in rural areas, almost 85% identify themselves as small farmers (campesinos). (ECV, 2020)

So, it is important to remember that Colombia's great progress in reducing poverty in the past 20 years has been highly unequal and differences are very telling in rural areas, where the government has not been able to provide basic goods and services. This has affected the most critical, isolated, and disconnected areas – which are strongly correlated with the places where there is significant armed confrontation and illegal economic activities such as coca cultivation and some mining activities. A study done by Rimisp (2018), found that dispersed rural municipalities are 2.8 times more likely to experience conditions of poverty than predominantly urban municipalities.

Furthermore, according to the multidimensional poverty index, 35% of rural households are poor, compared to 12% for urban ones in 2019. In 2020, almost 43% of the rural population was in monetary poverty.

Unquestionably, the rural population, and in particular women, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and young people, have been, perhaps, the most affected. These groups face multiple limitations, which keep them vulnerable and constrain their opportunities and the exercise of their human rights. That is to say, they suffer the consequences of the armed conflict, environmental degradation, neglect of rural areas and historical discrimination (Rimisp, 2021).

In addition, rural areas present significant deficiencies in those achievements related to civil rights; 20% of rural households experience illiteracy, while in urban areas, the figure is 6%. In addition, 41% of rural households do not have access to an improved water source, and 90% have informal working conditions.

The pandemic effects reveal that although we didn't face a serious problem with food supply, we met limitations in the distribution process due to a highly concentrated food distribution system, which can cause restrictions to food access, especially for poor people when faced with shocks like lockdowns and blockades. Many of the small and medium size cities, such as Mocoa, Leticia, San Jose del Guaviare, are not well-connected with other places and depend on a centralized distribution system for essential necessities in food and fuel. For example, in Huila and Nariño, rural households experience 50% borderline food insecurity. This condition affected more women than men (Rimisp, 2021).

However, during this period, the small and medium food commercialization circuits have come into play. Therefore, there could be an opportunity for small farmers to link to inclusive food distribution channels that would give them more resiliency to handle shocks and vulnerabilities. Moreover, that could be an actual window of opportunity for many small and medium cities with relations with rural zones.

In this context and recognizing the deep inequalities that Colombia experiences between rural and urban zones, public policy has presented an urban bias, not only from the distribution of economic public resources but also in terms of the design and interventions of policy instruments.

The responsibility to ensure better conditions for development and offer opportunities to rural inhabitants has been centered in the Ministry of Agriculture; the other ministries have generally not adopted enough approaches or instruments that address the problems of the rural sector.

That is why it is necessary, and I take advantage of this opportunity to highlight, the need to address this problem from different scenarios, including the international cooperation. Otherwise, it will be complicated for Colombia to move forward and transform itself into a more inclusive country from a rights perspective.