



FIRST PERSON With Cacao Comes Peace for Widow

A former coca grower finds a new livelihood in USAID-funded project

For ten years, former cook “Maria” worked in a coca plantation in the Department of Arauca, in northern Colombia on the border with Venezuela. Despite the danger and violence associated with cultivating coca, she processed and sometimes harvested the leaves, hoping to raise enough money to buy a house.



However, Maria’s husband was brutally murdered due to his involvement in illegal activities. “I try not to remember. It’s better. I don’t know who killed him, and if I knew, there’s nothing I could do. War is very hard and painful,” she said. Maria herself was threatened and forced to leave her hometown when she refused to join an illegal armed group. Frightened, she fled with her family to the Department of Santander.

There, she learned about a cacao project implemented by the National Association of Cacao Growers, which USAID supports to promote economic and social alternatives to illicit crop production by fostering market driven, private sector-led business initiatives in Colombia.

After her husband was murdered and she was threatened, “Maria” (with her two sons in a cacao plantation) welcomed a chance to leave behind the dangers of growing coca.

“Finally, I can leave behind the coca business, which is dangerous, troubled, and unhappy,” said “Maria”, who received training and support to grow cacao instead.

Today, Maria’s family and others cultivate cacao, whose seeds are used to produce chocolate. Along with others, she attends training courses at the Country School, where farmers learn about irrigation management, pest prevention and shade crops.

“I never miss a class because the information is very useful. With the technical advice that I receive, I am able to grow higher quality cacao and sell it at a better price. This project is wonderful. Finally, I can leave behind the coca business, which is dangerous, troubled, and unhappy,” she said.