



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**COLOMBIA**

## FIRST PERSON A New Beginning

### Program gives youth caught in armed conflict self-esteem and skills

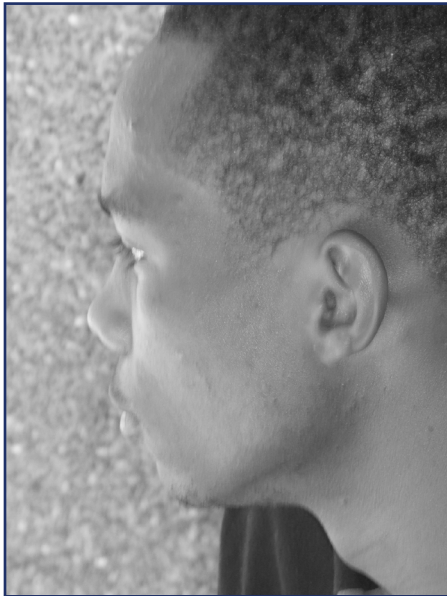


Photo: OIM

USAID supports programs in Colombia to help former child combatants such as “René” heal and reintegrate into society.

***“Although I was young, I always knew that this was not my path and that at any time I could die without ever knowing the reason why I was part of the group,” said “René”, a former child combatant in Colombia who is now a coach.***

Telling Our Story  
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“René” (a pseudonym) was one of 14 children born into a poor family in southern Colombia. He started working early to support his family, and by age 12 had joined an illegal armed group.

During recruitment, he persevered through harsh physical resistance tests, motivated by his desire to earn money to help his family. “Although I was young, I always knew that this was not my path and that at any time I could die without ever knowing the reason why I was part of the group,” he said. “I remember during one battle, which lasted 11 hours, my best friend, Felipe, was killed. It was then that I began to think about leaving, even though doing so could get me killed.”

One day in 2006, when René was sent to town on an errand, he turned himself in to the first authority he came across. When the town police chief asked his age, René didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know how old he was. (Medical examinations later found that he was 17.)

His life for the past five years had been filled with fear and despair. René was accepted into a USAID-funded program to rehabilitate child ex-combatants. To date, it has provided specialized attention to 3,577 child ex-combatants and 23,515 at-risk children.

When René turned 18, he began receiving training from the USAID-supported Don Bosco center in Cali to rebuild his life and self-esteem. The center has assisted 212 young people in municipalities in the departments of Cauca and Valle del Cauca.

René is now a coach, working with young people from the most socially disadvantaged areas of Cali. In his work, he relays a clear message: joining youth gangs or illegal armed groups is a waste of time — and can mean a wasted life.