



Land Release in Colombia: A Path Toward Recovering Territories Contaminated by Explosive Ordnance

Since its 2016 accreditation as the first civilian Humanitarian Demining Operator in Colombia, the Campaña Colombia Contra Minas (CCCM) has worked with the United States as a strategic partner to release territories contaminated by Antipersonnel Mines (APM), Unexploded Ordnance (UXO), and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). These explosive remnants of war, abandoned or placed in combat zones during the armed conflict, kill and maim civilians and prevent Colombian security forces and local communities from moving safely and freely.

In 2021, with funding from the United States, the CCCM launched a long-term demining project aimed at restoring safe access to land in regions affected by explosive ordnance. Through this initiative, communities were able to safely inhabit their territories once cleared of these threats and resume the use of their land for safe and productive use.

This article outlines the primary achievements, lessons learned, and impacts of this five-year implementation through May 2026.

***Cover photo: Clearance activity in Putumayo.**

Geographic and Social Context



Initially, the strategy covered nine municipalities in the departments of Antioquia (Dabeiba, Chigorodó, Murindó, Mutatá and Turbo), Boyacá (Pajarito), Casanare (Hato Corozal and Paz de Ariporo) and Chocó (Unguía).

The geographic scope later expanded to include six additional municipalities in Córdoba (Puerto Libertador), Putumayo (Puerto Asís, Puerto Caicedo and Puerto Guzmán), and Nariño (San Andrés de Tumaco and Barbacoas).

These municipalities were prioritized due to high concentrations of explosive ordnance plus ongoing security and public order challenges. Furthermore, 86% of these municipalities are classified as PDET (Territorial Development Program) zones, meaning they have been identified by the Colombian government as priority areas for demining due to the impacts of armed conflict, and limited access to services. In addition, these territories are characterized by complex geographical conditions and periods of intense rainfall.

Land release activities in these specific zones have created important opportunities for economic development. Among other benefits, they facilitate the arrival of security forces, public services, and other initiatives that contribute to improving the quality of life of local communities.

Regardless of the difficult operating environment, CCCM's field teams have achieved significant progress in supporting the comprehensive development of Colombian communities through land release efforts and the strengthening of capacities for risk prevention and protection.

The Project: Implementation and Key Results

Project activities were carried out through two core pillars of Demining:

- **Demining Operations**, including Non-Technical Surveys (NTS) -through which communities share information to help identify and map hazardous areas- and Clearance, which involves ground inspection, the search for explosive ordnance, and its safe final disposal.
- **Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE)**, activities that promote safe behaviors to prevent accidents among affected populations.

Between April 2021 and May 2026, the CCCM and the United States contributed to the declaration of six municipalities as free from suspected contamination by explosive ordnance: Pajarito (Boyacá), Hato Corozal and Paz de Ariporo (Casanare), Unguía (Chocó), and Chigorodó and Turbo (Antioquia).

Significant progress was also made in Puerto Asís, Puerto Caicedo and Puerto Guzmán (Putumayo) Dabeiba, Murindó and Mutatá (Antioquia). To date, more than 46 hazardous areas within these six municipalities have been cleared and returned to the communities, totaling 56,134 m² that can now be used for safe and productive use.

Additionally, efforts in NTS and EORE are ongoing in Puerto Libertador (Córdoba), Tumaco, and Barbacoas (Nariño), extending the reach of demining operations to communities that have long been affected by explosive ordnance contamination.

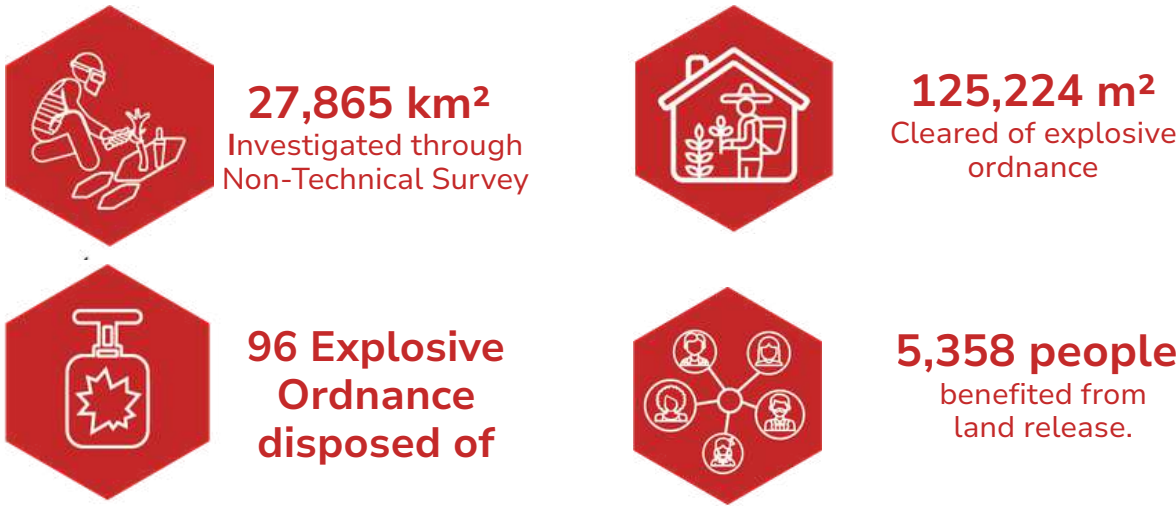
The movement of clearance teams to areas such as Murindó, Antioquia, reflects one of the main challenges of demining in Colombia: reaching territories that can only be accessed by river or bridle paths. Support from the United States has been essential to making these operations possible.

Photo: Clearance teams traveling to Murindó.



Through these actions, we continue building the path toward safer territories and land recovery for the well-being and development of communities.

Overall Achievements (2021–2026)



6 municipalities

Handed over to communities as free from suspected contamination





Photo: Visit for a Non-Technical Survey in Putumayo.



Photo: CCCM team members checking points in a hazardous area in Urabá.

CCCM field teams are composed by personnel with deep knowledge of the territory and close ties to the communities. This proximity strengthens the trust required to gather key information and strengthen team secureness for demining operations.

The sustained presence of demining in these territories has fostered the rebuilding of community trust toward external stakeholders, especially in areas historically affected by conflict and institutional neglect.

Communities recognize CCCM as a trusted and coordinating actor and look to the organization to amplify local voices and bring greater visibility to community needs.

The five-year implementation period of this project has enabled CCCM to consolidate lessons learned and best practices, ensuring that operations are carried out with the technical quality required for this work, including:

- **Strengthening bonds of trust** with communities and local institutions in rural and ethnic territories, facilitating access to affected areas, supporting the collection of reliable information, and reinforcing institutional presence in regions impacted by armed conflict.
- **Formation of adaptable teams** comprising personnel with expert technical skills and local personnel including speakers of indigenous languages- trained and accredited for the safe implementation and compliance with standards for Demining Operations and EORE.

- Preferential focus on enduring **EORE within educational and other community contexts**, building installed capacity among teachers and local leaders who have the highest potential to **replicate safe behaviors** with other community members, ensuring this knowledge remains after external assistance.
- Team **rotation across territories** while maintaining the participation of local communities in strategic roles, such as the community liaison, which enhances the efficiency of Demining Operations.

Territorial transformation and community recovery through Land Release

“This is an opportunity being given to the territory —For a place where few people are willing to go and pay attention to these strategic areas— i it is truly encouraging for the municipality.” (Resident of Hato Corozal, Casanare, 2024).

Land release transforms fear of landmine contamination into tangible opportunities. Beyond reducing the risk of accidents, it restores safe access to territory, strengthens community trust, and creates favorable conditions for the return of communities, and economic revitalization.

93% of residents of the released municipalities surveyed indicated that they had been awaiting demining to make full use of their land. They also emphasized the importance of overcoming the stigma left by years of armed conflict. In this regard, creating opportunities for local development stands out as one of the project's most significant impacts.



Photo: Clearance activity in Dabeiba, Antioquia.

Concrete transformations can be seen in how local authorities and communities are currently using the released land.

For instance, 75% of the handed-over areas are now dedicated to economically viable **agricultural and livestock activities**. This includes the cultivation of specific food crops such as rice, bananas, sugarcane, corn, cocoa, coffee, pineapple, and chiro (a variety of plantain that is a staple of indigenous diets). Furthermore, **timber harvesting** has resumed, and **critical infrastructure is being restored** through the construction of roads, paths, and bridges. This infrastructure not only facilitates the transportation of agricultural products but also improves access to essential health and education services.

Other important transformations include the **return of displaced populations** and **strengthening of institutional presence** in previously affected areas. These processes demonstrate that land release not only reduces the threat posed by explosive ordnance but also strengthens community trust.



Photo: Preparing signage to mark dangerous areas. Embera Katío Indigenous Reservation, located in the Paramillo National Natural Park in Dabeiba, Antioquia.

Releasing land within natural reserves allows communities affected by explosive ordnance to regain safe land and generate new economic opportunities linked to business opportunities in tourism.



Unguía

Peace, reconciliation, and post-conflict: “A free, decontaminated territory, clear of suspicion of explosive ordnance, is a source of pride. We, the farmers, are reclaiming our traditional knowledge.” – Community Leader from Unguía, Chocó.



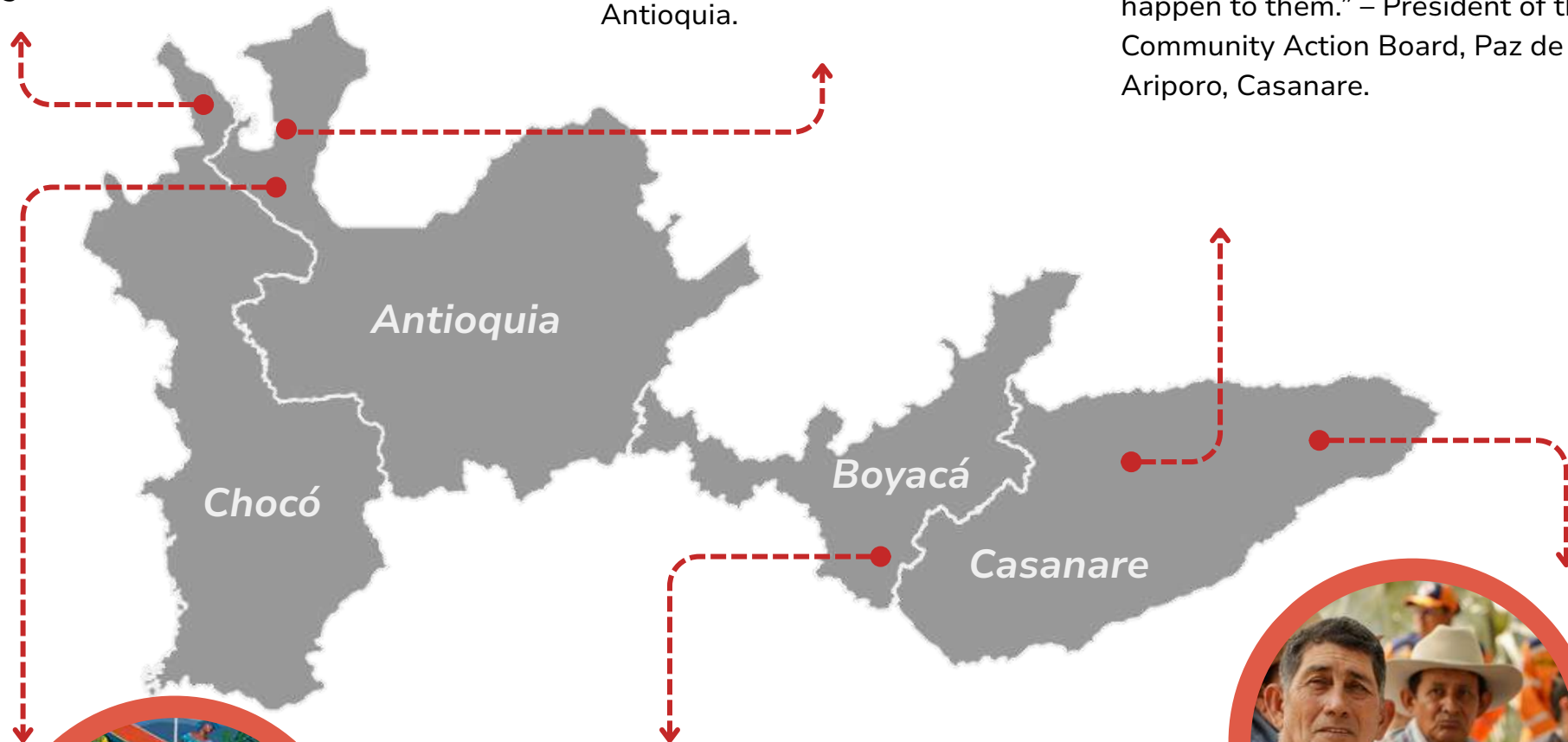
Turbo

Strengthening return plans: “Returns to the rural villages are taking place. People are regaining their trust. Even for us as a territorial entity, it is an invitation to co-responsibility.” – Victims' Liaison, Turbo, Antioquia.



Paz de Ariporo

Improving access to services: “Progress in the agricultural sector and progress in education, since children won't have to stay at home because they are afraid to go to their schools for fear that something might happen to them.” – President of the Community Action Board, Paz de Ariporo, Casanare.



Chigorodó

Rehabilitation of ancestral territories: Indigenous communities, such as Yaberaradó, stated that demining brought tranquility to their territories and allowed them to resume practices linked to their food security.



Pajarito

Recovery of territorial trust: “Demining allowed us to recover a water tank that had mines around it.” – Farmer from Pajarito, Boyacá.



Hato Corozal

Projection of rural management plans: The municipal initiative to develop the Territorial Management Scheme (EOT) contributes to the sustainability of Demining actions, strengthening investment opportunities related to its geographic location, scenic wealth, and agricultural and livestock potential.



Photo: EORE workshop in Putumayo.

Regarding EORE, communities emphasize the importance of having these programs led by civilians, community members, and speakers of indigenous languages, which ensures the safety messages are properly understood and embraced.

Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) also contributes to the consolidation of these transformations within the municipalities. The safety to travel through the territories is among the most significant contributions of these actions.

“I started getting involved in the awareness-raising sessions because, initially, we thought that the people behind that uniform and image were military, but they were actually civilians. So we began to engage in that process, we learned about it, and I went back to my rural village and told them, 'we are going to open these spaces.'” — Resident of Paz de Ariporo, Casanare, 2024.

This demonstrates the importance of the Demining model in contexts of the armed conflict.

Beyond what has been observed in the municipalities already handed over, these impacts are also beginning to emerge in others where work is not yet complete, but where progress allows for visible results.

“ Before, it was so difficult to enter these communities, and today these doors have opened because there is trust between the communities and the institutions”. - Secretary of the Community Action Board, Puerto Asís, Putumayo.

*Note: Community Action Boards are community entities that manage resources and development processes with the State. The presidents of these organizations serve as fundamental liaisons in the comprehensive Demining processes.

The work completed over these five years demonstrates that Demining is, above all, a tool for building peace with dignity.

Thanks to the strategic alliance between the Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas and the United States, thousands of Colombians now walk their land without fear, cultivate their fields, and begin to rebuild their lives. These are concrete steps toward a more self-reliant and stable Colombia.



Photo: Handover of the Municipality of Pajarito, Boyacá, on July 27, 2023.

These events involve community representatives and local authorities who receive detailed information about the process and provide feedback on their expectations regarding land release.



Photo: Closing ceremony for operations in the Municipality of Turbo, Antioquia, on December 9, 2025.

To commemorate the process, a mural is created in each municipality with the help of local artists. These murals showcase the business opportunities enhanced by demining activities. The CCCM staff and a U.S. Embassy representative are pictured in front of the mural.