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**COLOMBIA**

# FIRST PERSON

## Creating a Road Map to a New Life

**Displaced by conflict, man turned life around and now helps others**



Photo: Edgar Cortés

Forced to leave his hometown after his family was threatened, Julio Contreras put his life together again with support from a USAID-funded organization.

***“We received help and now we want to support other displaced families,” said Julio Contreras, who now manages a successful sausage factory in Colombia.***

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Julio Contreras is the general manager of ALIPROCAR Foods, a successful sausage processing plant in Cartagena, Colombia. He grew up in the Afro-Colombian farming community of Unguia, in Chocó, a department in the country’s conflict-riddled northwest. In 2001, one of the local illegal armed groups fighting for power and narco-trafficking routes threatened his family. Fearing for their lives, they abandoned their home and made the long trip to Cartagena to begin anew.

“I used to be a farmer, but the illegal armed groups forced me to leave my homeland. I did it at the right time. Two months later, they murdered my older brother,” said Julio.

Leaving everything behind, Julio arrived in Cartagena with less than \$60 in his pocket, only to have it stolen by petty thieves. The move was difficult for Julio and his family, as they were accustomed to rural life and did not have the necessary job skills to find work in the city. A family friend loaned Julio a small thermos, and he began selling coffee on the streets to support his family.

Life was bleak until Julio heard about Actuar por Bolívar, a USAID-supported non-governmental organization that provides social and economic assistance to people displaced by the drug-fueled violence in Colombia. He enrolled in its program and received psychological counseling to come to terms with the many changes taking place in his life.

The program helped Julio develop a road map for his new life. With the program’s assistance, Julio and his friends acquired business skills training and small loans to form a cooperative to make sausages in the community where they lived. The sausages were a great success and the business now generates more than 100 direct and indirect jobs.

“We received help and now we want to support other displaced families. In the cooperative, everybody earns a basic wage and we are paying social security for all the employees,” said Julio. He is optimistic that he can help others who find themselves in the same situation he was in just a few short years ago.