

The New Colombia

An Interview with María Claudia Lacouture, Executive Director, AmCham Colombia

EDITORS' NOTE *María Claudia Lacouture is the Executive Director of the Colombo American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham Colombia). She was Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (2016-2017), President of ProColombia (2010-2016), Manager of the “Colombia es Pasión” campaign and Vice-President of ‘Imagen País’ (2007-2009). She worked as a researcher for the Swiss multinational consulting company Egon Zehnder International and also held roles as Content Administrator and Coordinator at Yupi Internet in Miami. She worked as a specialist in foreign trade at Trade Wing Networks. She served at ProColombia in the market intelligence area in Bogotá and later was Marketing and Foreign Trade consultant and Tourism Director in the Commercial Office in the United States. Lacouture was given the Order of Merit ‘Carlos Lleras Restrepo’ by ANALDEX for her contribution to the development of Colombian exports. Her first book, Turismo Sostenible (Sustainable Tourism), was published in 2019. She is also an international consultant, lecturer and columnist. Lacouture studied finance and international relations at the University Externado de Colombia and earned a master’s degree in agricultural economics with a specialization in marketing and business at Cornell University.*



María Claudia Lacouture

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *AmCham Colombia’s (amchamcolombia.co) mission is to promote trade, investment and business by focusing on the commercial interests of Colombia and the United States in both hemispheric and global markets, offering its affiliated companies opportunities to enhance their businesses, reach new markets and strengthen themselves through privileged access to information and analysis on relevant topics. AmCham Colombia also strives to provide unique spaces for the development of professional networks at the highest level.*

Will you highlight the mission of the Colombian American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham Colombia) and your priorities leading the organization?

The Colombian American Chamber of Commerce, AmCham Colombia, aims to facilitate and promote free trade, and strengthen investment, tourism, cooperation and the transfer of

knowledge between Colombia and the United States by creating value for our affiliates and potential investors through relevant information, activities and spaces of business interest.

We offer our affiliates the possibility to reach new markets within the U.S. and Colombia, to diversify and innovate, and provide access to information and analysis of interest to their business. The entity is considered a benchmark for the U.S. and Colombian governments in relation to trade and investment and it is also a

key interlocutor in developing the bilateral agenda.

My priorities are aligned with the goals of the Chamber. The idea is to provide value through each one of the services we offer and connect needs with opportunities, doing this in line with the highest standards of ethics, social and environmental responsibility, equity, inclusion and the common good. To me, these values are fundamental for business development

and necessary to create good institutional relationships, obtain the necessary recognition and become a modern and efficient service platform as well as a valid and reliable interlocutor for the public and private sectors.

How has AmCham Colombia been impacted by the global pandemic and how is the organization navigating its efforts during this challenging and unprecedented time?

The first thing we understood at AmCham Colombia is that in the face of the pandemic and eventual confinement, the economic and business dynamics were going to slow down and we were going to have to turn on the turbo and boost our affiliates actions in order to continue finding opportunities. In these times, we evaluated what our members need. They need relevant, real-time information and in-depth analysis of all the aspects that affect their companies. They also needed clarity on the options that they have, given the situation was not clear, which generated disorientation and required guidance. We had to tell employers what was happening, how government measures could affect them, how to take advantage of different activities and circumstances without forgetting that it was of the utmost importance to save jobs, maintain productivity, take care of our health with extreme diligence, and prevent the destruction of the business fabric that contributes to poverty reduction and the development of the country.

That is why we created virtual channels that provide advice and updated information which has been of enormous value to our affiliates and all government authorities including President Duque, and the ministers, directors and all relevant actors. While we brought timely and strategic information to entrepreneurs, we brought the concerns of the productive sector to governments. In the midst of that synergy, we launched the first virtual business fair held in the Americas with more than 3,500 participants from 13 Latin American countries, 11 U.S. states, three European countries, as well as two from Asia and one from Oceania. We also developed virtual sector business missions and meetings and we brought the possibility of exchanging needs and generating opportunities for U.S. and Colombian entrepreneurs to different U.S. states. In short, we created a virtual ecosystem that allowed our affiliates to move forward.

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considered as an excellent destination for investment.”**

You served for many years in leadership roles in the Colombian government. What attracted you to public service and will you provide an overview of your areas of focus?

What is most rewarding about public service, actually any job, is to feel like it's your calling. Climbing positions is valid in so far as you can obtain the tools necessary to help build and benefit a country. All public servants have the opportunity to do good work and give value to their work.

Since I did my internships in the commercial information area of the export promotion agency – Proexport, which later became ProColombia – I knew that my work had one objective: to create value for the country's development. Valuable information such as telling a company that their product is needed in another country, finding a client or even an investment are things that contribute to the creation of a beneficial virtuous circle for all.

Through my experience in different places, I learned that nothing is easy, that every good purpose requires persistence, resistance and never giving up. Our work should focus on facilitating, fostering, guaranteeing, and above all removing psychological obstacles and economic barriers. It is useless to promote exports if we do not incorporate an export culture in companies.

The public servant, whether an intern or a minister, must go the extra mile, have a sincere desire to work for the country, be honest, honorable, clear, proactive, innovative and enterprising and seek balance between the actions that need to be taken and the policies that need to be developed alongside a clear sense of responsibility, the disposition to help, leadership, optimism, will and commitment.

You have worked with the Colombian business sector to create and articulate an accurate and positive image of Colombia to project to the world. Will you discuss these efforts and do you feel that there is an effective understanding of Colombia around the world?

I have had the privilege of working in the public sector even when Colombia was considered a failed state. For the last two decades of the 20th century, the country was at war against drug trafficking and guerrillas. Narco-terrorism shook the country, put the government in check and haunted a troubled

society. Furthermore, the guerrillas found an economic stronghold in drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion and they managed to seize a large part of the country's territory. From illegality, the paramilitaries did the same and the country was left in the hands of crime.

We had the real and strong data showing the transformation accompanied by a strong society with solid institutions that allowed us to maintain macroeconomic stability, renew the State's apparatus, and build a democratic security policy that made us go from a failed state to an emerging nation with great potential for the world. Additionally, it was possible to sign a peace agreement with the country's main guerrilla group, which allowed us to show what we really are. All of the above has been critical, coupled with the effort, commitment, and forcefulness of those who worked to improve the image of the country and managed to demonstrate that it was worth betting on Colombia.

We have a long way to go and there are still varying points of view regarding what we really are and the nonstop effort of all Colombians must continue so the world can see Colombia for its diversity, passion, as an investment destination, and the best place for sustainable tourism.

You led the campaign, Discover Colombia Through its Heart. What were you trying to accomplish with this message and have you been happy with the impact of this campaign?

As a result of that campaign and others that followed, we gave the world information about the new Colombia that has emerged which few knew about. We had regained security and the campaign showed a prosperous, friendly, diverse country, rich in culture and tourism with many possibilities. As foreigners arrived, they returned convinced that we had changed or at least that their perception was wrong.

The campaign was carried out with an intense work commitment. It had strong government leadership as well as good business support. In a relatively short time, we were able to turn around an adverse situation. We recovered international confidence and, although some aspects need to be corrected, Colombia is being considered as an excellent destination for investment. Campaigns are an efficient tool, but without national commitment it is difficult to achieve goals.

What do you tell foreign investors about the opportunities that exist in Colombia and how do you address potential concerns around stability and security?

Historically, Colombia has been characterized as a good destination for foreign investment and it offers the conditions necessary for the arrival of foreign capital. It is a country that has democratic stability, solid institutions, fiscal responsibility, trained human capital, and diverse regions that offer diverse opportunities for productive development and investment. In addition to the above, its strategic geographical location allows entry, in competitive times, to markets in South, Central and North America, as well as Europe. Additionally, it provides the possibility of taking advantage of the two oceans to which it has access through more than 13 current trade agreements that allow export of thousands of products and services without duty. The country also has an attractive domestic market.

Legal stability has always been a key factor, both for new investors and for those who are already in the country. Successive governments have made efforts to keep the rules of the game clear for investors and also respect acquired rights. This is a key message at a time when several companies are analyzing the possibility of entering the country to take advantage of the opportunities offered by nearshoring which has opened in recent years for U.S. companies in Asia so that they can transfer part of their production to Latin America.

What advice do you offer to young people about a career in government and the importance of public service?

Working for the country is very rewarding. To the young people who decide to work in public institutions, I can only say that there is much to do, that society is thirsty and in need of good officials. From their position in public service, they will be able to experience great happiness and fulfillment in seeing the impact they can have. Nothing is more beautiful than a smile of gratitude from communities you have helped to improve. That positive attitude is transmitted to others as they strive to create strong and more caring societies.

Anyone who does not have a social sense and a personal conviction, or is indifferent, is better off leaving public service. A lot can be learned working on behalf of a state. All young people should have compulsory social service, guided by their institutions, with the purpose of building a generation that is more committed to their fellow citizens and less selfish and individualistic. ●