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# Meeting the Needs of Colombia's Indigenous Children

*A Proposal Prepared for  
UNICEF's Next Generation,  
February 2013*

# Meeting the Needs of Colombia's Indigenous Children

## *Country Overview*

Colombia's population of 47 million makes it the third most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico. Colombia's economy is the fifth largest in Latin America. The country is often characterized by its ethnic and geographic diversity, but wealth is unevenly distributed across the population. As a result, many Colombians continue to be affected by poverty, discrimination, and inequality. In fact, around half of the population still lives under the poverty line.

Against this backdrop of inequity, violence by non-state armed groups continues to increase, causing widespread human rights violations, mass displacements, and constraints to humanitarian access. A total of 3.9 million people have been registered as internally displaced persons between 1997 and 2011. An estimated 40 percent of the displaced are children. Displacement is caused by a wide range of factors, including: gunfights and threats; the presence of landmines; the recruitment of children and adolescents; sexual violence; and denied access to supplies and services.

Restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by the conflict are having a devastating effect on the civilian population in places like Choco and Putumayo. Rural communities have also been confined to their villages because armed groups have laid landmines in surrounding areas. Access to food and essential medicines has also been blocked, leading to increasing malnutrition levels, particularly in indigenous communities.

Other key concerns relate to the risk of disease outbreaks due to contaminated water sources and poor sanitation. There is an urgent need to provide safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene messages. The provision of public health services in impoverished and indigenous communities is practically non-existent or has been severely affected by the conflict and heavy rains and flooding over the last two years.

## *Current Situation for Colombia's Indigenous Children*

According to the last national census (2005), Colombia's indigenous population stands at about 1,378,000 people. Among this segment of the population, about 70,000 are victims of forced internal displacement. While some have been displaced to live in marginal areas in cities like Bogota, Soacha, and Medellin, most live in scattered rural areas. Regardless of where they live, however, they face the most extreme forms of exclusion and discrimination.

Compared to Colombia's non-indigenous children, the country's indigenous children generally have lower vaccination rates and higher mortality rates; lower rates of school enrollment; higher rates of grade repetition and school drop-outs; and inadequate protection in formal justice systems. In communities on the outskirts of cities and on rural land alike, infant, child, and maternal mortality rates are higher among indigenous groups. Moreover, birth registration – the first step to a legal identity and the claims of citizenship – is often substantially lower among indigenous children.

The rights of indigenous children in both rural and urban areas are often compromised or denied. Specific areas of concern include the rights of indigenous children to survival and development; to good health; to education that respects their cultural identity; protection from abuse, violence, and exploitation; and participation in decision-making processes relevant to their lives.

Colombia's indigenous communities often live under severe cultural and social stress. Lack of opportunity, cultural discrimination, or inadequate social support contribute to low self-esteem and loss of identity that can give rise to depression, substance abuse, and suicide later in life. Faced with the armed conflict, indigenous children are also vulnerable to trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced labor.



Indigenous family at home.  
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Rodriguez

## *UNICEF in Action*

For UNICEF, equity means that all children have an opportunity to survive, develop, and reach their full potential without discrimination, bias, or favoritism. The equity-based approach in UNICEF's programs and policies seeks to understand and address the root causes of inequity so that all children, particularly those who suffer the worst deprivations in society, have access to education, health care, sanitation, clean water, protection, and other services necessary for their survival, growth, and development.

UNICEF Colombia is also working to prevent the recurrence of human rights violations within indigenous communities. It has adopted a comprehensive approach that promotes resilience and mobilizes further technical and financial support for longer-term projects that tackle the underlying structural causes of food insecurity and malnutrition, violence, abuse, and the exploitation of indigenous children. UNICEF tirelessly supports government institutions, indigenous leaders, communities, and families to prepare and respond to the needs of children and women affected by conflict, internal displacement, and natural disasters.

In partnership with the Colombian government, UNICEF is:

- Providing safe water, health care, and education supplies to indigenous children and adolescents;
- Preventing the recruitment or use of indigenous children by armed forces;
- Strengthening local capabilities of institutions and communities to respond to emergencies with a focus on the needs of indigenous groups;
- Reinforcing capacities of the national and local governments to adopt a comprehensive approach to building resilience and effective health services and social safety nets in communities;
- Mobilizing further technical and financial support for longer-term programs that tackle the underlying structural causes of malnutrition, violence, and the abuse and exploitation of indigenous children;
- Supporting and monitoring a coordinated response in the nutrition and child protection sectors;
- Raising awareness on the impact that humanitarian crises have on Colombia's indigenous populations; and
- Implementing key interventions at the community and family levels that protect women and children against violence, exploitation, abuse, and landmine accidents.



Embera Katio children at a community center in Choco.  
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## *The Impact of Your Support*

Your support will aid in establishing healthy and protective environments for Colombia's most vulnerable indigenous children. Your support will help UNICEF ensure that these children have access to comprehensive, culturally sensitive services to support and promote their health, nutrition, and protection from violence, exploitation, and recruitment by armed groups.

For example, an investment of **\$100,000** will support the following components of the program:

- Conduct training for adolescents, indigenous leaders, primary health care providers, teachers, and parents to develop skills and tools that nurture and establish protective environments for children.
- Implement a program of psychosocial assistance called *Retorno de la Alegría* (or Return to Happiness in English) in order to help indigenous children cope with their emotions and return to a sense of normalcy after bearing witness to violence, displacement, or natural disasters;
- Establish protective environments where vulnerable and indigenous children can learn, play, and generally just be kids;
- Provide communities supplies for the access to safe water and the management and prevention of malnutrition and child illnesses for indigenous families living in remote areas; and
- Design and produce culturally sensitive educational materials to promote protective environments for at risk youth including marginalized indigenous children.

Thank you for your interest and concern for the children of Colombia. Your support is vital to UNICEF's efforts to strengthen and expand access to essential supplies and services for Colombia's vulnerable indigenous children. Simultaneously, your support will help families and communities better prepare for and cope with emergencies in the future.

We are pleased to announce that if you make a donation today, your gift can have twice the incredible impact on the lives of Colombia's most vulnerable children thanks to the generosity of Next Gen New York Steering Committee member, Wendy Reyes, and her family. The Reyes Family has pledged to match the first \$25,000 that the Next Gen raises for this important project.

To make a donation, please visit:

<http://www.unicefusa.org/nextgencolombiaproject>

Or send a check, made payable to the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, to:

The U.S. Fund for UNICEF  
Attn: Casey Rotter  
125 Maiden Lane, 11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10038

Thank you very much for your interest in UNICEF's life-saving work for children, and for your consideration of a gift to support UNICEF's programs to protect Colombia's indigenous children. Together we can ensure the safety and protection of these children today in hopes for a brighter future tomorrow.

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The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) works in more than 190 countries and territories to save and improve children's lives, providing health care and immunizations, clean water and sanitation, nutrition, education, emergency relief and more. The U.S. Fund for UNICEF supports UNICEF's work through fundraising, advocacy, and education in the United States. Together, we are working toward the day when zero children die from preventable causes and every child has a safe and healthy childhood.

# Meeting the Needs of Colombia's Indigenous Children

## *The Impact of Your Donation*

At this time, I hope you will consider a gift to protecting and caring for Colombia's indigenous children.

**\$500** will support the training of 30 adolescents in the child-to-child strategy of Return to Happiness. Upon completion of the training, each adolescent will provide supervised psychosocial support to as many as 300 indigenous children affected by emergencies.

**\$1,000** will provide medicines, therapeutic food, and micronutrients to help 250 indigenous children improve their nutritional status and fend off preventable and treatable diseases.

**\$2,500** will support the establishment of a child-friendly space within an impoverished rural school where children can feel safe, play, and receive the social support they need..

**\$5,000** will provide the necessary building materials to improve water and sanitation facilities in one rural school.

**\$11,000** will support the improvement of lodging and sanitation conditions at a rural boarding school for indigenous children.

**\$20,000** will support the master training of 300 community workers and 100 teachers in the recognition and prevention of violence, abuse, and exploitation.