



# Meeting the Needs of Colombia's Indigenous Children

*A Progress Report for  
UNICEF's Next Generation  
November 2014*

# Meeting the Needs of Colombia's Indigenous Children

## *A Progress Report for UNICEF's Next Generation, November 2014*

### Overview

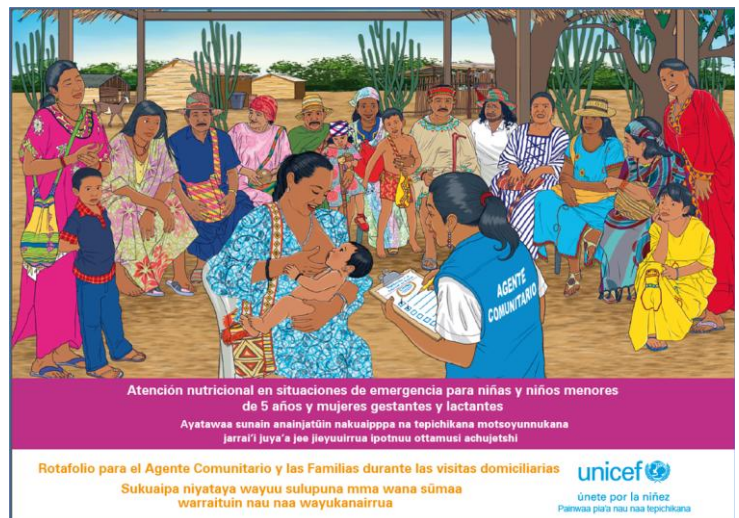
Colombia, located on the northwest corner of South America, contains the Amazon River, the Andes mountain range and both Pacific and Atlantic coastlines. Not only does the country boast rich biodiversity, but its population consists of a variety of ethnic groups, making it rich with history and cultural traditions. Unfortunately, this beautiful land has been marred by long, tumultuous periods of local conflict, causing marginalized portions of the population to suffer, most prominently, the indigenous people and their children.

Colombia has been engaged in ongoing armed conflict between government forces, guerilla groups and paramilitaries for the better half of a century. The situation continues to cause internal displacement and an increasing amount of child casualties and violence against children. While the country has enjoyed a decade of dramatic economic growth, the new wealth has failed to trickle down, leaving almost a third of the country living below the poverty line. The most excluded are the indigenous people, often finding themselves either displaced or confined to their villages, surrounded by guerilla forces and without support.

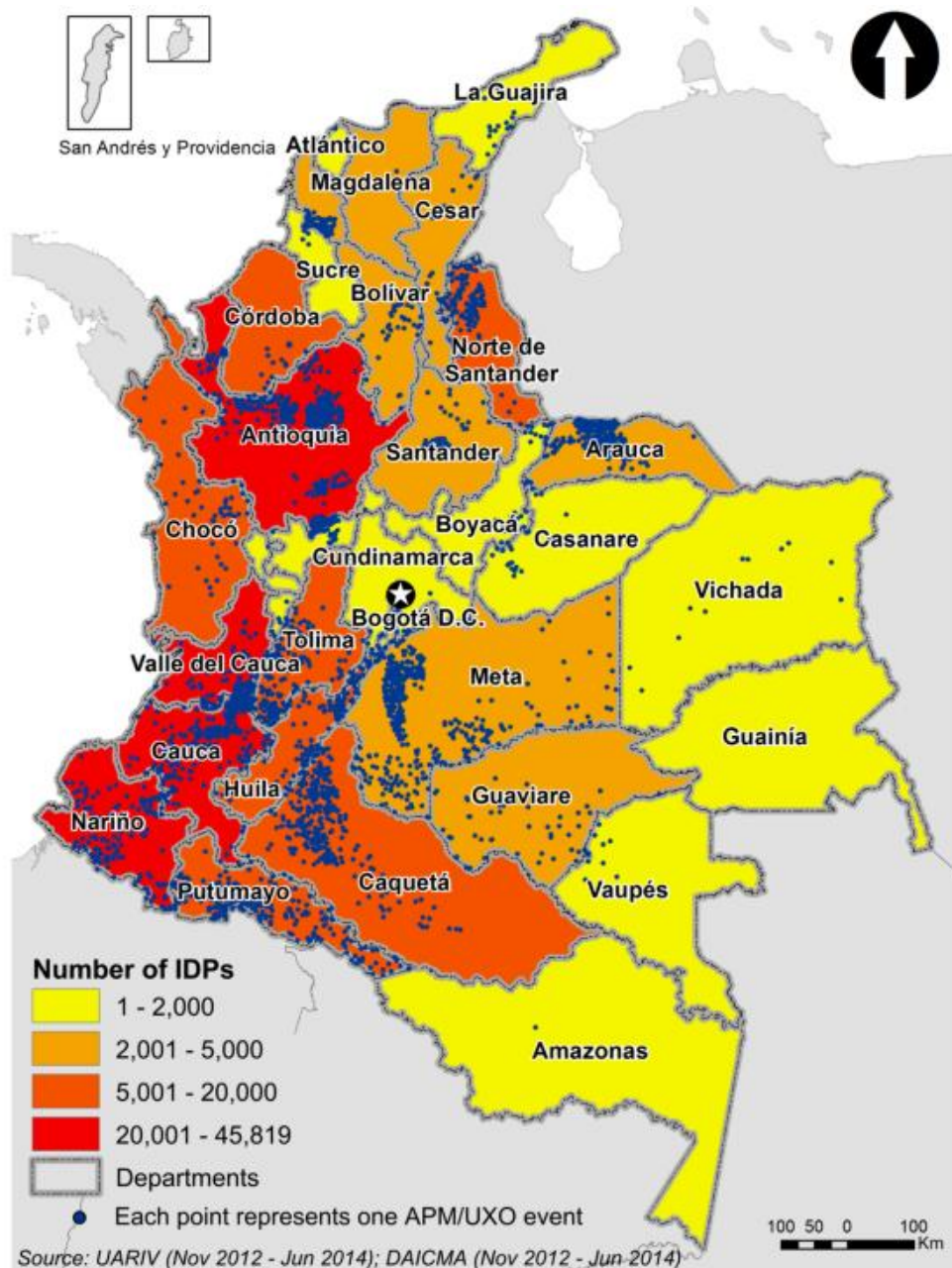
Colombia's indigenous population is roughly 1.3 million, with approximately 70,000 internally displaced. Forced from their homes and lacking resources, currently about 34 indigenous communities are considered at risk for extinction because of the armed conflict. The impacts of subsisting in these conditions are far-reaching, causing lower vaccination rates, lower rates of school enrollment, and higher rates of infant, child and maternal mortality. Compounded by cultural discrimination and an inadequate social framework, many experience a loss of identity, depression, substance abuse and even suicide.

### UNICEF in Action

Since 2013, UNICEF Colombia has helped children, adolescents, families, communities and institutions within these conflict regions increase their capacity to protect children and adolescents through technical and financial support. UNICEF Colombia focused on protecting indigenous children from violence and exploitation, prioritizing the construction and implementation of strategies in order to prevent and eradicate violence against children.



Specifically, UNICEF has replicated successful methods learned through previous experiences in the Amazon region and applied them in the Wayúu community and also in Novita, Chocó. Within Quibdó, Chocó, UNICEF supported a seminar on violence against children led by local officials which sought to strengthen violence prevention work. A partnership with the *Regional Committee for Children*, involving communities in northern Cauca, championed the prevention of and response to violence against children. In Putumayo, UNICEF supported a seminar on protection rights and building public awareness for children and adolescents. Through these interactions, UNICEF has developed an established relationship within many of the indigenous communities, making it the partner of choice for implementing strategic interventions and humanitarian support.



Map: Detailed image of Internally Displaced People (IDP) in Colombia from between 2012-2014. Source: OCHA Colombia, November 26, 2014.

## **The Impact of Your Support**

The funding from UNICEF Next Generation's generous support benefitted indigenous children in Emberá Katio, Emberá Chamí, Awa and Wayúu within the regions of Chocó, Córdoba, Nariño and Guajira as well as a group of internally displaced indigenous refugees living in slums near Bogota. The project implemented a multi-sectorial approach, liaising between UNICEF's education, protection, health, nutrition and early childhood development teams in order to reduce the impacts attributable to the humanitarian crisis.

UNICEF developed a strategy focused on educating the population on child health and well-being and raising awareness on issues of violence and child protection, while building capacity to respond to violence and emergency situations.

By providing training for adolescents, indigenous leaders, primary health care providers, teachers, and parents, **UNICEF helped communities develop skills and tools to nurture and establish protective environments for children.** Specifically UNICEF's work brought about the following results:

- Within the Guijara district, 60 percent of the hospital staff increased their capacity to manage infant and young child feeding, handle acute malnutrition and triage childhood illnesses.
- Training of 490 health workers, indigenous leaders and care givers in key practices to improve hygiene.
- UNICEF supported 100 training sessions on emergency response for health care with an added emphasis on serving women and children.

**UNICEF worked with local partners to implement a psychosocial assistance program, entitled, *Retorno de la Alegria* (or Return to Happiness), to help indigenous children cope with their emotions and return to a sense of normalcy after witnessing violence, displacement or natural disasters.** These efforts led to the following improvements within indigenous communities:

- Training for 22 indigenous leaders and 50 adolescents from Chocó Emberá communities and displaced in Bogotá on the psychosocial care strategy, preparing them to implement this strategy in their own communities autonomously.
- Psychosocial attention for 500 children between the ages of 5-12 through the *Return to Happiness* program.

By creating child friendly environments, **UNICEF built a protective atmosphere for vulnerable and indigenous children to learn, play and grow.** These measures brought about the following impacts:

- Access to child friendly protective environments was made available to 550 children within the Emberá communities during the crisis caused by armed conflict.
- Education material was distributed to supplement learning activities during the emergency.

**UNICEF provided supplies to establish access to safe water and support nutrition and health services for indigenous families living in rural areas.** Specific outcomes from these activities included:

- UNICEF worked with prioritized communities to provide water, sanitation and hygiene services to 1,500 indigenous families.
- Access to health services was provided to 6,450 children under the age of ten, and to 1,500 pregnant and lactating women living within indigenous communities.
- Community-based care and monitoring services were offered to 265 malnourished indigenous children by trained health and nutrition teams.

**Culturally sensitive educational materials were provided by UNICEF to promote protective environments for at-risk youth, including marginalized indigenous children.** Expressly, these interventions supported the following improvements:

- Design, production and distribution of culturally appropriate materials promoting health, nutrition and healthy environments in prioritized indigenous communities.
- Delivery of 123 medicine baskets complete with educational materials to advocate vital health practices and good nutrition in children and pregnant and lactating women.
- Design and implementation of a software tool to facilitate nutritional monitoring for children in real-time.
- Development of an operating manual for the Nutritional Care Community approach to inform primary health care teams.

Through the experience serving the indigenous populations in Colombia, **UNICEF has learned several lessons that will be valuable in informing future humanitarian efforts within the country as well as on a broader scale.** Specifically, UNICEF noticed better responses in emergency situations when it coordinated directly with community-based organizations and the Government. In the same vein, involving local authorities, Government, and indigenous leaders in the design phase of projects and programming, led to increased commitment and cooperation during the implementation phase, amplifying the overall effect.

In subsequent phases of indigenous support, it will be crucial to strengthen national capacities in order to mobilize the financial and technical needs that support longer-term, high impact programs and tackle underlying structural challenges.



Photo: UNICEF worker conducting a health and nutrition assessment on an indigenous girl in Tierralta-Cordoba. © UNICEF / Zestupiñan.

## **The Way Forward**

UNICEF Colombia is already planning for future work with the Government and various indigenous organizations to improve legislation and policies in order to provide greater assistance to the most disadvantaged children and families, ensuring that their effects can be felt at the local level. Meanwhile, UNICEF will continue existing services, measuring impact and improving statistics on child survival, development and protection by sustained efforts to strengthen the capacities of the Ministry of Health, National Institute of Family Welfare, as well as Government and indigenous partners.

The partnership between UNICEF's Next Generation and UNICEF Colombia had numerous, far-reaching impacts for the indigenous population, benefiting many children and their families. Your invaluable investment has helped vulnerable, indigenous children receive nutrition, health care, psychosocial services and education during a period of ongoing conflict, improving the quality of their lives and providing them with a network of assistance and support.

On behalf of the children of Colombia, we thank you!



Photo: Training Workshop with Wayúu community conducted by UNICEF public hospital health team in Guajira. © UNICEF / Mejia.

---

### **Casey D. Rotter**

Director & Founder UNICEF's Next Generation  
U.S. Fund for UNICEF  
125 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038  
212-880-9164  
[crotter@unicefusa.org](mailto:crotter@unicefusa.org)

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) works in 190 countries and territories to put children first. UNICEF has helped save more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization, by 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 no children die from preventable causes and every child has a safe and healthy childhood. For more information, visit [www.unicefusa.org](http://www.unicefusa.org).