

## **Children Change Colombia's work to improve social inclusion for demobilised young people and children at risk of recruitment**

### **Background information**

The armed conflict in Colombia which has lasted for over 50 years has contributed to high levels of poverty, the displacement of over 6 million people, and recruitment of children into armed groups. It is impossible to know the real number of child soldiers in Colombia. A 2012 report estimated that between 2008 and 2012 alone, 18,000 vulnerable children and young people, some as young as 8 years old, were recruited into the illegal armed groups and guerrillas fighting in Colombia's ongoing armed conflict<sup>1</sup>. 5,923 children and young people have been through formal demobilisation programmes with Colombia's Social Services (ICBF) from 1999 to June 2015. 62% of these were recruited by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the largest of Colombia's guerrilla groups and 24% by the ELN (National Army of Liberation), the second largest<sup>2</sup>.

The life experience of child soldiers is very different from that of other children and young people. They have held unusually adult roles, often having had the power of life and death over others. They may even have had children of their own. In other ways they are often less developed than others of their age, having dropped out of school and being accustomed to obeying orders and not thinking independently. It is often difficult for them to understand normal societal interactions and to act appropriately. All of these things make returning to society particularly difficult. It is also a huge challenge for former guerrillas to return to a society in which most people have been scarred one way or another by the conflict in which the guerrillas have been deeply involved. In addition, 17% of the population are from Afro-descendant and indigenous communities, and face additional barriers to their social and cultural reintegration<sup>3</sup>.

Having been recruited as minors, these children are also victims of this violence, but many Colombians either do not understand or do not accept this. Indeed, a 2008 evaluation of the Colombian Government's child demobilisation programme found that stigmatisation was the "single biggest challenge to reintegration".

After the demobilisation of Colombia's paramilitary groups in 2003-6, in the absence of any clear programme for demobilised children, many simply joined other armed groups, unable to make the transition back to 'normal' life. If Colombia is to successfully make the transition into a post-conflict society, it is absolutely vital that this does not happen again. The Colombian government recognises this, and ICBF is working with 7 specialist NGOs across Colombia, including CCC's partner CRAN in Bogota, to run their current reintegration and rehabilitation programme for children. However, CRAN has identified a number of weaknesses, particularly in supporting the children once they turn 18 and enter the adult system, which CCC's current project with them aims to address.

The current ICBF programme has very little focus on what the child will do after they leave the programme at the age of 18. At 18 young people are referred to another government agency, the ARN (Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation) with a sheet detailing their 'life

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<sup>1</sup> Springer, Como corderos entre lobos

[http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informe\\_comoCorderosEntreLobos.pdf](http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informe_comoCorderosEntreLobos.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Observatorio del Bienestar de la Niñez, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, septiembre de 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Observatorio del Bienestar de la Niñez, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, septiembre de 2016.

plan' which is usually developed for them, not with them. There is absolutely no communication or coordination between these two government agencies. Young people receive no support to make the transition from ICBF, where they have everything provided for them and are encouraged to be dependant, to the ARN, where they are seen as adults and immediately have to be independent and organise and provide for themselves. As a result, in CRAN's experience, only 34% of young people actually make this transition. It is not known what happens to the other 66%, but it is highly likely that a number of them, having been unable to gain the skills necessary to flourish in civilian life, re-enter guerrilla groups or other illegal groups, of which there are many in Colombia.

### **CCC's work on the issue to date**

So, since 2015, CCC has been supporting CRAN to develop and run an enhanced version of the government programme, specifically in the form of households hosting young people in Bogotá. From the outset, CRAN has involved the participants in re-designing the services on offer to them, to make sure that they really do address their needs. Based on the young people's input, CRAN has run activities about money management, accessing public services like libraries, and applying for education and training. In addition, CRAN has provided the young people with intensive therapeutic support to help them overcome the traumas they experienced in the armed groups. This focus on improving the young people's mental health will have a long-lasting effect on their lives, making it easier for them to succeed professionally and socially once they leave CRAN's programme. Also, CRAN strengthens foster parents, usually women, to play a major role in the process.

Since the FARC guerrillas signed a peace agreement with the government at the end of 2016, the challenges for reintegrating their former child members have evolved. Between September 2016 and August 2017, the FARC presented 112 children to the international mechanism led by the ICRC and UNICEF<sup>4</sup>. This number is lower than anticipated by many experts. CRAN think this is due to a couple of factors: a) the FARC have insisted on releasing a number of children directly into their communities of origin. We suspect this is because it is perceived as less threatening to the FARC for the children to be in their communities and not with the government, where they could provide information that could be detrimental to the FARC; and b) now that the communities of origin of the children are out of the control of the FARC, more children themselves are preferring to return to their families, rather than go through the government programme. The risk of this is that these communities do not have the capacity to support these children through their processes of demobilisation and reintegration into society. A number of our partners have notified us that organised networks of armed groups, considered by many to be linked to Colombia's former paramilitary groups, are already mobilising to fill the power vacuums left in many more rural communities that were previously controlled by the FARC. Children living in these communities, and ex-child soldiers returning to live there, are extremely vulnerable to being recruited by these armed groups.

It is therefore crucial to also focus on prevention of child recruitment or re-recruitment into armed groups.

A community which cannot successfully reintegrate young people into safe, fulfilling lives, and which instead pushes them back into armed criminality - or which cannot address the push and pull factors that lead to recruitment of young people in the first place - is continuing to put all its members, especially young people themselves, at high risk from continued violence and instability.

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<sup>4</sup> Los niños salen de la guerra, diario El País, 16 de agosto de 2017. [https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/08/16/colombia/1502894203\\_325800.html](https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/08/16/colombia/1502894203_325800.html)

## **How is CCC helping now?**

Over the next 3 years, we want to support CRAN to continue running their enhanced model of the government programme for demobilised children in Bogotá. But we also want to help them reach out into the communities where children are now at an even greater risk of recruitment or re-recruitment. This work will take place in three areas: Soacha, near Bogotá, an area with high levels of child recruitment by illegal armed groups; and in the Putumayo and Meta or Cauca regions, which used to have a very strong FARC presence. Following the model they developed in Bogotá, CRAN will design a programme of activities in collaboration with the young people themselves. It will focus on help the young people to develop the skills, knowledge and relationships necessary for long-term resilience in the face of these ongoing risks.

CRAN will also work with adults to break down barriers that threaten the successful reintegration of former child combatants across the country. This will involve work at various levels:

1. Training for parents, and other members of the household, and members of the wider community to help them protect rather than stigmatise ex-child combatants. They will be encouraged to value the young people's opinions and include them in decision-making processes at home and in community forums.
2. Training for community organisations in Cazucá, Putumayo and Meta or Cauca so that they can begin running CRAN's programme themselves.
3. Sharing their enhanced, youth-friendly model with other operators of the government programme nationwide, and supporting these operators to integrate CRAN's model into their work.
4. Creating opportunities for demobilised young people to work with employers, educational institutions and NGOs, to eradicate stigma and prejudice against the young people and to improve their access to these services.