

# *The care and protection of children in the Amazonas*

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Indigenous children in Colombia, and especially in the Amazonas Department, often live in an environment characterised by risk and vulnerability. Many of the children are disadvantaged from birth, as they are not registered and are therefore ignored in national statistics.

Malnutrition is one of the main problems faced by these children. The town of La Chorrera, for example, has the greatest risk of child death from malnutrition in the country. In La Chorrera and three towns of the Chocó, there were 5000–7000 deaths in children under 5 for every 100,000 live births in the period 1998–2002 (research by Magda Teresa Ruiz and Nubia Yáñez Ruiz at the Universidad Externado de Colombia). The national figure is 253 for 100,000 live births.

According to data from the Colombian Health Department, 30 percent of children in the Amazonas region suffer from acute malnutrition and 40 percent from chronic malnutrition. The ICBF estimates that calcium intake deficiency is at 96.8 percent in the Amazonas region, zinc deficiency is at 79.2 percent, vitamin A deficiency is at 51.5 percent, vitamin C deficiency is at 29.2 percent and protein deficiency is at 50.3 percent (ENSIN 2005, National Survey on the Nutritional Situation in Colombia, 2005, ICBF). These deficiencies increase children's susceptibility to chronic illnesses, mental disability, physical disability, decrease in learning ability and productivity and premature death.

Colombia has a coherent legal framework promoting appropriate education that respects cultural identity. Unfortunately this does not filter down to educational practice. Educational programmes and methodologies continue to be inadequate, ignoring the children's context and culture. In many cases, children do not learn the

cultural practices and knowledge that are part of their heritage. They may even develop a negative concept of their ethnic, regional, linguistic and cultural origins. Around 50 percent of children are not learning their indigenous language.

Verbal and physical abuse are frequent in indigenous communities. In La Chorrera, a study carried out on 225 boys and girls in the 20 communities found that 37 percent of the children are cruelly mistreated by their father, and 27 percent are similarly abused by their mother. There are also cases of sexual abuse, particularly in girls. There is also a growing number of unwanted pregnancies in young, unmarried mothers.

## **The Amazonas Indigenous Children project**

The Amazonas Indigenous Children project of the Caminos de Identidad Foundation (FUCAI) focuses on 406 families in the area (totalling 2119 people), 30 secondary school teachers, a boarding school and five primary schools.<sup>1</sup> The participants, who are mainly from the Uitoto, Bora, Okaina and Muinane communities, live in 20 settlements located along the Igararaparaná river, a tributary of the river Putumayo, which itself is a tributary of the river Amazon.

The basic elements of the project are: participative action-research and production of materials; community training; strengthening grassroots organisations and institutional coordination; agricultural production and nutrition; and support for bilingual education in the classroom. The programme comprises integrated intervention that recognises and promotes the community as the main agent for the care and protection of its children.

## *Action research*

FUCAI conducts participative and educational action-



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research, which seeks to generate knowledge that can be used for training participants and improving the situation for children.

We have identified the basic socialisation mechanisms of the people with whom we work, which inform them throughout their lives. These are the key features that we then use in our intervention with families. Examples include the oral tradition of telling a story or singing a song; the ritual morning bath; self-regulation, i.e., restrictions in food intake, behaviour or other everyday activities; keeping one's word; nutrition, work and dances.

We have also constructed a scale for the development of the Uitoto child, and a baseline of

good treatment and child abuse in local families. This research has contributed to strengthening the programme's training component by producing teaching materials related to, for example, the scale of development and the life cycle.

#### *Community training*

Children under the age of 7 years are at the centre of the project. According to Amazon cultures, the child is conceived as an extension to the parents' life, and when the child begins to take its first steps and utter its first words, parents are expected to take a significant interest and the necessary time to monitor the development of their child. Gender has an important role, with male children being prioritised (Rivero 1987).

The focus groups of the project are parents, grandparents, indigenous leaders, authorities and teachers. Thus the entire community is seen as the agent for the protection and care of the children.

The training focuses on traditional social practices such as the bath, the diet, advice and rituals, the perception of the rights of boys and girls, women, the family and ethnic groups; promotion of dignity and self-respect, particularly of children; self-regulation, independence, complementarity between different groups, spirituality, living as a couple and children's development.

Training is carried out by means of:

- workshops in each of the 20 communities, in which the whole population takes part. Normally, three or four one-day workshops are run each year;
- area workshops for the 40 local coordinators and 40 couples (two from each community). These last five days and are run twice a year;
- training workshops carried out every month for the coordinating women;
- educational assembly meetings.

In addition, annual meetings are held that are attended by about 250 representatives from all the communities. The topics are related to the quality and suitability of school education and the schools' internal relations.

#### *Agricultural production and nutrition*

This component seeks to address the problem of malnutrition suffered by the entire population, but especially children. FUCAI, in partnership with the Sembradores de Esperanza Foundation, seeks to improve soil quality in the area surrounding the communities, recover seeds that are no longer grown but that still exist in the region to enrich the *chagra* (the family agricultural plot) with food crops that are adapted to the region, and produce organic fertilisers to enhance sustainable production. This component has so far shown satisfactory results. Some families are recovering the variety and diversity of the traditional *chagra*, in some cases growing about 30 types of food crop. The scheme is promoting the production of a balanced diet based on local resources such as the *chagra*, game and fishing.

#### *Spirituality*

The indigenous communities are deeply spiritual. The project promotes reflection on spirituality and the revitalisation of traditional practices such as the rituals surrounding pregnancy, birth and children's development. The role of old people as guides for the community is strengthened.

Since these communities have been evangelised, Christian values are also promoted, to strengthen the respect for and the care and protection of children and families.

#### *Strengthening grassroots organisations and inter-institutional coordination*

To guarantee the continuity of the programme, FUCAI has been carrying out a training programme for indigenous leaders and authorities over the last four years aimed at strengthening local organisations. The training is being undertaken in partnership with the Asociación Zonal Indígena de Cabildos y Autoridades Tradicionales de La Chorrera (AZICATCH, the Indigenous Area Association of Traditional Town Councils and Authorities) and with each of the 20 community councils. A community life plan and a development plan have been developed jointly, in which the themes of family and childhood have been included.

Also jointly with the authorities, care and protection procedures have been designed to be used for serious cases of abuse in communities and at the area level.

We also work in a coordinated way with state institutions, particularly with the ICBF, which is responsible for issues related to family and childhood. Currently, we are developing an intercultural model of care and support for children in the Amazonas Department, and we are planning to hold events that will have political repercussions at the departmental level.

Based on local intervention, we generate knowledge with the aim of raising awareness of the problems facing indigenous children in the Amazonas, and impacting on policy formation at both regional and national levels. To this end, and together with other Colombian counterparts of the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Fesco, Germinando, Universidad

del Norte and Universidad del Valle), we are systematising the training of care agents to raise standards and also to impact on national training policy. This is an example of the determination of Colombian civil society to improve the environment for new generations.

#### Note

- 1 The Caminos de Identidad Foundation (FUCAI), with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, is carrying out a programme to train families in the care of children, in the river Igarapará area of the Amazonas Department in Colombia. Under an agreement with the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute), fucai is developing a model for assistance that is appropriate for the care of children in these minority groups, which are geographically isolated across the Amazon forest, and have huge cultural and linguistic diversity.

#### Reference

Wigberto Rivero (1987). *La niñez en las culturas indígenas amazónicas*. <http://amazonia.bo/textos/nino.doc>.