



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# HUMAN RIGHTS COMPASS

USAID HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM Bogotá, Colombia

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*Left: US NGOs at Consultations, Top: Mark Schneider- ICG, Bottom: Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, WOLA  
Photo Credit: CHEMONICS*

## US-based NGOs Voice Their Views at Annual Consultations in DC

USAID's HRP III considers NGO partner input and insight to be among its critical tools with regard to program development and evaluation. So as to ensure a comprehensive approach to its strategic thinking, USAID carries out an annual innovative and participatory exercise with leading experts and advocacy organizations. Taking place once a year in two cities, first Bogotá then Washington D.C., the annual consultations provide an open space for NGOs focused on human rights issues in Colombia to converge opinions, insights, and feedback on what they are seeing and hearing through their line of work with respect to USAID's programming in Colombia. On December 5, 25 US-based NGOs convened in Washington, DC to engage on some of the latest human rights developments in Colombia. Coincidentally coinciding with a meeting between US and Colombian presidents only days before at the White House to discuss US-Colombian cooperation, the timely gathering could not have resulted in more poignant discussions on Colombia's human rights situation in light of so many shifting dynamics underway in Colombia, including its ongoing peace negotiations being held in Havana.

Opening the event were top-level officials from USAID/Colombia Mission and USAID's Latin American and Caribbean Bureau as well as State Department's Director of Andean Affairs, William Duncan. Headlining

this year's agenda were HRP III's progress over the past year and key areas in USAID's programming including: Peace Process and Human Rights; Implementation of the Victims' Law; and Land/Rural Development and Human Rights. Throughout the discussion sessions, USAID maintained a big picture perspective of the diverse aspects and positions shared while keeping in sharp focus its steadfast commitment and flexibility in the wake of any and all changes expected to develop in the coming year.

Addressing the roundtable of experts, Peter Natiello, USAID/Colombia Mission Director, remarked, "Each year we have seen more and more organizations interested in participating in these dialogues, and this has become a helpful way to inform our programming in Colombia on these issues...Each of you brings a valuable perspective representing marginalized voices and are helping to bring attention to important issues... Through this consultation, we will develop a common agenda that will benefit human rights victims and all Colombians." With both consultations completed, USAID and its key partners working in human rights came away with a clearer roadmap for the year ahead before they regroup and recalibrate once again.●

*The opinions expressed by the author may not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government*

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## Radio Program Breaches Human Rights Talk in Bajo Cauca Region

USAID's HRP III is changing the landscape of human rights culture in one of the most devoid areas of the country due to armed conflict through a groundbreaking radio program, "*Vive Tus Derechos*". Cauca and surrounding communities of the Bajo Cauca region of the Antioquia department including Cáceres, El Bagre, Nechí, Tarazá and Zaragoza have become one of Colombia's emblematic casualties of its five-decade long conflict. Geo-strategically blighted by the heavy presence of FARC since the 1980s, paramilitary presence in the 1990s, and now notorious demobilized paramilitary groups such as the *Urabeños* and *Los Paisas*, as well as ELN forces, this area is no stranger to violence, paralyzing fear, and lawlessness. However, perhaps a harder blow to locals of this region has been the failure of the State or local authorities to protect and/or respond to the difficult situation resulting from these complex dynamics.



*Cauca human rights committee logo*

"When someone asks a common passer-by if human rights violations take place in Cauca, unequivocally the answer is 'No'. However, upon mentioning victimizing acts that have taken place against the civilian population there, they begin to recognize that their rights have been violated. People don't know their rights nor do they know how to value them." This observation made by a member of the municipal human rights committee reflects on an all too common perception made by locals on the human rights situation.

In the wake of the prevalence of human rights violations in Cauca, silence and inaction has become the norm contributing to a lack of confidence in the very same institutions entrusted with their protection. Instead, stigmatization targeting those claiming rights or simply raising awareness of human rights has blanketed their society causing self-censorship of discussing or de-

fending their basic rights. To tackle this head-on while taking into account the sensitive nature of these communities' environments, HRP III took a bold, holistic approach through the radio waves and created a safe and open space to begin to introduce a discourse on human rights, in general.



*Human Rights radio program in session  
Photo Credit: Luis Carlos Hernandez*

As of December, radio station 96.3 FM, broadcast from the *Universidad de Antioquia*, now reaches listeners in these ill-affected areas with a monthly radio program dedicated to discussing a broad range of topics focused on human rights. As the byproduct of the hard work of Cauca's first human rights committee, established in 2012 with HRP III support, this initiative is guided and supported by their 19-member team comprised of representatives from the mayor's office, personero, education secretary, the family commissary, the police chief, local chief of health, the military unit commander, the ICBF (Family Welfare Institute), and civil society leaders. In its premiere 30-minute slot, the program breached topics of the human rights context in the Bajo Cauca region led by the criminal prosecutor, Maria del Socorro Campis, and the municipal personero, Orlando de Jesús Ávila, who introduced the human rights committee.

With the cooperation and support of local institutions, the initiation of Bajo Cauca's new radio program represents a bold step forward in re-writing their communities' narratives using the powerful tool of dialogue. Aware of the inherent risks, community members remain committed to peaceful and participatory means towards regaining their rights and ultimately building communities free from violence.●

## Indigenous Youth and Community Create Safe Havens against Forced Child Recruitment



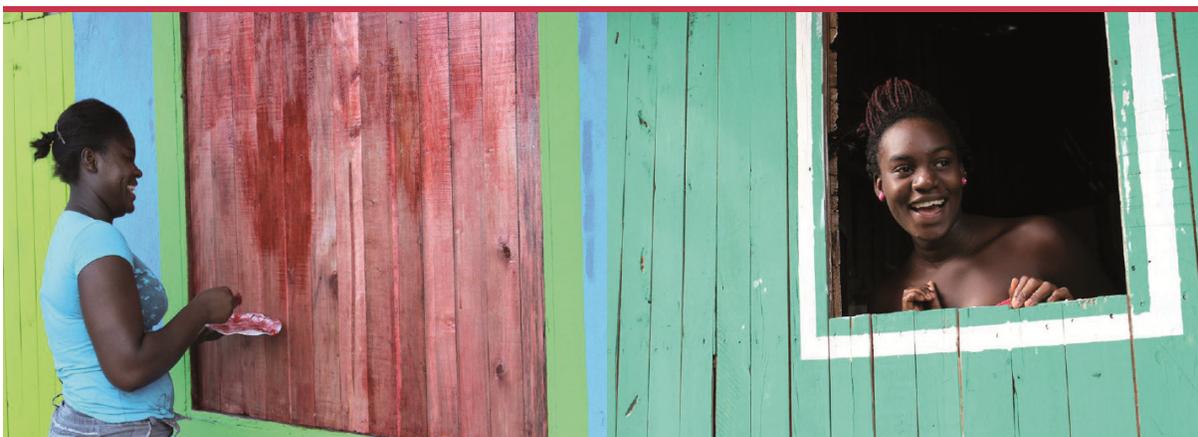
Activities protecting at-risk indigenous youth  
Photo Credit: BENPOSTA

Among the most vulnerable and at-risk victims of Colombia's internal armed conflict are its children and youth in the wake of increasing rates of forced child recruitment. While children and youth continue to be targeted by Colombia's principal illegal armed groups, one staggering figure according to a 2013 Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) report claims that up to an estimated 42% of fighters from Colombia's largest rebel group, the 9,000-strong FARC, are child soldiers. Over the past year, USAID's HRP III has worked to develop tools and strategies in prioritizing vulnerable indigenous communities of Colombia's northern Cauca region particularly affected by FARC operations. With aims to expand FARC ranks, indigenous youth of this region have been intently followed on their way to or from school and even approached outside of their homes. Lured with false promises of opportunities and easy money, children and youth, both boys and girls, have fallen into the ranks of illegal armed groups and robbed of their youth, innocence, and community's protection.

Such was the case of one indigenous family whereby three siblings (two boys of ages 11 and 14 and a 15 year-old girl) and children of an indigenous guard chief were being heavily targeted by FARC in the remote area of Andres Lopez. Staving off their tactics, however, only made their pursuers increasingly antagonistic and resulted in escalating their "recruiting" efforts. At night their houses were pelted with stones and on other occasions guerrillas would pound on their windows and doors threatening the entire family. Cases such as these motivated HRP III grantee BENPOSTA in partnership with *Asociacion de Cabildos Indigenas del Norte de Cauca*- ACIN to devise prevention and response strategies which would safeguard its most vulnerable while working to build stronger institutional capacities and break the cycle of victimhood.

In nine months, indigenous communities designed, developed and implemented protection strategies that maintained true to their customs and traditions involving community-based and participatory processes. As such, BENPOSTA ensured that parents, youth, teachers, cabildo leaders as well as ACIN coordination team had a direct hand throughout all project phases. In some cases, identified at-risk youth were temporarily placed with a proxy family or community member or in other cases they would be cared for at ethno-educational centers supported by HRP III to continue their studies in a safe and conducive environment. In extreme cases, high-risk youth were transferred to a BENPOSTA educational center in Bogotá to ensure their protection.

In late November, the Nasa indigenous community gathered to celebrate the closing of the project which ultimately protected 35 at-risk indigenous youth. According to Gabriela Valencia, Nasa community member and psychologist who worked on this project, perhaps the most effective component resulting in a successful outcome was the inclusion of their cultural customs and traditions in carrying out the designed strategies. She remarked, "...Taking into account we are a non-violent community, this project's contribution helped to address this risk while revitalizing the Nasa identity...and helping youth to value cultural practices as a main tool for prevention and protection. By re-focusing on cultural practices, ancestral wisdom, and working through indigenous mechanisms, youth and the community worked through risk assessment, self-protection designs, and strengthening protection networks, all the while empowering identity and culture." With greater awareness and community-based protection tools, the Nasa community are better equipped today in safeguarding their youth and preserving their culture and identity. ●



*Tumaco youth re-paint houses in their community.  
Photo Credit: Leidy Angulo*

## **Empowering and Protecting a Community in Tumaco Marred by Violence**

**T**umaco, a main port city in the department of Nariño, has gained significant press coverage over the past year albeit for some of the country's most complex and nefarious incidents resulting from the internal conflict and its residual violence. Terrorized by illegal armed groups operating in some of its most isolated communities, locals from this area have become subject to waves of crime, repression, violence including mobility restrictions, threats, murders, sexual violence and forced child recruitment. Compounded by weak State presence and high levels of impunity, residents largely identify with a sense of powerless and a lack of confidence in local authorities and institutions.

A breaking point however took place this past September when a dramatic turn of events transformed *comuna* 4 of the Panamá neighborhood. Within only days after working with the Police to identify and turn in GPDP members operating in their neighborhoods, residents discovered several of the detainees were released based on lack of evidence or surpassing their statute of detention. Not surprisingly, redress by the GPDP members was swift and intense consisting of threats and intimidations of community members. Not left to face these challenges alone, HRP III quickly mobilized a definitive coordination strategy involving community members and institutions to reclaim *comuna* 4's rights and homes.

By early November, HRP III had met with the Attorney General's Office to organize a special delegation mission to Tumaco. The mission, spearheaded by HRP III, included special prosecutors dedicated to handling cases related to GPDP, GBV and illicit activity. Following day-long meetings, agreements were reached whereby 5 special prosecutors were assigned to Tumaco to prioritize and advance civilian cases involving illegal armed groups and follow-up on GBV cases.

In efforts to support community empowerment, the Program worked with Panamá residents and, in particular, its youth. HRP III grantee *Familia Ayara* trained 13 youth from the community who along with the mayor's office support pulled off a dynamic "Concert for Peace" in December. Under the banner of also celebrating International Human Rights Day, the concert brought together 800 community members who were entertained by dance, skits, and moving messages for peace through song. Within a week and with HRP III support, "Paint Your House with the Colors of Peace" was carried out as part of a joint strategy which engaged community youth and adults including women, leaders, and public officials from the Panamá neighborhood to re-paint 659 houses out of a total of 856 houses in the neighborhood all in the spirit of re-building and strengthening their community social fabric and ties. Prizes were awarded by the mayor's office for the best painted houses as a means to promote community integration.

Panamá neighborhood resident, Ana Cecilia Castillo, feeling inspired and invigorated by the experience remarked, "...this project brought together different parts of the community together- youth and adults... including people who we normally don't speak to because the conflict itself created tensions but thanks to this initiative we were all able to share and come together. We were pleased to receive the materials and assistance to paint the houses to improve our houses and get to know our neighbors better. Today we live better than before and the neighborhood has a new face." •