



# Healing Young Minds Affected by Trauma

Adriana\* was a rural girl that loved to live in the countryside with her family but at a young age she was forced to join the guerrilla in Colombia. That was a very sad and difficult period in her life and the things she had to see and was forced to do are unimaginable.

After the peace agreement between the government and the guerilla, Adriana joined the government program for children who have been victims of child recruitment. She was placed in one of CRAN's foster homes in Bogotá a year ago when she was 14 years old. At the time, she was emotionally vulnerable and had difficulties coping with her day-to-day life. She had experienced bullying at school and had difficulties with social communication and interaction.

Since joining the project, Adriana has made significant progress with her personal and psychosocial skills, for example when expressing her needs and emotions. These skills have been developed through participating in training, cultural and recreational activities at the project.

She says, "My experience in art therapy activities has strengthened and helped me much more in my personal relationships and my capacity to express what I feel and to be myself". She was also able to talk about plans for

her future, showing interest in studying a technical or professional career.

Adriana is part of CCC's project Youth Reintegration Into Society: A Community-based Approach Towards Mental Health that involves a novel, community-based, narrative approach to psychosocial care, trauma and reintegration.

**Red Hand Day (12th February) raises awareness to stop child recruitment around the world. From 1990 to 2017, 16,238 girls and boys in Colombia were forcibly recruited by armed groups (Commission of Truth). CCC works with local partners to prevent child recruitment and support children who have forcibly been recruited into armed groups to reintegrate back into society.**

## RED HAND DAY

PHOTO: Diana Bermudez, Colombian actor, indigenous rights activist and supporter of CCC. The photo was taken by Tim Macklin for Red Hand Day.

\*her real name has been changed in order to protect her identity





# Trauma and Stigma affecting Survivors of Child Recruitment

Violence and poverty in Colombia have led to thousands of children being recruited into armed groups, while many others remain involved in other criminal activities. As a result, the mental health of these young people has become a pressing issue.

The latest analysis of mental health in Colombia (2020), based on the data from the Ministry of Health (Sistema de Información de Prestaciones de Salud - RIPS), shows a high demand for services related to mental and behavioural healthcare, with an increase over the years. Exposure to violence has resulted in adverse effects on the mental health of children, particularly for those who have escaped armed groups and now have to deal with their trauma, as well as the stigma and isolation that comes with reintegrating back into society.

According to the National Center for Historical Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica), the dimension of children and young people recruitment is such that, from 1958 to 2020, more than 17,860 minors have been victims of forced recruitment by armed groups. Regarding children at risk of joining criminal activities, according to the Colombian Social Services in the last 5 years over 15,000 children and young people (between the ages of 14 and 17) have gone through restoration of rights facilities in Colombia.

A report from the command of the Armed Forces of Colombia indicates that last year 411 children and adolescents were recovered from illegal groups that had conscripted them into their ranks. Most of the children who leave the armed groups joined the governmental programs of the Colombian Institute of Family

Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar ICBF).

The vast majority of these children and young people have been disproportionately affected by violence, poverty and exclusion which has left them more likely to be exposed to health disparities with already limited access to mental and physical health services. They come from the most marginalised neighbourhoods and regions in Colombia where children often suffer neglect, intra-familial violence, and lack a support network within their family or community. These risk factors and the exposure to such dangerous and violent events has resulted in several adverse effects on the physical and mental health outcomes of these CYP, particularly relating to trauma and their reintegration into civilian life where stigma and discrimination

have worsened their mental health and wellbeing. It is claimed that

**“youth who are both victimised, and delinquent have more adversities, lower levels of social support and higher rates of mental health symptoms”**

Psychologically, children in this situation lose their childhood, and lose their possibilities of recreation, study, and family time. Additionally, their reintegration process is marked by fear, mistrust, anguish, dread,

difficulty in assuming new challenges, loss of autonomy and other challenges that affect their behaviour and mental health. This is due to their uncertainty towards an unknown environment, as they have never been fully integrated into their communities. Many of these young people also have severe substance abuse problems and emotional instability which began before entering the institutional programmes.

Furthermore, from our experience, the children that are part of these institutional programmes for reintegration and rehabilitation can experience new traumas resulting from the social exclusion they face. They often feel displaced, uprooted and isolated which can cause emotional

crises, anxiety and depression. Most Colombians have been scarred one way or another by the conflict and violence; having been recruited or involved in criminal activities as minors, children formerly associated with armed groups, involved in criminal activities or are at risk to do so, are also victims of this violence, but many people, including their families, either do not understand or do not accept this which creates hostile environments and stigma towards them.

CCC joined efforts with the local grassroots organisations Fundación Cran and Tiempo de Juego in Bogotá and Villavicencio to support these children. Continue reading to learn more about our new mental health and elimination of stigma project.

## What does peace mean for you?

<p>Casa</p>	<p><b>EMIL, age 16</b></p> <p>It has been three years since Emil left his home in Chocó with his brothers, mum and dad, but he remembers it as a place of 'tranquillity, games, and joy.'</p>	<p>"I remember going out with my mother to the mountains to cut down bananas, running down the hill to the river with my brothers to play hide and seek."</p>	<p>"This house helps me remember where I lived, who I am, my history, and, most importantly, to not forget where I come from. Peace has the warmth of home and community."</p>
<p>Estrella</p>	<p><b>CATALINA, age 15</b></p> <p>Catalina looks to the stars to find peace. When she sees them through her window, they remind her that she is not alone. 'They are my companions and confidants.'</p>	<p>"Seeing them in the sky gives me peace, tranquillity, nostalgia, emotion: I see them no matter where I am."</p>	<p>"The stars continue to shine in the sky, teaching me that we can all shine. The peace that shines and illuminates desires, memories, dreams and promises to fulfil."</p>
<p>Ballena</p>	<p><b>LIFE, age 17</b></p> <p>Lipa remembers one special afternoon on the beach in Chocó with her godmother, who she hasn't seen for a while, and she hopes one day to be able to share more 'moments of love and peace' like this one.</p>	<p>"It's a blurry memory and I don't know how old I was, I just know that I was little. I remember we were walking on the beach and talking. The colour of the water was crystal clear and the sun kissed the sea."</p>	<p>"Every time that moment comes to mind I remember the tranquillity and joy that I felt."</p>
<p>Bote</p>	<p><b>ANDRES, age 16</b></p> <p>For Andres, boats represent many aspects of his life, his culture, his livelihood, resilience and perseverance.</p>	<p>"In the boats you fish, talk and share. It represents all my people, an entire culture."</p>	<p>"Peace is sailing. It is to be now and always, it is never giving up."</p>



# CCC's New Mental Health Project

Many children and young people in Colombia have been victims of child recruitment, they are forced to do and see horrible things, and when they want to restart a new life, overcoming the trauma, guilt and stigma against them are their biggest challenges.

That is why last June Children Change Colombia started a new 3-year project that uses a novel community-based narrative approach to psychosocial care, trauma and reintegration that helps children and young people (CYP) formerly associated with armed groups or at risk of join gangs to gain access to the resources and skills they need to deal with a variety of traumatic situations and stigmas.

The purpose of the project is for CYP to enhance positive relationships within the community and change situations of vulnerability and criminality through the use of narratives of resilience, to create protective and healing environments.

The project is implemented in collaboration with two local partner organisations that CCC has been working with for 10 years: Tiempo de Juego (TDJ) and Centro para el Reintegro y Atención al Niño - Center for reintegration and child care- (CRAN).

## Working with Victims of Forced Child Recruitment

Our partner CRAN works in Restrepo (Meta) where children face a high risk of recruitment by armed groups. They also provide foster homes and psychosocial support to children formerly associated with illegal armed groups in Bogotá and Villavicencio. These children were forcibly recruited by the guerrilla and it is very dangerous for them to go back to their hometowns so they are in these cities to be in a safe home and recover from the trauma they have experienced, as well as helping them to develop the life skills necessary to reintegrate into society, to access state support, and to navigate the legal system if necessary.

The project directly benefits 286 children and young people, but we do not only work with young people. Over the course of the first 6 months of the project, 149 families from Bogotá and Meta also took part. Additionally 38 staff members and volunteers were involved in the completion of the project, 5 of whom were CRAN staff members.

## Connecting with their inner child

One of the healing tools CRAN uses to help the CYP deal with their trauma is to connect with their inner child. The children recognized their greatest joys but also their pains and fears and how these have influenced their lives. The session began with reading a text, then a short meditation. The text invited them to think about their childhood, revisiting different situations, while recreating them with organic materials such as clay and elements of nature.

## Some results

The results of the first 6 months of the project were analysed by our monitoring and evaluation system and it was found that 79% of participants strengthened their leadership skills, with some struggling to identify personal progression. Also 97% of participants noticed an improvement in their wellbeing during the project, 90% of carers have stated that the project sessions are the only space they have to talk and take care of their mental health. These sessions enable carers to have a moment for themselves and feel connected to others going through similar experiences.

## What does peace mean for you?

The children of the project took part in an art therapy activity where they created pieces of art in response to the question 'what does peace mean for you?' The activity brought up memories from their childhoods and hometowns when they were happy and peaceful. The participants came from all over Colombia and their artwork was reflective of their culture and regions. For example, for Lipa who grew up on the Pacific Coast, the whale represents the tranquillity and joy she felt seeing a whale with her grandmother on the beach. And for Andres, who is from a fishing village, the fishing boat reminds him that "sailing is peace". The artworks were successful in allowing the teenagers to create positive narratives for themselves. They were displayed in different public buildings around Bogotá, so people could better understand their dreams and lives. You can see some of the artworks produced on [page 3](#).



Our partner Tiempo de Juego developed the project activities in three different centres in Bogotá. The first is the "Arcadia", a Protection Unit from the District for the Protection of Children and Youth (IDIPRON). The second is "Semillas de amor" foundation, which is a therapeutic centre specialised in caring for girls and young women who have been victims of rights violations and/or who have problems with drug addiction. The third is "Junior Masculino" which is an institution specialised in caring for boys and young men who have also been victims of rights violations and/or have substance abuse problems.

Over the course of the first 6 months of the project, we worked with 171 children and 161 family members and 19 staff members and volunteers.



## Working with children that needs special protection

### Self-recognition and leadership:

The aim of the project is to develop audiovisual projects that could help the participants to express their opinions of themselves. The purpose is to promote self-care and mental health through artistic exercises. Some topics that have been addressed include s "Expressing Emotions", "Self-Esteem", "Learning to Be Calm", "Thinking Positively About Ourselves" and "Creative Thinking". They talked about these topics and themselves through strengthening their technical skills related to music and video production. They made a song and a video clip about their life and dreams.

The project also focuses on building skills in critical thinking, empathy and managing emotions, as well as planning and leadership abilities to help the children and young people prepare for society when they leave these centres. Sport and other playful activities are a key way in which TDJ teaches these skills, for example through football they learn assertive communication and teamwork.

## Some results

The project also allows and encourages participants to openly talk about sexual abuse and mistreatment; They have learned that being able to identify and name it is part of the healing process. They also talked about their experience in the conflict, the positive and the negative. They learned to allow themselves not to feel guilty and to see that these past experiences do not define them.

We're very pleased to say that the results of the first 6 months were successful. 100% of participants experienced an improvement in mental health and 100% reported that they strengthened their leadership abilities from the project. Additionally, 100% of the participants were able to change their perspective on their involvement in armed groups, looking at their participation as a violation of their rights which is crucial in their progression going forward in society.

## Yomaira aged 17

When Yomaira was 14, she experienced mistreatment and abuse by a family member. To mitigate this violent situation, she began to consume various psychoactive substances and was admitted to a centre for reestablishment of rights at 16 years old..

Her dream was always to be a professional dancer, so when she had the opportunity to create a music video, she was excited to lead her group in the dance choreography. This experience of a leadership role, has had a huge positive impact on her self-esteem, where before she had been quite introverted, she now led the group with confidence.

She has asked if she could participate in the dance activities offered by TDJ after the project ends. She also asked if she could have a job carrying out activities in different centres and projects offered by TDJ.. Her positive and enthusiastic words sum up the progress she has made: "Can I be like Mila (TDJ manager who supports project activities) and work for this? I'd love to!"



# Events



## Our Project Talk at the Hippodrome

We're pleased to say that our Project Talk, which we held in November of last year, was a great success! We're very excited to share with you our new venue for the event - The Hippodrome in London. The evening featured talks from the CCC staff in the UK and Colombia, as well as videos from the children themselves. Attendees could also try out our new immersive virtual reality English learning platform that we are providing to schools in rural Colombia. Overall, it was a beautiful evening where the CCC team and key supporters could get together again in support of a common cause - supporting, empowering and protecting Colombia's most at risk children. Thank you very much to The Hippodrome and Simon Thomas for hosting us and your ongoing support

## CCC was on a podcast! "Protecting Colombia's most at-risk children from exploitation in Bogotá"

Earlier this year, CCC was featured on the Colombia Calling podcast, where three CCC supporters were interviewed about their experience of visiting our project with ACJ, which works with children who have been or are at-risk of being victims of sexual exploitation. Betty, Abhijit and Carlos went to ACJ's children's centre in the Santa Fe neighbourhood of Bogotá, an area where children are surrounded by legal sex workers and high levels of gangs and drugs.

Betty said of the project: "it's not just about giving the children the possibility to study but also the opportunity to have an integrated education, with music and dance, and to enjoy life without seeing the reality they have to see everyday".



**CHECK OUT THE PODCAST HERE!**

## Commitment to the Peace Agreement

Children Change Colombia is committed to advocate for the rights of children and young people, so we have joined efforts with Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD) to bring two Colombian experts to London to promote children's rights.

Paola Forero Acosta, is a Colombian Human Rights expert who wrote the Children and Young People chapter of the Colombian Truth Commission's Report, and Karen Arteaga Garzón, is the director of Rodeemos el Diálogo Colombia, who supported the work of the Colombian Truth Commission.

In the last week of April, our guests talked in London School of Economics' Latin America and Caribbean Centre, The Houses of Parliament, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Colombian Consulate with the CCC team to advocate for the children and young people who were victims in the internal Conflict in Colombia, and to highlight their role in the construction of peace and the implementation of the Peace Accords.



## Yvonne's Visit to CRAN

As a long-term volunteer for CCC, visiting the projects has always been a very rewarding and encouraging experience. My recent visit to 'Fundación CRAN' on the outskirts of Bogotá allowed me to see first-hand the great work that CCC is doing with vulnerable children in Colombia, especially with those who have been victims of the forced recruitment into illegal armed groups.

The project is housed in a beautiful natural setting, the ideal environment for the children to feel safe and secure. They provide foster homes with families that treat them with love and respect and help them feel confident and hopeful. However, the psychological and mental health support is their paramount mission to help them overcome the trauma they have endured. They achieve this through a series of activities and workshops from art to sports and through the academic and curricular programmes, either vocational or high school. More recently they have also embarked into university education, where they are being empowered and able to reinsert into society through their own skills and capabilities.

Finally, I would like to thank CCC and Fundación CRAN for their time, the insight they have given me about this wonderful project and for making me feel so welcome. **Gracias!**

## Natalie's visit to Minca

Natalie, who was one of our interns last year, visited our project with Mision Gaia in La Sierra Nevada which focuses on improving education in rural schools, as well as vocational training in ecotourism and sustainable agriculture to improve livelihoods in the area.



## Donation of technical equipment to our project on the Caribbean Coast

We'd like to say a big thank you to the organisation Ilumno for donating tablets, laptops, drones and other equipment to our project on education and vocational training in La Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The equipment will support the children to make a video blog and podcast on the biodiversity of their region, with the aim of teaching them entrepreneurial skills with a focus on eco-tourism and green jobs so they can benefit from the biodiverse territory.

## CCC has a new cooperation partner

CCC is very happy to announce that we have signed a Cooperation Agreement with the University Areandina to work together on academic scientific and cultural projects for young people in Colombia.

## Colombia-Masala night

In March, CCC was invited to take part in 'Colombia Masala' an event of live entertainment, music, food and dance both Colombian and Indian cultures. The highlights included a Bollywood dance performance and class and Cali salsa workshop! The evening was organised by our long-term supporter Abhijit Kapadia who runs "Latindian events". The CCC team had lots of fun - we hope to see you at the next one!



### NEWSLETTER NO 61

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# Join us for the Thames Walk!

## Saturday the 17th of June 2023



### Thames Walk

Join us on Saturday 17th June for fun-filled summer's day out - a 10 mile walk along the Thames and through the beautiful wilderness of Richmond Park! At the picnic half-way, enjoy the tastes and sounds of Colombia, with music, cumbia dancing, Colombian coffee and empanadas. It's a chance to practice your English and/or Spanish and most importantly to get together with all our wonderful supporters, united in a common cause, to enable children in Colombia to claim their right to live safely and in peace.

An important part of the event is to raise funds and that's why we'd like to ask you to kindly set up a fundraising page and get your friends and family to sponsor you to do the walk. We ask that everyone has the fundraising target of a minimum of £50.

#### Tickets

**£15, including a free CCC T-shirt**

(children under 12 go free)

#### Email

[events@childrenchange colombia.org](mailto:events@childrenchange colombia.org)

or call us on +44 (0) 2080502735

#### Date

**Saturday the 17th June 2023**

#### Time

**10:00am - 4:00pm**

(the walk will take at least 4 hours)

#### Location

**Richmond Park, London**



**GET YOUR TICKETS HERE!**



**SET UP YOUR FUNDRAISING PAGE HERE!**

If you need help setting up your fundraising page please email [info@childrenchange colombia.org](mailto:info@childrenchange colombia.org)

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## Yes, I want to help transform the lives of children in Colombia

Title  Name   
 Address   
 Postcode   
 Tel  Email

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Here is my gift of: £10  £25  £80  £100  Other

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Signed

Date

I do not require an acknowledgement (please tick or we will assume you do; this will help us save on administration costs).

I would also like to receive email updates about your work protecting children's rights in Colombia, your fundraising events and campaigns, and how I can get involved.

You can change the ways you hear from us at any time using the contract details below.

You can also donate online at [www.childrenchange colombia.org/donate](http://www.childrenchange colombia.org/donate)

Thank you so much for your support!

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E [info@childrenchange colombia.org](mailto:info@childrenchange colombia.org)

Please return this form to Children Change Colombia, 5 Richbell Place, Holborn London, WC1N 3LA



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