



# Children of the Andes

Defending Children's Rights in Colombia

Spring 2015



## Never Going Back

Ivan is 14 years old. When he was 12, he joined one of Colombia's guerilla groups.

"A militiaman came to our village and convinced me to join. He told me that if I joined them, things would be better for me, that I'd never go hungry again. I told my mum I was going and she cried and tried to stop me, but I left anyway. When I got there they gave me a pair of boots and a uniform and made me sign a contract for 5 years.

We had to collect firewood and bananas, and to clean and guard the camp. They taught us to shoot different weapons. We had to go to classes on politics, health, how to be a sniper and how to use explosives. It was really hard, the army was always attacking us so I never slept and we had to move around a lot. They had really strict rules, and if you didn't follow them

you were punished. If you did what they said then they'd let you out to see your family once a year. I wasn't allowed out in my first year, but in my second year I behaved better so they let me go and visit my mum. When I got home, my mum was so happy to see me, and my uncle persuaded me to stay. We ran away from our village so the guerillas wouldn't find me and make me return".

**In 2015 Children of the Andes will begin working to support children like Ivan, who have managed to escape armed groups, but we can't do this without your support.**

**Please donate today.**

# Child recruitment into armed groups

**We aim to provide intensive psycho-social support for children, without which children will struggle to recover from the traumas they have experienced, and to develop the life skills necessary to successfully reintegrate into society.**

Colombia is experiencing an historic opportunity for change. The peace process has progressed further than ever before and, for many Colombians, there is a real sense of optimism about what this could mean for the future. In February this year, after more than half a century of conflict, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), the largest and oldest of Colombia's left-wing guerrilla groups, announced that they will no longer recruit children under the age of 17. Whether this

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commitment is realised, and has any effect on recruitment of minors into Colombia's other illegal armed groups, remains to be seen. What is certain is that child recruitment continues to be a significant issue in Colombia. A recent study estimated that at least 18,000 children and young people, some as young as 8 years old, were recruited into the guerrillas and other illegal armed groups between 2008 and 2012. According to the Colombian Ministry for Defence, 70% of the 5,000 plus Colombian children who have been officially demobilised over the last 13 years were recruited by the FARC.

As Ivan's story demonstrates, forced recruitment is not the only reason children become involved in armed groups. Sometimes, because of violence, abuse or poverty at home, they believe that joining an armed group offers them a better life. In other cases, children might be so used to being

surrounded by violence and gangs, that they simply don't see any other options. Whatever their reason, once they have joined children are used as messengers, informers, combatants, cooks, and for sex.

## Reintegrating children into society

To date the Colombian government has struggled to find an effective way to integrate children who have demobilised from these groups back into society, and help them get over the traumas they have experienced. With the peace talks gaining momentum it is likely that thousands more children will be demobilised, so there is an urgent need for improved services. It is crucial that reintegration into society is effective, otherwise these children run the risk of ending up in other potentially dangerous situations, or even recruited into other armed groups. Children who have been





involved with armed groups are stigmatized by society, and often by their own families and communities. Many don't feel like children any more. They may have held the power of life and death over others and experienced traumas most of us never will. They may even have had children of their own. Many will have dropped out of school before or after they were recruited. They will have been taught to obey orders without thinking and to suppress any moral scruples about committing violence, which they would have witnessed routinely. They will have got used to living in constant fear.

After the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups from 2003-6, in the absence of any clear programme for demobilised children, many of the children simply joined other armed groups, unable to make the transition back to 'normal' life. It is absolutely vital that this does not happen again. The Colombian government recognises this, and

ICBF (Colombian Social Services) is currently working with 7 specialist organisations across Colombia, to run foster homes to reintegrate and rehabilitate children.

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### **What will Children of the Andes do?**

Prevention of recruitment itself is obviously a fundamental response to this issue. COTA is already working in areas with a high level of child recruitment, supporting partners such as Tiempo de Juego and Carvajal to address some of the issues that lead to recruitment.

In 2015, for the first time, we will also begin to work with children who have been demobilised from armed groups. The issue of demobilised children is a very delicate one, and Colombian Social Services require a high level of confidentiality from state operators running their programmes. After a long and difficult process of researching this issue and discovering the organisations running the ICBF programme, COTA has identified a potential partner. This organisation sees an urgent need to make existing programmes for demobilised children more effective. It aims to provide intensive psycho-social support for children, without which children will struggle to recover from the traumas they have experienced, and to develop the life skills necessary to successfully reintegrate into society.

**Please help us to begin this urgent work. Donate today.**

# COTA Project Talk 2015

This January we were delighted to welcome our Field Officers for a two week visit. During their visit, Natalia, based in the Bogotá Field Office, and Heidy, based in the Cali Field Office, led our annual Project Talk presentation on Thursday 29th January.

Thank you to all who attended and contributed to making the evening a great success!

This year, the Project Talk focused on what some of Colombia's most excluded children say about their lives, their hopes for the future and how COTA's work in 2015 will help respond to their current needs and expectations.

We were proud to premiere our new film at the talk. It features some of the incredibly articulate children and young people who our partner organisations work with, talking about how Colombia is changing, what that means (or doesn't mean!) for them, and their hopes for Colombia's future.

Watch our new film online at [childrenoftheandes.org](http://childrenoftheandes.org) or contact us for a copy.

COTA believes that peace talks and a more prosperous Colombia have the potential to offer children and young people the peaceful and secure future which many have previously been denied. In this context, every Colombian has the right to be optimistic. But as yet, not every Colombian can be. Our partners in Colombia, supported by the wider research carried out by our Field Officers, have shown us that too many young people and their families continue to be excluded from the benefits this transition might bring.

Building on the film, Natalia and Heidy explained that the Colombian government and politicians are gearing up for change; creating and

strengthening agencies to work with those affected by the conflict, and developing campaigns focused on sustainable peace-building. However, it is unclear whether these advances are mirrored by changes in the structures of Colombian society.

If a peace agreement is signed, ordinary Colombian society will experience an influx of demobilised guerrillas, both adults and children. It is difficult to predict how successful the difficult process of reintegration into society will be, or how the rest of the population will respond.

Natalia and Heidy highlighted some of the many unresolved questions about these changes: Will the programmes that the government is developing be enough to help





demobilised children overcome their traumatic experiences and take part fully in ordinary life? Will there be appropriate educational opportunities for these children so that they can find a productive role in society? What will be done to prepare existing students to welcome their new classmates who have experienced a very different childhood? Will employers be open to offering them work in the future? Will people be able to overcome the stigma that surrounds these children and be happy to sit next to them on the bus, or welcome them into their community? Most importantly, how will understanding and forgiveness be nurtured? No-one knows the answers to these questions yet, but COTA will continue to research, to talk to our partners, community members, and decision makers in government in order to better understand where COTA's support will most be needed in the months and years to come.

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Our partners have highlighted that there is a real danger that a post-conflict dialogue will focus only on the FARC reintegration. This, they fear, would leave those affected by Colombia's many other illegal armed groups, and other marginalised people, even more excluded than they are at present. Natalia and Heidy emphasised that there won't be a single peace for the whole of Colombia; each area will have to create solutions that are suitable for their own context and

that address the specific issues that they face. This won't be easy, and the only way it will work is if all actors, including children and young people, have a voice in this process.

The protection and empowerment of neglected children is central to COTA's work. All of our partners aim to support children and young people to develop the confidence to make their voices heard in the decisions that affect their lives. Our focus in 2015 and beyond is to ensure that our partners continue to empower children to have their say about the Colombia they want to live in. The challenge for COTA and our partners in this changing Colombia will be to continue this work and to encourage others to open up spaces where the voices of children and young people will be listened to. This, we think, will be a vital element in the success of a peaceful future for their country.

# Upcoming events

## COTA's 10th Thames Walk Sunday 3rd May 2015

Join us and invite your friends and family to come along to the 10th Thames Walk! We will begin along the riverside and then venture into beautiful Richmond Park! Don't miss it!

## Stewards needed

We urgently need volunteer stewards for the Thames Walk. Stewards will need to be available for a "Dummy Walk" on 18th April, as well as the actual walk on 3rd May. If you'd like to volunteer please contact Victoria ([victoria@childrenoftheandes.org](mailto:victoria@childrenoftheandes.org)) by 13th April.

## Help us spread the word!

Distribute COTA leaflets around your local community! Please contact Victoria ([victoria@childrenoftheandes.org](mailto:victoria@childrenoftheandes.org)) if you would like to help.

# News

## COTA's Rumba Tropical

Our Rumba Tropical in October raised over £4,000. COTA would like to thank everyone who attended the event and everyone who made it a success.



# Thanks

Thanks to all our supporters, whose generous donations make our work possible

## Individuals

**Martha Castellano** organized a Colombian breakfast with friends and **Caitlin Greenan** organized a fundraising coffee morning. **Leslie Duff** and **Katherine Patiño** asked for donations in lieu of presents and **Martha Isabel Lopez Ruiz** asked for donations in lieu of birthday presents for her daughter Sofia. **Phil Manzanera** donated his time and creative genius in return for donations. **Maria Luisa Ortiz** donated Spanish classes in return for donations. **Paget Fulcher** and **Juan Diego Carrillo Rendon** fundraised through work. The **Murray family** donated Andy & Jamie's tennis clothes to support our work. **Lyn Payne** donated proceeds from a meal with her running group. **Teresa Molano (Calthorpe Project)** invited us to have fundraising stalls at her event. **Andrea Ortiz** donated from her bucket challenge and **Nicholas Rennie** donated the cost of a jumper during Christmas Jumper Day.



## Sports Challenges

Thanks to everyone who has raised funds through sporting challenges, including: **Simon Bone, Paula Emery, Marcela Sierra** and **James Westhorpe**.

The COTA 2014 Run to the Beat team: **Yeniree ChinFong, Angela Morse, Andrea Restrepo, Sandra Rios** and **Glenn Todd** who raised over £1,500.

If you would like to organise an event to fundraise for COTA or for more info about fundraising challenges in your area please contact [victoria@childrenoftheandes.org](mailto:victoria@childrenoftheandes.org) or **020 7549 0225**.

## Community

A big thank you to everyone at **Brampton College, Haringey Sixth Form Centre** and **Kingston Grammar School**.

Thanks to religious groups that have supported our work in recent months, including: **Alderney Religious Society of Friends, Alexandra Presbyterian Church (Belfast), Chichester Cathedral, Church Of The Immaculate Conception (Stroud), St Albans' Religious Society of Friends, St Andrew's Clubmoor (Liverpool), St Joseph Catholic Church (South Molton), St Leonard's Toddler Group (Teignmouth), Southdown Methodist Church (Harpenden)**.

# Letter from the Director

Dear Friends

Next year we'll be celebrating 25 years of Children of the Andes.

Much has changed in Colombia over these years and, just as Colombia has changed, so has Children of the Andes.

We began as an emergency rescue mission for children living in the sewers of Bogota. Protecting children from immediate harm is still a necessary and important part of what we do.

But, over the years, we have also focussed more and more on long term changes to children's lives and on children themselves as the leaders of these changes.

We want to make sure that every child we work with develops the knowledge and self-confidence to stand up for their own rights, so that their lives change for the better, for good.

We think the work we are doing with children and young people in Colombia is so important that it is time we had a higher profile, not just in the UK, but in Colombia as well. With a higher profile, we can do more, and change more children's lives.

So to mark the way we have developed as an organisation and to help raise our profile, we feel it is time the organisation had a new name.

In addition, there is another foundation working in Colombia – Fundación Niños de los Andes – with whom we were once associated and with whom we are still often confused. We also feel a new name will help end this confusion.

For all these reasons, you will see a change in our name and our logo over the next year. But we will remain the same organisation, with the same priorities: to defend the rights of the children most at risk in Colombia.

COTA would have achieved nothing over the last 25 years without your support, so we don't want to change our name without getting your views on the subject first.

So please fill in the questionnaire enclosed with this newsletter. You can either return it by post or complete it online at [surveymonkey.com/r/99GMYGX](https://surveymonkey.com/r/99GMYGX). We really want to hear from you.

With enormous thanks, as ever,

Duncan Millar,  
Executive Director

## Regular Giving

Remember: a standing order is the most cost effective way for us to administer your contribution

### Instructions to the Manager

#### Your account:

Name of the Bank or Building Society: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Account No.:       Sort Code:

#### Your donation:

Please pay **Children of the Andes** (Account No.: **22052801**, Sort Code: **60-07-02**) at NatWest Bank plc, 14 High Street, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 1AX,

**The sum of £** \_\_\_\_\_ on the day of \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / 20 \_\_\_\_  
(This date should be at least one month from today).

**And the same sum**  Monthly  Quarterly  Yearly

#### Your details:

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ (dd/mm/yy)

### Gift Aid Declaration

I would like Children of the Andes to reclaim tax on any donations I have made over the last 4 years and all future donations until I notify you otherwise.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Please let us know if you change your address or if you no longer pay an amount of income tax or capital gains equal to the tax we will reclaim on your donation (currently 25p for every £1 you give).

Please return completed form to Children of the Andes, Development House, 56-64 Leonard Street, EC2A 4LT. For more information about Gift Aid, standing orders, legacies or payroll giving, please telephone our office on: 0207 549 0225

# Thank you!

# Field Office Diary

Victoria, our Events and Community Fundraiser, writes about her experiences from her recent trip to Colombia.

Last year, I travelled for the first time to Colombia. During my trip, I had the privilege of meeting the project staff and the children at all COTA's partner projects. I got a real sense of the issues and dangers these children face on a daily basis, which was quite an emotional experience for me. Although I knew some of the shocking stories the children had faced, it was much more real being there and hearing their voices, how they have experienced abuse and neglect at home, bullying at school, the dangers of gang violence and sexual abuse in the streets and many other risks, without mentioning the traumas many of them have been faced with as a result of being forced to flee their home towns because of the ongoing conflict.

I will never forget visiting COTA's project with our partner Renacer in Cartagena and the children I met

there, among them 6 year old Mariana. I arrived to a group of 14 happy, smiling boys and girls, but the project leader explained to me how each one of them was in this session because they were at risk of abuse or because they had been victims of sexual abuse, including Mariana.

I admire how strong these children are, despite the traumas they have lived through; they are all so full of positivity. Their determination to move forward and their desire to learn is inspiring, but key to this is the work COTA partners are doing to help them to protect themselves against threats to their

wellbeing. Visiting our partners made me realise how the need in Colombia for the work our partners do is huge, and how our partners are really relying on us so that they can continue to have a positive impact on the lives of the many at risk children that they support. Please help us to continue to make a difference in the lives of children like Mariana.



Children of the Andes: Keeping children safe, defending children's rights and strengthening children's organisations in Colombia.

## Please donate now

**Donor details:** (We won't share your details with anyone else.)

Title: \_\_\_\_\_ First name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode: \_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

Tel: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

### Your donation:

I would like to make a donation of: £5 ; £10 ; £25 ; £50 ; £100 ; Other £ \_\_\_\_\_

### Payment details:

(By BACS transfer: **Children of the Andes**; Sort code **60-07-02**; Account no. **31623212**)

Cheque (Please make cheques payable to **Children of the Andes**)

Visa;  Mastercard;  CAF Charitycard

Card No.:

3 digit security number (on signature strip):    Expiry Date: /  (mm/yy)

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ (dd/mm/yy)

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**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

Please let us know if you change your address or if you no longer pay an amount of income tax or capital gains equal to the tax we will reclaim on your donation (currently 25p for every £1 you give).

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

Please send me a COTA fundraising pack

# Thank you!