



Children of the Andes

Building a better future for vulnerable children in Colombia
Spring 2008

The photographs do not represent the specific children mentioned.
All children's names have been changed.



To Dream Again: the Paz y Bien Foundation

Miguel never had the chance to dream of becoming a footballer or a pilot, like other boys do. By the age of 11, his childhood was already over. He was living the grim reality of life in a street gang. But now, thanks to the support of the Paz y Bien Foundation and Children of the Andes, Miguel can dream again.

Living in Aguablanca, one of Cali's most troubled districts, with little chance of an education or a way out of the poverty common to so many children like him, Miguel started stealing from shops and pickpocketing.

Rejected by his community, he turned to the street gangs that offered a sense of belonging, as well as a way to make some money.

"I could only see one way of life," says Miguel. "No matter what I did, people treated me as if I was just a worthless criminal, so I came to believe that myself. The only thing that mattered to me was money."

By the age of 13, Miguel was trafficking drugs and guns. On some days, he would earn more

than a million pesos (around £300) for a few hours work. And no one dared cross him.

Miguel didn't expect much else from life, and didn't even expect to live much longer.

Now 21, Miguel is a changed person. He was one of the young people to graduate recently from the Paz y Bien (Peace and Wellbeing) Programme which works to provide alternatives to gang life in Aguablanca.

With the practical and emotional support of Paz y Bien, Miguel has been able to leave his old life behind. He now intends to focus his talents on making friends and getting a job as a radio presenter. *"I want to study journalism,"* he says, confident that he will make it happen.



Children of the Andes is committed to helping young people like Miguel rebuild their lives and create real alternatives to crime and gang membership.

Our experience of supporting the work of Paz y Bien has shown that, in the face of stigmatisation and abandonment by family and community, these young people have shown a tremendous desire to change their lives, against all the odds.

Street gangs: the danger and the lure

In the '80s and '90s, the drugs trade produced a generation of young people who were pressured into working as traffickers or hit men for the notorious Cali cartel.

The legacy of this era is still clearly felt in Aguablanca. In the last few years, levels of violence in this area have escalated, including an increase in the recruitment of young people into illegal armed groups.

Poverty and social exclusion further increase the vulnerability of children and young people to exploitation and involvement in gangs.

The young people most likely to be drawn into gangs and illicit activities have been forced from their homes by conflict in rural areas. They arrive in the city without any legal status, which prevents them from accessing employment and education. Their families live in substandard, overcrowded housing, many with limited access to even basic services. These factors have led to a high incidence of domestic violence, sexual abuse and drug use within the family.

For many children in Aguablanca, accessing education is a challenge. Some are ineligible for school enrolment because they are unable to produce identity documents. Others find it hard to keep up with the academic demands of mainstream schools that lack the resources to provide the support these children need.

Even getting to school is difficult. Since there are so few schools in Aguablanca, children must frequently travel to schools in other neighbourhoods. But gang rivalries often make it dangerous for them to go into these areas.

So with few viable alternatives, it is hard for many of Aguablanca's youth to avoid being drawn into gangs. Insecure, vulnerable and often ostracised by their community, the young people can look to gangs to provide them with a sense of security and belonging. What is more, dealing drugs or selling guns offers the prospect of earning more in a day than the average family can earn in a month.

However, the refuge and opportunities that gangs seem to offer are illusory. Most young gang members in Aguablanca are not expected to reach their twentieth birthday.

Our work to provide viable alternatives to poverty and gang membership

Children of the Andes began working with Paz y Bien last year to help provide real opportunities for vulnerable young people in Aguablanca.

For nearly 20 years, Paz y Bien has been delivering vital services to neglected communities in Aguablanca, including nursery care for displaced families and support for young mothers.



In 2000, some members of street gangs in the area approached Paz y Bien and said, "You help everyone else in Aguablanca except us." They asked for a safe place to go, and for help with schooling and employment.

Responding to their great desire to create a better future for themselves, Paz y Bien set up the Francisco Esperanza Programme for young people involved in or at risk from street gangs and crime.

Today, the programme works from six day-care centres in the heart of Aguablanca's most neglected neighbourhoods.

Approximately 570 children and adolescents aged between 10 and 22 participate. Nearly all of them have been drawn into or affected by crime.

The day-care centres, which form the hub of the programme, are oases of safety and hope. They provide counselling and practical support with education and employment, opportunities for safe recreation, and a focal point for re-establishing relations between the young people, their families and the communities who have rejected them.

Entrants must abide by a set of rules drawn up by the youngsters themselves, which include the enforcement of a drug- and arms-free zone, and a ban on any continued involvement in crime.

How does the programme work?

An individual plan of intensive personal, educational and vocational support is established for each young person. Tutors, who are locals themselves, provide mediation services between the young people, their families, the community and, where necessary, the authorities.

Individual and group counselling help to address the root causes of conflict and trauma, enabling the young people to come to terms with their experiences and gain the confidence to change their lives. Crucially, the families are involved in this process as much as possible.



Paz y Bien also works with younger children in danger of gang involvement and with young people who are already so deeply involved in gang activity that they cannot enter the day care centres.

By creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding, Paz y Bien seeks to ensure that all its young people are valued by their community, by their families and by the youngsters themselves. In fostering a sense of self-worth and providing real opportunities for education and employment, the programme is helping some of Cali's most neglected and troubled young people build happier, more secure lives.



How has the programme helped so far?

In 2007, COTA supported the costs of one of Paz y Bien's day-care centres in Aguablanca. Here's what it has achieved:

- 70% of the young people ceased their involvement in illegal activities
- 50% of the heavy drug users are consuming fewer drugs each day
- Over 50% of the young people are now studying for qualifications that will enable them to secure legal employment in the future.

Paz y Bien is planning to help many more vulnerable young people build a safer, happier life in Aguablanca over the coming years. We hope that, with your help, COTA can be there with them.



La Rayuela



Cermujer



Formemos



Aguablanca, Cali



La Rayuela

How Children of the Andes made a difference in 2007

New partnerships

As well as our new work with young people and street gangs in Cali, COTA took on two more new partners in 2007. All of these organisations carry out vital work with extremely vulnerable groups of children and young people, but lack the financial and technical support they need to fully meet the needs of their beneficiaries.

Preventing child sexual exploitation in Cartagena

During 2007, COTA began working with the Renacer Foundation, the leading NGO tackling the growing problem of child sexual exploitation in Colombia.

Child victims of sexual exploitation are among the most vulnerable and marginalised children in Colombia. **It is reported that there are currently up to 35,000 children involved in the sex trade/industry in Colombia***, with reports of children as young as nine being forced into prostitution. This crisis is particularly acute in Colombia's coastal regions, due to the growth of sex tourism in these areas. Despite the

gravity of the situation, support is extremely limited, possibly due to social taboos around sex work.

Last year, COTA gave a general grant towards Renacer's broad range of services, which include outreach support for child sex workers, residential care and prevention. We also started working with Renacer to develop a prevention campaign, aimed at protecting vulnerable children in the tourist sector in Cartagena – a major centre for child sexual exploitation.

Offering lasting support to street children in Bogotá

According to Colombian Social Services, there are more than 11,000 street children in Bogotá alone. As part of COTA's ongoing commitment to supporting street children, we have established a partnership with the Albergue Infantil "Mama Yolanda", a Bogotá-based programme for street children that has been accredited by the United Nations for its work with children and drug addiction.

A recent change in legislation has had a considerable impact on the work of the Albergue. All Colombian care institutions receiving state subsidies are now obliged to reduce the amount of time they can support children in residential care, risking the possibility of children being returned to their families before the fundamental problems causing the child to live on the street have been resolved.

In response, COTA has worked together with the Albergue to develop a new outreach service that will ensure that ex-beneficiaries and their families or carers continue to receive practical and emotional support after the child has left care.

COTA will draw on its experience of pioneering leaving-care services with Formación d'Futuros (see opposite) to continue developing this three-year pilot service, which we hope will be of value to other care institutions experiencing similar challenges.

*Source: ICBF, ECPAT Colombia



Nutrinfantil

Ongoing work with existing partners

In 2007, COTA continued to support a range of programmes addressing the education, healthcare and protection needs of vulnerable children. All three are crucial areas of need and are intrinsically linked. Although education is vital for children to emerge from poverty, they cannot progress unless they are healthy and feel safe.

We have continued to support a range of community and care institutions in Cali, Bogotá and the coffee-growing region. Through La Rayuela, for example, we have helped nearly 200 children from coffee-growing communities go back to school, improve family relationships and learn useful skills in bakery and carpentry. In Cali, we have continued supporting the Cermujer Foundation which provides a refuge for young pregnant victims of sexual violence.

Supporting innovative projects with the potential for wider impact

In addition to this grass-roots work, COTA also supports initiatives that have the potential to provide longer-term benefits beyond the scope of the project itself. These are often innovative approaches to problems that are not being adequately addressed by the government and the voluntary sector. In 2007, COTA continued to support three key projects in this area.

One of these projects is the development of a **flexible educational model for child workers**. This project, which benefited from our Christmas appeal, has already exceeded expectations, with most children progressing through primary school more quickly than anticipated. In addition, new services have been added, such as the establishment of informal learning groups within the community, which have increased flexibility and accessibility.

The second project in this category is the programme offered by Cali-based

Formación d'Futuros, which provides **vulnerable young people leaving residential care** care with two years of comprehensive support. After five years of development and systematisation, they now plan to promote their methodology to care institutions and organisations in Colombia.

Finally, since 2003 we have supported the Carvajal Foundation and its community resource centre for disabled children in Aguablanca, Cali. Over the last two years, with funding from COTA, Carvajal has been able to set up a new and vital outreach service. This service, delivered by specially selected and trained volunteers, provides **outreach support to disabled children and young people** who, for various reasons, cannot attend the community centre. This service is expected to reach an average of 1,000 children and young people in 2008, as well as serving as a model experience for other disability organisations in Colombia.

Building institutional capacity

In addition to the provision of financial support, our work is underpinned by a commitment to helping our partner organisations build their capacity to become more sustainable, and to decrease their dependency on our support. As well as the day-to-day technical support offered by our two Field Officers, COTA organises training and networking days for our partners, one of which is the subject of our Field Office Diary (see the back page).

Looking towards the future

In 2008, Colombian NGOs benefiting thousands of children and their families will rely on COTA's capacity to raise funds on their behalf and to provide ongoing technical support. Your support to COTA in 2008 will be vital to ensure that their work can continue.

In their own words

"COTA's approach is not to look for the error in our work, but to challenge us to clearly identify and express the value of what we do in terms of the results we expect to achieve. You accompany us in our work, suggesting alternatives and ideas... In this way, you have added a new dimension to this project and its development."

Director of the FNA Manizales Elimination of Child Labour programme

"My time at FFF has been really good, and has helped me transform many things in my life. I learnt how to write a CV, to share with others, to work in different jobs, to accept differences and to respect my peers. I learnt how to manage money, how to budget and how to shop on a budget – not easy! I learnt so many things I can't mention them all here – perhaps the most important for me was how to express my individuality but in a respectful way and how to interact with people from different walks of life. I really appreciate that now I'm living on my own."

Female beneficiary, two months after leaving the programme

"I can't describe how much La Rayuela means to me; I've learnt so many things here, especially in the values and health workshops, and, of course, the bakery project too. And it's great that we're learning how to use our time well, and not get into bad ways."

14-year-old girl on the La Rayuela programme in Chinchiná, coffee-growing region

Thankyous

Dear Supporters,

Last year, your incredible support enabled COTA to continue offering hope to some of Colombia's most vulnerable children. Our latest figures show that, thanks to you, we raised approximately £488,000, of which around 80p in every pound went directly to the field in grants and project support activities. We were able to provide financial and technical support to 16 partner projects, directly reaching approximately 4,600 children, young people and family members, and affecting the lives of many more.

With these funds, we were able to place a greater emphasis on identifying urgent needs faced by children that are not being sufficiently addressed in Colombia, and developing projects that face these issues head-on.

Your support also enabled us to continue working with our existing partners, whose services are a life-line to children who have been affected by conflict and poverty, live and work on the street or have suffered abuse.

Your response to our Christmas appeal was wonderful. We have already raised a fantastic £12,000 to support our ground-breaking education programme for child workers in Cali.

You have done brilliantly, but we still need to raise more to ensure the sustainability of the programme and to enable this experience to be shared with other organisations across Latin America.

If you can, please help us to gain more support for this project and the life-changing opportunity that it provides to child workers. Tell your local church, club or school about it or organise your own fundraising event. We can provide ideas and volunteers, so just get in touch! With your help, we can enable more children to stop work, go to school and start to imagine a happier future for themselves.

On behalf of all the children who participate in our programmes, thank you for your interest and commitment. None of this work would be possible without your support.

With warmest wishes,



Rachel Joseph
Executive Director

Muchas Gracias:

Thank you to all our individual supporters, trusts and companies whose generous donations in 2007 enabled us to continue supporting our project partners!

Community

Many thanks to Trusham's St Michael the Archangel Church, St Joseph Catholic Church and Rugby School.

Thanks also to the students of St Francis RC Primary School who organised a fashion show in December raising £205, and Cambridge University's Corpus Christi College that chose COTA as one of two beneficiaries from their summer ball; they donated £2,300 in 2007.

Thanks to Artisan Life for their ongoing support and for donating £147.90 from the proceeds of their Christmas fair.

Sports & Challenges



Sideequat Dawodu ran the Hydro active women's challenge last September (her third run for COTA) and raised £50. Louise Semple raised £125 by running the Bupa Great North Run. Victor Lohle raised £5,187 by taking on the challenge of climbing Mont Blanc. Well done to you all!

The COTA Hall of Fame

Special thanks to Andrew Warren for his unstinting support of our work. Andrew is a great promoter of COTA's efforts and a regular and always-welcome visitor to the office. As a human rights activist with a special interest in Colombia, Andrew is totally committed to our aim of enabling young Colombians to build better futures for themselves. Keep up the good work, Andrew!



Simple ideas, great results! Our warmest thanks to:



John Higgins, who kindly asked the guests at his last birthday celebration to participate in a lottery game instead of buying presents, raising a total of £642 for COTA. The lottery prizes

were a bottle of rum and some decorative Colombian craftwork – enabling the lucky winner to take a little bit of Colombia home with them!

David Maxwell Scott, chair of our board of trustees, who helped us raise £2,030 by donating all the proceeds from his book "Rare Spanish Oak" to COTA. Copies are still available in the office!

The artist Nena Geiger, who donated £300 from the proceeds of her beautiful



paintings sold at Reflections, her exhibition last October.

Luz Vallejo, her family and friends, who organised carol singing and a crafts fair in the lead up to Christmas, raising a total of £1,416.

Verity King, who raised £70 through her summer fete.

Upcoming Activities and Challenges

2008 could be the year when you do something extraordinary. Why not take on a big fundraising challenge and help make the challenges facing Colombian children a little smaller. Available expeditions in Latin America include a trek to Machu Picchu or through the avenue of the volcanoes in Ecuador, a bike ride from the Andes to the Amazon or a cycling tour of Cuba.

Or you may want to do something closer to home. Why not run a marathon? Here are the dates for some of the upcoming events:

Paris Marathon	6 April 2008
Flora London Marathon	13 April 2008
The Great West Run	4 May 2008
Edinburgh Marathon	25 May 2008
London 10k	26 May 2008
The Mazda London Triathlon	9 & 10 August 2008

Adidas Women's Challenge (Birmingham, London and Liverpool)	7 September 2008
Windsor Half Marathon	21 September 2008
Berlin Marathon	28 September 2008
BUPA Great North Run	5 September 2008

If you would like more information about any of these possibilities, please contact us.

Project Talk

On 20th February, Libia Rodríguez from our partner organisation the Carvajal Foundation came to talk to us about her work with marginalised disabled children in Cali. This was a wonderful opportunity to get a greater sense of the impact your donations make on children's lives, by hearing directly from the people that work with them. If you could not join us this time, please visit our website for an account of the evening. And don't worry, this is an annual event, so there will be an opportunity to meet another one of our partners next year.



Please keep an eye on our website for information about future events



María Cristina Temmink, COTA's Field Officer in Bogotá, writes:

"How does Children of the Andes ensure that we are always doing as much as we can for vulnerable children in Colombia? By constantly learning from the children themselves about their needs, and from the organisations who work with them.

In the same way, we know that our partner organisations can learn a lot from each other's experiences. But so urgent are the immediate needs of the children they support that they rarely have the time to devote to meeting their counterparts in other organisations.

That's why COTA has taken on the task of regularly bringing together all of its partners so that they can share their experiences of working with vulnerable children. Through exchanging ideas and information, and airing questions and problems in a wider forum, it is hoped that each organisation can become stronger and more effective at promoting the interests of the children they work for.

The first such meeting of COTA's Bogotá partners took place in November 2007 at the school and farm of Formemos, in Tena near Bogotá. Formemos helps children affected by violence and poverty overcome their traumatic experiences and avoid being drawn into a perilous existence on the margins of urban society.

The participants – who included Fundación Nutrinfantil, Fundación Colombo-Británica and Albergue Infantil – were given a tour of Formemos by two children from the project. The enthusiasm and maturity of the kids was in itself a valuable lesson.

'I experienced the real meaning of "participation", in which the children are running the daily activities. This provides them with so much more than just

academic and technical knowledge,' said Adriana Sánchez, a psychologist at the Albergue Infantil, who works with street children in Bogotá.

One of COTA's aims is to assist our partners in developing their own fundraising capacity, so that we can gradually transfer our support to other needy organisations knowing that our partner can continue successfully without us. Pedro Cortes, of Formemos, had insights to share on this subject.

'A business is much more likely to respond if you present yourself as a "social enterprise" rather than as a "charity" which dwells on the tragic stories of poor children. These people are not sociologists but businessmen. They understand numbers, budgets and concrete objectives,' he noted.

Whether we all agreed with him or not, this discussion, and many others that went on that day, was an invaluable opportunity to debate and to learn.

If the vulnerable children of Colombia are to have a happier future, this sort of exchange of ideas amongst those who work with them is essential.

'The visit was very enriching,' commented Ana María Trujillo, of Fundación Nutrinfantil. 'To get to know other's experiences and ways of working always helps organisations grow. It would be great if COTA planned more of these meetings.'

This may not make for the most emotive of fundraising appeals, but we know it's important that we provide these opportunities. We are able to do so because our supporters in the UK understand this as well. So, on behalf of our partner organisations and the children that need your support, thank you."

CHILDREN OF THE ANDES

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