



Children of the Andes

Building a future for street children and child-victims of violence in Colombia
Autumn 2006

Invisible Children Disability and Poverty in Colombia

When he was younger, Hector was unable to speak and used to signal all the time. His parents didn't understand him, and with their income barely enough for one meal a day, they had no money to send him to school. With no services of any kind in the shanty-town where they lived, they were forced to leave him locked at home, often alone, where he would get scared, angry and frustrated. Without an education and the opportunity to interact with children his own age, Hector's disability was making him invisible to society.

Then, about a year ago, Hector's parents found out about El Vallado Centre, which provides free support to children with disabilities. The Centre Coordinator told them that Hector had a mental disability, but that with the right support he could in fact learn many things.

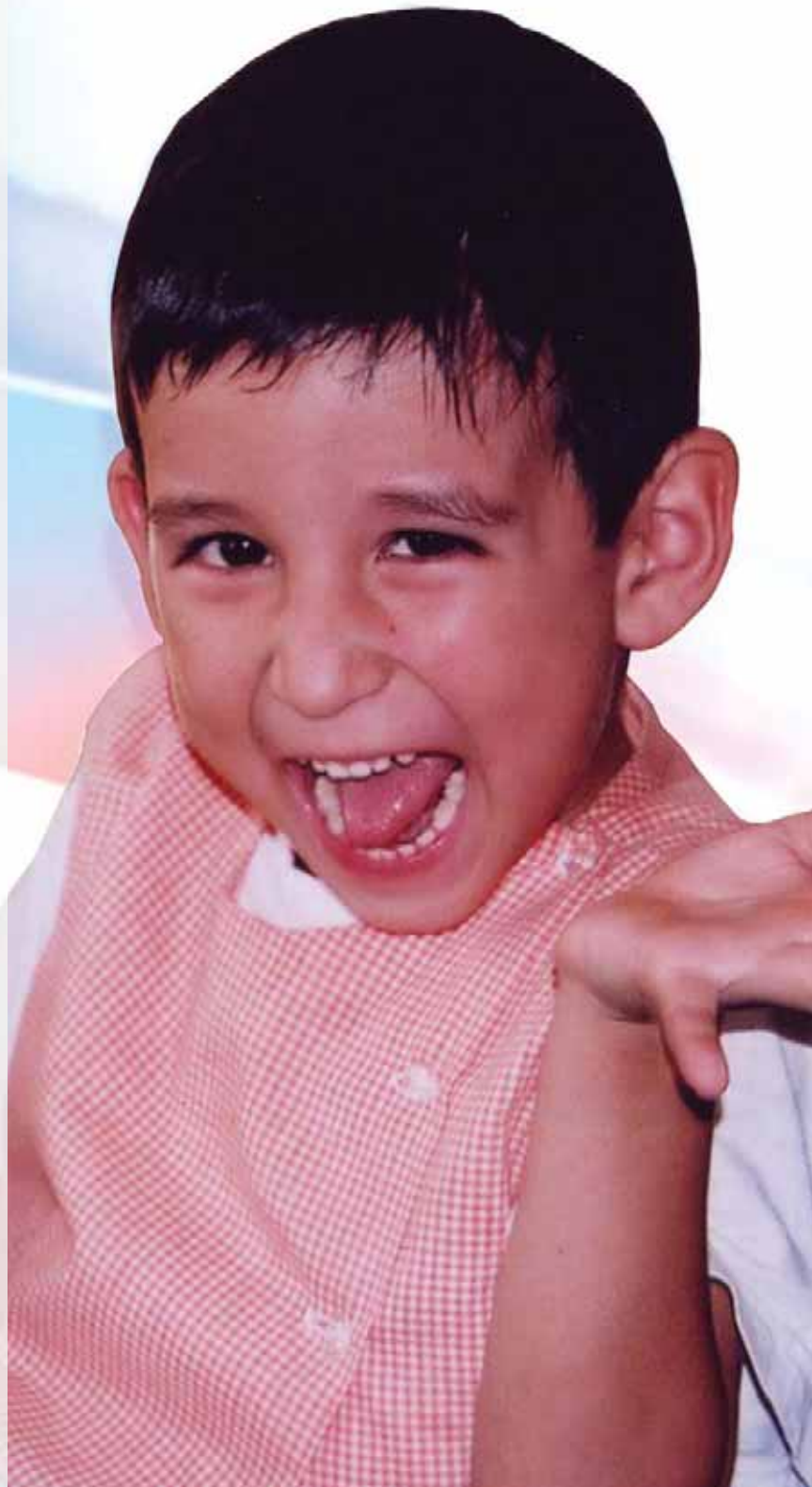
Now seven, Hector goes to the Centre twice a week and is in a special needs class at a local school, where he has made lots of friends. His teacher is one of nearly 300 local teachers who have been given training by the Centre in teaching methods for children with special needs.

Hector and his family are slowly learning to communicate with each other using sign language. Hector has also learned to use a computer - he sits down, turns it on and knows how to play games!

The El Vallado Centre has enabled Hector to live the dignified and fulfilling childhood that he deserves.

The El Vallado Disability Resource Centre was built in 2003 by Children of the Andes and the Carvajal Foundation. It is the only free service providing specialist support for children and young people with disabilities living in poorest areas of Cali.

With your support, we can help El Vallado continue to provide essential support to hundreds of children and young adults every year.





Issues affecting children with disabilities

Issues affecting children with disabilities The tendency in Colombia is to place children with disabilities either in regular classes or in special education classes in mainstream schools. While this integration is seemingly progressive, the reality is that many schools are unwilling or unable to admit disabled children, and those that do for the most part lack teachers qualified to meet their needs. This leads to high dropout rates and poor academic progress. Indeed, of the estimated 2.5 million Colombian children living with a disability, 45% do not attend school.

Instead, children with disabilities from low-income backgrounds are being made virtual prisoners in their own homes, unable to go out due to lack of money and vital equipment such as

Background to the problem

Cali is the third largest city in Colombia and host to large and ever-increasing numbers of forcibly displaced and economic migrants. They make up the hundreds of thousands living in the marginalised and violent settlements of Aguablanca and Ladera, where state services are largely non-existent.

These areas are also home to the vast majority of the disabled population of Cali, estimated at around 77,000. In Aguablanca alone, nearly 60% of people with disabilities are under the age of 26, representing a population bereft of any educational, social or healthcare support.

“For me, the El Vallado Centre has been like encountering a completely different world. It is difficult when you are blind and have grown up in a village. I come from a community near Tumaco, where disabled people stay at home and do not receive any treatment or support”

Centre beneficiary, 23 year old Efraín, who is blind





wheelchairs. Some are also bed-ridden due to conditions that could be treated or improved with the appropriate care.

El Vallado Disability Resource Centre

Research conducted by COTA's partner the Carvajal Foundation revealed both the scale and the virtual invisibility of disability as a social and public health issue in Cali. In response, and with the support of Children of the Andes, it set up the El Vallado Disability Resource Centre. It is the only free community centre in Cali promoting the education, recreation and social integration of children and young adults with disabilities.

The Centre is run by a Special Education Teacher and Assistant, who between them give an average of 700 consultations, classes and workshops every month to over 250 beneficiaries.

In addition to a wide range of specialist educational tools such

as Braille printers, sign-language videos and specialist computer programmes, games and books, the Centre offers cultural and recreational activities. Many beneficiaries use the centre as a friendly, safe place to socialise with friends, play games, or just read quietly.

More than just a service provider, the Centre works hard to change attitudes towards disability in the wider community. Key to this is building the capacity of teachers and schools to recognise and meet the needs of children with disabilities. Last year, training was given to 272 teachers from 17 schools. These teachers are collectively responsible for 10,000 children from high-risk low-income backgrounds, of whom 40% have a physical disability and/or learning difficulty.

In 2006, COTA is also working with the Carvajal Foundation to pilot a Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Project. With the aim of reaching much larger numbers of people with disabilities in Cali and the wider area, this service involves the training of specially selected volunteers to provide outreach services for disabled people who

“I have been fighting for the rights of people with disabilities, for them to be recognized as people, as human beings who form part of a community and a society that ignores them, not just because of their economic status or for reasons of race or belief, but for something that runs much deeper than that...their disability renders them almost invisible in a society that lacks the sensitivity and awareness of an issue that can touch anyone at any point in their life.”

El Vallado Centre Coordinator
Libia Rodriguez

due to poverty and physical disability are unable to access the Centre.

The CBR Project has shown how disability can be given adequate attention in a way that guarantees the genuine social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Since it opened, the El Vallado Centre has literally transformed the lives of thousands of children, young adults and their families who had been rendered invisible by poverty, disability and social exclusion. A marker of just how important the Centre has become to its users is that most have to travel on foot or in a wheelchair through violent, gang-controlled areas of Aguablanca just to get there.

In words of one mother, “this marvellous space has made our children feel part of society.”