

Socioeconomic Inclusion for Victims of mine/explosive remnants of war (ERW) and persons with disabilities in the departments of Cauca, Nariño and Córdoba of Colombia.

Project Funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and implemented by Handicap International

Article co-authored by: *Angela Kohama, Elke Hottentot, Johana Huertas, and Gaétane Bléher*

History

Departamentos Proyectos ISE COSUDE



The origins of the Colombian conflict date to the 1920s, during which several non-state armed groups (NSAGs) fought over Colombia's resource-rich land. As political parties became increasingly involved in the conflict, the violence worsened and in 1948 the assassination of a populist political leader resulted in 10 years of rural warfare known as "La Violencia." From this period of rural warfare, "Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia," better known as "FARC" was born. Between the 1960s and the beginning of the peace process in 2012, multiple other armed groups formed such as the "Ejército de Liberación Nacional" and "M-19." Most armed groups have roots in Marxist ideology. The decades of conflict between state and non-state armed groups have left the country riddled with antipersonnel mines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW). To date, the precise extent of contamination remains unknown, though all but one of Colombia's 32 departments may have an explosive threat.¹ Colombia ratified the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) in September of 2000 and exactly five years later, in 2015, the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM),

thereby committing itself to clearing the ground, destroying any stocks of these weapons that remain, education the population about related risks, and assisting victims. Victim assistance efforts aim to increase quality of life of survivors and indirect victims (family members of people injured and killed, as well as affected communities).

The Problem

Colombia is heavily affected by antipersonnel mines, improvised explosive devices, unexploded ordnances and other ERW.ⁱⁱ According to Dirección para la Acción Integral contra minas Antipersonal, between 1990 – February 2017, 11,479 victims of mines/ERW were registered in Colombia.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2015, Colombia ranked sixth globally for most recorded casualties.^{iv}

Mines and other ERWS disproportionately affect rural communities and those predominantly dependent on agriculturally-

based livelihoods in Colombia. According to the ILO, in 2016, 16.3 % of Colombia's population works in agriculture.^v According to the World Bank, in 2015 approximately 24% of Colombia's population lived in rural areas.^{vi} Beyond the suffering created by death and injury due to mine/ERW accidents, the presence of these weapons across Colombia greatly affects mobility of rurally located populations, safe access to school or social activities, as well as livelihood opportunities, including the ability to engage in agricultural activities.^{vii}

The Project: Creating New Livelihood Opportunities for Rural Colombians with Disabilities

To realize the APMBC and CCM victim assistance obligations, activities related to emergency and ongoing medical care, rehabilitation, inclusive education, social inclusion and economic inclusion need to be undertaken, benefiting survivors, other persons with disabilities and indirect victims alike. Aligning with the Swiss cooperation's priority areas and HI's strategy in Colombia, this project has worked for the past nineteen months (2015 – 2017) to strengthen local capacities to enhance the productivity and income-earning capacity of this vulnerable population in rural areas.

The economies of Cauca, Nariño and Córdoba's are primarily dependent on agriculture and rurally-based income generating activities. As a result, this economic inclusion project primarily focused on increasing individual economic opportunities for persons injured and/or impaired by mine/ERW, as well as other people with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. But all of these persons face barriers for their socioeconomic inclusion, at individual and environmental level.

In Colombia, the primary barriers identified at the individual level are the poor development of vocational skills as well as business and soft skills needed for the workplace. By training persons with disabilities in skills such as agribusiness, food processing, communication, decision-making, management, accountability and leadership, we diversify their personal assets and equip them with the skills needed to strategically expand their microenterprises as one way to strengthen their income generating capacity.

At the environmental level, overprotective families, community members and service providers categorize persons with disabilities as persons that need to be assisted, instead of persons with abilities to work and to participate in the community. HI supports these actors to change their attitudes and practices, to include persons with disabilities in the workplace and community. In rural areas that run technical and vocational training programs, including persons with disabilities in pre-existing programs expanded the opportunities for persons with disabilities previously excluded.

To overcome these barriers, HI implemented a four-part inclusive economic development strategy:

Strategy at an individual level:

- Provision of personalized social support, an approach that puts the needs and goals of persons with disabilities at the center of a personal project, allowing them to achieve their personal goals while increasing self-reliance and empowerment for socio-economic participation, improving their quality of life
- Provision of training and seed funding for microenterprise development, focusing on access to decent, sustainable and market-oriented work

Strategy at an environmental level:

- Capacity building of local employment service providers to help them be more inclusive of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. Support was provided by social service providers and directly by HI staff, including through a) training and financing of entrepreneurial activities, b) working with employers to facilitate their understanding of how to hire and retain persons with disabilities as employees, c) awareness raising amongst current service providers on topics such as disability and inclusion, d) training on inclusion, and e) provision of resources to ensure reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities.
- Supporting local government to ensure that all future national policies related to socio-economic service provision initiatives specifically include provisions for mandatory inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The project impact

The impact of this project is both economic and social. Economically, the project resulted in the development of 182 new microenterprises, many of which are rurally located in the departments of Cauca, Nariño and Córdoba, and consist of agricultural and livestock activities. 132 of these microenterprises are still operational (March 2017) and generate between 100 to 150 euros monthly. The remaining microenterprises are presently inactive, primarily due to a need for further business skill training for the founding beneficiaries. 68% of the total microenterprises have already reached the “break-even point,” making equal to or more than the amount invested in the project’s start-up. 750 euros per

person were invested in the development of each new microenterprises.

Socially, project participants reported a positive increase in their personal emotional state and increased feelings of worth and purpose within their family and communities; and correspondingly reported feeling empowered within familial and in their social roles, leading to a reported increase in, and strengthening of, family and community ties, enabling the creation of support networks that benefit the rehabilitation care processes. They also noted increased decision-making power and understanding of individual rights. In addition, project participants developed new, market-aligned occupational skills and reported new

and increased engagement in local professional networks. Since this 19 month project ends in March 2017, Handicap International is currently

finishing a final evaluation of the project and can speak to finalized project results in the future.

Case Study: Maria Flor Elisa Espinosa Torres



Maria Flor Elisa Espinosa, originally a resident of the village of Guadualito, was displaced on June 30th, 2009 by an armed rebel group in Colombia. She currently lives with her family, including her husband and two daughters, age 17 and 9, in the village of La Capilla in the municipality of Samaniego-Nariño. Eight years ago, Maria and her daughter were victims of an antipersonnel mine.

Maria and her daughter Mellisa, two years old at the time, were injured while working on a farm in the village of Guadualito, within the municipality of Santa Cruz de Guacheavez. Maria and Mellisa were leaving the farm to meet her husband for lunch when they stepped on a mine. Alone and severely injured, Maria and Mellisa were found three hours later by farm workers, who quickly transported them to a local hospital from where they were transported to a municipal hospital, where they were treated for five days.

Maria and Mellisa were lucky in that they received excellent medical attention and did not sustain any permanent physical impairment from the injury. However, the psychological trauma Maria incurred from the accident coupled

with her current forced displacement and presence of armed groups in the area created significant barriers to reintegration, as well as psychological distress and trauma, for Maria and her family. Maria experienced many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, including stress, anxiety, mistrust of others and generalized fear of leaving her home. This had significant repercussions on both Maria's personal psychological state and her relationship with her family, and extended to their economic well-being. Maria did not want to return to her previous permanent role on the farm, and the farm did not have roles for her that would ease her anxiety and stress around working in the field. Maria worked periodically as a day laborer across a couple of farms in her village, but the income was not consistent enough to sustain her family's economic needs.

Maria and her family were referred to Handicap International, where she received psychosocial support which helped her overcome the emotional aftermath of their forced displacement and the accident. Maria and her family told Handicap International about their current economic difficulties. HI helped Maria and her family identify appropriate entrepreneurship training, and subsequently Maria and her family applied for a loan from HI's partners, the Solidarios Cooperative, to start their business.

Based on the training they received and the market conditions, Maria's family decided to start their own farm. Procurement of the land was achieved by pooling family resources, and there was continuous familial tension around the purchase as armed groups continued to clash in close proximity to the land in the years leading up to the peace agreement. Initially the family tried to plant Coca, but after receiving market aligned training from HI, switched their crop choice and chose to produce two specialized, high quality fruits: grandilla and gulupa (similar to the well-known fruit called pomegranate in English). The loan allowed Maria's family to buy seeds, purchase farm inputs and tools for crop maintenance. At present, the family is making enough money to sustain their economic needs. Since there is high demand for grandilla and gulupa on the international market, the family has started to export their products from Colombia to Ecuador. On average the family is exporting 30-40 boxes of grandilla every two weeks (15 kilos per box) and 7 boxes of gulupa every eight days (15 kilos per box).

The family's success has inspired neighbors to start cultivating and commercially selling these fruits, and the family is happy to share their tips and successes with their neighbors. In addition, Maria now actively participates in and contributes to the association of victims of the municipality, where she shares her story and provides peer support to other victims of mines/ERW.

Remaining Needs

While our teams on the ground have made significant impact within the departments of Cauca, Nariño and Córdoba, there is still an overwhelming need for humanitarian demining work in Colombia. Handicap International is one of a few international organizations with technical expertise in the following four of the five pillars of Humanitarian Mine Action: humanitarian demining, victim assistance, risk education and advocacy. HI aims to directly

support the Government of Colombia to fulfill their APMBC-treaty obligations to become contamination free by 2021. We hope that the best practices found in our Colombia programs can influence the formation and implementation of inclusive policies that boost the social and economic status of survivors and other persons with disabilities, both in Colombia and across the globe.

History of Handicap International in Colombia

Since 1998, Handicap International has worked in Colombia to improve the lives of persons with disabilities, vulnerable people, mines and ERW survivors, and their families since 2005. In 2016, HI Colombia received accreditation to begin humanitarian demining activities. Today, in addition to demining, HI Colombia focuses on a wide range of interventions: rehabilitation, support to Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs), provision of psychosocial support, risk education, economic inclusion and social inclusion. In addition to our funding from the SDC, the program receives funding from the Japanese Government, and the governments of Norway, France, Belgium, and Canada. The program also recently secured funding from the U.S. government to start clearance work in Zone 5 of the Vistahermosa department.

HI Colombia is proud to practice an extremely participatory approach to development. Over the past 11 years, HI Colombia partnered with more than five local grassroots organizations in over 10 Departments across the country,

gaining first-hand understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and engaging in participatory decision making processes throughout our projects.

Handicap International and Global Economic Inclusion

Handicap International brings 35 years of experiencing working with persons with disabilities, including persons with disabilities, survivors of landmines and explosive remnants of war, other vulnerable populations, and their families; and 25 years of experiencing designing, implementing and evaluating economic inclusion projects for persons with disabilities. HI utilizes the twin-track approach throughout all economic development interventions, operating on the basic principle that barriers to employment and social inclusion for persons with disabilities should be addressed both at the environment and at the individual level. In 2016, HI operated 35 economic inclusion projects in 29 countries, and was operational in 59 countries total.

ⁱ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor Colombia country profile, see: <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2016/colombia.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Idem, see: <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2016/colombia/mine-action.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department for Comprehensive Action Against Antipersonnel Mines (Dirección para la Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal, DAICMA)'s database—updated to 28 February 2017

^{iv} The Land Mine Monitor, 2016, page 43.. <http://www.the-monitor.org/media/2386748/Landmine-Monitor-2016-web.pdf>.

^v <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=CO>

^{vi} <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=CO>

^{vii} <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/colombia>