



Real-time learning piece

Forced recruitment and use of children by armed forces

In April 2021, the End Violence Lab launched the **Colombia INSPIRE Coordination Course**, a 15-module online course co-delivered by the End Violence Lab at the University of Edinburgh.

As part of the End Violence Lab's commitment to global learning, this real-time piece addresses how Colombian participants from the Guaviare Department are using course outputs to improve interventions to address the forced recruitment of children by non-state armed forces.

The course was done in partnership with several multisectoral, national, and transnational stakeholders: the **National Alliance to End Violence Against Children and Adolescents of Colombia**, the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), **USAID HEARD**, the **CDC**, and **Together for Girls**. The course content was **co-designed with national partners** for practitioners and decision-making authorities engaged with **implementation, monitoring and scale-up of INSPIRE interventions** in Colombian government departments.

Addressing forced recruitment in the Guaviare Department

The Guaviare Department in the Southern central region of Colombia is a vast tropical rainforest area the size of Croatia.

The **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights** has denounced continuous attacks and threats to children by armed forces, including forced recruitment by illegal, non-state armed groups. Children and adolescents living in hard-to-access rural areas and those belonging to nomadic indigenous communities are especially at risk — a situation that has only been exacerbated by COVID-19.

In 2020, the Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights with the Office of the First Lady, the Colombian Family Wellbeing Institute (ICBF), twenty-two government entities, UNICEF, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and USAID, **launched the strategy 'Súmate por mí'**. This strategy aims to prevent the forced recruitment by creating safe community environments, implementing 99 projects that aim to benefit a total of five million children. The programme is active in the Guaviare region.





Interview with a frontline worker¹

Can you tell me more details about the forced recruitment and use of children by non-state armed forces?

As a practitioner and as a Guaviarenses, I can say children living in rural areas, sometimes seven or eight hours away from the urban centres, are very vulnerable for two main reasons. First, they do not have access to the Internet or the media, so they are unaware that they are entitled to their full human rights.

Second, not all children are recruited through threats and coercion. In many cases, non-state armed forces promise to give children a better material life and the opportunity to work. Many children join them as a survival mechanism (for more information on recruitment tactics in the Guaviare, see [this 2012 report by the Ombudsperson's Office](#)). In the Guaviare, 37.7 per cent of the rural population live in poverty (2019 [Multi-dimensional poverty report, National Administrative Department of Statistics](#)), and higher education opportunities are among the scarcest nationwide ([IDERE Report 2020](#)).

These children benefit from the state's universal public policies, such as education and school meals. The programme for the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Children by armed forces 'Sumate por mí' offers education on human rights, capacity-building for practitioners, psychosocial support services for children and their families and the strengthening of inter-sectoral protection strategies.

The programme operates only in the department's capital, leaving children in inland areas without access to services. We try to visit these children, but this is highly dangerous due to the armed forces' operations. We know from reports that children who have been recruited and used by armed forces have suffered from physical violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and labour exploitation in illegal activities.

Is there any progress for young people in this area?

We have recently held workshops to empower youth from the areas where there have been early warnings of forced recruitment practising prevention—rather than response.

We realised there is a need to teach young people about their human rights. It is crucial to give them this information. It is like Plato's Allegory of the Cave: we are giving them a light in the darkness, and we know they will share this new knowledge with their friends.

Do you feel the INSPIRE Coordination Course is helpful to improve interventions for such vulnerable populations?

I'm learning so much valuable knowledge and skills, both as a government official and as a parent. So far, the most helpful things I've taken from the course are how to better articulate with other entities and find alternative routes and methodologies to serve children better. This is critical work when working in dangerous and restricted movement areas of Colombia.

Apart from government authorities, all frontline workers and practitioners from the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) who work directly with children and families should participate in this course. It would benefit them a lot.

¹The name of this informant is anonymous for reasons of sensitivity. Responses have been edited for clarity.

