

## Chapter Five

# Colombia: Marta Arango's Story

For over 30 years, conflict and violence have permeated the nation of Colombia. Thousands of children of almost three generations have suffered from the death or displacement of family members; from the fear and terror of kidnapping; from poverty, illness, and lack of schooling; and, in many cases, from early deaths.

In 1976 Marta Arango and her husband Glen Nimnicht founded CINDE (Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano). CINDE's mission was to support the physical and psychological well being of young Colombians. As the effects of long-term violence on children became increasingly apparent, CINDE enhanced its goals and programs.

Currently CINDE runs community-centered programs for peace building and is a major player in the development of regional and national networks to serve children. Most uniquely, CINDE has developed collaborative graduate programs with universities as a way to ensure the development of specialists and leaders committed to the problems of children and youth. To date, more than 2,000 graduates have completed high-level degrees in this area.

In this chapter Marta Arango, Alejandro Acosta, and Milena Jaramillo tell the story of CINDE and its programs for peace within one of the most beautiful, and yet one of the most conflict-ridden and violent, nations in the world.

## Colombia: La historia de Marta Arango Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano

Por más de 30 años, el conflicto y la violencia han permeado la nación Colombiana. Miles de niños y niñas, de casi tres generaciones, han sufrido la muerte o el desplazamiento de miembros de su familia, el miedo y el terror del secuestro, la pobreza,

enfermedades, falta de escolarización, y en muchos casos muerte temprana.

En 1976 Marta Arango y su esposo Glen Nimnicht fundaron CINDE — Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano. La misión de CINDE era apoyar el bienestar psicológico y físico de los colombianos jóvenes. A medida que los efectos de la violencia de largo plazo se hicieron evidentes, CINDE fortaleció sus metas y sus programas. Actualmente CINDE lleva a cabo programas para la construcción de paz basados en la comunidad y es un actor importante en el desarrollo de redes nacionales

y regionales para beneficio de la niñez. De manera particular CINDE ha estado desarrollando programas de postgrado en convenio con universidades como una forma para asegurar el desarrollo de líderes y especialistas comprometidos con el desarrollo de la niñez y la juventud. Hasta la fecha más de 2000

profesionales se han graduado de estos programas.

Marta Arango, Alejandro Acosta y Milena Jaramillo cuentan la historia de CINDE y sus programas para la paz, en uno de los países más bellos, y aun así más violentos y conflictivos del mundo.

## Background

Colombia is a land of infinite richness and biodiversity. Its beauty is reflected in lush jungle and forests, beautiful coasts, large plains, and rich fauna and flora. Colombians themselves are diverse and colorful. Colombian nationals are made up of Black, Amerindian, Caucasian, and mixed races. Colombia should be a paradise on earth. But underlying the beauty, there is a tragic tradition of armed conflict and destruction.

Colombia is one of the most violent countries in the world (Rubio, 97). Nearly every family in Colombia has been exposed in some way to the threat of kidnappings, extortion, and massacres. In the cities, protection gangs often have control of various areas, including roadways into the cities. In the country, rural homes and agricultural areas are threatened by unregulated mining, environmental destruction, and drug wars. Colombian citizens are three times more likely to die from homicides than they are from infectious or parasitic diseases and twice as likely to die from violence as from cardio-vascular problems (National Health Institute — Instituto Nacional de Salud, 1994). Kidnappings, landmines, environmental destruction, extreme rates of male mortality, and the long-term effects of displacement color the experience and the potential of each child.

In relation to kidnapping for ransom or revenge, this is a common characteristic of the Colombian scene: more than 15,000 people were kidnapped between 1999 and 2003; over 4,000 died in captivity. Hundreds

of kidnap victims are children (PCS y CNR, 2004). Kidnapping results in terror, trauma, psychological breakdown, destruction of families, and poverty. Living conditions can change drastically. Whole extended families become bankrupt from paying ransoms. When families cannot pay, victims are killed. Given that they are often the main breadwinners for their families, this leaves families without an income source.

As for land mines, they have been placed in nearly every area of the country, including cultivated fields, trails, areas near small towns and villages, and schools (Santos, 2003). Between 1990 and 2002, close to 2,000 land mine accidents, in over 400 different towns and areas, were reported. Children are often victims of landmine maiming or death.

Insurgent forces in Colombia have taken control of large tracts of land in jungle areas which are vital to the global ecosystem. These are good hiding places with extremely difficult access for outsiders. Rain forests have been destroyed and illegal cultivations have been developed. In an effort to weaken the economic base of the insurgents, the government of Colombia has adopted strategies such as massive fumigation — but this solution brings enhanced ecological consequences.

Insurgents have also taken over production zones which affect the national economy: gold mines in northeast Antioquia and southern Bolívar, oil in Arauca, bananas in Urabá, and coal mines in Cesar and Guajira have been appropriated — cutting off large sections of the population from the benefits of

these economies. Meanwhile, fighting and anarchy have affected the ecosystem. Violence and attacks have been blamed for the spilling of 2.3 million barrels of oil in Colombia. This amount is equivalent to 11 times that spilled in what was called the greatest ecological disaster in world history: that of the Exxon tanker (Rangel, 2004).

## The impact of conflict on families and communities

The violence has had a number of effects on families and communities. Men are most vulnerable to the violence within Colombia. The tendency for family breadwinners to be kidnapped and killed has already

been mentioned. This is also evident in the fact that the risk of dying for a male aged 20-24 is 4.5 times that of a female. In fact 60 percent of male deaths are caused by homicides (Romero, 1997). The number of widows, therefore, appears to be growing exponentially. In the year 1994, 73,000 children were reported to be without fathers.

Another common impact of the endemic violence on families and communities is displacement. “Displacement” refers to the aggressive takeover of land and property, forcing the residents to flee for their lives. In Colombia, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and/or drug dealers commonly use violence and extortion to take control of land. There are no effective safeguards. It is not uncommon for whole communities to be forced violently and urgently from

### Box 5.1 Comuna Trece: Mariana’s story of life after displacement

“I lived in El Salado and the houses were falling down because of the rain and we lived on a very steep hill, in high risk as they say, but also there were a lot of problems of violence. So they relocated many families, and we came to Comuna Trece.

“This was very hard, because, since we had to leave in a hurry, we had to leave almost everything and we had almost nothing for the new place. We knew very few people in the barrio.

“Very soon after we moved the guerrillas and paramilitaries took over the community and killed many people. In one month they killed my brother, a nephew, and another one disappeared. This is very hard; one was 18, the other 20, and my brother 37.

“We had no work. We had to register at the office for displaced people to receive some money for food, but this was not enough. My three children were full of fears and did not sleep well. They never went out, even to school, because they were afraid to be killed.

“One day we had a visitor. When he was leaving, we went into the street to help him find a taxi. He was gunned down in front of us. We never knew why! It is hard. But we cannot keep focusing on what has happened to us. We would become crazy.

“When CINDE came with the program, we started doing things to change what was going on. We started getting together every week to solve those problems we could not solve alone. We learned about the institutions in the community that could provide some health, nutrition, and income generation services.

“Most importantly, we became aware of what we could do for ourselves at home and with the neighbours. We learned to do a lot of things with our children. Now I feel much better. I understand better where to go and who to ask for help. But I am still scared that shootings could start again.”

*Mariana (not her real name)*

their homes and belongings. These communities and families never get the chance to return. They are suddenly impoverished, homeless, and disenfranchised — and need to find another place to start a new life. Many end up in urban ghettos called barrios.

Human rights watchers have estimated that close to three million people were displaced in Colombia in the decade ending 2002. Displacement is unpredictable, taking place under conditions of extreme distress, fear, and panic. Most families leave their land empty handed. Displacement destroys community and cultural attachments. Citizens end up in alien environments — cut off from family, work

opportunities, and/or sources of support (RSS, 2003a; El Tempo, 2003). Moreover, displaced families also tend to relocate to barrios which are already overcrowded and impoverished. The lack of systemic documentation about displacement and displaced persons make it virtually impossible for government services to address their needs in any integral way. Barrios are not safe for families and children.

In addition, in the past decade illegal “armed groups” have become as common in the cities as in rural areas. These groups often target areas inhabited by displaced people where government presence is lacking or ineffectual. Sometimes self-defense groups develop to fight off the invaders. Both groups have access to guns

## Box 5.2 Comuna 13: Barrios war “Worse than a scene from Hollywood”

Comuna 13 is in a very strategic location in Medellin — on the route in and out of town. Food and munitions for surrounding regions need to travel through Comuna 13. In addition, this area is a corridor for an important highway that connects with the mega in the west. Those who control the route control a great geographical range. Both the guerrilleros and opposing paramilitary groups want control over this strategic area.

There was a time when the armed groups moved in. In response, community “self-defense groups” developed to protect the Comuna. Armed confrontations became a daily occurrence. At any time of the day and into the night, wherever you were, bullets would be flying by you. It was like a terrifying episode at the level of the most violent scenes in Hollywood movies. Madness walked the streets armed with submachine guns and pistols, with its face hooded so that only a glimpse could be caught of a look full of rage, hate, thirst. There, in

those barrios with ridiculously steep streets that give the impression of being stairs to heaven, hell itself had a branch office.

The self defense co-oped the young people and performed a “cleansing.” Cleansings consist of actions in which delinquents, drug addicts, and prostitutes are forced to leave a zone. This is achieved through forced eviction and, in some cases, murder. Eventually they succeeded in driving the armed groups and the groups of common delinquents out of the barrios. But there remain people who sympathized with the armed groups. Some of the members of the groups created networks and settled here — supporters helped them with a lot of things.

Things have calmed down. Right now there are sporadic killings — by dagger, by blade. It isn’t very common, but sometimes you are talking to people and they say, “Can you believe it? There have been 12 knife killings in my barrio.”

*Adapted from a report by:*

*Sandra (Family and Community Center Worker, CaC program, Comuna 13)*

and other weapons. A kind of “barrios war” takes place. In some barrios this has gone on for years.

The stresses and lack of support in barrios can give rise to rage, calls for vengeance and, out of frustration, to domestic violence. Young children in these areas are witnessing or experiencing high levels of physical and sexual abuse. Poverty, malnutrition, morbidity, and lack of schooling are further outcomes associated with displaced families. Perhaps most tragic is the fact that cultural identity tends to be lost along with land and community. When groups are forcefully scattered, mobilization, leadership, and the ability to participate in community building are destroyed. This represents systemic and sustainable annihilation of the social fabric (Rodríguez y Bodnar, 2006).

## The plight of children

Displacement is particularly alarming for women and children. In 2002, 49 percent of the displaced homes were headed by a woman. Women are being forced to assume responsibility for the affective and economic well-being of their families, while being cut off from supports and dealing with hostile, often violent environments. (RSS, 2003b). Their situation puts their children at risk.

Displaced children suffer from loss of family members, loss of friends and peers, and, in overcrowded and impoverished conditions, are often subject to physical abuse and exploitation. Most displaced children cannot access schooling (Research Group, 2000). In the capital city Bogotá, it has been estimated that up to 77 percent of displaced children are not attending schooling of any sort. Moreover, for some ethnic groups the problems are compounded with Afro-Colombians being a case in point. It has been estimated, for example, that less than 21 percent of this population are accessing supports for housing, food, and education.

Living as a displaced person during childhood can have long-term consequences. Children without schooling during their formative years have no structure to their day and no focus for their energy; no way to educate themselves and no help in applying rational thought or finding other ways to work through their emotional trauma. It is within this context that children are left to build their personal and cultural identity (Petit, 2003). Even if and when the children are in places of relative safety, their environment tends to be filled with symbols and reminders of violence. Meanwhile, for many, adults are unable to provide protection and security, and domestic violence is rife. Many displaced children end up in armed groups — as soldiers, assistants, and/or in situations of domestic and sexual slavery. It is estimated that between 7,000 and 13,000 children below the age of 18 years in Colombia are working with armed groups (Forero, 2003).

Children whose feelings of chaos and danger are not addressed, who have no way of developing a vision for a better future, and who are deprived of a sense of territory or homeland, have no foundation upon which to build a healthy world outlook. Instead, they generate fantasies, attitudes, and values which reflect their context. Brutality affects the trajectory of their lives and relationships with others. It is those with weapons who seem to have power. They are the source of admiration and envy. Knowing no other way of being, children as victims become perpetrators — and the cycle of violence continues. CINDE believes that interventions in the early years of life can avert this path.

## Colombians helping Colombians: Family and Community Centers (FCCs)

For 30 years, CINDE has been running programs to facilitate healthy physical and psychological environments for children, their families, and communities within the most excluded areas of the

country. We in Colombia who have lived through terrifying days and nights want to move on. But deep scars remain. For us, the only way to transcend the horror is to reconstruct the social fabric within communities. No outsider can make this happen. That is why we have called our program *Colombianos Apoyando Colombianos* (CaC) (Columbians helping Colombians). The CaC program is a grassroots approach to dealing with individual and community problems. At the core of the program are Family and Community Centers.

The role of Family and Community Centers is to foster environments for holistic development in young children. Describing the work of the Family and Community Centers is difficult because FCCs do

not follow any set formula. Each Center is established on the basis of existing services in the community, gaps in service provision, or access and the aspirations of the community. FCCs are committed to capacity building; that is they reflect methods that complement what already exists in the community, incrementally adding value and addressing needs as they develop.

Each center is run by a Coordinator and supported by several Promoters. These are respected individuals from the community who take on the task of “leading” community development projects. Promoters meet weekly with the caregivers and children to identify and find ways for addressing family- and child-related issues within the

### Box 5.3 Strengthening the abilities of families and communities to attend to the physical and psychological needs of their children

One of the goals for the Family and Community Centers is to strengthen positive and nurturing interactions between parents and children. The Promoters conduct weekly meetings for caregivers focusing on the needs of children from birth onward. They also conduct the *Play to Learn* and *Peace Builders* programs for young school-age children. These Programs use participatory methodologies to model, raise awareness about, and build values for peace and democracy.

Adult programs are focused on enhancing their understanding about how children perceive the world, and how to meet their psychosocial needs at each stage of development.

One of the best tools for parent-child relationship building is our *Parent Toy Library* whereby families are introduced to educational toys and games and take these home to share with children, siblings, and others in the community. Parents are also taught

about the use of drama and art as ways to help children work through stress and trauma. Parents discuss activities which will enhance cultural identity and improve self-concept for all family members.

Other child-oriented issues which are prevalent in each community are discussed in groups, and families are given support to work on community-oriented solutions for common problems. While caregivers, including mothers, fathers, and others are meeting, the children have access to play areas with trained workers. Here children have opportunities to work through their own issues, to socialize in positive ways, and to develop logical thinking and pre-literacy, pre-numeracy skills through a structured learning environment.

Another function of FCCs involve the facilitation of support networks for fathers, mothers, and other significant people who have common goals of improving the environment where children live.

community. The Coordinators and Promoters receive training from CINDE, depending upon their situation and needs. Topics may include community organization and participation, networking, inter-institutional articulation, and/or leadership. Training on child development and programming for young children is also provided.

### *Activities of the FCCs*

FCCs have identified diverse program needs for displaced families and other victims of violence and disruption. Some programs focus on psychosocial needs such as trauma and post-trauma sessions for children and families and/or the restoration of self-esteem at the individual and collective levels. Many communities in Colombia continue to experience intergenerational waves of violence. New, younger gangs are replacing the old ones. For this reason,

FCC programs address strategies for modifying violent imageries and deeply rooted negative behaviors in children and young adults through participatory approaches that address strengthening values for peace and democracy. Other programs have a more pragmatic focus such as the support for income generating projects. Some programs tend to be common for all FCCs, such as the Parent Child Toy Lending program in every FCC.

Once communities have prioritized their own health, cultural, educational, and political needs, they develop a plan of action which includes the mobilization of people and other resources. If extensive financing is needed, the members of the FCC will seek alternate funding sources as part of their plan. Private sector sources and philanthropic agents are enlisted to assist with early childhood and

## Box 5.4 FCC promoters speak out

“We received a lot of training. We met every week to learn about the different aspects of running a centre: how to keep it organized, how to conduct meetings, about how children grow and develop, and how to treat common illnesses in children like diarrheic, respiratory diseases, and first aid.”

*Dora Yanet Osorio of Maruchenga*

“What I like most is to see the mothers coming to the meetings every week, very happy because they are learning many things to raise their children: they do not scream at them, show affection, children behave better; also because they do not have as many problems with their neighbours. Now they can dialogue.”

*Beatriz Guzman of Maruchenga*

“The children don’t get diarrheic as often and those who are already in school are achieving better and don’t miss school as often.”

*Nayerlin Velasquez of Comuna Trece*

“I always admired the program. I was surprised to see how everything we learned at the meetings, we applied immediately working with the families. We learned to diagnose the needs of the families, to make health campaigns, to conduct home visits. We conducted the meetings in any place of the community, because we did not have the Center yet.”

*Claudia Gomez of Maruchenga*

“I started as an assistant and I just supported the Promoter in some activities in the program. Then I helped with the attendance and the materials, including lending the toys to the parents, and later I became a Promoter in charge of conducting the meetings for 20 or 25 mothers and meeting with the institutions of the community. Now I can help my family and I am interested in continuing learning.”

*Luz Amparo Garcia of Comuna Trece*

family programs. In this way FCCs move beyond social service facilitation to community development, fostering inter-sectoral solidarity to meet the needs of young children and their families. Private sector sources and philanthropic agents are mobilized to assist with early childhood and family programs.

### *Characteristics of the FCCs*

Family and Community Centers have characteristics which contribute to effective outcomes. They differ from traditional child care centers in several ways:

- Their clientele is seen as the family (and community) rather than the individual child.
- Their target population includes families with children in early infancy.
- They take a holistic perspective — assessing impact of programs in terms of cultural and social relevancy as well as immediate alleviation of issues.

FCCs offer an alternative social pattern to that of violence and abuse, modeling democratic, consensus decision making which focuses on benefits of a broad population. Because they are not tied to a hierarchy or bureaucracy, members of FCCs can undertake quick decision making and action. Most importantly, the FCCs are totally localized: each one determines the specific needs of their community and involves locals who “own the problem” to develop strategies for addressing these.

### *Networking for community support*

CINDE has worked to facilitate networks amongst FCCs. Through networking, individual FCCs can build on each other’s experiences, and, where possible, share resources. CINDE also plays a facilitation role for communication, sharing, and cooperation *between* FCC and other relevant agents and agencies. Networks which facilitate dialogue between civic agencies, non-government organisations, and government departments are usually highly successful in terms of planning, securing funding, coordination, and taking action.

Colombia appears to be increasingly stable and may be ready now to undertake a review and development of national and regional policies that address social inclusion, prioritise services for children within family structures, restore rights, and support a focus on prevention over crisis interventions for delinquency, abuse, and intra-family violence. Family and Community Centers are delivering programs and creating networks whereby diverse social sectors connect with each other, coordinate activities, strengthen institutional arrangements, and develop financial strategies. This mobilization of agents and services under the auspice of better environments for children represents a decentralized power base from which the establishment of local and national policies for children and families can emerge.

## Sustainable infrastructure: Developing leaders in early childhood education to influence national policies

The Family and Community Centers reflect a strategy for conflict-ridden communities to rebuild themselves through a focus on their children. They represent a grassroots approach to helping themselves, despite a lack of government and other resources and support. As the Promoters become more confident and more successful in implementing local programs, they seek out other Promoters and extend networks. CINDE is facilitating this process. The goal is to develop a nationwide community safety net and support system through the FCC scheme.

But CINDE is aware that sustained progress calls for leaders at all levels of society — we need those who can rebuild communities, and also those who can influence regional and national policies towards the development of a new social fabric. From the beginning, CINDE has been working through universities in Colombia to develop a cohort of leaders who understand the critical nature of support and healing in the early years of life.

## Box 5.5 Changing communities one step at a time: From drug addiction to helpful participant — Carmen’s story

“When Carmen initiated her participation in the FCC program she was a drug addict. At the beginning she was very quiet, never participated or interacted with anyone. However, she never missed a meeting and paid attention to everything.

“In one of the meetings we were talking about self-concept. She started to cry, and I was very concerned about what was happening to her. When the meeting was over I asked her why she had cried so much. She said that the meeting had made her aware of all the problems she had, the ugly life she was living, and how bad she was feeling.

“She told me some things about her life. Her family did not like her, and she had been thrown out several months ago, and she did not have good relationships with her four brothers and sisters. Her boyfriend wanted to marry her, but he was the one that introduced her to drugs. Now she was stealing and selling the objects to buy drugs.

“After that I started a new relationship with her. She began to be interested in cooperating with me in the meetings, keeping attendance control, and going with me to do the home visits. One day, when I was walking to the office, a man I did not know greeted me in a very friendly way and thanked me for having Carmen in the program. According to him, she had changed so much, that she was now living again at home and was having good relationships with everyone in the family. That man was Carmen’s father.

“Carmen, started changing rapidly, and she went from being a volunteer, to becoming a Promoter, and eventually becoming the Coordinator of the program, elected by her own colleagues. Now her family and children live peacefully and productively.”

*Story told by Claudia Acevedo*

The development of specialists and leaders in the fields of early childhood and social development is being forwarded through CINDE and its partner universities in a unique program. Following our philosophy of relevance, openness, and flexibility, we use a theoretical practical approach that combines conventional educational delivery with innovative and participatory learning strategies aimed at producing social change and transformation. To earn postgraduate qualifications, students will undertake community and social development projects, be involved in research and evaluation projects, and participate in processes for formulating and implementing policies and programs.

We need a different outlook for the next generation. Our community development programs, our focus on

young children, and our unique educational opportunities for early childhood leaders are, we believe, creating a way towards a better future for the children of Colombia (Arango, et al., 1992).

## Lessons learned

There are many things that can be learned from the development and working of Family and Community Centers. Four key lessons are worth drawing out and highlighting here.

### ***Local initiatives are most effective***

The Family and Community Centers in Colombia are not highly resourced, nor are they dependent on outside funding and charity. Rather, what makes

them effective is the fact that they are locally developed and run. They are staffed by local individuals who are committed to ensuring healthy environments for children and who have good communication, interpersonal, problem solving, and leadership skills. Training is provided to raise awareness about processes for developing programs and strategies. Training also includes information dissemination about topics which are important for all Centers, such as child development and dealing with traumatised children and caregivers. Networking within communities and between FCCs is fundamental in creating a new social fabric for a troubled region.

### ***Simple programs can have multiple outcomes***

Parent-child toy libraries provide educational opportunities for young children. However, they also serve as a facilitating vehicle to discuss child development issues with parents. Through the toys, parents are encouraged to talk and play with their children. Older siblings are often included. The parent-child toy libraries also provide a network for caregivers; facilitating discussions and information sharing amongst mothers and between mothers and promoters/specialists.

### ***Those affected by conflict have the greatest power to overcome and heal***

The Colombians helping Colombia program has shown that despite their own troubles, citizens can be mobilized to address community needs. Colombians care about the health and well being of the future generation. The cycle of violence is being broken through activities which empower and support

## Box 5.6 Focus on the future

Three Family and Community Centers are functioning in Comuna 13. Their names were chosen by the community. This is significant. The barrios are doing all they can to erase its violent past and focus on building a new “story” for the community. The CFCs call themselves *Sowers of Hope* in Gabriela barrio, *The Children’s Future* in Corazon barrio, and *Dream Fulfillers* located in Independence barrio.

mothers and teachers who work with the children. By ensuring equitable access to good services, by modeling peace in community centers, by introducing play and joy for children and those around them, the process of healing and peace can take hold.

### ***Strategies used for reconciliation and peace need to target the whole community and to provide an integrated approach to meet diverse needs***

In Colombia, whenever possible, the displaced families have called upon relatives and friends for physical, financial, and emotional support. Whole families may move in with their supporters — causing depletion of sparse resources. Further, the non-displaced relatives and supporters tend to absorb the stress and anxiety of those within their care network. Frustration and resentment can ensue. FCCs however have the potential to offer community-wide programs which can address the needs of all families, both those directly and indirectly affected by conflict.