

Colombia

Keeping Afro-Colombian traditions and practices alive

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

The Casa del Niño Association → works across the northern Cauca region of Colombia to collect, preserve and disseminate traditional Afro-Colombian knowledge and practices. Using an intergenerational approach, it brings together older and younger people to share knowledge at local events and undertake community activities to preserve their cultural heritage.

More broadly, the Association has helped local communities to get their voice heard, and contributed to changes in the school curriculum, as well as advocating for the judicial system to incorporate traditional practices.



HelpAge

International

In support of:



GLOBAL
CAMPAIGN
TO COMBAT
AGEISM



What problem or issue does the project address?

The Cauca region of Colombia is home to the largest proportion of Afro-Colombian communities. They have faced protracted discrimination in education, employment and other spheres of life, and have increasingly lost their knowledge of cultural and social traditions that sustained communities over generations. The Casa del Niño Association, set up more than 40 years ago, is trying to preserve and disseminate traditional cultural knowledge and practices to mitigate some of the inequalities experienced by Afro-Colombian communities. It is also addressing the barriers to school enrolment among marginalised communities, as well as the fact that Afro-Colombians are disproportionately represented in Colombia's prison population.

What did the project aim to do?

By regularly facilitating collaborative events and initiatives between communities, the Association encourages sharing of cultural knowledge and practices between older and younger people.

It also aims to replicate and extend the legally recognised jurisdiction held by other Indigenous communities within the Afro-Colombian community. This ensures that such communities have the legal authority to incorporate individual cultural traditions within a specialised education curriculum (known as ethno-education) and a specialised judicial system (known as the Afro-court).

To avoid a paternalistic approach, the Association encourages community ownership of project activities by asking for contributions to project expenses (such as travel costs and refreshments) and organises other fundraising activities to encourage sustainability of the intergenerational work. Local ownership is further bolstered through the Association's rapport with local government institutions, including the Mayor's office, which provides a consistent funding stream and helps the Association build relationships with the private sector and international donors.

How did the project work?

The Association helped to set up intergenerational groups to share knowledge and encourage a greater understanding of traditional Afro-Colombian practices (such as medicinal herbal remedies, cooking, dancing and singing) among the younger generation. The knowledge-sharing groups are formed with participants that represent the different stages of life – such as adolescents, adults and older people. The Association meets with each group to discuss their specific needs and to arrange who would like to represent the sub-groups at the larger meetings. There is always an equal ratio of ages at these meetings – each age group selects two or three representatives to take part in the intergenerational group. Once established, the intergenerational groups go on to create community organisations for older people, younger people, and women, so that they can continue to share knowledge and organise cultural activities.

Decision-making processes within the intergenerational groups are collaborative and consider members' differing perspectives. The groups discuss a range of issues, such as breaking stereotypes held by older people about younger people, and vice versa. For example, some younger people believe that *“since [older people] did not go to school, they don't know much”*. Through intergenerational discussions facilitated by the group's activities, this stereotype has been challenged, with younger group members recognising older people as *‘sabedores’* (wise ones). The Association notes that younger people are now more open to listening to older people's knowledge about their territory and history, and how best to use resources sustainably.

The Association also encourages people to diversify their income-generating activities – for example, creating opportunities for people who grow traditional medicinal plants to sell at local markets. Throughout the project's activities, the Association has worked with local government and traditional leaders to help their voices be heard. Not only does this approach encourage community involvement in the activities to share cultural traditions and knowledge, but it also supports efforts to advocate for change within the education curriculum and judicial system – institutions which have long been recognised to discriminate against persons of Afro-Colombian descent.

Taking advantage of recent government efforts to remove barriers to school enrolment among disadvantaged communities, the Association has worked with local Afro-Colombian communities and leaders to adapt the curriculum in the Cauca region so that it reflects local children's realities. For example, the curriculum now incorporates teaching on local cultural traditions, such as agricultural practices and Afro-religion. These changes were the result of a participatory process, consulting with school teachers, villagers and older people to agree what should be taught.

The Casa del Niño Association held a series of events for older and younger people to share their knowledge:

- **Veni Charlemos (“Come, let’s chat”)**: Discussions were held on how to make the education system inclusive of Afro-Colombian realities. The Association set up the Afro-Colombian Education Project as a way of tapping into older people’s cultural knowledge, as they are considered ‘walking libraries’. One important example is the discussions held around traditional medicine, involving both older people practising traditional medicine and younger members of the community working as medical practitioners (such as doctors or midwives) in more modern institutions. They devised a way to make sure that remote communities have access to traditional medicines for use when people cannot access more modern health facilities.
- **Peace Observatory (Afro-Court)**: the Association has helped set up a space where local grievances can be discussed as a mechanism to prevent violence. The Afro-Court comprises 11 people (older and younger people) and is an important space for intergenerational discussion, peacebuilding and problem-solving.
- **Smells and Flavours**: with support from the Ministry of Culture, the Association has organised several sessions to share knowledge on traditional Afro-Colombian cuisine. The events were organised in response to the reality that many younger Afro-Colombians were unaware of the cultural significance of traditional dishes.
- **Afro-culture adorations to the Child God discussions**: the Association has organised various events in Cauca to share the meaning and significance of traditional dances and songs among the younger generation.

What changes did the project achieve?

The Association’s knowledge-sharing events and advocacy to change the school curriculum have led to a greater awareness and understanding of Afro-Colombian cultural heritage. The intergenerational exchanges have not only promoted a deeper socio-cultural understanding within communities, but have also initiated changes in natural resource management and environmental preservation. With support from the Association, traditional natural methods of crop management used by older generations have been preserved, and the younger generation (which had become increasingly reliant on chemical crop treatments) has begun to use traditional methods they have learnt about from older people.

Another key change stems from the Association’s work to bring together older people and younger people providing medicines and medical treatment (either traditional or modern) to local communities who have often been under-served by government health services. These efforts to get both systems to complement each other have contributed to the diversification of income-generating opportunities, as people selling traditional herbal medicines are now linked to local markets.

By creating the Afro-Court, the Association has contributed to a reduction in violence, and in turn, a reduction in the incarceration of Afro-Colombians. The Afro-Court enables local communities in the region to hold jurisdiction over legal proceedings in their territories, administering justice in line with their traditional practices.

What worked well?

The Association notes that the greatest success and most collaboration occurred in discussions with young people and children about gender equality and development. This, along with the efforts to change the curriculum, proved an extremely successful aspect of the Association’s work. The success of the Afro-Court model has also been widely lauded, as it has enabled Afro-Colombian communities to hold greater jurisdiction over their own affairs.

The Association’s activities have increased in line with increased funding and awareness. By advertising meetings on social media, and through word-of-mouth, the activities have gained considerable reach, with people from communities outside the project’s immediate target area attending events.



Casa del Niño Association



What could have been done differently?

Despite the success of changes to the school curriculum, staff members from the Association recognise the ongoing barriers (including racial prejudice, geography and language) that prevent Afro-Colombian young people obtaining high levels of formal education. There is also limited social mobility as younger people from within those communities cannot generally afford to attend university.

Ongoing conflict between the Colombian government and rebel forces, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), has also limited project activities. Although a peace agreement was reached in 2016, ending 50 years of conflict between FARC and the Colombian government, the Duque administration did not support it. Therefore, many ex-guerrillas have reverted to taking up arms once more and have gone into hiding in the Amazonian territories. This has led to increased displacement among Afro-Colombian communities in the region, who are also grappling with illegal mining activities within the territory, drawing them into conflict when they try to protect their land.

What can we learn from this project?

- It is essential to work with those who have power and influence in the local community (stakeholders such as traditional leaders and government officials) to create relationships that can help an intergenerational project achieve its aims.
- It is crucial to engage the local community and establish community ownership of activities (for example, by getting local people to take on roles such as facilitators or project promoters) if the intergenerational and other groups are to continue after the project has ended.
- Using creative and informal ways to involve people (such as through dance, cooking or singing) is a good complement to more formal exchanges of knowledge and dialogue.
- It is important to be realistic about what the project can achieve, bearing in mind the broader context (in this case, the unstable domestic political situation and presence of active guerrilla groups in the region).

This case study was developed with the support of the Casa del Niño Association in Colombia. It is one in a series of ten case studies, produced in connection with HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

HelpAge International, PO Box 78840, London SE1P 6QR, UK
Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778 info@helpage.org www.helpage.org

Registered charity no. 288180



@HelpAge



HelpAge International

Copyright © HelpAge International 2022. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>