



## IMPROVEMENT OF HUMAN SECURITY CONDITIONS IN SOACHA, COLOMBIA THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATED AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

A UNTFHS funded project implemented by WHO/PAHO, OCHA, UNICEF, WFP, UNODC,  
UNHCR, and FAO  
May 2010 – May 2012

### Success Stories from the Project

#### Background

Fifty years of continuous armed conflict and the existence of powerful drug cartels have had a dramatic impact on the security and humanitarian situation in Colombia. As a result, and despite significant Government efforts, the situation of forced displacement is still one of the most serious in the world, disproportionately affecting indigenous populations, Afro-Colombians, youth, women and children.

Among the most vulnerable areas is Soacha, a municipality of about 450,000 inhabitants located near Bogota. Faced with a history of high and uncontrolled settlement growth due to the continued displacement of people as well as a weak governance structure (the municipality has had seven mayors in the last two years), Soacha is confronted with myriad of factors that continue to challenge human security including insufficient coverage of public services, lack of social cohesion, and high indicators of violence, criminality, unemployment, and environmental degradation.

In view of the complex situation in Soacha, seven UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes collaborated on the joint programme to address reduce vulnerability, relieve urgent needs and protect human rights as well as strengthen local governance in order to provide a more effective and durable response to people's insecurities in the district of Altos de la Florida. In this regard, the project identified a broad range of interconnected issues – health, education, protection, food security, nutrition and housing – and considered the need for interventions to be prioritized based on an integrated and comprehensive framework.

During the UNTFHS funded project in Soacha, local capacities have been enhanced to promote community participation in decision making processes and to empower people to act on their own behalf. As a result, many families experienced improved human security conditions in various ways. The following human security stories illustrate the many significant changes in the lives and living conditions of people in Soacha.

## Blanca, feeding with love the children of Altos de la Florida

Blanca is one of many women who have managed to get through life thanks to determination. “*We built this with our hands*”, she says while showing us the community cafeteria. Blanca’s dream was to take care of children, so she established a cafeteria for children in Altos de la Florida and became a community leader. Supported by a local NGO, Blanca and other women set up their own community organization, HORMIPAZ, which operates the community cafeteria, cooking for the children in Altos de la Florida.

“*It is more than a cafeteria; it is a strategy to support the families. We are also a kind of psychologists*”, she says. “*We try to guide the mothers by telling them how important a good nutrition is for our children. But more important is to prepare the food with love*”, Blanca says. Since the joint programme started, Blanca has been participating in more than three activity areas. For example, both her family and HORMIPAZ participated in the food security and nutrition interventions carried out by WFP and FAO. Blanca implemented one of the 500 family gardens in her house (FAO), and HORMIPAZ has been strengthened through food rations and improved cafeteria facilities (WFP). Her learning did not end there.

“*If I want to be a good community leader, I also have to learn more about thousands of things*”, says Blanca. For this reason, she found it useful to learn about gender and women’s rights policies: “*I understand what my rights are, and I know why it is important to have such a public policy*”.

Through her participation in this process, Blanca promoted the strengthening of HORMIPAZ: “*I participated in a long workshop carried out by UN WOMEN; I have been learning during 15 days about my rights; but the most important thing I learned was to fight for my dreams*”.

At the end of our conversation, Blanca emphasized how important it is to implement a multi-dimensional approach: “*My children also have been participating in different programs and activities*”. Andrés, her oldest boy, became a youth leader through ‘Golombiao’ (the game of peace). Camilo, who is 16 years old, participated in “Return to Happiness”, a strategy carried out by UNICEF.

“*We also improved our living conditions by learning how to maintain our home healthy (PAHO). This brought our family closer*”, Blanca says.

Blanca also emphasized how important it is to work with and for the youth in Altos. She became an important advocate to involve more youth in the strategy carried out by UNODC. “*I helped five young men and women to identify their own socio-productive initiatives*” Blanca tells us. “*I hope that they use this opportunity to make something for their lives*”.

Although Blanca participated in various activities, she ends the conversation with mentioning that her priority is to help the children of Altos de la Florida: “*I presented HORMIPAZ and our community cafeteria as an income generation initiative in order to learn how to make our project sustainable*”, she explains. “*I hope I can continue working with HORMIPAZ for a long time*”.

## Epifania, an empowered woman

Altos de la Florida has a large settlement of people residing illegally in Soacha. The situation requires that inhabitants learn about their housing rights. Three years ago, a group of community members and community leaders established the Association for Property Rights of Altos de la Florida (ASOVIALFLO). During this process supported by UNHCR, UNDP and OCHA, the empowerment of women has been a clear focus of the strategy.

Epifania came from the north of Colombia six years ago in order to escape violence. *“In my old town, I didn’t know how important it is to work with and for the community; I didn’t like that kind of work”*, she says. As a mother, Epifania lived for her kids, but when they grew up and left home she began to think more about herself. Today Epifania is one of the most recognized community leaders in Altos de la Florida. She participated in the establishment of ASOVIALFLO and is the association’s treasurer. Through this work, she has successfully halted an eviction process, and champions dialogue with local authorities for land legalization.

As a community leader, Epifania has been essential for the joint programme by helping the UN agencies identify community participants for the various strategies. She also participated during the formulation of the programme. *“I participated in different ways in the programme, from the formulation phase until the implementation phase. I helped the Agencies to define the best way to work with and for the community”*, Epifania says.



Epifania also participated as a programme beneficiary, establishing a community garden in her house: *“For me, it was very important to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions in my neighbourhood. For this reason, I opened the door of my house and established a community garden”*, explains Epifania. The garden is one of the eleven gardens that function as a kind of classroom for the community. *“Here, many of my neighbours can learn how to establish a garden”*, she says.

She also learned about the healthy home strategy with PAHO, and improved her family’s living conditions. *“Here in Altos we have a lot of difficulties to get water. It has been very important to learn how to store the water we received once a week. I know through this kind of activities we can learn how to make Altos de la Florida a better community”*, concludes Epifania.

### **Liliana, a community leader who works for the IDPs in Soacha**

Liliana always liked to be a leader: *“I have been a community leader for many years”*, she tells us. She likes to contribute to the empowerment and protection of all vulnerable persons, in particular IDPs.

*“When I had to leave my previous town, it was very useful to receive all the information about my rights and opportunities”*, Liliana says. *“Now I’ve become a kind of expert in IDP issues, that’s why I like to work for my community; to bring them all the information I know”*.

Liliana has been working with the Local Roundtable of IDPs of Soacha for more than three years. She worked for two years as the technical secretary of the forum. *“In this timeframe, I had the opportunity to dialogue with the local government and the Ombudsman Office”*.

To further bolster her skills, Liliana engaged in two activities through the joint UN programme. She participated in the revision process of the local public policy on IDPs: *“For me, it was a very good experience and an opportunity to make a kind of advocacy for my rights. UNHCR helped us to learn about our specific situation as IDPs and to work for our rights”*, she says.

She also participated in the workshops carried out to formalize the civil society control group: *“I learned new things about other public policies, such as women’s and gender rights, food security and nutrition, territorial plan and youth public policy”*, Liliana tells.

One of the additional values of this process was to promote a multi-sectorial approach which should be implemented by the advocacy strategies carried out by the civil society control groups. *“Through the IDP public policy, we did a great progress in terms of protection of IDPs in Soacha. Now I’ll still be working for the strengthening of the Local Roundtable of IDPs of Soacha. We need a place to work, an office, from where we can give to all IDPs information about their possibilities in Soacha”*, Liliana concludes.

*These beneficiary stories were provided by the UN Country Team in Colombia.*