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## Colombia's displaced indigenous women

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**Indigenous peoples are one of the most vulnerable groups within Colombia's internally displaced population, and a lack of understanding of their culture and needs constitutes a major challenge to their protection and assistance.**

Of Colombia's estimated population of more than 49 million, 1.5% are indigenous peoples. Under the Constitution of 1991, indigenous peoples are entitled to own the lands where they practise their culture. These indigenous territories, which are usually located in isolated parts of the country, tend to be rich in natural resources – and therefore attractive to different actors involved in Colombia's armed conflict. Over the years, increasing numbers of indigenous peoples have been displaced by violence or threat of violence.

Losing their territory is a major problem for indigenous peoples. Communities are divided and families separated. In many cases, indigenous women end up alone and/or as heads of household after their partners are killed. Afraid of being found by the perpetrators, many flee towards the cities where they are forced to settle in slum conditions. All of these reasons contribute to the "...de-structuralization of entire communities and the risk of disappearing as distinct and different peoples."<sup>1</sup>

### The case of Zenu women

Zenu indigenous people are mainly located in the north of Colombia. Their principal economic activities are the production of handicrafts and the exchange of agricultural products with other indigenous groups. Within the family, women are responsible for the creation of a garden known as *el patio* where vegetables, fruits, medicinal plants and domestic animals are kept for the use of the family. From a community's perspective, women help create a 'reservoir of biodiversity', with some *patios* reported to include as many as "...28 species of vegetables, 30 species of fruits and more than 70 species of medicinal plants".<sup>2</sup> Women are also responsible for traditional medicine and knitting. In these ways, Zenu women

have a great impact on the survival of their communities – and land is crucial to their role.

In displacement, the role of Zenu women changes abruptly. In many cases they face challenges such as lack of housing, food security, education and employment. Since many Zenu women have little more than primary-level education, most employment opportunities for them are lowly paid and temporary, and nearly all displaced women and families are forced to live in rental accommodation. Lack of land to create a *patio* compromises the family's food security, and the need for women to work outside the home affects their ability to take care of their children – which leaves the children more at risk of becoming involved in gangs. In this manner, internal displacement drastically changes the role of Zenu women and compromises the survival of the whole community.

### Inadequate government response

Colombia's Law 387 of 1997 was designed to prevent internal displacement and assist those who had been displaced. Each of the country's 32 departments was expected to decide its annual budget for implementing relevant programmes but the lack of government oversight has led to wide variations in implementation and hence in the assistance provided. In the case of indigenous people, local governments have failed to understand and address their specific needs.

In order to access assistance, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) need to register with the Colombian Registry of Victims. If successfully registered, IDPs have the right to receive Emergency Humanitarian Aid which aims to cover their immediate basic needs; a second stage concerns economic and social stability for which income generation and housing assistance are available. Findings

from interviews with Zenu women from the Pasacaballos community in the city of Cartagena indicate that the registry system makes it difficult for indigenous women to access aid. These difficulties proceed from circumstances including women having been displaced more than once and no longer being eligible for assistance.

For those who have received aid, it has generally been insufficient, of poor quality or delayed. For instance, some women received financial assistance to cover their rental costs two years after requesting help. Another woman was promised financial assistance but received part of the payment in the form of food (of poor quality), four chairs and a set of spoons. Many years later she is still owed 40% of the funds promised. This type

of assistance represents a waste of resources for the government considering that it does not provide women with the tools they need.

Poor organisation of assistance by the government and a lack of understanding of the real needs of displaced indigenous women are proving damaging both to the short-term survival of internally displaced Zenu women and their families and to the longer-term survival of their community and culture.

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1. Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia/National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia  
<http://bit.ly/UASB-RAA-08-ONIC>
2. Vélez G A and Valencia M (1995) 'Comunidad Zenú del Volao: De las cenizas del desplazamiento forzoso resurge la vida', *Biodiversidad, sustento y culturas* [www.grain.org/e/803](http://www.grain.org/e/803)