



DEFENSA DE NIÑAS Y NIÑOS INTERNACIONAL DNI
DEFENSE DES ENFANTS INTERNACIONAL DEI
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL DCI
the worldwide movement for children's rights



COALICO
Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas
y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia

“THE DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN IN THE LAND OF THE JAGUARS”

An ethnic perspective of the impact of collective violence against girls, boys, adolescents and young people, with an emphasis on the situation of children, women and families in the municipality of Mitú-Vaupés (Colombia’s North Amazonia)

Author: Vilma Amparo Gómez Pava, Vice-President of Defense For Children International (DCI) - Colombia
Email: vilmaagomez2011@gmail.com
Landline number: + 57 1 3382306/3382272 Mobile: + 57 1 315 8312804
Address: Carrera 20 No. 39-33 Of. 405 Bogotá, Colombia

1. ABSTRACT

In the context of Colombian indigenous populations, when focusing on situations of collective violence that affect indigenous children, adolescence and youth, this report considers the situation of indigenous girls and women in the municipality of Mitú, Vaupés in the northeastern Amazonia. Witnessing firsthand the damage, changes in identity, culture, family and social relationships, allows us to identify the ancestral and non-ancestral mechanisms of protection that help this population face certain realities on a daily basis. Recommendations have been put forward to public policy makers at the regional and national levels, in order to open platforms for local, national and international social and political advocacy. These recommendations would give visibility to these situations and help build a proactive indigenous citizenship, even amid the ongoing Colombian armed conflict.

KEY WORDS: Colombian indigenous children, adolescence and youth. Damage. Identity and cultural changes.



2. CONTEXT

Colombia has an indigenous population of 1,392,623¹ persons corresponding to 3.43% of the total population (which is of 42,090,502 inhabitants). The indigenous population under 18 years is a total of 638 937 (45.88%) persons.

Official statistics recognize the existence of 84 different indigenous ethnicities, but according to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia – ONIC; however there are a total of 102 self-proclaimed indigenous ethnicities. These indigenous groups speak 65 languages, grouped into 12 different linguistic families²; there are 8 isolated languages³ - a great number of them also speak Spanish. According to their original geographical location, indigenous populations are present in 27 departments but, for different reasons, different indigenous ethnicities are found in all 32 departments of Colombia. In the department of Vaupes, the total population is estimated to be 41,965 inhabitants. The municipality of Mitu has 14,213 children under the age of 17 and 4,768 live in the urban area of the town. Indigenous territories are recognized by the state as “Resguardos”⁴ (referring to collective property land settled with governments according to cultural and customs uses), and three of them are located in Vaupés.

3. INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

The internal armed conflict in Colombia is one of the longest lasting in the history of Latin America. Its causes are numerous, among them there are economic crises and social policies that have led armed conflicts since the creation and formation of the country. The past decade the conflict claimed the lives of over 40,000 people. The military and police forces, paramilitary groups or gangs, and guerrillas are the actors in this conflict. The decade of the 1980’s was characterized by the degradation of the internal armed conflict due to drug financing of illegal armed groups activities and the expansion of the paramilitaries. Particularly indigenous children, adolescents and youth see their fundamental human rights infringed, since they reside in rural areas where armed conflict is intertwined with structural conditions such as extreme poverty⁵, lack of opportunity and neglect.

¹ National Department of Statistics-DANE. Census 2005. The population under 18 corresponds to 16.302.000 (38% of the total population) www.dane.gov.co

² A linguistic family is defined as a group of languages derived from a common language. For more information on Colombian indigenous languages go to: <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/antropologia/lengua/clas01.htm>

³ Isolated languages are those that may not be grouped into any of the existing linguistic families, because of unique features that make them exist alone.

⁴ Currently there are 747 legalized territories named as “Resguardos” located in 28 departments and 234 municipalities of Colombia. A total of 770 633 indigenous people (70.43%) of the surveyed indigenous lives in lands legally established. 26,283 persons (2.40%) are surveyed without information on reservations.

⁵ Extension of this information in the Report of the General Secretary of the UN Security Council at http://www.coalico.org/S2012171_SP_Informe2012_SG_2.pdf



Hereafter are a few examples, which are more than enough to understand the extent of damage inflicted to indigenous children:

The Committee on the Rights of the Child⁶ expressed its deep concern that Afro-Colombian and indigenous children were particularly vulnerable to massacres and forced displacement by refusing to be recruited, as their communities were often affected by armed conflict. Between January and March 2011, the FARC-EP recruited at least three indigenous children in Caquetá. In June 2011, in the department of Cauca, the National Army of Colombia presented to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) two children who had been recruited by the FARC-EP. During the period under review, other cases of recruitment of indigenous children by armed groups were reported in the departments of Cauca, Córdoba, La Guajira, Guaviare, Nariño and Vaupés.

In its annual report for 2010, the Observatory of the Presidential Program on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law reported that there was an increase in cases of forced recruitment of indigenous children of the Guayabero and Sikuni ethnies in the department of Guaviare.

Between 2007 and 2010 more than 79 000 indigenous persons were displaced from their territories. According to ONIC⁷, up to December 2011, 33 cases of forced displacement were registered, affecting a total of 5327 indigenous people.

Between 2008 and 2011, according to the “Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca-ACIN”⁸, in their territories 46 children were victims of the conflict: 11 of them were killed, 18 were wounded and 17 were affected by unexploded munitions.

Sexual abuse against indigenous girls committed by members of the security forces have increased, but many of these cases fail to be reported and therefore not investigated. The statistics of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in children of the indigenous territories have also increased, but they do not receive adequate attention or support due to the lack of specific program to this end.

The confinement and the denial of humanitarian aid have been consistent, especially in the indigenous territories of the departments of Putumayo, Nariño and Chocó where most often such events are reported and registered.

In 2009 the “Consejo Regional Indígena del Vaupés- CRIVA” submitted a report to the Ombudsman reporting the recruitment of 42 indigenous children by the FARC. This report indicated that the

⁶ Examination held on June 4th 2010 to the initial report submitted by Colombia by virtue of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children into armed conflict (CRC/C/OPAC/COL/CO/1).

⁷ At: <http://cms.onic.org.co/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/05/informe-violencia-sexual-mujeres-ind%C3%ADgenas-Colombia.pdf>

⁸ Data provided by “Fundación Caminos de Identidad-FUCAI” based on their files work with ACIN.



DEFENSA DE NIÑAS Y NIÑOS INTERNACIONAL DNI
DEFENSE DES ENFANTS INTERNACIONAL DEI
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL DCI
the worldwide movement for children's rights



COALICO
Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas
y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia

most affected indigenous populations, by the number of children recruited, were Cubeo and Yurutí; in total over 14 communities were affected. The report does not discriminate the information by gender, highlighting that "*the recruitment of indigenous children occurred in schools and in boarding schools where no security forces were present or these were only temporary*".

This current situation of physical disappearances, aggravated by the lack of registration and ongoing monitoring, is jeopardizing at least 45 indigenous populations; with no effective measures been taken to prevent this situation.

3.1. MITU: ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CONFLICT - BETWEEN INVISIBILITY AND SILENCE

During the decades of the 1970's and 1980's, the municipality of Mitu was continually harassed by the FARC. In 1998 one of the worse attacks perpetrated by the FARC to a departmental capital of the country occurred and, devastated Mitu. The civilian victims of this military action and its effects have been left invisible, silent and unaccounted for. The whole country remembers the kidnapping of police and army officers by the guerrilla who remained for more than a decade in captivity. What the whole country fails to recall and thus remains without due attention, are the mental and physical effects on survivors of what occurred. Official documents subsequent to the year of the attack, such as state and municipal plans of development, did not take into account the victims or the reality of the facts, leaving the affected civilian population without policies or access to truth, justice and reparation.

In the collective environment there appears to be a sort of "frozen duel": a deep, unconscious and invisible trace in the daily lives of people who lived this episode, and in the infrastructure destroyed and which was never rebuilt. Mitú has a generation of young people who lived the attack, but have never been provided opportunities or assistance able to express it; there is also a generation of children who have grown and continue to grow up being directly and indirectly affected by the war, with its actors and symbols as an open offer that the institutional weakness does not filled. The local authorities perceive as normal the threats inflicted to indigenous children by the armed conflict, which is why prevention and public communication activities that generate sensitivity in such communities are not included in the public agendas.

4. KNOWLEDGE DIALOGUES APPROACH AND WORK METHODOLOGY

Based on a context of invisibility and silence, and taking into account that indigenous women and girls face the greater risks and damages derived from the armed conflict, we wonder how



indigenous women and girls in Mitu live, feel and perceive the armed conflict? To answer this question, we have designed an approach based on the principles of Participative Action Research (IAP by its acronym in Spanish) and Qualitative Research. From both principles, we establish techniques and tools such as observation, field notes, semi-structured interviews and means to collect and systematize information (syllabi, summaries, surveys, social mapping). Among these tools, special emphasis was given to meetings held to sustain “knowledge dialogues”⁹, based on the oral traditions that characterizes indigenous cultures of Vaupés, and beginning with issues or topics of interest for the participants of the certain group.

The steps taken in the organization of meetings to hold Knowledge Dialogues with the groups were:

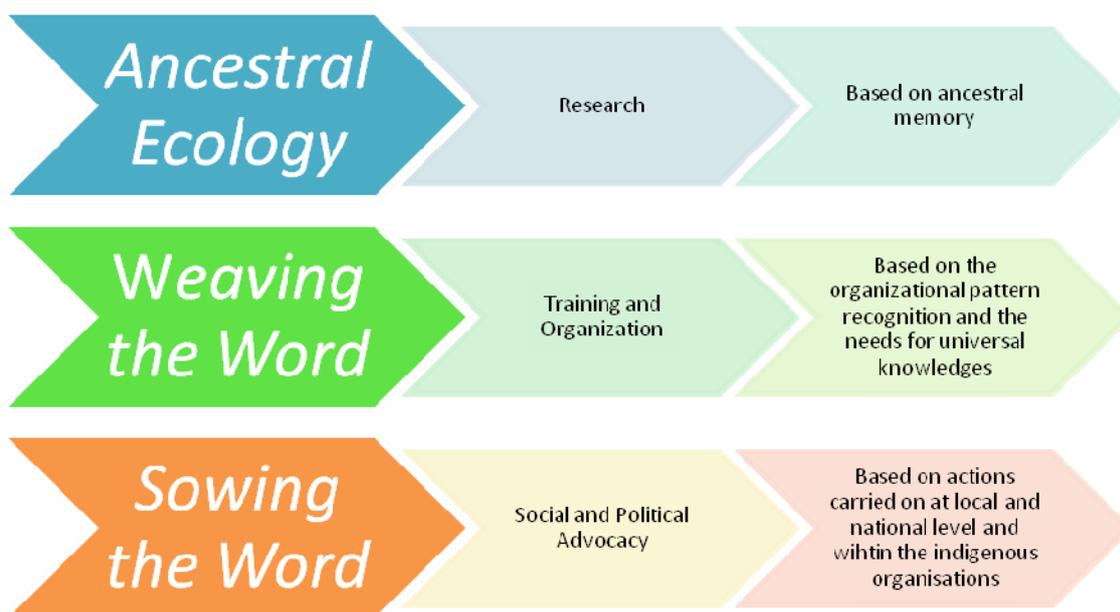
- ✓ Context recognition
- ✓ Contact with key and direct participants
- ✓ Free, prior and informed consultation with groups of girls and women
- ✓ Establishment of agreements on times for meetings and issues to be discussed
- ✓ Planning and verification of meeting agendas with an elder of the Cubeo ethnic group
- ✓ Organization of each meeting for a dialogue of knowledge with shared activities:
 1. Meeting
 2. Word Circle
 3. Mobilizing Questions
 4. Synthesis and commitments
 5. Feedback through new questions

The knowledge dialogues are intertwined in a process that, respecting the spoken word, create an open space among girls and women of free and spontaneous expression that initiates internally and progressively exteriorizes. It begins with the thematic dialogue dedicated to *Ancestral Ecology*, where different and also common cultural customs and uses of the peoples of Vaupés are discussed together. Then the thematic dialogue concerning *Weaving the Word takes place*, which is focused on acknowledging certain organizational structures and the needs for universal knowledge. Finally the knowledge dialogue *Sowing the Word takes place*, which consists in participating in different spaces of those of their own group and

⁹ The Knowledge Dialogue is a creative meeting (...) of human beings constituted by knowledge, is the peaceful relationship with the Other that is produced in the language (...) is dialogue with (...) the memory and the word, with traditional knowledge. The dialogue becomes inquiry (...) of deleted text, is a therapeutic policy that returns the speech and the language sense whose flow has been blocked by dams of dominant science. The Knowledge Dialogue fertilizes the cultural diversity and recreates the world, not only is confluence of thoughts and knowledge, but an endless series of relationships (...) between distinct beings, where solidarity and confrontation of knowledge generate new identities (...) that strengthen each autonomy within synergies of the encounters with the other and the different. Enrique Leff in Sustainable Discourses. Editorial Siglo XXI. 2008. The edition of the quote is ours.

community, as a way to express their knowledge, exchange experiences and strengthen individual, family and collective issues. The general process is summarized in the following diagram:

Knowledge Dialogues Process



In the municipality of Mitú, the process which occurred can be described in the following table:

Dialogues and issues conducted with girls and women in Mitú

DIALOGUES LEVELS	MOMENTS	TOPIC OF THE KNOWLEDGE DIALOGUES
<i>Ancestral Ecology</i>	Memory and Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chagra¹⁰ • Land and Authority • I am man, I am woman • Speaking with the elders • Traditional Remedies
<i>Weaving the Word</i>	Training and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We're not alone but we're different

¹⁰ The "Chagra" is a growing area in the jungle that is opened by cutting and burning. It is also the perfect place for the transmission of gender differentiated cultural knowledge according to the traditions of the indigenous ethnies.

	Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can decide • Communications Dialogues • I Want a Future
<i>Sowing the Word</i>	Social and Political Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion session "Indigenous Childhood: see it is to recognize it" • National and International Institutions visits • Forum "Indigenous Children between exclusion and extermination" and Proposition 047 of the National Congress • Board on public policy and situation of indigenous children and adolescents in Colombia

Knowledge Dialogues are to be given due attention and emphasis, as a means to create communication spaces for girls and women, where they can experience the difference between the denial and silence of their voices, in the family, and community and organizational spaces. These dialogues developed into participatory environments where active listening generates confidence to talk about silenced topics, as for instance the issue of armed conflict. The flexibility of this proposed activity took into account the comments and observations suggested by the participants themselves, which helped in the appropriation of space for dialogues, the improvement in participation and strengthening the comprehension of different issues, as well as and the explicit verbal expression of the participants themselves.

5. FINDINGS

After three years of dialogue between groups of girls and women who agreed to participate in the meeting spaces proposed by DCI-Colombia, we found in the voices of the participants themselves, and in their daily lives, how they have been affected and what they identified as protection mechanisms.

5.1. ASSESSMENTS

The sensation and perception of insecurity is highlighted on a daily basis. Expressions like "*do not go out alone at night*", or girl's answers given to the question what affects your life "*to be raped and left pregnant*", show that for girls and women the fear associated with the lack of security to walk alone peacefully, affects their daily life.



DEFENSA DE NIÑAS Y NIÑOS INTERNACIONAL DNI
DEFENSE DES ENFANTS INTERNACIONAL DEI
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL DCI
The worldwide movement for children's rights



COALICO
Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas
y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia

Interference of the cultural practices and the rituals for food security. As the opinion: "working on the *Chagra is done with fear, while working in the community is not*" expressed by one of the women, reflected what many of them feel and have experienced in silence: patrols of soldiers interfere with women's routine of going to work on their crops, so the crops remain neglected and get damaged or dry out. Fear about landmines that were planted since 1998 is also expressed.

The collective and individual psychosocial effects are directly related to the attack of 1998: running and dispersing when witnessing fireworks during the holidays of 2010, and the description that a woman makes about her anxiety when there is a storm, because she hears (in her mind) sounds of army helicopters; all show levels of impact that remain invisible and untreated.

In the municipality, militarization of civilian life is over all: All the public recreational sports and entertainment activities are convened and executed by either army or police security forces. No principle of distinction or application of the guidelines issued by the military authorities are observed in this territory, where the presence of illegal armed groups is still a concrete reality.

Forced displacement is another effect that denies access to agricultural land, generates overcrowded housing, domestic abuse, changing of family and social roles, and exposition of girls to the worst forms of labor, family division and dissolution.

Forced recruitment and admission to the guerrilla ranks, by means of the report from the Indigenous Regional and zonal organization, is characterized by engaging children with tricks and false promises to improve their quality of life. It also generates displacement of the youngest to avoid being recruited, thereby weakening the family and so the permanence within their own territories.

Violence and sexual exploitation of indigenous girls is expressed with phrases like "*[Girls] let themselves be taken (away) by adults*", "*They do something for the money*", "*Girls allow [strangers] to touch their bodies*", "*They consume vices with men and do not care for their bodies*", "*They sell their own lives*", "*That [for them] life doesn't matter*", "*Indigenous girls are the hardest working and strongest but they let themselves be fondled by men*". Notwithstanding this harsh reality, no preventive measures or exemplary punishments have been registered concerning the cases reported.

Early aged pregnancies¹¹ and fatherless children who were disdainfully called "*Children of Plan Colombia*" or "*Sons of the Greens*" continue the vicious circle of human rights infringements and the exclusion of children, who remain unaccepted into their mothers' communities nor fully integrated into the non-indigenous society.

5.2 PROTECTION MECHANISMS

We also found that ancestral protection mechanisms exist, and according to these girls and women, would be as follows:

¹¹ The Department Health Secretary, reported Mitú as the municipality with the highest number of early aged pregnancies between 2008 and 2010 with frequencies of 47, 25 and 45 cases in this period.



DEFENSA DE NIÑAS Y NIÑOS INTERNACIONAL DNI
DEFENSE DES ENFANTS INTERNACIONAL DEI
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL DCI
The worldwide movement for children's rights



COALICO
Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas
y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia

- *The chagra*: a complementary space between genders; a place where, in addition to planting and harvesting food for the family, it is an optimum place to offer and receive lessons. For women, it is a link to their female lineages, a link of knowledge about their territories, its management, the cycles of time, the environment

- *Carayurú, prayer and diet*: according to the traditional Cubeo elder Enrique Llanos "*The carayurú is a thought, an energy, a layer of material and spiritual protection. It is to be accompanied by prayer and diets to obtain different types of protection. The prayer invokes the gods, the spirits that protect us. The diet makes the effect greater*". And this protection mechanism is used daily in Mitú; in most of the indigenous families, girls and women learn the preparation and preservation of this knowledge, which is to be kept a cultural secret.

- *Counseling Word*: These are special words that take the form of prayers, songs, greetings, legends or stories that generally lie in the memory of the grandparents. Why are the words of advice a protection mechanism? Because these counseling words, within their contents, transmit key elements for the care and protection of people and the environment. For girls and women, having grandparents to whom they can seek word of advice is to have a social network of care and protection.

- *Friendship and Support network between neighbors*: Friendship is a form of protection which is appreciated by girls and women alike. At boarding schools for girls, because they give support and share solutions to school and personal situations; in the neighborhood women say that to "*Be friends with the neighbors when you go to the chagra is good in case any inconvenience were to occur, then you may be supported and be assisted and supported back at home,*". Listen and learn from the strength of others, find different ways to solve family situations, finding ways to guide children, learn about open opportunities for women, solve pressures caused by domestic violence, join events and open training spaces, are all reasons that provide women with examples of the true value of a friendship and support network among neighbors.

And we also found two relevant non-ancestral protection mechanisms:

- *Specialized Roadmaps* to address human rights violations in differential and appropriate forms depending on the specific cases. By law, local governments are empowered and provided with a budget to coordinate interagency actions, establishing a roadmap for: cases of children affected by armed conflict; girls and women affected by domestic violence and sexual violence; case of forced disappearances. These roadmaps are mechanisms for the prevention, observation, monitoring and restoration of the human rights of victims. In indigenous territories specialized care roadmaps act as a harmonizing mechanism between legal systems: the special indigenous jurisdiction and ordinary jurisdiction. In the case of Mitú, the roadmap to assist disappeared people and the others mentioned, operates with difficulties and so have not been properly implemented. We also found that women and girls request that the support of entities be respectful and coordinated.

- *Knowledge Dialogues*. From the experience with girls and women and their opinions given during the meetings such as: "*I have been strengthened*", "*Now I can say what I think without fear*", "*I learned to respect others and to respect myself*", we learned that to open more spaces for knowledge dialogues is of uppermost importance, acting as a non ancestral protective mechanism. Girls and women together resolve



DEFENSA DE NIÑAS Y NIÑOS INTERNACIONAL DNI
DEFENSE DES ENFANTS INTERNACIONAL DEI
DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL DCI
The worldwide movement for children's rights



COALICO
Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas
y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia

different situations daily; to listen carefully, with dedication and respect to their knowledge is what public entities do not so. As a matter of fact, this finding has been shared with the local public officials. .

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Together we propose recommendations for local and national governments; some were established by women themselves, and others by the team but which were shared and adopted by the groups. Recommendations of the women and girls include the following:

- Stimulus to each family “chagra” and support to strengthen a network of “chagreras” women
- Maximize the traditional knowledge with technological developments to contribute to productivity
- Review of educational policies and curricula content and administrative organization of the system
- Encourage intergenerational dialogue within families with love and respect for the preservation of cultural knowledge
- Strengthening the domestic economy as an issue on the political agenda of the municipality and of the indigenous organizations
- Having more and better activities during leisure time

From the recommendations made by the team of DCI-Colombia to local and national governments, we highlight the following:

- Develop a comprehensive plan for the prevention, monitoring, tracking, and attention of indigenous children of the department and the municipality affected by armed conflict and in high risk for the presence of illegal armed groups; built on free, priority and informed consultation with children and their families.
- Set up specialized roadmaps for children affected by armed conflict and sexual violence victims.
- Conduct participatory socio-cultural studies to approach childrearing practices, care and education, processing and resolution of family conflict, and indigenous survival strategies in urban areas.
- Consolidation of an information system that includes municipal and departmental differential variables of gender, age and ethnicity.
- At boarding schools, increase support and monitoring, to ensure that the living environments of the students undergoes an effective improvement.
- For a healthy use of internet, create awareness campaigns and educational activities to service providers, parents, mothers, children and young people.

The aspiration to develop these recommendations is that in the municipality of Mitú, and particularly public officials, both indigenous and non-indigenous ones, in Vaupés, understand their role as guarantors of human rights; and that girls and women recognize themselves as citizens, and active rights-holders. These aspirations are challenges that present multiple difficulties, notably: the absence of an active citizenship; a rooted culture of “rumor and request”; and the systematic disregard for human rights in general, and children, women and indigenous rights in particular.

7. THE WAY FORWARD?

To answer the question that actually encouraged us to examine the issue of children affected by armed conflict and witness the reality of indigenous girls and women of Mitú; we have come to the conclusion that two different forms of advocacy are to be followed: social and political.

Social advocacy aims to make indigenous children visible among national social organizations and agencies that are present in Colombia; seeking to sensitize those who form part of these entities about the potential for the country and the possibilities for improvement of the conditions of indigenous children and their families.

Advocacy brought us to engage directly with members of Congress, encouraging more political control. As a result, today we are part of the "*Board of Monitoring of the situation of Indigenous Children in Colombia*", which is a coordination space where all entities responsible for public policies for indigenous children are represented. This board has issued recommendations to a variety of entities and has established targeted criteria in order to draw attention to communities, as well as a methodology for working with indigenous populations in the country. These criteria were endorsed by the National Social Policy Council, and the Board will be integrated as a technical consultation space within the National Family Welfare System of the country (SNBF by its acronym in Spanish).

Another way to answer the question of how to proceed is through the support of communication and information technologies. In this way it is essential that girls and women handle different media and are able to afford this; we continue to dedicate knowledge dialogues to facilitate internet access and management of different formats, so they may, in a near future, circulate their own experiences and cultural knowledge through the internet.

8. FINAL CONSIDERATION

Indigenous peoples, in spite of such adverse reality they encounter daily, have a fierce capacity for resistance, are resilient and extremely harmonious, with foolproof a sense of humor and the conviction that their past ancestral knowledge is the hope for a better world in the future.