

# ‘De Cero a Siempre’, a commitment to our children’s early years

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**Investing in early childhood is the best commitment a country can make both in its present and in its future. Based on this premise, in Colombia we designed a comprehensive policy – known as ‘De Cero a Siempre’ (From Zero to Forever) – with the aim of achieving an egalitarian society in which disadvantaged circumstances at birth are not perpetuated throughout our citizens’ lives.**

Our children are at the very heart of the peaceful Colombia we are now building, so we understand the urgency of designing a visionary early childhood policy that is in keeping with the international agenda on this same issue.

Evidence shows that the brain develops at its most rapid pace in the first five years of life, and that investment in this sector of the population brings the greatest rates of social return. Based on this evidence, and putting the safeguarding of children’s rights at the top of our agenda, we decided to create a programme of comprehensive care that could be adjusted to suit the particular circumstances wherever children were living across the country. We also invited the private sector, social and community organisations, academia and international cooperation bodies to join the project.

This challenge required an innovative approach to the way we designed, managed, implemented and invested in effective public policy. Seven years after implementation, and thanks to an unprecedented increase in investment in early childhood, Colombia has managed to significantly expand the coverage of integrated care for this population. This has enabled us to go from providing care for 400,000 children in 2010 to the current figure of more than 1.2 million children, close to 50% of whom are living in vulnerable circumstances.

## Every child as the subject of integrated care

The De Cero a Siempre policy changed the way we approached early childhood care, putting children at the centre of the action, bringing about changes in their lives and promoting their overall development. Nowadays, care is provided on a nominal basis. Each child is registered with their name, surname, identification number and location. Also, all the care they receive is monitored and followed up regularly.

To make this happen, we set up the *Ruta Integral de Atenciones* (Integrated Care Route), the policy’s main management tool, defining the care that each child



△ Photo: Press Office, Presidency of Colombia

should receive from birth to 6 years of age. A series of services were prioritised, in which each child is given, for example, their own entry in the Civil Registry of Births, membership of the General Social Security System for Health, a full vaccination programme, nutritional monitoring, care and child-raising training for their families and carers, and so on. These services are accountable to institutional recording and monitoring systems, which check and follow up the execution of our early childhood policy. These systems are crucial for preventing risk situations and also taking steps to remedy them.

## A joined-up effort across sectors

Specialising – both institutionally and technically – to tackle the challenge of guaranteeing good-quality integrated care, required a huge effort of coordination at the national, departmental and municipal levels. Implementing all this work meant we were able to channel financial and technical resources into matching up institutional supply with territorial demand, as well as including early childhood initiatives in development plans.

This prompted us to set up the *Comisión Intersectorial para la Atención Integral de la Primera Infancia* (Cross-Sector Commission for Integrated Care in Early Childhood), which created a structure in line with the objectives of our policy, joining together and coordinating the actions of all the organisations involved in providing integrated care.

## Generating partnerships

In addition to all the above, a series of valuable public–private partnerships were established, and these played a key role in the whole process of structuring, implementing and promoting the policy.

As a government, we were deeply touched by the enormous contribution from civil society organisations, private sector companies, academia and the international cooperation bodies, who willingly gave their services to work on early childhood development. We were ready to create the necessary conditions for these actions to be synchronised with policy and in coordination with the State. This would widen the scope of the objective that united us all, that of promoting integrated early childhood development.

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## Promoting joint responsibility

The principle of joint responsibility sets out that family, State and society are guarantors of the rights of women in pregnancy and of children – in our case, children in early childhood. Bearing in mind this guiding principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and our country's own laws on this issue, our policy has sought to foster cultural change and influence social norms to make childhood care a top priority. It does so by emphasising the critical role played by families in children's overall development and by encouraging the local community to be proactive in supporting them.

## An integrating perspective on development

It is not enough for the De Cero a Siempre policy to concentrate actions on just one single aspect of children's development, we must consider the concept of all-encompassing care. This view involves seeing children as active agents in their own development. It means putting in place new requirements for their families, for the teachers who work with them every day, and for everyone who designs these kinds of programmes and projects.

## What the policy means for the lives of children in Colombia

The De Cero a Siempre policy is yet another example of the huge effort this Government is making in a number of areas to help build a better country. This better Colombia demands our pledge that the generation of peace is able to grow up in the best possible conditions.

Since 2010, we have invested close to USD 6.8 billion in welfare. This sum is in addition to resources invested by regional bodies, and the USD 100 million administered through public-private partnerships in order to implement the action lines set out in the policy.

The policy is now alive and well across the regions, the same regions that are now experiencing a rebirth following half a century of armed conflict. Through processes of technical cooperation between the country's 32 departments – plus almost a third of the country's municipalities – we have succeeded in strengthening the ability of local authorities and stakeholders to manage and implement the policy.

By providing the right kind of care, enormous progress has been made in the humanisation and flexibility of care delivered to pregnant mothers and very young children. Also, primary education stages have been defined and updated, with 150,000 educators being trained to date in providing integrated care during early childhood.

As part of the First 1000 Days of Life care schedule, more than 4 million children under the age of 6 were registered with the Social Security system, and 95% of children under the age of 1 year have already been vaccinated. In addition to this, we have strengthened the care and child-raising skills of both carers and families, working alongside them using a range of strategies, including giving 7400 'new baby sets' to newborns in vulnerable areas.

To promote access to reading and cultural heritage, we have delivered more than 15 million books and specialist material designed for primary schools and public libraries, in addition to which some 227 reading rooms have been started.

We are proud of the lives we are helping to change for ever, thanks to the 274 new childhood development centres we have opened across the country.

We have also joined the alliance of more than 40 public and private partners to set up a new initiative, *Generación Cero Desnutrición* (Zero Malnourishment Generation), which has set itself the task of eradicating chronic malnutrition in Colombia by 2030.

To consolidate the results of cooperation on early childhood issues, we worked with the Inter-American Dialogue analysis centre, the Bernard van Leer Foundation and other agents to set out the *Agenda Regional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Primera Infancia en países de Latinoamérica y el Caribe* (Regional Agenda for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Latin American and Caribbean Countries), an instrument that will help us gradually improve the care delivered to this population across all our countries.

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## The challenges of the De Cero a Siempre policy

Colombia is experiencing an era of sweeping change and, as a result, the De Cero a Siempre policy will always have to be fine-tuned to ensure it responds to the ongoing needs of early childhood.

One major challenge is achieving the universal application of high-quality integrated care and focusing on children who need particular attention, especially children living in the areas worst affected by the armed conflict. This task involves a high degree of coordination between national and regional organisations to clearly define everyone's responsibilities in terms of policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The same applies to the various bodies in the public and private sector, as well as in civil society, with whom we work extremely closely for the good of our country's children.

### Securing peace, our priority

Just as the Bernard van Leer Foundation took the wise decision to concentrate its efforts on children, around 60 years ago, the Colombian State has chosen to put children at the heart of its actions with the De Cero a Siempre policy. This is the best legacy we can leave for the generation of peace, building a solid foundation that empowers Colombia to remain steadfast in its duty to ensure that everyone can fully exercise their rights from before they are born.

Our children are not only the future, they are the present of a Colombia and a world at peace!

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