

Venezuela: “A Message of Peace Through Music”



“When you play a musical instrument, it feels like you are touching the sky.” Photo: UNHCR Venezuela/J. Ribera

“Music for me is like an instrument that I can’t see, but that I can feel in my soul and in my heart,” says Isabel, a ten-year-old girl who has been a member of the *FundaMusical* orchestra since 2012 in Zulia State, bordering Colombia. Music has also touched the life of fourteen-year-old Elisa, who was recently selected to be part of *Child Singers of Venezuela*, a programme led by Gustavo Dudamel, Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. “Singing is what I like to do the most in my life because it allows me to share messages of peace with the world,” notes Elisa.

Isabel and Elisa were displaced from their hometowns in Colombia as a consequence of the armed conflict. They now live in Venezuela and have been able to find peace. Music has allowed them to be part of a family that has no borders and welcomes them with open arms. They feel that that they reached a turning point in their lives when they had the opportunity to become part of a programme carried out jointly by UNHCR and *FundaMusical*.

This joint initiative is aimed at promoting peace and facilitating the local integration of refugees. In the border states of Apure, Táchira and Zulia, local and refugee children attend music schools and participate together with local children in youth orchestras and choirs. The initiative also uses music education and musical expression as a way to alleviate the trauma caused by the violence experienced by Colombian refugees.

Three years ago, now twelve-year-old Camilo and eight-year-old Alejandro joined the UNHCR-*FundaMusical* programme in one of the centres in Apure State after fleeing their hometown in Colombia. They are brothers and they both play the violin. After the difficult experiences that they have been through, Camilo feels that as part of the symphonic orchestra they have found companionship and joy. “When you play a musical instrument, it feels like you are touching the sky,” says Camilo.

After three years of cooperation between UNHCR and *FundaMusical*, a new music school will open in Casigua El Cubo, a small town in Zulia State close to the border with Colombia. This school will allow more than 500 children, most of whom are in need of international protection, to participate in this integration programme. A binational centre is also foreseen within this cooperation framework, allowing children from both sides of the border to be included.



Refugee girl during singing rehearsal. Photo: UNHCR Venezuela/G. Giacomantonio

Matías, Isabel's 14-year-old brother, is also part of the FundaMusical orchestra in Zulia State. He is passionate about music and says that it can help us let go of sadness and experience many ways of feeling happy. He would like more children to become part of this wonderful experience. "I invite all of you to join this celebration as a family."

The life stories of Elisa, Isabel, Camilo, Alejandro and Matías are inspirational and proof that solidarity has no borders. As part of its protection strategy, UNHCR Venezuela promotes the inclusion of more children in this programme.

"I love being in the orchestra because I am so happy there. I feel togetherness, and I don't feel alone. This is how I would like to feel my whole life," says a smiling Isabel. We want more refugee children to heal the pain produced by violence and displacement, to feel part of their communities, and to be able to smile when they think about their futures.

Zasha Millán, UNHCR Venezuela

Ecuador: Ready to Face Life

Five years ago, after two of their children were violently killed, a terrified mother and father fled their hometown in Colombia with their two remaining boys. Luis and Fernando were six and eight years-old at the time. Although they knew that they were stepping into an uncertain future, they also knew that they had no choice but to escape from a violent reality marked by death, the forced recruitment of children and the loss of innocent lives.

When the family arrived in Ecuador, their painful journey took a turn for the better. Luis is eleven years-old today and already has a lifetime's worth of experiences and memories. Many of those are terribly distressing, such as the death of his siblings. But fortunately, now that he and his family are safely living as refugees in Carchi Province, he has many happy memories and hopes for the future. "When I first arrived, three children approached me and invited me to come play with them. When I realized that I could have friends here, I knew that I could start again."

Luis and his thirteen-year-old brother Fernando actively participate in activities offered by a local youth centre created to provide children with a safe environment, where they can use their free time to participate in fun and productive activities that have a positive impact in their lives. Through activities that include music, dance theatre and sports, personal development and leadership skills are nurtured, while facilitating the integration of refugees within the host communities.



Local and refugee children in Carchi Province gather for football practice. Photo: UNHCR Ecuador

Fernando is considered a leader within the community and is also admired for his football moves. “I have participated in several championships and my team has won three times!” he says proudly. Participating in activities offered by the youth centre has helped him stay away from potentially dangerous situations. He knows armed groups are trying to recruit children, offering them power and money. But he says that he would never fall for this, because he knows well that “violence only destroys families and leaves orphaned children.” He feels that being part of this project has placed him on a positive track. “I have learned to be disciplined and make the right choices.”

Luis agrees with his older brother: “All of us children participating in the activities offered by the centre are good friends and we always look out for one another. We have had the opportunity to realize that we are good at many things and to feel confident that we are ready to face life.” Like Luis and Fernando, over six hundred children have benefited from activities aimed at preventing forced recruitment. Carchi Province borders Colombia’s Nariño Department. This is a point of entry for many Colombians crossing into Ecuador every month.

UNHCR implements the youth centre project in coordination with the local government and civil society organizations, thanks to the support from the EU Children of Peace Initiative.* This initiative started in 2012, when the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and decided to dedicate prize money to help children in conflict. UNHCR Ecuador and UNHCR Colombia presented a joint project that was among the four selected to receive the prize funds. Since then, other donors have joined, allowing the initiative to expand to other locations around the world, benefiting over thirty thousand children so far. In the Americas region, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Guatemala currently benefit from the EU Children of Peace initiative through UNHCR projects.

Dalila Calán, UNHCR Ecuador

*The European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO) manages the EU Children of Peace Initiative.

Colombia: *I Am the Key*



Youth participating in the *I Am the Key* project improve community infrastructure in Altos de la Florida. Photo: UNHCR Colombia

Over 6.3 million people have been forcibly displaced in Colombia. Many have been displaced multiple times and more than half of them have settled in marginal urban areas. Altos de la Florida is a vulnerable neighborhood in the municipality of Soacha, approximately an hour's drive from Bogotá. Over 23 per cent of the population currently living in Altos de la Florida arrived there after being forcibly displaced elsewhere in the country. Unfortunately, residents of Altos de la Florida face many challenges, which make integration of the displaced even more difficult. A limited state presence, lack of basic services and an unsafe environment where armed actors continue to be present keep the community exposed to a wide range of risks.

Within the community, children and youth are particularly vulnerable, as they are exposed to forced recruitment, involvement in illegal activities, drug trafficking and consumption, and violent dynamics that often result in death. What makes the situation more complex is that these children and youth, who are victims of the armed conflict, are often perceived by many - including their own families and communities - as part of the problem.

In this context, in 2013 youth from Altos de la Florida started the *I Am the Key* initiative, with the support of UNHCR and a local NGO, *Corporación Gestora de Paz Kairós*. The purpose of the initiative is to help youth protect themselves from risks they face, while showing their communities through concrete actions that rather than being part of the problem, they can actually be active agents of positive change. They believe that their own effort and contribution are the key for a better future, and that is why they decided to call the initiative *I Am the Key*.

With support from UNHCR and Kairós, *I Am the Key* participants work together to envisage the future that they would like for themselves and their neighbourhood, regardless of experiences that they went through in the past, and then take concrete steps toward achieving what they imagined as results. In this context of personal growth and sense of community, activities include sports tournaments, study groups, community clean-up crews to improve community spaces, among many others.

In 2014, *I Am the Key* presented a project proposal to strengthen its initiative and was among those selected to receive support from UNHCR's Youth Initiative Fund. The funds received allowed *I Am the Key* participants to put into practice ideas they believed would allow them to strengthen their own capacities and benefit their community. Activities included the creation of an ecological group, whose participants make sure to keep their community clean, while gathering materials that they recycle and turn into handcrafts.

The initiative also seeks to reduce generational differences and foster constructive relationships between young persons and adults, including community leaders. “Community leaders recognize our contributions. The activities we developed have generated ties between the leaders and us,” explains Milena, a youth leader. “We learn about how they became leaders, what abilities they have acquired. They have shared with us their experience in helping our neighbourhood,” she added. Every Saturday the group meets for about two hours and they schedule time during the week that will be used for activities that benefit the community.

Aware of the fundamental role of families, *I Am the Key* participants seek to improve interactions and strengthen relations with their parents and other family members. Integration activities raise awareness in terms of the challenges and needs that families face, and help nurture protection spaces in households and the neighbourhood. Participants are also conscious of the importance of protecting and setting a good example for other young members of the community, especially younger children.

I Am the Key has been a life-changing experience for many young persons who now believe they are the key for building better futures for themselves and those around them. Sixteen-year old David, one of the young leaders, stated during a recent evaluation this year: “The group is for us like a second family, we feel we are in a welcomed environment, in which we help others and help ourselves too. Now we can give advice and be role models for other young people in our community. We are more confident and understand that if we work and study hard, we will reach our dreams.”

Diana Ramirez, UNHCR Colombia

UNHCR’s Regional Campaign *Tour Around the World in a Backpack*



A young girl shows a drawing she made for refugee children before placing it inside the traveling backpack. Photo: UNHCR Colombia/E. Cristancho

According to UNHCR’s annual Global Trends Report (June 2015), worldwide displacement has reached the highest level ever recorded. Children account for approximately half of the almost 60 million who are currently refugees, internally displaced, or stateless persons in need of international protection. Children are particularly vulnerable in conflict situations, and face increased risks as victims of forced recruitment, exploitation and other forms of violence.

UNHCR’s regional campaign *Tour Around the World in a Backpack* (La vuelta al mundo en una mochila) seeks to promote awareness and bring hope to children who have experienced the trauma of displacement. A backpack was chosen as the protagonist for the campaign as a symbol for children of the world, regardless of nationality, language, ethnicity or religion. When children go to school with their backpacks, in addition to carrying books and pencils, they are carrying hope for their futures.

UNHCR launched the campaign this past June on the occasion of World Refugee Day. Luggage manufacturer Totto produced the oversized backpack especially for the campaign. The backpack will tour ten countries in the Americas region before making its way to children in a refugee camp in the Middle East. Along the way, it will gather messages of support, drawings and meaningful objects that people from all over the Americas want to share with refugee children.



Children's messages for the traveling backpack. Photo: UNHCR Colombia/E.Cristancho

In the campaign, both the journey itself and the final destination of the backpack are meaningful. While at the end of the tour refugee children in the Middle East will receive the backpack and its contents as an inter-continental gesture of solidarity, as the backpack tours the Americas it also raises awareness about the plight of children who experience conflict and violence in the region.

By bringing together the local, regional and intercontinental, we are reminded that we are all part of one world, and that refugees and other persons in need of international protection are just like us. They deserve happiness and enjoyment of their rights just like anyone would, but happen to be going through especially difficult circumstances. With every letter of encouragement or loved item placed inside the traveling backpack, the message of empathy grows stronger.

Several celebrities, including professional football player James Rodriguez and award-winning singer Juanes, have joined the campaign. James wants to share the cleats that he played in and one of his footballs with refugee children. For him these items symbolize happiness and unity. Meanwhile, Juanes explained how his guitar is his most precious object because it is an instrument of peace that can change the world. He would like all refugee children to have an instrument like this in their lives.

Children and adults from all over the Americas are filling the backpack with letters, drawings, their favorite objects, and even making toys and handcrafts in this joint effort to bring joy to refugee children and create awareness to their plight. You can also follow and support the campaign through its website <http://lavueltaalmundoenunamochila.org> and with #mochilaviajera.

Regional PI - UNHCR Americas

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All names of persons of concern mentioned in the articles have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality.