

# Legal Aid provided by Law students

## *Access to justice*

*UNHCR supports a network of 14 Colombian universities that provide legal aid to IDPs.*



UNHCR/G. Valdivieso

## Background

Appeals in court have proven to be an effective mechanism for IDPs to be granted protection and access to their rights. The Constitutional Court has intervened 158 times on behalf of IDPs. In 2010, there were 37 Constitutional Court rulings including statements on the right to humanitarian assistance, individual registration and access to protection, housing and education programmes. Court ruling 092 (2008), for example, acknowledges that sexual violence within the context of armed conflict is a systematic and extensive but often invisible practice. It recognizes that sexual violence takes several forms, including sexual violence against women who are related to members of armed forces; sexual violence against forcibly recruited women and children; acts of torture, sexual mutilation and public nudity; sexual violence against women leaders; and forced prostitution and sexual slavery.

Despite the progress that has been made in the recognition of risks faced by IDPs and women in particular, many remain unaware of their rights and the mechanisms available to ensure their rights are respected. In order to tackle this problem, and considering the traumatic experiences IDPs go through, UNHCR supports several universities in Colombia that provide legal aid and psycho-social counselling for IDPs.

**Location** Bogotá, Medellín, Apartadó, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Quibdó, Santa Marta, Villavicencio, Pasto, Barrancabermeja, Cúcuta, Ibagué and Florencia - Colombia

**Time & Duration** 2009- present

**Population Groups** IDPs

**Actors** UNHCR, Instituto Latinoamericano para una Sociedad y un Derecho Alternativo (Latin-American Institute for an alternative Society and legal framework, ILSDA); and 14 Colombian universities.



## Description

14 Colombian universities opened a legal aid office for IDPs within their law schools. The main purpose of this project is to provide IDPs with high-quality legal assistance without having to pay the high costs usually associated with it. This free service allows those IDPs who are most in need of legal redress to bring their cases to court, which otherwise would be very difficult given their lack of awareness of their rights and inability to afford legal representation. Moreover, IDPs are referred to the universities' psycho-social support services when necessary. Women particularly benefit from both legal aid and psycho-social services, as they usually are most in need of legal redress due to the heightened risks they face in the Colombian conflict.

In order to systematically identify protection gaps, each office enters the relevant information into a data base. This is then used for advocacy work.

## Steps to Implementation

- Competent law students and professors are selected to work at the legal aid office for IDPs at their respective universities.
- ILSDA trains law students and professors in relevant concepts and methodologies to work and follow up on cases.
- Cases are allocated, worked and followed up on.
- Clients are referred to psycho-social services when necessary.
- Relevant case information is entered into a data base.

## Impacts and Results

- In 2009, legal-aid offices assisted 4,217 cases.
- Training for students and professors has improved services for IDPs.
- Students and professors who have participated in the project have acquired a broad knowledge on the situation of IDPs in Colombia.
- The information collected in the data base has helped universities' advocates point out gaps in Colombian legislation on the protection of IDPs.

## Constraints

The capacity of legal aid offices to provide their services is not constant, as the amount of cases students can take on is dependent on their university work load.

## Lessons Learned/Keys to Success

Engaging students in projects dealing with IDPs or other persons of concern substantially raises their awareness of the country's humanitarian situation, which may lead them to become actively involved in advocacy efforts for the rights of IDPs.

