



# Colombia

## Comprehensive School Safety Country Implementation Snapshots

### Colombia: School safety challenges in the face of compound hazards

*Comprehensive School Safety Implementation Snapshot (research conducted as part of an evaluation of GADRRRES in March 2025).*

#### Overview of education situation

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Colombia is an upper-middle-income country with a population of 54 million people. The Colombian education system, regulated by the Ministry of National Education, provides 12 years of education from preschool to upper secondary. The education system faces multiple challenges: The quality of education is considered low and inequalities between urban and rural areas are an ongoing problem. Children in rural Colombia are far more likely to drop out of school early, as compared to those in urban areas. 2.6 million children are out of school and learning poverty is a major issue, with a significant percentage of children at age 10 struggling to grasp basic skills, especially in those in rural areas. Completion rates of lower-secondary school are lower for boys than for girls.

Colombia has faced significant challenges with armed conflict since the 1960s with a ceasefire between the government and the main non-state armed group eventually being agreed in 2016. During the conflict more than half of the estimated 3.9 – 5.3 million internally displaced people in Colombia were under 18 and educational continuity was hugely impacted. The conflict left a significant legacy on education outcomes in the worst affected parts of the country.

Since 2016 Colombia has become the primary destination for Venezuelans fleeing instability. There are currently around 3 million Venezuelans in Colombia. In response, the Government of Colombia adopted an open-door policy that offers regularization pathways for migrants to access services legally in the country. Almost 600,000 Venezuelan refugee and migrant children are enrolled in the school system, representing 6% of the total enrolment of children in the Colombian education system. Additionally, 61,959 Venezuelan children under five years old are enrolled in early childhood education (ECE) facilities delivered by the Government.

#### Risks to education and learners

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Since the ceasefire, conflict and violence have continued to affect many locations, leading to reduced school attendance, damaged facilities, and negative effects on students' academic performance and mental health. Thousands of children have been forced out of school due to violence and displacement, and educational facilities have been targeted in attacks. Between 2022 and 2025 nearly 50,000 students, teachers and school staff were affected by attacks on education.

The continuing crisis in Venezuela also creates challenges for the education system in Colombia, with uncertainty about how many Venezuelan children will have to be accommodated over the coming years, making educational planning challenging. In addition, Colombia continues to be a key transit country for irregular migration, especially for migrants seeking to reach the United States and Central America.

In addition to conflict and displacement-related risks, Colombia is exposed to drought, flooding, landslides and seismic risks. Due to climate change, rainfall patterns are likely to change with the potential to increase flood and drought risk, along with other impacts on food security and health. School infrastructure is often located in places prone to natural disasters such as landslides or floods.

## Innovations in school safety

The “**Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2022 -2026**” (National Development Plan 2022 – 2026) aims to ensure equitable access to education as part of its aims. It also prioritises climate action and peacebuilding. It includes efforts to reduce barriers to education in emergency situations by increasing coverage of early education, offering a school day focused on education for reconciliation, and improving education spaces.

The “**Plan Nacional Decenal de Educación 2016–2026**” (PNDE) (The ten-year National Education Plan, 2016-2026) focuses on overarching educational goals, whilst aligning with national strategies for disaster risk management and emergency preparedness, primarily the “**Plan Nacional de Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres 2015–2030**” (National Disaster Risk Management Plan). This plan emphasises the importance of integrating risk management into various sectors, including education, to enhance resilience and preparedness. The plan also underscores the need for an inclusive education system that is resilient to disaster risks, including armed conflict. By integrating risk management into educational planning, the plan aims to ensure continuity of education and safeguard the well-being of students and staff during emergencies.

Since launching the plan, the **Ministry of Education** has implemented several initiatives to bolster the education sector's capacity to handle emergencies, which include:

- **Formation of internal committees on Education in Emergencies:** Establishing dedicated groups within educational institutions to plan and coordinate emergency responses.
- **Development of risk management and emergency action plans:** Creating structured plans to address potential emergencies, ensuring a swift and organized response.
- **Training for education officials:** Providing training in risk management, prevention of recruitment into armed groups, and education on landmine risks.
- **Support for schools in high-risk areas:** Assisting educational establishments in developing risk management plans, conducting awareness sessions, and facilitating experience-sharing workshops.

*The Ministry of Education is currently in the process of updating its national policy for comprehensive school risk management and education in emergencies, to better align with international commitments, including Colombia’s endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration in November 2022. This is a particularly important step due to the increasing attacks on education in Colombia which often involve improvised explosive devices placed near schools, particularly in rural areas, and threats or targeted violence against teachers and other education personnel.*

A **Safe School National Action Plan** (2022-2026) has recently been put in place which aims to guarantee the continuity of education in safe learning environments, in which students, educators, administrators and, in general, all members of the educational community and schools and/or higher education institutions can be protected from acts of violence during armed conflicts.

With regards to the arrival of refugees from Venezuela, in 2018, the Ministry of National Education established formal guidelines to address legal barriers and promote education access for Venezuelan migrants. In 2021, the Government launched the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants to regularize the Venezuelan migrant population in Colombia.

The education cluster is activated in Colombia and has a 2023-25 strategy that is framed around ensuring educational continuity in emergencies for all children and adolescents. This is an important coordination mechanism for international agencies and non-governmental organisations. The Ministry of National Education is actively involved.

Horizontes Seguros (or Safe Horizons) is a new regional initiative led by Plan International and financially supported by the European Union (ECHO). The project was designed based on a detailed needs assessment which examined the school safety situation in Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador and Colombia. This assessment considered the experience of key UN agencies (UNDRR, UNESCO, UNICEF) and NGOs (Save the Children and NRC), the Regional Education Cluster. The assessment noted the success of a regional Safe Schools initiative has been developed for the Caribbean countries, based on the comprehensive school safety framework and a regional-level roadmap.

In Colombia the Horizontes Seguros project aims to strengthen the capacities of Ministry of National Education staff and the educational community at beneficiary institutions, aligning it with the Comprehensive School Safety Framework. This project promotes the creation of Risk Management Committees, which are essential for strengthening School Risk Management Plans in educational institutions. It also focuses on improving school infrastructure, conducting practical drills, and providing financial support to children and adolescents who are not enrolled in school or at risk of dropping out. It also promotes educational reinforcement through specific plans and strengthens the implementation of child protection mechanisms within educational institutions.

The “Creer” project, supported by ECHO in Colombia and implemented by Save the Children, Alianza por la Solidaridad, and Entreculturas, is promoting the implementation of the comprehensive school safety framework at the school level. To this end, support is being provided to schools in the creation of safe school committees, multi-risk mapping, updating of contingency plans, and conducting multi-risk drills. Additionally, school continuity plans are being developed for emergencies, and child protection mechanisms within schools are being strengthened.

## Recent experiences of flood emergencies

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**Chocó Department** is in the west of Colombia and borders Panama (highlighted in red in the map to the right). Chocó is one of the poorest departments in Colombia with 2 out of every 3 people living in poverty. Chocó has the largest Afro-Colombia population in Colombia, and a large population of Amerindian and mixed African-Amerindian Colombians. It has a complex geography including the Andean mountains and areas of dense forest. Many locations are only accessible by boat or plane. Chocó has the poorest health care in Colombia, with only one hospital accessible in its capital, Quibdó.

In November 2024 more than 188,000 people living in 27 of the 31 municipalities that make up the department were affected by flooding and flash flooding. The Governorate of Chocó declared a situation of public calamity based on reports from the Municipal Disaster Risk Management Councils. At the same time an attack by a Non-State Armed Group impacted flood-affected people in five of these municipalities, severely impacting movement and provision of humanitarian assistance. The Departmental Education Secretariat (SED) reported that at least 74 educational institutions were affected, affecting 51,000 children and adolescents in

terms of infrastructure, equipment, computer equipment, school supplies and cooking. Among them, three indigenous educational institutions were affected. Children and adolescents were affected by the suspension of academic activities, increasing protection risks, including mental health effects and increased recruitment, use and utilisation.

Educational institutions in rural areas were not well prepared for the flooding and armed attacks. They did not have practical plans in place and the school structures were weak and, in many cases, badly damaged by flooding. Rural schools in Chocó are often remote, have poor road access and communications. They are usually small in size and school principals often have limited awareness of how to prepare the school for emergencies. Despite having a relevant law in place (Law 1523) implementation in these schools is very limited. There are few staff to support risk management. Some teachers have been trained in risk management, but students are rarely involved. There is no early warning system in place due to lack of resources to purchase them. In the words of a local official the situation during the flooding “was a chaotic situation”. Parents assumed that teachers were taking care of the students in the schools, but it turned out that many children were not in school, resulting in significant confusion.

Urban communities in cities like Quibdó were much better prepared for the flooding – they are usually larger schools with thousands of students and have one or two designated persons for risk management. School infrastructure is usually much more resilient, and risk management is well supported by school principals in these schools.

In the view of those with experience of this emergency, an all-hazards/all-risks approach makes sense. Teachers and students in Chocó Department face several intersecting hazards and risks which makes their situation very challenging. Any approach to make schools safer requires an integrated approach and close coordination between the school and relevant bodies (schools, risk management office, police, civil protection, UNOCHA). This is essential whether the school is facing flooding or a mass movement of people, or both. In all such cases children can be more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. They face similar physical and mental health risks. Migrant children in the same area often cannot access school and are often targets of gender-based violence, sexual violence, exploitation and human trafficking. Children and adults need to know how to react to all the relevant scenarios.



**Nariño Department** is in southwestern Colombia on the border with Ecuador (highlighted in red in the map to the right). Like Chocó it also faces significant challenges with poverty. Much of the department is mountainous or has dense forest. Armed conflict and violence are ongoing problems, with approximately 45,000 people displaced as a result.

During the recent rainy season, the Municipality of Tumaco in Nariño Department faced serious flooding. Heavy rain caused the Rosario, Caunapí, and Mira rivers to flood, causing structural damage to multiple educational institutions on 11th February 2025. The Tumaco Education Secretariat identified the following impacts:

- Deterioration of school infrastructure, with classrooms at risk of collapse and damaged sanitary facilities.
- Loss of essential furniture and teaching materials.
- Damage to school cafeterias, affecting student nutrition.
- Risky conditions in institutions near the riverbank, requiring classroom relocation.

Within the framework of the Creer project, a coordinated assessment process was carried out with the Ministry of Education and the Local Education Group (LGE), comprising of UNICEF, NRC, and Save the Children. This led to support being delivered to support schools and students in Tumaco, including Development of a capacity-building plan to promote child protection; referral pathways and resources for teachers and counsellors for cases of gender-based violence; delivery of pre-positioned materials to promote educational continuity.

## Moving forward and lessons learned

The implementation snapshot demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive approach that covers all-hazards/all-risks. Both recent flood events highlighted above occurred at the same time as continued armed conflict. Schools in affected areas tend to be under-resourced in terms of supporting quality education, have poorly maintained infrastructure and limited capacity to prepare for emergencies. This is especially the case in rural areas, as the Chocó example demonstrates.

Although Colombia has a comprehensive disaster risk management framework under Law 1523/2012, its application varies across regions. On the basis of this snapshot, the same appears to be the case within the education sector. Whilst Colombia has strong policies in place, the capacity to implement these policies is limited in two locations discussed, both of which are relatively poor and have underdeveloped infrastructure, as compared to other parts of the country. The decentralised education system aims to promote efficient governance, local autonomy and responsiveness but municipal school management bodies do not have sufficient funding to support risk reduction and resilience activities to deliver on these policies. There is also a lack of coordination capacity within the local education system. Key areas for investment include:

- Enhance infrastructure resilience, especially in vulnerable region (such as rural and conflict-affected areas).
- Standardise the DRR curriculum.
- Invest in teacher training so that they can educate students and help schools to prepare.
- Strengthen policy implementation.

The snapshot also highlights a range of cooperation models where NGOs and UN agencies are trying to find ways to strengthen resilience and preparedness in the education sector. Organisations from the national Education Cluster are working together with the Ministry of Education and Local Education Groups using a “nexus” mindset. The Creer project brings national and international NGO efforts together. The Horizontes Seguros regional project aims to share good practice examples and to inspire change across neighbouring countries. Given the profile of Colombia, the Comprehensive School Safety Framework, Safe Schools Declaration and the four pillars of the Greening education Partnership are all highly relevant for Departments such as Chocó and Nariño. But achieving sustainable progress in these areas requires a phased and integrated approach if it is to make a difference to the most disadvantaged schools and students. The snapshot highlights the importance of further aligning efforts to promote and support such global instruments focused on school safety.

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