

► Providing care through the social and solidarity economy

June 2024

Colombia: An assessment summary



Key points

- In 2021, **unpaid domestic and care work** in Colombia, mainly done by women, was valued at **21.7 per cent of the gross domestic product**, as measured by the Care Economy Satellite Account of the National Statistics Department.
- The **National Development Plan 2022-2026** introduced the **National Care System** and the **Ministry of Equality and Equity**, established via **Law 2281 of 2023**.
- **Community care** in Colombia has a rich history particularly in **indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities**, yet it has been undervalued due to **defamiliarization and decommercialization**.
- **Social and solidarity economy** entities can play a crucial role in improving care provision, offering potential to **formalize care work**, improve working conditions, and promote **gender equality**.

Background

In Colombia, the care sector is deeply influenced by diverse social and economic factors that disproportionately affect women, primarily those from marginalized groups such as indigenous, Afro-Colombian and migrant communities. These women often engage in unpaid or informally paid care work, reflecting broader societal issues of gender inequality and economic dependency. The demand for care services has been growing, driven by demographic shifts like aging populations and increases in chronic illnesses, yet the workforce remains undervalued and lacks formal recognition. This scenario highlights a critical need for systemic changes to improve the conditions of care workers and to address the gender disparities embedded in the labour market.

In light of this, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Gender, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Branch (GEDI) and Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy

Unit (COOP/SSE), initiated "[Cooperative Care Provision as a Gender Transformative Decent Work Solution](#)", an innovative cross-regional, multi-country programme which follows an established intervention model and involves conducting assessments, developing capacity-building tools, and running pilot trainings.

Recognizing the critical importance of community care work, Colombia's National Development Plan 2022-2026 introduced the National Care System (NCS) and the Ministry of Equality and Equity, established via Law 2281 of 2023. Furthermore, the Vice-presidency of Colombia requested the ILO to support the territorialization of the NCS by piloting innovative solutions to care community workers already operating in the field by bolstering social and solidarity economy (SSE) entities dedicated to providing care. The first step was targeted research to assess the specific needs of community care organizations. The study focused on 10 entities located in the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions that are part of the SSE or have the potential to integrate it.

Key findings

The ILO, in collaboration with the Vice Presidency of Colombia and its National Care System, commissioned an assessment of the community care sector, prioritizing the regions of Cesar and Magdalena in the Caribbean, and Nariño, Valle del Cauca and Chocó in the Pacific. The assessment sought to identify the needs (economic, training, resources, etc.) of diverse community care organizations based on their social and legal environment. The work included focus group discussions and interviews with 10 different care-oriented SSE entities providing critical services such as care for the elderly, childcare, midwifery, community kitchens, and care for people with disabilities. Key findings from the research include:

- **Community care diversity:** Various community care organizations exist across Colombia. Some are formally established as associations or cooperatives while others are informal groups or initiatives. Additionally, some partner with local or national governments, while others have been supported through international cooperation or are self-funded.
- **Capacity development and integration:** Some organizations have developed project management and procurement capacities, leading to a better management of resources such as diapers and wheelchairs for disability care. Others have successfully tapped into broader social networks to enhance their community support and cohesion.
- **Significant gender disparities and informality:** Community care roles predominantly reinforce traditional gender responsibilities, with women receiving minimal or no compensation and lacking formal recognition, perpetuating gender inequalities.
- **Decent work deficits and economic challenges:** In addition to their unpaid care work at home, the study identified a significant deficit of decent work conditions among community-based caregivers. These shortcomings encompassed inadequate remuneration, extended work hours, and a lack of social protection and occupational safety and health measures.
- **Infrastructure and public service gaps:** The absence of basic services like electricity and water in impoverished areas exacerbates care demands and lowers the quality of life, with no significant view towards using cooperatives to formalize labour or improve workers' rights and social security.

Recommendations

Based on the research, an intervention plan was developed to strengthen the care organizations which identified the following recommendations:

- **Inclusive, rights-based approach:** Enhance existing initiatives by incorporating a rights-based approach, addressing discrimination, and acknowledging their essential role in providing sustainable care.
- **Empowering women:** Develop transformative strategies to shift the responsibility traditionally placed on women, aiming to empower them and achieve gender equality within care organizations.
- **Aligning with ILO standards:** Revise the national regulatory framework to align with international labour standards, ensuring integration of decent work and social justice.
- **Regulatory oversight and community support:** Strengthen inspection and surveillance mechanisms to prevent exploitative labour practices, and support community care organizations with comprehensive training, financial access, and market integration.
- **Environmental and territorial integration:** Link care initiatives with environmental planning and territorial management, emphasizing the redistribution of care responsibilities and improving quality of life for communities.

Next steps

In follow-up to the assessment, the ILO is committed to enhancing the capacity of two identified community care organizations in promoting decent work standards throughout 2024. Specifically, the focus will be on empowering an organization comprising 1,300 midwives in Chocó and another consisting of 150 indigenous Arhuaca women in Cesa who play a vital role in providing care within the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta region.



ILO capacity building tools for care cooperatives Think.CareCoop & Start.CareCoop were developed in 2023 and are ready for roll-out in pilot countries.

Contact details

International Labour Organization

Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch (GEDI)
E: gedi@ilo.org; www.ilo.org/ged

Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy Unit (COOP/SSE)
E: coop@ilo.org; www.ilo.org/coop; www.ilo.org/sse

ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean
www.ilo.org/latin-america-and-caribbean