



Human Rights Watch Submission
to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Review of Colombia
78th Session
August 2025

We write in advance of the 78th session of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (the “Committee”) and its review of Colombia. This submission focuses on issues of poverty and inequality, labor violations and sexual exploitation of webcam models, deaths from acute malnutrition in children under 5, and the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation.

Rural Poverty, Access to Health and Education (articles 12 and 13)

According to World Bank data, Colombia has a Gini index of 53.9 for 2023.¹ This inequality manifests in the 16.5 percentage point gap in multidimensional poverty between urban areas (7.8%) and rural areas (24.3%)². Short-term or prolonged displacement due to armed conflict and ongoing violence has severely disrupted displaced people’s lives, worsening food insecurity, deepening poverty, and increasing inequality, especially for single women–headed households, who have lost family members, or who themselves have been directly targeted and displaced.

In rural areas, conditions are more precarious, creating fertile ground for the perpetuation of violence. This situation is especially true in the 170 remote municipalities most affected by armed conflict. These are the municipalities prioritized for the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

¹ “Gini index,” World Bank Group webpage, https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SI.POV.GINI?most_recent_value_desc=true.

² “Multidimensional poverty,” National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia webpage, <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/pobreza-y-condiciones-de-vida/pobreza-multidimensional> (accessed August 5, 2025).

Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). The rural development programs established by the Peace Agreement (Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial, PDET) seek to increase the presence of state institutions in areas highly affected by the armed conflict, poverty, and illegal economies.³

The government's own statistics put informal employment in rural municipalities most affected by the conflict at 96%, while the national average is 73%. Likewise, educational lag rates in these municipalities stand at 33%, compared to the national average of 24%. The gap in access to water sources is 45 percentage points between the rural areas of these municipalities (55%) and the national level (10%)⁴. Colombian police statistics indicate the homicide rate in these municipalities (40.5 per 100,000 inhabitants) is 14.1 percentage points higher than the national rate (26.4)⁵.

Efforts to implement the PDET in these municipalities have had limited success.⁶ As of July 2025, authorities had finalized only a handful of public works established under the PDET⁷ in some 170 municipalities and 57% of the PDET "initiatives" were under implementation.⁸

Recommendations

Human Rights Watch encourages the Committee to call on Colombia to:

³ ART, "ABC of PDET and PNIS;" ART, "What are the PDET?" (¿Qué son los PDET?), n.d., <https://centralpdet.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/conoce-los-pdet/#mapadiv> (accessed January 22, 2024); Human Rights Watch, *Left Undefended: Killings of Rights Defenders in Colombia's Remote Communities* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/02/10/left-undefended/killings-rights-defenders-colombias-remote-communities>.

⁴ Agencia de Renovación del Territorio, "Seguimiento a la Pobreza Multidimensional en los Municipios PDET," webpage, last accessed August 5, 2025, <https://centralpdet.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/tablero-de-pobreza/>.

⁵ National Police of Colombia, "Homicides," webpage, last accessed August 5, 2025, <https://www.policia.gov.co/delitos-de-impacto/homicidios>.

⁶ See Laura Herrera and Emilia Isaza, "Chronicle of a Foretold Forgetfulness: Can the Fate of the PDET Be Changed?" ("Crónica de un olvido anunciado: ¿Se puede cambiar el destino de los PDET?"), Fundación Ideas para la Paz, October 23, 2023, <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/opinion/2023-10/la-cronica-de-un-olvido-anunciado-puede-cambiarse-el-destino-de-los-pdet> (accessed January 22, 2024).

⁷ According to official statistics, authorities had finalized 5,098 public works connected with PDETs in the 170 municipalities. ART, "Completed Works" ("Obras terminadas"), April 30, 2025, <https://centralpdet.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/obras-terminadas/> (accessed July 14, 2025).

⁸ According to official statistics, authorities were implementing 18,833 "PDET initiatives" out of 33,007. ART, "Progress of initiatives" ("Avance de iniciativas"), April 30, 2025, <https://centralpdet.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/avance-en-iniciativas/> (accessed July 14, 2025).

- Accelerate the implementation of public policies aimed at reducing the multidimensional poverty gap between urban and rural areas. This should include advancing the implementation of the Rural Reform established in the Peace Agreement signed between the Colombian government and the now-defunct FARC guerrilla in 2016.
- Prioritize the funding and implementation of initiatives included in the PDET, particularly those related with infrastructure, health, water and sanitation, and food.
- Pursue the necessary, often complex and structural, changes, to address the status quo of violence, displacement, and access to land especially in rural areas that disproportionately impacts Afro-descendant, Indigenous, and peasant communities.
- Strengthen the implementation of the National Plan for Drinking Water and Basic Sanitation as outlined in the 2016 Peace Agreement.

Human Rights Watch recommends the Committee ask Colombia:

- What specific steps has the Colombian government taken to accelerate the implementation of the Rural Reform of the 2016 Peace Agreement? In what ways have budgetary measures been ensured to support this goal?

Labor Violation and Sexual Exploitation in Webcam Studios (article 7)

In December 2024, Human Rights Watch published a 175-page report documenting serious abuses by studios producing content for the billion-dollar adult webcam industry.⁹ The report – based on 18 months of research and interviews with 55 sex workers with experience in the industry, in collaboration with La Liga de Salud Trans and Corporación Calle 7 Colombia – exposes the poor working conditions Colombian webcam workers face; those interviewed reported unhygienic conditions, long shifts without breaks, and coercion to perform sexual acts they find degrading, traumatizing, or physically painful.

Workers report streaming from small, confined cubicles with a lack of ventilation, and bedbug and cockroach infestations. Some identify verbal, physical, and sexual abuse by studio management, and coercion to perform sex acts to which they did not consent. Labor conditions include wage theft, fines for taking breaks to eat and use the bathroom, and computer keyboards, mice, and

⁹ Human Rights Watch, *“I Learned How to Say No”: Labor Abuses & Sexual Exploitation in Colombian Webcam Studios* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/12/09/i-learned-how-say-no/labor-abuses-sexual-exploitation-colombian-webcam-studios>.

furniture covered in bodily fluids from other employees. Workers developed rashes and infections and had a lack of mental health support.

All those interviewed were adults, though several reported that some violated platforms' age restrictions by reusing accounts that were registered for former adult models, allowing them to start before the age of 18.

Nearly all of those interviewed (49 of 50) told Human Rights Watch they had not seen or signed the terms of service from any platform on which they streamed. Instead, most said the studios created accounts for them. This left models without crucial information to help ensure they were paid fairly; in some cases, this contributed to models experiencing wage theft, sexual coercion, and labor exploitation by the studios.

All models interviewed said that they chose to work as webcammers and were not forced or coerced into doing so. At the same time, all report that they felt surprised, deceived, or misled about several conditions of their employment, including what they would be paid, sex acts they were expected to perform, or studio sanitation. For some, the inability to take their account with them, compounded by small amounts of debt they accrued at the studio store or while living in the studio, also made it more difficult to leave.

Recommendations

Human Rights Watch encourages the Committee to call on Colombia to:

- End use of the term “prostitution” in all government policies and communications, and replace it with language that clarifies whether the text refers to consensual adult sex work, trafficking into sexual exploitation, or trafficking into labor exploitation.
- Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2018 (No. 190), as soon as possible.
- Abandon rehabilitative rhetoric around sex work and sex workers in all government policies and communication, ensuring alignment with the Constitutional Court’s framing of sex workers as a group of “special constitutional protection.”
- Pass legislation strengthening sex workers’ employment status by codifying it into law, in line with Constitutional Court Sentences T-629 of 2010 and T-109 of 2021.
- In line with Colombia’s Constitutional Court jurisprudence, classify sex workers and webcam models as workers, with the following labor protections: equality, non-discrimination including on grounds of pregnancy and parental status, personal integrity,

freedom from abuse, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, free choice of trade, free development of personality, work, minimum wage, including in cases in which employees only make a percentage of the total generated revenue, paid sick leave and family leave, workers' compensation, dignified and healthy working conditions, job security, social security, and the right to health.

- Develop and produce guidance that differentiates legal sex work from induction to prostitution, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking;
- Develop specific guidance and registration procedures for studios which provide living facilities.
- Open up banking systems that allow informal workers to set up bank accounts so they can receive electronic payments

Human Rights Watch recommends the Committee ask Colombia:

- What specific steps has the government taken to ensure all studios comply with health regulations? Can the government show statistics of labor and health inspections done to webcam studios in the last two years? What steps has the government taken to ensure Congress acts on the Constitutional Court decisions requiring them to protect sex workers rights through legislation?
- What measures have the government taken to ensure Studios can't use "recycled accounts" that allow studios to bypass minimum age requirements with platforms?
- What measures have the government taken to work with sex workers and webcam models in finding solutions to the labor and sexual exploitation of webcam models by some Studios?

Deaths from Acute Malnutrition in Children Under 5 (articles 11 and 12)

In 2023, the mortality rate per 100,000 inhabitants from acute malnutrition in children under five was 6.6, representing a 43.5% increase compared to the 4.6 rate recorded in 2017.¹⁰ Children from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have been significantly impacted, including those living in Vichada, on the border with Venezuela, with a rate of 108.3; Chocó, on Colombia's Pacific coast, with 65.8; and La Guajira, with 52.5. Acute malnutrition affected 18.5% of Indigenous children and 3.1% of migrant children under five in 2022. In 2023, children from Indigenous groups accounted for 26% of acute malnutrition cases and 60% of deaths from malnutrition.¹¹

¹⁰ Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, "Disminuye la mortalidad por desnutrición aguda en niños y niñas menores de cinco años en el país", January 26, 2024, <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/Disminuye-la-mortalidad-por-desnutricion-aguda-en-ninos-y-ninas-menores-de-cinco-anos-en-el-pais.aspx>.

¹¹ United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF Colombia Annual Report 2024, UNICEF, New York, February 2025, p. 4.

In 2020, Human Rights Watch documented how this situation particularly affects Wayuu Indigenous children and their communities in La Guajira, where mismanagement and widespread corruption by local officials, a humanitarian crisis in neighboring Venezuela, and the effects of climate change have exacerbated food and water insecurity and resulting malnutrition.¹² The official death rate of children under 5 from malnutrition in La Guajira was nearly eight times the national rate in 2023.¹³

Recommendations

Human Rights Watch encourages the Committee to call on Colombia to:

- Increase and direct efforts to provide sufficient food, safe drinking water, and hygiene supplies to communities most at risk of malnutrition.
- Provide and guarantee immediate access to health services to Indigenous and Afro-descendant children and their communities, including by increasing funding to missions run by the Ministry of Health to detect and treat malnutrition; offering assistance, such as travel vouchers to subsidize transport to and from hospitals; and providing economic support to families for health care and medicines.
- Speed up and prioritize plans to establish and maintain permanent water infrastructure in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

Human Rights Watch recommends the Committee ask Colombia:

- How does the Colombian government interpret the extremely serious situation of deaths among children under 5 due to acute malnutrition in the departments of La Guajira, Chocó, and Vichada? What steps has the government taken to reduce these rates, and to prevent acute malnutrition disproportionately experienced by children living in these areas?

UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation (article 2)

¹² Colombia: Niños indígenas en riesgo de desnutrición y muerte,” Human Rights Watch news release, August 13, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2020/08/13/colombia-ninos-indigenas-en-riesgo-de-desnutricion-y-muerte>.

¹³ Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, “Disminuye la mortalidad por desnutrición aguda en niños y niñas menores de cinco años en el país.”, January 26, 2024.

Human Rights Watch notes with appreciation the support Colombia has shown to the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation thus far, including by organizing the first Latin American and Caribbean Tax Summit in 2023.¹⁴

Equitable global tax rules are crucial to supporting human rights economies that align domestic and international economic decision-making with the realization and fulfillment of human rights. The ICESCR obliges states parties to use the maximum of their available resources to fulfill economic, social and cultural rights - such as health, education, and social security - including through international cooperation. Tax cooperation is critical to realizing these and other rights obligations as it makes it possible for governments to raise revenues to fund these rights, as well as by reducing inequality within and between countries. The Committee has consistently urged states, including Colombia, to align their tax systems with their human rights obligations, and has emphasized the importance of strengthening international cooperation on taxation and ensuring that their tax rules do not undermine other governments' ability to meet their ICESCR obligations.¹⁵

Recommendations

Human Rights Watch encourages the Committee to call on Colombia to:

- Continue to support the United Nations Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation.
- In line with the Committee's previous recommendations to Colombia in its State Party reports,¹⁶ continue to take the necessary steps to examine the impact of its taxation policies on reducing poverty and inequality, and make any adjustments necessary to ensure its policies are redistributive and increase the resources available for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

¹⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN experts welcome first Latin American and Caribbean Tax Summit," media release, July 25, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/07/un-experts-welcome-first-latin-american-and-caribbean-tax-summit>.

¹⁵ See Human Rights Watch, "Database of UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies' Statements on Taxation," last updated July 8, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/feature/2025/07/14/database-of-un-human-rights-treaty-bodies-statements-on-taxation>.

¹⁶ See, for example, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Colombia," October 19, 2017, <https://docs.un.org/en/E/C.12/COL/CO/6>, para. 20.