

 Colombia

Community protection structures supported by Oxfam in humanitarian emergency contexts in Colombia

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In La Guajira, the Wayúu indigenous communities have a matrilineal structure, which is based on clans or castes organised across a binational territory – between the department of La Guajira (Colombia) and the municipality of Guajira in the state of Zulia (Venezuela) – and the ancestral link of common descendancy through the maternal line. Each community, depending on its territory, has an elected supreme authority (or traditional authority) and runs an autonomous justice system.

In addition to the traditional indigenous authorities, their community organisation features spokesmen,¹ sages,² teachers and both male and female leaders who, in an autonomous and unique way, manage community protection based on their cultural and ancestral practices and their social constructions around customs and traditions. For the Wayúu people, wellbeing should be collective, just like afflictions, which also involve the family and community system since there are matrilineal blood ties.

The traditional authorities, or *alaulayu*, are selected by maternal line. They are mainly maternal uncles, but must also have the respect of the community and show leadership qualities. The authority must be registered with the Interior Ministry and perform the ownership process each year at the Department of Indigenous Affairs or the offices of the indigenous reservations.³

Within the communities, roles and functions of care are allocated according to capacities, knowledge and the cultural constructions associated with gender. Thus, for example, with regard to water systems – such as jagüeyes (trenches full of water), artesian wells and mills – there are people who are in charge of administration of the water resources, maintenance or repair of the structures and cleaning, for example, organising collective work days (*yanamas*) for the excavation and conversion

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- 1 In Wayúu culture, the *pütchipüu* or *pütche'ejachi* – the “spokesman” – is the person who normally resolves internal conflicts in the community. The spokesman must always be a man.
 - 2 In Wayúu culture, the “sage” is an elder of the community with specific knowledge about their culture. Like the spokesman, the sage must always be a man.
 - 3 “The reservations are a special legal and sociopolitical institution made up of one or more indigenous communities which, through a collective ownership title that confers the guarantees of private property, own their territory and are governed, for the management of the territory and its internal life, by an autonomous organisation supported by the indigenous code of laws and its own regulatory system”. Colombia, Ministry of Agriculture, “Decree 2164 of 1995 partially enacting Chapter XIV of Law 160 of 1994 on the provision to and ownership of land by indigenous communities for the creation, restructuring, expansion and remediation of the Indigenous Reserves in the national territory”, Official Gazette, Year CXXXI, no. 42140, of 7 December 1995, Bogotá, taken from <http://www.suin-juriscol.gov.co/viewDocument.asp?ruta=Decretos/1411247> (accessed in November 2020), Chapter V, Article 21.

of wells or carrying out external operations with local authorities or humanitarian organisations. From a Western perspective, this might be called a “water committee”.

Teachers are very important people in the communities since, through their educational role, they also lead advocacy actions for the protection of the boys and girls in their territory. The participation and leadership of women, mainly the nieces of traditional authorities, is very representative in the management of public healthcare services, such as vaccination days, and in the recognition of the right to identity, through raising awareness of the need in their territory for community days for the issuance of identification documents and birth records that will allow them subsequently to access care and protection services.

The agents of the education sector, those in charge of food and the intercultural team (members of the community) that make up the associations established as a consortium in agreement with the Colombian Institute of Family Wellbeing promote – via Community Care Units (CCUs) – the guarantee of rights, participation and comprehensive development from young childhood, through the delivery of meals and the organisation of community, group and family activities. The CCUs are an important structure, because they support the activation of pathways of care and protection for boys and girls under five and for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in the community.

Spokesmen or *pütchipüu*, sages and *outsü* (female traditional and spiritual healer) are a fundamental part of community protection structures for social regulation among the Wayúu people, since they are the ones in charge of maintaining harmony and preserving the culture. They mediate and intervene to share knowledge and sensitise both the community and *alijunas* (non-indigenous people) about Wayúu values, customs and culture, and in so doing they ensure a harmonious, responsible and respectful relationship.

Some communities lack a strong community protection mechanism due to the absence of strong leadership within their population. These are usually the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

However, there are important initiatives involving both male and female leaders who come together via local organisations and collectives to manage and mobilise actions - always in support and representation of their own communities and the Wayúu people as a whole - through advocacy in their communities, as well as using their voice as a binational indigenous people in local, national and international spaces.