

Colombia Opportunity Zone: Nourishing Hope and Making Progress

Spring 2023

2023–2025 OPPORTUNITY COLOMBIA STRATEGIC GOALS

To impact the lives of an additional **170,454 people**, providing **six programs** in collaboration with **16 partners**, and releasing **\$10.4M** in capital

OUR GRATITUDE

Thanks to your belief in Opportunity International's work in Colombia, we are reaching more people than ever. Our field staff on the ground is comprised of committed professionals trained to support and walk with our clients on their journey out of extreme poverty. Our work in savings groups, education, and microbanking continues to expand. The Graduation program is up and running; the impact on the 250 participating families and their communities already can be felt and seen. Thank you for supporting the people of Colombia.

THE NEED

Opportunity International launched our work in Colombia in 1971. It is a beautiful country of great need and even greater potential, a country which has lived in violence for more than 50 years and is home to more than eight million displaced persons and refugees.

THE SOLUTIONS

In response, Opportunity launched an **Opportunity Zone** in Colombia, intentionally bringing together our flagship programs—**agriculture, education, and microbanking**—into a geographical region with a large population of people living in extreme poverty. Our program models are built on our proven three-pronged interventions of **training, financial**

resources, and support. These interventions increase incomes, create and sustain jobs, and provide affordable quality education for children and youth.



PROGRESS ON OUR WORK

Savings Groups

Savings groups learn financial literacy and offer peer support and accountability; small, disciplined savings help families build a financial footing, and occasional access to a loan from the group savings helps them build readiness to access a loan from a financial institution. Benefits of savings groups include:

- Increase in savings and use of credit
- More easily manage expenses related to food, healthcare, education, household items
- Savings use for productive activities may increase income levels
- Likely positive change in food consumption/food security
- Increase in self-confidence
- Increase in household resilience

In Colombia, **351** savings groups were formed in 2022, serving a total of **5,008** individuals, **65%** of which are women. We have more than doubled the number of savings groups from 2021, when we served 128.

Graduation Program

Focusing on people living in ultra-poverty, the Graduation program is rooted in a financial resource with accompanying training and support: a market-viable asset (say, livestock or shop inventory) or marketable skill is transferred to a client, along with a larger package of comprehensive services such as crisis relief; training in life skills and financial literacy; access to health and education; introduction to formal or informal financial services.

- ▶ *Get to know the community:* In four carefully chosen communities in the Atlántico and Bolívar regions in Cartagena, Colombia we started with a “design mission” process involving local focus groups to better understand the concerns and needs of each community.
- ▶ *Hire outstanding, knowledgeable staff:* We hired the best and brightest—many young graduates from local universities—to serve as project supervisors and coaches. In December 2022 the newly assembled team received intensive coaching and training to prepare them to work with clients in January 2023.
- ▶ *Identify the greatest need:* In partnership with government and non-governmental partners, Opportunity staff identified 650 families for participation in the augural Graduation program; 250 families were chosen based on criteria such as food insecurity, female-head of households, homes with inadequate materials, and few/no productive assets.
- ▶ *Commit to program pillars of training, access to resources, and support:* An 18-month program that is both structured and rigorous, Graduation is designed to empower families living in extreme poverty to build economic and social self-sufficiency. Two staff members are assigned to each family: a livelihood facilitator focused on economic education and a psychological facilitator supporting social work, plus a local community liaison to support the socialization and integration of the program. Clients meet with staff twice a month. Graduation participants complete 34 training modules, 24 of which are from Opportunity’s Shalom/Pathway to Wellbeing holistic training program. Regular feedback, measurement, and evaluation allow the program to be both responsive and resilient.

Education Finance and Education Quality

We continue to expand to support local affordable non-state schools to improve conditions for learning through training, resources, and local expertise. In 2022 in the Colombia Opportunity Zone, 34 schools were a part of the EduQuality program, impacting 6,800 children living in poverty. We are developing four new technical assistance curricula.

Microbanking

Currently two financial partners serve local women entrepreneurs with business growth loans and zero-cost digital savings. In 2022, a national loan guarantee fund

COLOMBIA	2022
Number of Female Clients Approved for Loans	3,491
Number of Loans Disbursed	299
Total Amount of Loans Disbursed to Women	\$96,300
Number of Women Approached for Loans	20,105

supported loan subsidies to facilitate access to credit for businesswomen; that national program was discontinued in the second half of the year. Opportunity allocated resources to continue loan guarantees for the women of these regions. The guarantee covers 15% of the value of the credit and is aimed at low-income women and micro-entrepreneurs who request credits for a value between \$500 and \$1,500. These credits are intended to finance or support the businesses of these women that generate income for their families. Staff successfully addressed the challenges of moving from the shuttered national fund program to an alternate pool of funds; at the same time, women clients were requesting more per loan due to increased prices of products.

The Heart of Our Work: Opportunity Clients



Margarita makes lunches on her charcoal grill to sell on the nearby beach. She takes care of her two children who attend a local school. Like more than 70% of the people in her neighborhood, she lives in extreme poverty—about \$2 a day—and deeply desires to provide a more sustainable life for her family. Margarita is committed to participating in Opportunity’s Graduation program, which will allow her to learn more about running a successful, safe small business. She will be able to secure improved kitchen supplies to grow her business. She will earn more income and learn how to save. Her family will benefit from the weekly trainings on social empowerment, health, and wellbeing. When asked what the Graduation program means to her family, Margarita cannot find the words, but tears spill out of her eyes and she smiles with such profound hope. She holds her children’s hands; we witness incredible strength and dignity.

“Every good gift...is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” – James 1:17