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Transforming Colombia's Conflict: A Case for Re-prioritizing U.S.-Colombia's Militaristic Approach

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Transforming Colombia's Conflict: A Case for Re-prioritizing U.S.-Colombia's Militaristic Approach

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Master's Associate

by

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August 2010

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Abstract

The United State's influence on Colombia's militaristic approach to the conflict has deprived the nation's children of quality education and socio-economic opportunities, and created a culture of violence that has provided an expansive breeding ground from which armed groups and criminal networks continue to recruit. Colombian citizens have developed and implemented various approaches that have proven effective in transforming Colombia's classrooms and largest cities into collaborative, socially responsible and accomplished communities. Yet these initiatives continue to fall short of their full potential, as the democratic security approach remains the focus of Colombia's policy and programming. In keeping with the theoretical orientation of "conflict transformation" as a strategy for addressing conflict, this study makes the case for prioritizing and adequately supporting transformative approaches, such as the two educational programs and city-wide community interventions presented in this document, that are alleviating the systemic issues fueling the conflict. Given that the youth population will inevitably evolve into future leaders or future insurgents and gang members, these young adults must be the focus of U.S.-Colombian policy, youth programming and funding priorities.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
CODHES	Council for Human Rights and Displacement
CSC	Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers
DFID	Department for International Development
ELN	National Liberation Army
ELN-UC	National Liberation Army- Camilista Union
EN	Esuela Nueva
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	Internally Displaced Population
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FARC-EP	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-The People's Army
TE	Transformative Education
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Project
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Transforming Colombia's Conflict: A Case for Re-prioritizing U.S.-Colombia's Militaristic Approach

"These [children] are tomorrow's parents, business owners and agricultural workers or tomorrow's fighters" (Baker & May, 2004, p. 42). The United State's influence on Colombia's militaristic approach to the conflict has deprived the nation's children of quality education and socio-economic opportunities and created a culture of violence, which has resulted in an expansive breeding ground from which armed groups and criminal networks continue to recruit. The strategic approach to resolving the conflict has been based on the assumption that the insurgency will cease when insurgent groups are defeated and the drug economy that sustains them is eradicated. In fact this approach will continue in vein if the predominant grievances influencing the overt reactions to them are not addressed. In keeping with the theoretical orientation of "conflict transformation" as a strategy for addressing conflict, the U.S.-Colombian alliance needs to shift its focus towards transforming the conflict by alleviating the systemic issues fueling it. Given that the youth population will inevitably evolve into Colombia's future leaders, or future insurgents and gang members, these young adults need to be the focus of Colombia's efforts for policy, programming and funding priorities that will foster socio-economic opportunities and encourage cohesive citizenship. More importantly, these priorities should be established in collaboration with the citizens of Colombia and adequately supported to ensure sustained social, economic and political progress-a strategy that could prove instrumental in transforming the conflict.

The idea of *transforming* conflict in order to mitigate or even end protracted social conflicts has now become an integral part of theory and practice in the peace and conflict studies field and deserves serious consideration in its application to the Colombian conflict. This approach is distinguished from traditional conflict resolution approaches because of its focus on systems change. Intractable conflicts become so as a result of social patterns that emerge from

the conflict and become systemic. “Transforming deep-rooted conflicts is only partly about “resolving” the issues of the conflict – the central issue is systemic change or transformation” (Botes, 2003, ¶ 23). Theorists, such as Lederach, Harrington, Merry, and Burton, assert that societies are transformed when “fundamental social and political changes are made to correct inequities and injustice to provide all groups with their fundamental human needs” (ibid., ¶8). Conflict transformation must penetrate both micro and macro levels of society, including individual actors, the specific issues fueling the conflict, the norms dictating individual behaviors and the systems in which the conflict occurs (Väyrynen, 1991). In accordance with Lederach’s (1998) definition, the transformational peacebuilding process would translate into an organic, open political process which would actively engage a broad base of participants from all three tiers of the affected societies, including top leadership officials; respected professionals and intellectuals across sectors; and local grassroots and non-government organization leaders. Thus, this process would pave the way for a systemic transformation, thereby increasing justice, equality, access to resources and non-violent resolution strategies throughout the entire social system.

In many ways, the people of Colombia have initiated such an approach in their schools and communities, but these efforts have mainly been limited to regional or community efforts that have yet to be adequately supported and sustained by high-level officials informing policies and influencing national priorities. Worse still, the militaristic approach that has dominated Colombia’s political agenda has undermined the potential of these efforts by promoting violence and intimidation as the rational approach to end decades of violence and intimidation. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to make the case for a shift in funding and policy priorities for addressing Colombia’s conflict. Four case studies, two educational programs and two city-wide community interventions, are presented that demonstrate how these approaches have contributed to enhanced social cohesion, peaceful interactions and individual agency among youth and their communities. These cases were selected because of the consensual recognition of their transformative nature and impacts. The first section offers a summary of the historical context of the conflict, the resulting democratic security approach that has dominated the country’s political agenda and the subsequential impacts on youth in the affected communities. The second section

provides case studies of youth and civic transformative approaches that have been initiated by Colombians to address the deeply-entrenched socio-economic issues, outlining their impacts and challenges. The third section offers some concluding remarks and recommendations for the recently elected U.S. and Colombian administrations to consider that could contribute to the cultivation of these approaches and gradual transformation of the seemingly intractable conflict.

The limitations to the study stem from issues inherent in reviewing material authored by other individuals. Excluding Escuela Nueva, the remaining transformative approaches presented are relatively new and lacking in in-depth analysis and evaluation. In addition, given the changing dynamics and context characteristic of conflict-affected areas, long-term impact and efficacy of programming can be difficult to assess. It should also be noted that these programs were selected based on their notable impacts on transforming some of the major impacts of the conflict. However, because of a lack of available information or the possible limited scope of the programs, certain serious issues were not addressed, such as the increasing internally displaced population and severely marginalized indigenous communities. Thus, this study does not aim to be prescriptive regarding the exact methods and modalities to be utilized, for this is for the people of Colombia to decide, but instead advocates for an emphasis and prioritization of such programming which is transformative in its intent, design and approach.

SECTION 1: THE U.S. AND COLOMBIA'S PLAN FOR "PEACE"

The Causal factors of the Conflict and the Current Dynamics Sustaining It

In the Colombian conflict the violence does not revolve around a single clearly defined set of circumstances that can be attributed solely to economic or ethnic grievances. Instead the conflict is related to various dynamics and different historical processes which have manifested in radical ideologies and produced frequent changes in territorial control and political will. The use of violence to achieve political objectives has been prevalent since Colombia's independence. Since the beginning of *La Violencia* in 1948, up until very recently, the Colombian conflict has consistently escalated, particularly because of the continued influence of U.S. involvement, the increased number of armed groups in operation and the illicit markets that have been developed to sustain them.

Context of the Conflict

This lack of political representation for all segments of society has been a causal factor of the conflict. Beginning in the drive for independence from Spain in 1810, conservatives and liberals have been aggressively competing over the style of governance needed in Colombia. These political parties eventually became channels for expressing social grievances, such as land control, racial conflicts, regional and family rivalries, which "...prolonged the dual structure of power: alongside formally modern and democratic political institutions, the traditional parties functioned as two opposed but complementary federations of local and regional clientelist power networks" (González, 2004, ¶ 6). This dynamic eventually led to a schism between society and politics and entrenched state bureaucracy, corruption, skewed public spending, clientelism and the marginalization of a large percentage of Colombia's citizens.

In addition to an exclusionary political atmosphere, significant economic and social inequality has pervaded Colombian society. The social system of Colombia has been stratified since soon after Colombia gained its independence from Spain, as those of direct Spanish

descent were better positioned to acquire property, wealth and power than those of mixed descent. This aspect is paramount in the structural nature of the conflict, as long-standing discriminations and prejudices have prevented certain groups from socio-economic opportunities, property rights and cultural freedoms. Land ownership has remained highly concentrated, resulting in displacement and poverty for a large percentage of the population- a problem that has worsened with the development of the illicit drug trade. Not surprisingly, agrarian reform has been listed as a major demand by insurgent groups, as well as a rationale for their continued existence.

Another major contributing factor to the conflict has been the state's inability to exert control over all of its territory. The expulsion of poor *campesinos* towards less desirable areas of unclaimed frontier has resulted in an uneven state presence in these regions. In fact, this was predominately the impetus for the formation of right-wing paramilitary groups, which originally attempted to fill this security void.

These problems reflect the sources of the continuing conflict in Colombia, which revolve around basic needs such as security and access to resources. The government has never been successfully reformed to provide security to its citizens, equal opportunity for economic development, and equal representation under a democratic system. Presently, the major issues in the Colombian conflict include the dependence of armed groups upon drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion in order to further their causes as well as the historical use of violence as a vehicle for change. Socio-economic disparities, violence inflicted by armed groups and a flourishing drug economy continue to be a major problem and consistently undermine prospects for transforming the conflict. Additionally, the involvement of the United States has continued to be an issue, particularly since the leftist movements vehemently oppose its participation.

Currently, the major parties involved in the conflict include FARC, ELN, AUC, the Colombian government, and the United States. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was formed in mid-1960 out of disillusionment with the liberal party and brought together communist militants and peasant self-defense groups (Hanson, 2009). They have supported their activities with profits from the illicit drug trade, kidnapping, extortion and assassination

(Sweig, 2002). Their typical targets tend to be representatives of the state, as well as wealthy landowners, foreign tourists, and prominent domestic and international officials. FARC's current official interests include promoting a Marxist state, advocating for the rights of those exploited by the wealthier elites, and opposing United States involvement in the conflict and the privatization of natural resources. Their tacit interests include maintaining their profits from the drug trade and other illegal activity. FARC continues to prove its resilience, despite government claims that it has been substantially weakened.

The National Liberation Army (ELN) was also formed in the 1960's with many of the same goals as FARC. This group was inspired by the Cuban revolution and attracted many Catholic priests who adhered to liberation theology. The group also found support in left-wing intellectual movements. The ELN primarily supports itself by targeting Colombia's oil industry with kidnapping and extortion (Sweig, 2002). Membership in the group has been dwindling over the years and has been further weakened by paramilitary advances, competition with FARC, and greater aggressiveness exhibited by government security forces (Hanson, 2009).

United Self Defense of Colombia (AUC) was formed in 1997 to serve as an umbrella group to further the interests of various right-wing paramilitaries. The group has been supported by economic elites, drug traffickers, and local communities that could not rely on state security (globalsecurity.org, n.d.). The group declared a cease-fire in 2002 and negotiated a the demobilization of its members in return for amnesty, however the process was extremely flawed and has resulted in numerous splinter groups that have perpetuated the AUC's criminal activities and human rights abuses.

U.S. Influence: a Change of 'Plan'

The United States' involvement and interest in Colombia is multifaceted. There are various reasons why Colombia has remained the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the western hemisphere, including the estimate that 90 percent of the cocaine used in the United States is from Colombia (U.S. Department of State, 2010a). Its policy to fight terrorism globally has justified continued support of the Colombian government and added the FARC, ELN and AUC (since demobilized) to the global list of terrorist organizations. The U.S. is also interested in

keeping an ally in Latin America, particularly when many other governments in the region oppose U.S. policy.

It is also important to note that the U.S. is a direct benefactor of Colombia's oil reserves, which have recently been predicted to double in the next 4 years (Forero, 2004). John Forero, a reporter for the *New York Times*, has highlighted the consistent correlation between the location of oil reserves and the selected sites for U.S. presence in Colombia. One account reveals that the Bush Administration, eager to solidify alternative supplies for oil production, dispatched Special Forces to train Colombian soldiers to protect 500 miles of pipeline owned by American-owned Occidental Petroleum (ibid.).

In 2000, the Clinton administration started allocating large amounts of aid to Colombia, utilizing Plan Colombia as a vehicle to fight the "War on Drugs". Initially, Plan Colombia was used as a platform for development and peace negotiations with FARC during the Pastrana administration. In Pastrana's initial iteration of the plan, peace was viewed as a prerequisite for alleviating the pervasive drug problem, which he believed to be a social issue. In fact, FARC had agreed to reduce coca crops in exchange for alternative development initiatives at the beginning of Pastrana's term. However, the Colombian Defense Minister, fixated on defeating FARC, and the U.S. Defense Secretary, determined to reduce drug flows and preserve a positive climate for its investment priorities, argued that security must be in place before peace and development could be effective (Jones, 2009). The U.S. added crop fumigation and the military defeat of insurgent groups as the main stipulations for dispersing 7.5 billion U.S. dollars to support Plan Colombia. The resulting agreement was drafted in English in Washington, excluding the very people who would be most affected and shifting a platform for peace to a war on insurgency, drugs and eventually, terror.

Since the inception of Plan Colombia, between 76 and 82 percent of U.S. funding has been dedicated to strengthening the Colombian military and police (Ramirez, 2009). The U.S. military has gone to great lengths to train and expand Colombia's military and police forces, in spite of well-documented human rights abuses and links to paramilitary groups. In addition, the United States has provided equipment to the Colombian military and police through the military

assistance program, foreign military sales, and the international narcotics control program (U.S. Department of State, 2010b). The core strategy of Plan Colombia was the target the southern region of Colombia with massive fumigation of coca crops and the military defeat of FARC. Thus, the Counter-Narcotics Brigade was established, consisting of 2,300 soldiers, 45 helicopters, advanced communications and intelligence-gathering equipment, infantry training, arms and ammunition (Ramirez, 2009). The U.S. agenda in Colombia is exemplified in the following:

Colombia ...has had exceptional success in pursuing the goals it established, with support from the United States and the International community, but the job is not finished and we need to ensure that the progress made so far in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism continues. Efforts to address the deeper causes of Colombian problems must continue. We must staunch the flow of cocaine to our shores, and that means targeting the suppliers as well as the consumers. Arguably, our interests in Colombia are even greater now than they were six years ago, at the start of Plan Colombia. Not only is the government of Colombia our counternarcotics and counterterrorism partner, it also is our valued ally to maintain stability in the region, particularly in the face of external, anti-democratic forces. (Nogiera, 2005, p. 59).

Regardless of the reason for U.S. interest in Colombia, its influence on policy and Colombia's politics has resulted in a military-security approach that is costing the Colombian government an estimated U.S. \$14 million per day, with an additional \$1.6 million per day from the U.S. government (Bouvier, 2006). After 6 years and over \$5 billion dollars of U.S. assistance, the U.S.-backed "War on Drugs" has failed to reduce the flow of cocaine into the U.S. (Lindsay-Poland, 2009). Despite this, the Bush Administration committed another \$3.9 billion to support its combined counter-drug agenda, which was repackaged following the September 11 attacks, allowing for the use of the military resources of the Counter-Narcotics Brigade to be utilized in the War on Terror (Ramirez, 2009). President Uribe's "democratic security" platform has proven to be a perfect channel for the U.S.-declared "War on Drugs" turned "War on Terror", albeit to the detriment of prospects for conflict transformation and socio-economic development for Colombian youth.

The U.S. has admitted that the wide range of Colombia's problems stem from traditionally limited government presence in large regions of the country, a history of violence against civilians and entrenched social inequities (Nogiera, 2005). Yet U.S. policy and influence has encouraged President Uribe to give counterinsurgency operations priority over social and economic

investments that could work to address the economic, social, structural and political grievances fueling the conflict, as well as the drug economy sustaining it. The 18 to 24 percent of Plan Colombia's funds that has been dedicated to socio-economic endeavors has not been able to counter the multifaceted structural changes that need to occur, especially when a consistent 80 percent of that money has been channeled into creating a culture of fear, violence, intimidation and mistrust. The new Obama administration has vowed to start scaling down funding to Colombian and give it more ownership of its plan. However, the 10-year agreement signed in October 2009, which solidified U.S. access to at least seven Colombian military bases "...to address common threats to peace, stability, freedom and democracy" (Washington Office on Latin America, 2009, p.5), seems to indicate otherwise.

Colombia's Militaristic Approach

Since the inception of Plan Colombia, Colombian spending on the military has more than doubled, topping out at \$9 billion in 2009. This is largely a result of Uribe's election in 2002, which set in motion his "democratic security" platform, doubling the defense budget and number of armed forces personnel. President Uribe asserted that Colombia's massive issues of inequality and poverty were a direct result of terrorism, not the cause of it (Jones, 2009). He referred to his anti-guerrilla campaign as, "...the independence war of the twenty-first century, a patriotic war of national reunification" (Ramirez, 2009, p. 316). In 2007, defense and security expenditures reached 6.32% of GDP (The Center for International Policy's Colombia Program, 2008). In 2008 alone, Colombia spent approximately \$5.5 billion on military purchases (Washington Office on Latin America, 2009). In 2009, Colombia was reported to spend \$200 million of the \$9 billion spent on a complete overhaul of its aircraft fleet.

The obvious result of the increase in military spending has been the dramatic increase of troops. Even as irregular armed groups diminish, troop strength continues to be augmented. According to counter insurgency theory, ten regular combatants to one irregular combatant is the ideal ratio (Isaza, 2008). Between 2002 and 2007, the ratio of soldiers to insurgent group members was approximately 4.9 soldiers for every irregular combatant. By the end of 2007, as the military succeeded in reducing the number of guerrilla troops, the number of soldiers

increased to 15.5 to every guerilla. In 2008, with the number of guerillas estimated to be 12,499, the number of soldiers was still increased to 254,300, which ensured 20.34 soldiers would be mobilized for each guerrilla fighter (ibid.).

The Fruits of War

Overall security gains and the string of military successes against FARC in 2007 and 2008 elicited widespread support for President Uribe among Colombia's citizens, albeit citizens living in Colombia's major cities. In 2005, the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs boasted the following statistics as the steady progress made in Colombia since the beginning of Plan Colombia:

Between 2002 and 2004, homicides fell by 30 percent, massacres... fell by 61 percent, kidnappings by 51 percent, and acts of terrorism by 56 percent... Drug crop eradication, narcotics interdiction, and related arrests are at record-high levels... The aerial eradication program in Colombia sprayed a record 136,551 hectares (more than 300,000 acres) of cocaine and over 3,000 hectares (7,000 acres) of poppy... If public safety is a measure of well-being, most Colombians are better off today. (Nogiera, 2005, p. 57)

The U.S. Assistant Secretary goes on to declare, "In spite of continued violence, there is no question that the country's democratic traditions are solid and widely-respected. Our investment supporting Plan Colombia has contributed to this and is increasingly paying off" (ibid.). He also celebrated, "[Uribe] made good on his promise to President Bush to devote a greater share of his budget to security" (ibid., p. 60). The U.S. Assistant Secretary declared that, although the intention was to decrease funding by 2005, the Uribe administration offered an unexpected opportunity to continue progress.

Reading Between the Lines

U.S. backing, in tandem with counterterrorism discourse, allowed President Uribe to infuse Plan Colombia with a counterinsurgency logic that indirectly legitimized the military's violations of human rights (Ramirez, 2009). The U.S. referred to Colombia as an exemplary thriving democracy with a legitimacy that is unquestioned, dismissing the fact that the paramilitary openly endorsed Uribe during his campaign and the international community has publicly condemned his administration for repeated human rights abuses. Uribe enjoyed public support from the same political and economic elites who backed the paramilitaries, resulting in a high degree of paramilitary penetration of government agencies (Jones, 2009). In fact, Uribe's close

ties with the AUC's leader is believed to have been the impetus for the group's 'demobilization'- an accord that was condemned by human rights groups and the global community as impunity for murderers, terrorists and drug traffickers (ibid.).

The government's 'successful' demobilization of the AUC was not only seen as inadequate, it reaffirmed the mistrust and disillusionment of those most affected by the atrocities and injustices committed by the group and allowed their criminal networks to remain intact (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Thus, new groups, or more accurately, subsequent iterations of the AUC, have surged throughout the country, along with informed testimonies of links between lawmakers and paramilitaries. These armed groups continue to control the civilian population and are engaging in massacres, killings, rapes, threats and extortion with little to no consequences. As one former teacher who was forced to flee from the violence stated, "Uribe brought security to the main highways, and tourists can go from city to city, sure—but the countryside is still a red zone" (as cited in Daniel, 2010, ¶ 27). In addition, despite the military's claims of FARC's weakened state, the group has proven its resilience with continued attacks. In December, 2009, FARC kidnapped and executed state governor, Luis Cuellar and as recently as February 2010, FARC had taken over multiple villages, refusing to let anyone enter or leave, and planting more landmines in the surrounding areas (Markey, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Although the Colombian government has been credited with establishing "state presence" in every municipality of Colombia, the legitimacy of that presence has been debatable (DeShazo et al., 2007). The underlying philosophy of Uribe's approach is that security is the collective responsibility of all. Active and engaged support for the military has been expected and reinforced through far-reaching networks of civilian informants, as illustrated in the "Peasant Soldier Program". This initiative, launched in late 2002, aimed to enroll up to 20,000 armed soldiers or paid informants in an attempt to expand military presence in particularly problematic regions (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004). The government also intended to establish a network of peasant informers meant to relay intelligence to the army. This has not only armed millions of people, mainly youth, with virtually no training or oversight, it has resulted in increased suspicion from all sides and targeted attacks on innocent civilians.

Impacts on Colombian Youth

“The war in Colombia is a war on children” (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2004, p. 8). Uribe’s democratic security approach, combined with the heightened military presence and imposed power of the U.S., has hindered Colombia’s socio-economic development, particularly in rural areas, and reinforced fear, mistrust, resentment and desperation for many of its future leaders. Over the course of the conflict, young Colombians have been exploited as soldiers, informants and drug traffickers. Countless children and young adults have witnessed brutal acts of violence, received death threats, been sexually abused, tortured, assassinated and denied access to basic health, education and social services. The reality is worse still for children living in rural areas, where conflict is exacerbated by extreme poverty, limited employment opportunities, child labor, forced displacement, attacks on schools and violent struggles between all sides fighting for control over territory, illicit markets and political power.

It is important to note that not all Colombian youth are exposed to the horrors of the conflict and those enduring the Colombian conflict are not simply passive victims lacking agency or resilience. In fact, there are many exceptional young adults who have channeled their energies towards fighting for peace, as exemplified by the Children’s Peace Movement (CNN, 1999). However, if youth become acculturated to violence and grow up without rights or positive environments to nurture their energy, they can become the target of political and military predation or criminal activity. For the many Colombian adolescents faced with the brutal impacts of the internal conflict, joining armed factions or criminal gangs may seem like the most viable option for survival.

Forced to Fight

The recruitment of children by all of the various armed groups is widespread. A report released by the *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict* (2004) estimates 11,000-14,000 children, with an average age around 12.8, have been involved in fighting forces, placing Colombia as the country with the fourth highest rate of child soldiers worldwide. Children are targeted by the usual suspects: guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and emerging criminal groups, but

also government armed forces and national police, often with a high level of impunity. In fact, the Ministry of Defense initiated a public program, "Soldiers for a Day", that directly targeted child involvement with national armed forces. Children were taken to military facilities, dressed in uniform, invited to swim, given candy by soldiers dressed as clowns, and then pressed to inform upon friends and relatives who were involved in armed opposition groups (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007). In the town of Arauca, national forces allegedly gave children counterfeit 20,000 Colombian pesos with a message on the back inviting people to abandon armed groups. The Attorney General's office subsequently condemned the program in Arauca and requested its suspension, warning that it encouraged children to distrust their social surroundings, which can be detrimental to their mental development and put them at risk as potential targets of attack (The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2004). In February 2008, the Secretary General of the United Nations (U.N.) (2009) reported that the National Police had used a 12-year boy as an informant in the Valle del Cauca. Consequently, the boy began receiving death threats from FARC and was assassinated within the year. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSC) also reported on the previously mentioned Peasant Soldier Programme stating, "...children and young people have also reportedly been offered economic incentives to become involved in the conflict as "peasant soldiers" (2004, ¶ 1).

As published in the Human Rights Watch Report (2003) more than 11,000 children were fighting in irregular armed groups, including paramilitaries and urban militias. Reports confirm that the FARC and the ELN have continuously used schools for recruiting grounds, launching campaigns and even utilizing school grounds for military training in exchange for financing the school (UN Secretary General, 2009). CSC (2007) reported an incident involving the death of 10-year old boy. On April 17, 2003 FARC attached a bomb to his bicycle, which exploded as he rode up to a military checkpoint. The paramilitaries have used money and clothing to lure youth (Richardson, 2007). Of the 12 demobilized AUC soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch, only three were age 15 or older when recruited (as cited in CSC, 2007). The splinter groups that have now replaced the demobilized paramilitaries have created yet another trap for Colombian

youth, as they continue to recruit children to engage in their criminal activities and grave human rights violations (UN Secretary General, 2009).

Forced to Work: Disparity, Extreme Poverty and Scarce Opportunity

While Uribe has been credited with increasing investment and economic growth during his two terms, U.N. data demonstrates that income disparities grew between 2002 and 2008 (The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2009). In addition, the 12 percent unemployment rate remains one of the highest in the Americas. The gross social and economic disparities between rural and urban areas continue to impact Colombian youth and validate the long-standing grievances posed by insurgent groups. According to a 2004 United Nations report, Colombia was the world's ninth-most unequal country, with the wealthiest 10 percent earning 58 times that of the poorest 10 percent (as cited in Jones, 2009). Colombian official statistics reveal that nearly 64.2 percent of Colombians, 85.3 percent of which are rural citizens, live on less than \$3 per day, and 31 percent live on less than \$2 per day (ibid.). Little or no access to social and public services or income-generating opportunities translates into a high probability that a mother's poverty will be handed down to her children, perpetuating the seemingly endless cycle of poverty.

"The first contact that young people may have with armed groups is through their work harvesting coca leaves" (UN Security Council, 2009). Young Colombians, either by force or necessity, have helped sustain the drug economy ensuring the survival of illegal armed groups and criminal gangs by working as coca harvesters or in coca leaf processing plants (ibid.). According to a 2001 study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 41,000 children under age 15 were working in coca leaf processing plants in Putumayo. Parish priests in this same area reported that up to 85 percent the children in local schools had chemical burns, resulting from the sulfuric acid used to process the coca leaves. For youth living in these disempowered communities, generating income takes precedent over their age, rights or desire for an education. In most cases, it is their motivating factor for joining armed groups or participating in criminal activities. Research has demonstrated that high numbers of jobless youth become highly vulnerable to organized rebel groups, gangs, or violent crime activity and thus high

youth unemployment has been identified as one of the key risk factors for determining conflict risk (UNDP, 2008; Buckland, 2005). In regions where the U.S. and Colombia have unleashed their widespread fumigation tactics, children who depended on the coca crops to generate income have been forced to join whatever group controls their region in hopes of receiving food and promised income (Colusso, 2007).

Displacement

“Children and their mothers make up the majority of the Colombian families forcibly displaced by war, and number in the hundreds of thousands” (Human Rights Watch, 2003, p. 6). Murders, threats, gang-activity, kidnappings, forced recruitment, sexual violence and land theft have forced hundreds of thousands of citizens from their homes, making Colombia the state with the second largest population of internally displaced persons in the world (UN Security Council, 2009). Once displaced, children regularly confront a wide range of difficulties, including poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare, psychological stress, child labor and other serious violations of their rights. Research by UNICEF, Save the Children and the Council for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) indicates that up to 85 percent of children who were in school prior to displacement are unable to return to school after becoming displaced. Families disintegrate or separate regularly and, in some cases, are sent to urban areas in search of safety. According to news reports, many internally displaced population (IDP) children are plagued by nightmares and other emotional disorders from experiences with severe violence, yet they often have little access to counseling or health services (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2004). These displaced young people often experience a lack of opportunity to participate in society and feel like they are criminalized for being young because of the way children are portrayed in the media (CSC, 2007).

Sexual Violence

In 2008, the Colombian Constitutional Court released a report stating:

Sexual violence as well as the exploitation and sexual abuse is a habitual, extended, systematic and invisible practice in the context of the armed conflict perpetuated by the illegal armed groups, and...agents of the national armed forces...children account for an exceedingly high proportion of the total cases of known victims. (as cited in UN Security Council, 2009, p. 8)

In 2007, testimony taken by the Special Rapporteur for included accounts of raids by paramilitary forces that involved multiple rapes (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2004). One interviewee, who described how paramilitaries controlled the entrance and exit to her neighborhood, spoke of one girl who had been raped and tortured before being killed - her eyes and nails were removed and then her breasts were cut off. Six additional women had been killed for alleged ties to guerrillas or for refusing to have sex with paramilitaries. During an operation of the national army in the indigenous community in Betoyes, soldiers of the XVIII Brigade of the Colombian military, wearing armbands of paramilitary groups, raped and killed a pregnant 16-year-old girl, cut her stomach open, tore out her fetus and threw her body in a nearby river. Three other girls, ages 11, 12 and 15, were also reportedly raped (Amnesty International, 2003). A report issued by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman released in 2008 revealed that 31.2 percent of the girls interviewed had become pregnant and lost the fetus while with illegal armed groups and 40 percent stated that they were between 11 and 14 years old when they became pregnant (UN Security Council, 2009).

Abduction, Torture and Murder

Between 1996 and 2008, 287 children were reported to be held in captivity by various armed groups and a total of 1, 636 cases of missing children are under investigation (UN Security Council, 2009). FARC-EP, UC-ELN and other guerrilla groups carry out most kidnappings, but paramilitaries also use abductions as a tactic of war. According to País Libre, children accounted for 86 of the 676 abduction victims reported during the first four months of 2003 and approximately 60 children were being held hostage, some of who had been in captivity for years (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, 2004). A local NGO that serves as a national resource center for information on abductions reported that an average 27.5 children were abducted each month.

Colombia has the second highest rate of youth murder in the world (Howland-Jackson, 2008). Since 2006, the bodies of 109 children have been discovered in clandestine graves, allegedly victims of paramilitary groups. In 2008, 819 cases of murdered children were reported by the observatory of Presidential Human Rights and the International Humanitarian Law

Program; in 704 of these cases, the perpetrator was unidentified (UN Security Council, 2009). One 14-year old-girl was killed by FARC-EP, only after one of her hands was cut off and one of her eyes gouged out. Another report revealed the death of one boy who was covered with gasoline and shot in front of his brother after he refused to join FARC; the brother was subsequently successfully recruited. Indiscriminate attacks by all sides are yet another cause of death among children. Extrajudicial killings have also been increasingly exposed. As of November 2008, there were 50 cases of extrajudicial executions involving children under investigation (ibid.).

Acculturation to violence

Perhaps the most disconcerting impact for youth has been the way in which violence, abuse and conflict have been normalized and recreated in the daily lives of Colombia's children. Even in the Colombian capital, the main recipient of the alleged improvements in security, violence, abuse and intimidation continue to be reproduced in schools. All children have witnessed or heard of shootings, bombs, kidnappings, mutilation and murder. Chaux (2009) recognizes that, "violence in Colombia is not limited to armed conflict, since much of the more common, domestic, urban, gang and crime-related forms of violence also greatly affect children" (p.85). The pervasive violence infiltrating Colombian society is just as pronounced, if not more so, in rural areas controlled by the various armed groups. One twelve-year-old girl from Cauca justified her enlistment with FARC as a means to get a gun and kill her father for the abuse he inflicted on her mother (Clark & Moser, 2001).

Studies have demonstrated that children who are exposed to violence at an early age have been prone to develop violent behaviors (Chaux, 2009). In communities that have higher levels of violence and homicides, children and young adults exhibited increased levels of aggression. Thus, children who witness those around them using aggression and intimidation to get what they want will often recreate such behaviors to achieve their desired outcome and this aggression has been directly transferred into schools. A nationwide study of over 50,000 students in especially violent regions of Colombia demonstrated that schools in these areas had an increased rate of school bullying.

The prevalence of attacks on and violence in schools has exposed countless children to traumatic, unforgettable acts that consequently shape their beliefs, behaviors and attitudes in ways that fuel a cycle of violence. In 2006, the National Statistics Department and a private university carried out a survey in 807 public and private schools across varying levels of the social stratification in Bogota. The study found that 56 percent of students claimed to have been robbed while at school, 32 percent said they had been physically assaulted to varying degrees and a total of 2, 583 students had been threatened with guns. Counselor Jimenez, the woman responsible for releasing the shelved study, emphasized the importance of the study by stating, "it is impossible to isolate students from a society in which there is a deeply rooted culture of corruption, easy money and the principle of paramilitarism, which is to defend oneself from violence by means of violence" (as cited by Martinez, 2008).

Schools have also been repeatedly occupied and directly attacked by both illegal armed groups and national army members. Teachers suspected of collaborating with the enemy repeatedly fall victim to kidnappings, abuse, torture and murder. Between 1991 and 2006, 808 teachers were assassinated, 1,008 were forcibly displaced, 2,015 received death threats and 59 'disappeared' (Novelli, 2009). In June 2008, four teachers suspected of being informants were kidnapped and killed by FARC-EP, resulting in the cancelation of classes for 500 students and, most likely, substantial psychological trauma. One boy recounts:

Some men wearing masks came into the classroom and shot him [his teacher], right in the middle of our lessons. They didn't give him a chance to say anything. One of the masked men lifted our teacher's dead body by the back of his shirt and spoke to us. "This man had to die because he was teaching you bad ideas. We can kill all of you as well so don't get any bad ideas if you want to stay alive. (ibid., p. 14)

Youth and Conflict: An Incentive to Fight

Political elites have waged wars on drugs and terrorism-the devastating symptoms of a state plagued by poverty, disparity, inequality and corruption- but until these underlying issues are addressed and young individuals are provided viable alternatives to joining armed groups or engaging in criminal activities, the insurgency will continue. For children growing up in conflict situations, transitioning into adulthood becomes even more challenging as they contend with the various negative consequences of war. Widespread poverty, inadequate socio-economic

opportunities, fraudulent governance and extreme violence can provide adequate incentive for young adults to engage in illicit markets for survival and use the conflict as a way to vent their anger. These intersections between youth and conflict have been increasingly recognized as hindrance to peacebuilding efforts. The United States Agency International Development (USAID) (2005) has stated:

If young people find that opportunities for employment are absent or blocked, that families cannot offer support, that authorities cannot protect them or offer justice, and that hard work and education offer few benefits, some may turn to extremist groups or rebel leaders who promise a brighter future or immediate rewards. (p. 3)

If conditions in are not created that provide positive and empowering roles for Colombian youth, they will continue to foment the violent conflict, especially when there is ample opportunity to do so. The Uribe administration is credited with eliminating 50,464 guerillas from the conflict, but FARC was only reduced by 8,101, from 20,600 to 12, 499 (Isaza, 2008). Thus, they were able to double the number of their original recruits, a clear indication that there is still a high incentive to join. One displaced leader from San Onofre estimated that 20 young men from his neighborhood had recently joined the successor groups of the paramilitaries. He reported that members of these groups sit in the public parks and offer young men and women the equivalent of \$400 to join their groups (Isacson, 2009). This is tempting for young men and women who are displaced, unemployed and living in extreme poverty. "If accepted, the new member is given a motorcycle, a gun, a salary, and a sense of purpose" (ibid. p. 22). In regions where violent groups provide more opportunities than the state for income, protection or survival, the continued recruitment of young adults becomes inevitable.

SECTION 2: TRANSFORMING COLOMBIA'S CONFLICT ONE CITIZEN AT A TIME

A Social Communication Approach

The country of Colombia is at a crossroads. Uribe finished his second and final term, and similar to the recent elections in the United States, the climate in Colombia seemed ripe for something drastically different. An unlikely candidate, the previous mayor of Bogotá Antanas Mockus, proved to be a serious contender to Uribe's former Minister of Defense, Juan Manuel Santos. The former mayor, along with his running mate, both initiated nontraditional approaches for addressing serious challenges in two of Colombia's most dangerous cities. These approaches have produced impressive results and convinced many Colombian citizens that creative, non-violent tactics can elicit transformative changes. Although their overarching strategies were not directly targeting youth, they were creating a community-oriented, peaceful and interactive environment in which Colombia's children could thrive.

Bogotá: Citizenship Culture

From 1993 to 2003, Antanas Mockus, the mayor of Bogotá, confronted very serious issues of government corruption, endemic violence, shortage of basic services and an overarching disillusionment among "Bogotanos" with what has been coined as a "social communication" approach. A former mathematician and philosopher, Mockus took on the seemingly insurmountable challenge of strengthening citizenship in a city plagued with violence and crime by creating physical, social and psychological space for people to participate in the decisions and policies that affect their lives. Mockus credited much of his approach to the economist and Nobel-prize winner, Douglass North, who stated:

Changes in informal constraints--norms, conventions, or personal standards of honesty, for example--have the same originating sources of change as do changes in formal rules;

but they occur gradually and sometimes quite subconsciously as individuals evolve alternative patterns of behavior consistent with their newly perceived evaluation of costs. (2004, p.6)

To encourage alternative patterns of norms and moral standards, Mockus sought to distribute knowledge and provide incentives for participatory change. He asserted, "Knowledge empowers people. If people know the rules, and are sensitized by art, humor, and creativity, they are much more likely to accept change" (Caballero, 2004, p. 4). To address a water shortage, Mockus playfully appeared on television programs while showering, demonstrating his efforts to save water by turning it off as he soaped and asking viewers to do the same. He also implemented economic incentives for those who decreased their water consumption. The foundation of Mockus' campaign was aimed at recapturing the value of human life, which he felt had been lost in Colombian society. To address lawless traffic issues, Mockus hired mimes to mimic pedestrians and drivers who displayed reckless behavior and requested that a star be painted on each spot where a pedestrian was killed. He organized a "Night for Women" to celebrate women's role in society and address their safety concerns at night. He asked men to stay home and take care of the kids while around 700,000 women safely roamed the city policed by a female commander and 1,500 women officers. Major streets were closed off on Sundays and turned into pedestrian and bike paths, mass yoga events were organized in city parks and a club of highly recommended taxi drivers was created to address community members' overall dissatisfaction with service and treatment. Additionally, Mockus tackled corruption and public spending issues head on by refusing to award political posts to supporters, accept campaign money or meet with any officials known for corruption. To address security issues, he focused on strengthening the police and implemented community campaigns against domestic violence and abuses by armed groups. By the time Mockus finished his second term as mayor, the number of traffic fatalities had been reduced by more than half; homicides were reduced by half; overall water consumption had decreased by 40 percent; the city had collected more than three times the revenues it had before, mostly voluntarily paid by wealthier citizens. Mockus also oversaw the rise in the city's provision of drinking water from 78.7 percent to 100 percent, while the percentage of homes with sewage services rose from 70.8 to 94.9 (Caballero, 2004). Interestingly, when asked about

whether, as president, he would maintain the “synergistic” relationship with the U.S. and Plan Colombian, his response was, “No one is going to resolve the problem of drug trafficking but Colombians” (Kraul, 2010).

Medellín: A long-awaited renaissance

The former mayor of Medellín, Sergio Fajardo, promoted several initiatives based on a similar approach in the town of Medellín, which had been labeled one of the most dangerous cities with the highest homicide rates in the world (Drost, 2010). The approach was centered on dialogue, transparency and accountability. Public officials were encouraged to spend time in the most economically challenged neighborhoods, engaging with individuals who suffered the most. These officials were judged on their ability to build trust and deliver on their promises. Fajardo supported public policies that were transparent and initiated by the people of Medellín. Seven percent of the city’s core budget, around \$70 million dollars, was controlled by committees in some of Medellín’s poorest communities. The only conditions were that a consultative process among community members dictated the spending priorities and that the allocation and monitoring of available resources related to those same priorities. The established priorities and their corresponding fiduciary requirements were immediately made public to all community members to ensure transparency and accountability.

Fajardo’s vision was to erect Colombia’s most beautiful buildings in the poorest areas to inspire a culture of inclusion, pride and community cohesion. During his term, he oversaw the construction of 10 new schools and the renovation of 132 others. The city constructed five library parks, botanical gardens, interactive museums and public buildings, in addition to a state-of-the-art cable car that has allowed workers to comfortably travel across the dangerous and mountainous areas for employment and leisure (Feek, 2008). Instead of pumping more money into increasing security and military forces, city officials tore down walls, opened up spaces, created high quality restaurants, and supported the transformation of the cultural scene with ongoing events and festivals. Medellín established its own institution, the Armed Conflict Victims’ Programme, to support local victims with their psychosocial needs and reconciliation claims (Stroehlein, 2008). In addition, the city has set up childcare services, job placement and credit

facilities. Local businesses flourished as a result and the city experienced a surge in domestic and international investments. In 2004, local exports brought in three times the amount of revenue compared to the early 1990s (Beith, 2004).

In Moravia, considered the most violent neighborhood in Medellín, Fajardo encouraged a project that directly opposed the standard security approach previously used. The city targeted the most problematic area, a local creek dividing two warring communities, and bought all the houses at a price above market value. All houses on either side of the creek were demolished and replaced with a library park designed by the most famous architect in Colombia on one side, and an open-space park on the other. Three pedestrian bridges were then constructed, symbolically and physically linking the two communities. The names of those people who sold their houses were engraved on the side of the new library and, most importantly, the daily shooting did not just resume in another area, it dramatically decreased. The enthusiasm of the community became palpable and the transformation, inevitable.

Education as a vehicle for Transformation

If Colombia is to realistically emerge from this conflict as a nation capable of providing essential public services, security, and adequate socioeconomic opportunities for its citizens, it is essential that young Colombians are taught how to lead their country, critically evaluate their most pressing issues, and learn how to take effective action to address those issues. A report on post-conflict education and reconstruction by the World Bank concludes that “schools are almost always complicit in conflict, reproducing the skills, values, attitudes, and social relations of dominant groups in society. Thus, the reconstruction and reforming of education is a critical element in the strategy to reduce the risk of ... conflict” (Buckland, 2005, p. xv). In conflict-affected areas, a lack of qualified teachers, safe structures, and appropriate materials are often compounded by divided societies, traumatized children who have been orphaned, injured or both, as well as state governance incapable of providing assistance. However, conflict and post-conflict situations can also present an opportunity for comprehensive education system reform. In fragile and violent contexts in which the state is unable or unwilling to provide adequate and basic services to its citizens, educational institutions have been able to preserve the trust of most

students, teachers, parents and the local community while presenting a way in which children can improve their prospects for a better future (Bouvier, 2009). This trust and credibility presents an opportunity for developing initiatives that promote the creation of social microenvironments where healthy interactions and leadership skills can be cultivated. Chaux and Velasquez state that “within schools, social hierarchies and roles are defined, groups and subgroups form, shared attitudes and behaviors are established, individuals’ behavior-regulation mechanisms operate, different types of conflict occur, people are affectively connected to one another, and group identity is built” (2009, p. 160). These microenvironments have the potential to alter the legitimacy of violence in order to resolve conflict.

The international community has reinforced the importance of education as a vital reconstruction and development tool in war-torn areas. The Department for International Development (DFID) states that “education provides a foundation for the knowledge, skills and values that fuel personal, social and economic development - the means by which sustainable development might be achieved” (Smith, & Vaux, 2002, p. 43). In Article 29, the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) declares that education should aim towards “the development of the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms... [and] the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance” (as cited in Smith & Vaux, 2002, p. 24). Additionally, the Dakar Framework for Action emphasizes that the quality of education must include measurable outcomes concerning essential life skills that can be achieved by all (UNESCO, 2000). UNICEF also promotes a multidisciplinary approach that aims “to empower children and youth to participate in bringing about constructive change, both locally and globally” (Fountain, 1995). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) outlines the need to review current mandates so that they include approaches that focus on cultivating lifelong skills including, “...skills for critical and creative thinking, oral and written communication, collaboration and cooperation, conflict management, decision-making, problem-solving and planning, and practical citizenship” (as cited in Battisti et al., p. 3). A key element in the World Bank’s approach to post-conflict peacebuilding, as well as development, is youth empowerment, where youth are

considered “a human asset, a medium-long term investment for creating thriving societies, and a base for social capital development” (as cited in Borer, T., Darby, J., & McEvoy-Levy, S 2006, p.6).

Colombian educational policymakers have recognized the importance of education in transforming the conflict in their country. Across the country youth, parents, teachers, government and non-governmental organizations have consistently pointed to education as a long-term approach to help mitigate the violence and better prepare society to address the most pressing issues in their communities. In 1990, the National Development Plan for Education stated, “In addition to the economic virtues emanating from the transmission of basic knowledge, the educational process must produce critical, free, creative and solitary spirits; committed to the search for peace and tolerance, and who are able to be aware participants in collective processes” (as cited in Vanegas, 2003, p. 231). Chaux and Velázquez recognize that “education’s developmental mission and schools’ credibility and status as social microenvironments underlie education’s great potential to promote some of the social and cultural transformations required to confront Colombia’s violence” (2009, p. 160).

To utilize education as a vehicle for fundamental social change and development, interventions need to use an approach that will encourage diversity, tolerance, innovation, and conflict management skills, as well as invent ways to engage children with their communities to foster child agency and leadership. Given the potential power inherent in the education sector, it is essential that any intervention involve the affected communities to create innovative, context-specific curricula to support youth agency and community participation that will inspire long-term social change. Transformative Education (TE), a concept demonstrated in the Escuela Nueva (EN) schools and the Citizenship Competency Program, is one such approach. Bevin et al. (2009) define TE as “the process of recognizing the structures of injustice and recognizing one’s own ability to redress those roots of injustice” (p. 100). Within this system, students are encouraged to challenge their current frame of reference or philosophy and imagine new possibilities for action with respect to ethnicity, race, class, and power (Bergin & Pugh, 2005). TE curriculum is designed according the local context (Bivens et al., 2009). Curricula can include

collaborative group work, community service, experiential education, reflective practices and participatory decision-making. The main goal is to transfer what is learned in the classroom to students' homes and communities so that they can become agents of change. TE incorporates critical thinking, active learning, and community service so children learn ways in which they can challenge existing structures and take action to make a change. In addition, they are encouraged to identify current community issues and formulate concrete ways to tackle those issues.

Escuela Nueva: Cultivating Youth Agency and Empowerment

To transform the failing educational system in rural areas, local residents in some of the most remote areas of Colombia pioneered a set of innovative pedagogical techniques to address issues of multi-grade classrooms supervised by only one teacher in rural areas. Poor quality in materials and teaching methods, high levels of attrition, repeated failures to advance grades and perceived irrelevance of classroom material, all in the context of a deeply embedded internal conflict, prompted community members to try a different approach. The first iteration of Escuela Nueva was initiated through the first Major Project in the Field of Latin American Education, an approach that was based on active learning and multi-grade teaching, self-instruction, interactive handbooks and advancement based on both student and teacher evaluation of progress (Scheifelbien, 1992). A passive, urban-biased, and inflexible curriculum that isolated classroom experiences from the community was replaced with active instruction, encouraging decision-making and participation from students, emphasizing written communication, community involvement and an evaluation process that allowed for the distinct ages, developmental stages and lifestyles of each student (ibid.). The method was piloted in Pamplona, Colombia. Over the next two years, 4,500 teachers were trained and what became known as Escuela Nueva was gradually implemented in more than half of Colombia's 34,000 rural schools (Nee, 2008). As the system continued to evolve, a steering group was initiated comprised of local teachers, administrators, university professors and a core team from the Ministry of Education. This group eventually transitioned into a supervisory group that ended up being placed in the Ministry of Education; this proved instrumental for EN's evolution. .

Curriculum

In EN schools, students are given self-guided, instructional handbooks that permit them to go at their own pace. The material is presented in a ways that enable literate students to teach themselves the material so that teachers can focus on students who need more individual instruction (Kline, 2002). The interactive guidebooks incorporate core national curriculum, but also encourage active learning, linking what they learn in the classroom to their daily community and family experiences (Colbert, 2009). Students are required to observe what is going on around them, think critically about those observations, express them in written form, and then discuss their thoughts in a group setting. The children compare their work with their textbooks on their own, make corrections and then work in groups for further comparison and guidance if needed. Classroom libraries and learning corners offer supplemental learning materials, while student government, committees and community projects help students engage the local community and exercise the democratic principles and citizenship values they learn in school.

Creating agency

White and Wyn (1998) define youth agency as “the extent of which young people take an active role in shaping their futures” (p. 316). They go on to provide three dimensions of agency: private, which is driven by individual or personal choice; public, which is individual or collective and geared toward improving institutions and circumstances; and collective project, which is linked to the fundamental change of overall social order. Finally, effective agency is the embodiment of all three: the awareness of the ability to take action, the willingness to engage in collective action for the interest of the group, and the knowledge and willingness to challenge the current social structures. Yet, when social divisions and inequalities exist, effective agency is diminished. Moreover, negative forms of agency can be instilled through relationships and socialization, such as gang or political activities that teach violence as the way to gain acceptance, status, wealth, or power (Moncrieffe, 2009). More times than not, classroom environments undermine youth agency by treating children as passive objects who should be kept quiet and maintain the status quo. EN’s approach ensures that children become agents of change, first in their classroom, then in their families and communities (Nee, 2008). The

transformative approach dissuades passivity by developing curricula that is relevant and applicable to the child's family and community. Children are encouraged to discuss human rights, ethics and cooperation, utilize various art forms to express their ideas about peace issues, and raise awareness about these issues in their communities. Students are also encouraged to form student committees and establish democratic processes to initiate improvements in their schools. Most importantly, students exercise their agency via service-learning projects outside their schools, during which they come up with action plans to directly address the issues that they view as the most pressing in their communities.

Community participation

The U.N. stresses the need to locate support for education in poverty-stricken rural areas within the larger context of rural development and to promote multi-sectoral approaches designed and implemented with a high level of community involvement (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003). The knowledge, experience, and inputs of parents and community members are solicited through the EN approach. Students and their families work together to develop community maps, including information detailing various community members' demographic information, culture, health, employment and other relevant information, as well as an agricultural calendar to help teachers adjust scheduling accordingly. Some schools also provide adult education programs, healthcare facilities, and microfinance training at their sites, which encourage adult figures to be more engaged in the students' lives (Bivens, et al., 2009). The service-learning component of EN engages community members and can help forge relationships with students and elicit more of an investment in their education and future.

Personalized, flexible evaluations

A flexible mechanism for advancement allows students to graduate to the next level at their own pace, relative to their varying circumstances. Based on self-reflection and feedback from the teacher, each student evaluates their overall performance and then, together with their teacher, the two agree on a final level of "excellent", "outstanding" or "acceptable". They also agree on goals for improved performance, which are assessed every two months.

Teachers as facilitators

Teacher training is a fundamental component of the EN model to ensure that instruction is interactive, personalized and presented in ways that foster creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, democratic values and leadership development. Teachers of the EN method are trained to function as facilitators of the learning process versus implementing traditional rote learning methods. Teachers go through training workshops to expose them to practical elements of the curriculum and assist them in developing the skills to manage multi-grade classrooms. The training is divided into three one-week, interactive workshops, following detailed manuals similar to the student guides (Bivens, et al., 2009). The first training outlines the goals, methodology and organization of the EN and its various components. The second workshop takes place within three months and focuses on effective use of the learning guides, successful navigation of the multi-grade classrooms, and the flexible promotion of students. A third workshop goes over developing and utilizing the school library and reviewing previous information. Teacher training continues monthly through “microcenters” located in schools that have demonstrated particularly successful implementation of the EN methodology. These observational opportunities allow teachers to exchange ideas, experiences and questions to inform their efforts to deliver an educational experience that is transformative.

Impacts of Escuela Nueva’s approach

Various evaluations and studies have demonstrated that, when implemented in adherence with its intended model, the Escuela Nueva approach has increased student enrollment and retention, elicited higher achievement scores in mathematics and languages, and fostered improved self-esteem and democratic behaviors in students. During the 1988-1996 World Bank-financed project to universalize primary education, which incorporated the Escuela Nueva model, the number of students increased by 45.6 percent overall in rural schools. In urban schools, the number rose by 7.6 percent (as cited in Colbert, 2009). Research also shows that EN students achieved higher test scores than those in conventional schools, regardless of socio-economic status, level of community violence or geographical demographic (Chesterfield, 1994; Pitt, 1999). A study comparing EN schools with conventional schools in six districts across

Colombia revealed that EN methodologies had a significant positive impact on peaceful social interactions- defined as active respect for others, universal solidarity, fair play and equity- as well as positive influences on parent contributions in community life and enhanced collaboration between family members at home (Forero-Pineda et al., 2001). The World Bank has acknowledged the EN model as one of the best innovations in global development. EN has also been credited for effectively addressing issues of relevance, equity, efficiency and quality where it counts the most, in the classroom, despite limitations for impacting national education systems or policy (Kline 2002). In regards to EN's impact in Colombia, UNICEF (2009) concluded:

Overall, the Learning Circles initiative has improved school retention and academic performance, promoted coexistence and democratic behaviour, decreased violence in the classroom and at home and increased parental involvement. In addition, the initiative has demonstrated its capacity to inspire students to stay in school and plan for their futures. In this way, the Escuela Nueva programme helps repair and strengthen the social fabric by helping to eliminate violence, exploitation and child labour. (¶ 27)

The Colombian Citizenship Competencies Program

In 2003, Colombian educators and policymakers took an important step towards establishing programs and techniques to cultivate more peaceful and resourceful competencies in Colombian youth. Understanding the potential education has to develop peaceful agents of change, the Ministry of Education included citizenship education into the national core curriculum, placing the mastery of social, emotional and civic engagement at the same level of importance as academic achievements (Espinosa & Patti, 2007).

The Citizenship Competencies Program aims to develop compassion, conflict resolution skills, collaborative decision-making, social responsibility, respect for the differences and rights of all groups and identities by encouraging students to practice such skills and behaviors in simulated and real-life situations (Chaux, 2009). Chaux outlined the four principle components of the Citizenship Competencies Program: defined standards for citizenship; a national evaluation system, conducted every three years, that supplements the established core international testing; best practices visible in a national forum via knowledge dialogue exchanges and a published portfolio; and the Ministry's economic and pedagogical support to the regional and local Secretariats. Parents are also reached by targeted program components, including four optional

workshops a year that teach the same competencies that are taught to their children. Additionally, there is an internet portal that provides resources and materials for implementers. As Chau recognizes:

Knowledge is not enough to make a citizen. At stake in a society is that its members *behave* as citizens by continuously developing several competencies that make them 'good' citizens, willing to understand, decide and behave by considering the wellbeing not only of their family or kin, but—most importantly—by bearing in mind the 'common good'. (as cited in Jamarillo & Mesa, 2009, p. 473)

Impacts of the Citizenship Program

Aulas en Paz (Classrooms in Peace) is one way in which the citizenship competency program has been implemented in some Colombian schools. An initial evaluation conducted eight months after one classroom's exposure to the approach revealed that the children's expression of aggressive behavior decreased by almost one-fifth and pro-social behaviors, such as helping, cooperating, and exhibiting compassion for others increased nine-fold, while adhering to class norms improved six-fold. A transformation also occurred in the children's friendship networks. When the program was first implemented, each child identified three or fewer classroom friends. At the end of the 8-month period evaluated, children identified more than twenty friends. This was close to three times the number of friends identified by children in a classroom not participating in the program. It should be noted that this evaluation was conducted in a school located in the most violent neighborhood of downtown Bogotá.

Overarching Challenges for transformative approaches

A Surge in Violence and Decline in Political Support: Medellín

The transforming initiatives that were used in Medellín and Bogota initially succeeded in increasing security, strengthening citizenship, fostering community cohesion and improving the daily lives of citizens. This progress has been maintained for the most part in Bogota, although this has been attributed to the fact that, as the capital, it has been more protected from insurgents and territory battles between successor groups. In addition, the mayor who served between Mockus' two terms maintained and enhanced his approach to improve security by improving the lives of Bogota's citizens. In contrast, Medellín has experienced a recent surge of violent episodes which has threatened to reverse these positive trends. This increased violence has

been blamed on the failed demobilization process of the AUC and de-mobilized guerilla members, which has left their criminal networks and illicit revenues intact with several gang leaders competing for ownership. In 2008 the U.S. began extraditing the most powerful local paramilitary drug traffickers to the United States, which left the underground network open for the taking for aspiring gang members. Human Rights Watch (2010) reported 1,717 homicides in Medellín the first ten months of 2009, more than doubling the 830 killings reported over the same time period in 2008. In January 2010, the city experienced its most violent month yet, with 238 murders, doubling the number of the previous January. The violence has continued to displace hundreds of thousands of Colombians, many of whom have settled in Medellín's slums. The welcomed dramatic decline in homicides the following month was not a result of improved security or effective government leadership; rather, a ceasefire between two rival gang lords was mediated by civil society leaders (Mejia, 2010). This has proven to discount official claims that criminal gang structures are weakening and authorities are winning the war against crime and violence.

Despite the range of improvements in the city experienced from the various social projects, poverty and inequality still plagues local residents, with over 80 percent living in poverty. A former governor of Antioquia states, "Although marginalized areas have greatly benefitted from infrastructure and building projects, cultural and geographic barriers continue to hamper social integration" (Lowenthal & Mejia, 2010, ¶18). These enduring social problems, exacerbated by the violent struggle among successor paramilitary and organized crime groups, have summoned the return of violence to Medellín's streets.

The Minister of Defense has tried to downplay the dramatic increase in violence. In response to city mayors' complaints about the surge of homicides, the Minister quoted police figures, which claimed *only* 22 homicides had been occurring a week in Medellín (Alsema, 2010). According to Medellín's ombudsman, Jairo Heran, there were actually 86 homicides in Medellín in the first 10 days of January alone. The Minister dismissed these figures as exaggerated, but the 120 soldiers and 9,600 police officers sent as reinforcements to violent neighborhoods in major cities indicates serious concern from government officials (Mejia, 2010). In response to a risk

report about the successor groups prepared by the Early Warning System of the Ombudsman's Office, the Mayor's office rejected the report, stating that there was no armed conflict in the region, only criminal gangs engaging in criminal activity (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

In contrast to state's official claims of successful demobilization efforts, communities' experiences exemplify that little has changed. One woman recounted her personal tragic encounter with the "new" criminal gangs. Shortly after the demobilization process started, her son received a death threat. The family fled, but the group tracked them down, killed her son in front of her, and then shot at her and her little girl. She concluded " ...No authorities have responded and [the gang] was acting freely, and I said no more" (ibid., p65). A community leader summarized the issue:

We saw that the groups act with impunity, and that's what hurts...They are paramilitaries. They demobilized, but the demobilization was a worldwide publicity act. In reality, groups kept the same structure. They keep killing and exploiting the communities...The state does nothing to end these structures. They [paramilitary] assassinate community leaders, those who speak, they exploit the communities that work, the person that works. They exercise control over the territory with the justification that they are against the guerrillas, but they really are treating the communities as guerrillas, communities who have nothing to do with the national conflict... They do it to control territory, obtain wealth, and impose their agribusiness. They want to achieve a high economic level, but at the expense of blood, and the lives of communities. They terrorize communities so that they abandon their lands... The demobilization may have made the paramilitaries less visible, but paramilitary and military control under the same structure has continued. (ibid., 2010, p.71)

The fact that a ceasefire between drug lords, lead by community actors, immediately decreased the murder rate by half has made many Colombians question the success of the democratic security approach and the validity of statements made by their national leaders. Even more unsettling is the repeated reports of local police and government officials tolerating criminal gangs and even collaborating with them and their illicit activities (ibid.). One citizen stated that it was well known that the army or police are practically members of some of the armed groups. He recounted being interrogated by a group known as the Black Eagles, while the police silently watched only 20 meters away. There is currently an investigation involving the chief prosecutor of Medellín, the brother of Colombia's minister of interior, who is accused of extensive collaboration with successor groups. A specialized group of prosecutors was established in 2008 to handle

such cases, but they are so understaffed that investigations can drag on for years, leaving victims with no recourse for crimes against them and their perpetrators immune from consequences for their actions.

Education's untapped potential

Transformative and innovative approaches such as EN and Citizenship Education were developed by community members who understood that the policies and strategies created by political elites were not impacting their communities, nor producing positive change future generations. The positive impact these approaches had in some of Colombia's most isolated and problematic areas caught the attention of national policy makers and attempts were made to adopt them at the national level. In theory, taking these approaches to scale would have exposed more children to the benefits experienced by those at the local level. Unfortunately, fragmented implementation, inadequate training for teachers and community members, and waning political will have diluted the potential for replicating the success experienced by the initial bottom-up approaches.

Insufficient adherence and oversight of programming

Both Escuela Nueva and Aulas en Paz have demonstrated impressive results with students who are exposed to the intended design of the methodologies. However, evaluations of both have shown that these results diminish when full adherence to the strategies is compromised. Although the theory of the EN model has been widely distributed throughout Colombia, its practice has yet to be effectively integrated into the national system. A study conducted after the national expansion of EN discovered only two-thirds of EN schools had the recommended library and less than 34 percent of third graders and 47 percent of fifth graders were using their guidebooks in Spanish and mathematics. Another study comparing the core teaching methods of EN schools as compared with traditional schools revealed that there were no notable differences between the two (as cited in Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). Additionally, the flexible, adaptable nature of the initial EN design became more rigid and less effective when it was packaged for the national expansion. Although it is a much younger initiative, the Citizenship Competency Program has faced similar challenges. One evaluation of the program

has shown that positive results were diminished when implementers failed to include all the necessary components of the initial design (as cited in Chaux, 2009).

Inadequate teacher training

As stated in the McKinsey report, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 16). For both the Escuela Nueva approach and the Citizenship Competency Program, teacher training and support is perhaps the most crucial element to successful implementation. Teachers not only need the necessary materials, resources, and opportunities for growth and capacity building, they need to feel confident with the theory and practice of TE methods and be invested in their potential benefits for students. Furthermore, communities need to be exposed to the benefits of these new methods and their transformative potential. When EN was expanded, the training days and necessary material resources for teachers decreased. One study of a random sample of mathematics teachers in EN schools indicated that only 64 percent had completed all three of the required training workshops, with 12 percent lacking any training at all (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). As the integrity of the approach began to diminish, there were fewer demonstration schools for teachers-in-training to visit. In rural settings, teachers were committed to promoting leadership, collaboration and active citizenship through establishing close relationship to the community. When EN was transferred to more urban settings, teachers felt isolated and alienated from the community outside of the classroom (Upegui-Hernandez, 2008). Thus, an approach that was originally based on community participation was restricted to cultivating relationships and collaboration inside EN schools.

Inadequate investment in teacher training and community information-sharing has also affected efforts to implement the National Program of Citizenship Competencies. The standards were released before training programs were established, thus teachers did not know by what means they were supposed to obtain the new standards, nor did they feel they had been consulted in the decision-making process to establish the new standards (Espinosa & Patti, 2007). Ownership of the reform has also been lacking, as stakeholders have become acclimated to the inconsistent and underfunded nature of education policy in Colombia. The lack of training

and information provided to recipient schools and communities has further discouraged buy-in from program participants.

Inadequate support from the U.S. and Colombian governments

National education policy makers have demonstrated their recognition of the need to transform how and what Colombian children are taught, but they have yet to devote the adequate resources, support and advocacy necessary to ensure the implementation and sustainability of successful transformative approaches. The instability of national priorities, or rather the consistent prioritization of military expenditures, has resulted in decreased will, funding and support compounded by the high turnover of government posts and political support. Changing priorities of representatives from different political parties have contributed to little or no continuity or potential longevity for different education initiatives or legislation, which has left communities reluctant to take ownership of standards or procedures that would help ensure quality and sustainability (Espinosa & Patti, 2007). The education system is highly decentralized in Colombia, which shifts resource management and quality improvements for education to provincial levels. This means each school can dictate what and how curriculum is presented in its classrooms, as long as they follow the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education (Jaramillo & Mesa, 2009). The ministry can recommend, advocate for or even impose its preferred programming, but it is ultimately up to teachers and administrators to structure and implement the principles and methodologies. In theory, a decentralized system would allow for flexible teaching strategies to accommodate the different contexts throughout Colombia. However, as noted in the *Handbook for Decentralized Education Planning*, "...decentralization also calls for greater responsibilities for policy making and implementation monitoring at the central level, in particular, by the Ministry of Education" (UNESCO, 2005, p. viii). The inconsistent nature of the ministry's programming and related funding coupled with reliance on local implementers who have little or no training, resources, or the will to make the necessary changes have prevented potentially transformative programs from penetrating the deeply entrenched hierarchical education structure at the provincial level.

The steering group established for Escuela Nueva succeeded in providing a general organizational structure to support the program and its development. However, little formal administrative support was established for the supervision of teachers, with the exception of the fleeting high-level political backing of a presidential decree (Benveniste & McEwan, 2000). Escuela Nueva eventually lost political support within the Ministry of Education and the accompanying educational bureaucracy. This waning support is believed to have coincided with the state's shifting focus, from placating the rural populations who were believed to be fueling the violence to a militaristic strategy of defeating FARC, the paramilitaries and drug traffickers. Benveniste and McEwan (2000) assert that "as priorities shifted to reasserting state legitimacy, changing classroom practices came second to demonstrating a rural presence...the state emphasized the construction of schools, rather than the altering of core educational practices within them" (p. 106). Key members of the original steering group once included in the Ministry of Education were replaced, distancing the initiative from the ministry's support. It is the Escuela Nueva model is now being integrated in to urban schools at the national level using a top-down approach that lacks local input and is restricted by standardized testing and continued violence (Upegui-Hernández, 2008).

National education experts have recognized that the National Program for Citizenship Competencies could potentially transform Colombia's educational system, but many schools do not have the tools, support or resources to fully implement the program (Chaux, 2009). The Ministry of Education's heightened interest in the Citizenship Competency Program prompted it to organize national forums that included international researchers and teachers in various municipalities across Colombia. However, the desired long-term relationships between experts and Colombian teachers have proven difficult to cultivate and maintain due to the lack of adequate resources, coordination between government and non-government groups, and follow-up from government officials (Jaramillo & Mesa, 2009). There has also been a feeling of discontent among a large percentage of teachers who feel that yet another set of national priorities, which were developed by a select few, have been imposed upon them.

SECTION 3: KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Ending a conflict is a fool’s errand in self-contradiction...transforming conflict often includes thinking of, and building consensus around, ways that the conflict can be modified by...reducing human suffering and violence and addressing root causes of the conflict” (Adell, et. Al, 2009). Fighting what has long been viewed as a socio-economic conflict by military means has promoted violence as the preferred means for conflict resolution and consequently provided more incentive for many Colombian youth to take up arms or engage in illicit markets. The recent elections in Colombia presented a rare opportunity for a decisive split from Uribe’s long-running democratic security tactics. In the end, however, the previous Minister of Defense was elected, promising to continue the “progress” made via the former president’s security policies. Indeed, progress has been made in Colombia, but those truly responsible are the visionary leaders who have inspired non-violent approaches which have proven to transform some of the most pressing issues fueling the insurgency. Both the U.S. and Colombia have new administrations and new opportunities to transform Colombia’s conflict, but they must align their strategies and resources with the practices and programs already proven effective in improving the lives of young adults vulnerable to the impacts of the conflict. Based on the findings presented in this study, strategic decision-makers charged with addressing the conflict are encouraged to consider the following:

A Shift in Focus: A Conflict Transformation Approach

Finding

Those affecting Colombia’s strategic planning for addressing the conflict need to shift from a democratic security approach to a transformative one, utilizing programs that are effectively addressing systemic socio-economic issues fueling the conflict.

Recommendations

- U.S. funding and programming policies prioritize initiatives that target quality, transformative education, socio-economic development and enhanced citizenship
- Colombian government administration consults, collaborates and adequately resources transformative approaches at the appropriate regional, community and national levels to ensure growth and optimal impact
- Civil ministries, including Agriculture, Social Protection, Justice, Education, Family Welfare, Transportation and others, are integrated and incentivized to equally contribute to conflict transformation
- Public officials spend time in the most problematic neighborhoods to engage, empower and be accountable to those most affected by the conflict
- Policies and programming targeting conflict transformation are developed and implemented by community members most affected by the conflict

Support Existing Programming Proven Effective for Transformation

Finding

Escuela Nueva and the Aulas de Paz have proven to transform young Colombians' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, while the social communication approaches implemented in Medellín and Bogota have proven effective for transcending some of the cities' most pressing issues.

Recommendations

- Transformative education approaches are housed within the Ministry of Education and receive the sustained political will, funding and additional resources, particularly adequate teacher training capacities, needed for sustainability and maximum impact
- Social Communication Approaches are encouraged to strengthen citizenship and provide the physical, social and psychological space for people to participate in the decisions and policies that affect their lives

- Teachers, administrators, youth and their family members are consulted and integrated into decision-making and implementation processes

Broader Implications for a Conflict Transformation Approach

Although this study focuses specifically on the situation in Colombia, the findings do in fact have implications for other conflict-affected countries. Addressing conflicts through a “transformation” lens broadens strategic thinking beyond the constraints of a narrow military defeat and forces decision-makers, academics and affected parties to analyze the deeply entrenched issues perpetuating the conflict. This process is essential in any context, as it engages multiple actors spanning the social, cultural and political strata, dramatically increasing opportunities for enhanced collaboration and holistic problem-solving. The challenge lies in uprooting deeply entrenched structural injustices and reaching certain actors, specifically youth, that have been directly affected by the conflict, but excluded from participating in its transformation. The transformative programs presented in the study offer ways in which young and older community members can critically assess the underlying factors contributing to their community’s suffering and equip them with the knowledge, confidence, and expertise to transcend these issues. If national leaders adequately support this process, Colombia’s efforts could offer guidance for effective programming, while providing insight for lessons learned and possible improvements.

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