

## PRACTICE NOTE

## Youth &amp; Armed Groups in Colombia

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For the many years of Colombia's civil war, youth have been trying to find their way in complicated and dangerous situations. A central component of this is their relationship with armed groups, something that has evolved considerably over the past ten years. This practice note examines the context within which these connections are formed and the implications this has for self/social identity and meaningful resistance. The ideas in this practice note are based on consultations with young Colombians, particularly those displaced from 2000-2013. These sessions included art activities, focus groups and individual interviews. Art activities involved descriptive and expressive projects so that participants could explore their feelings and memories of situations and experiences. This provided a base for group discussions where youth exchanged information and debated issues. A total of 34 workshops were held over a twelve year period. These consultations revealed how war flows all over young people, touching every aspect of their identity. The boundaries between the personal and political no longer exist in today's civil wars, if indeed they ever truly did. Young people growing up inside Colombia's war understand this at a deep level. An acknowledgement of this pain – showing the connections between the personal and political dimensions of war – is, they would maintain, the basis for their personal healing as well as an important tool for the building of sustainable peace.

## The Language of War

Threats, blackmail, manipulation  
Deceit and false promises.

Enticing boys:  
Dreams of money

Dreams of overcoming their reality.  
A language of permanent threats,  
Keeping you on the run.

I manage your life  
I control your actions.

This poem was written by a young Colombian male from Soacha, a city located just outside Bogotá which is primarily made up of displaced people. The poem describes a world where human communication is defined by 'La Violencia,' the bitter 50 year Colombian civil war. Violence has permeated all aspects of the poet's life, and has been a major consideration in all his relationships and activities. Like many young people, he is struggling to create an identity that is not solely defined by his circumstances.

This practice note focuses on the situation of Colombian youth trying to find their way through complicated and dangerous situations. A central challenge is their relationship with armed groups, something that has evolved considerably over the past ten years.

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I examine the context in which these connections are formed, and the implications they have for the development of social identities and meaningful resistance. It is a complicated process in which dreams for peace must come to terms with a difficult reality.

The ideas in this practice note are based on consultations with displaced Colombian<sup>1</sup> youths at 34 workshops held between 2000 and 2013. The workshops were held in different parts of Colombia, including Barranquilla, Cauca (with an indigenous Nasa population), Choco (with an Afro-Colombian population), Ibaque, Medellin, Putumayo, Pereira, Santander, Soacha and Usme. The workshops included art activities, focus groups and individual interviews. Art activities included descriptive and expressive projects so that participants could explore their feelings and memories of personal experiences. These explorations provided a base for group discussions in which participating youth exchanged views and debated issues.

The consultations showed how war flows all over young people, affecting every aspect of their identity. Boundaries between the personal and the political do not exist in today's civil wars, if indeed they ever truly did. Young people growing up during Colombia's civil war have a deep understanding of this. They maintain that acknowledging the connection between the personal and political dimensions of civil war is the basis for their personal healing, and an important tool for the building of sustainable peace.

### **Overall Context: Child Protection and Civil Wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, introduced in 1989, emphasizes state and international obligations to protect children under the age of 18 years. Given its objective, it is somewhat ironic that as the convention was being introduced, civil wars were increasing in number and in their level of brutality. Young people were living 'inside' wars rather than apart from them, which often resulted in the forced recruitment of children into legal and illegal armed groups.

Under-aged soldiers are nothing new. In the past, their use was limited, as guns were heavy, and children are small. However, as cheap and lightweight rifles became more easily available in the late 1990s, ruthless commanders began to actively recruit children into their ranks. This practice only escalated with the increased incidence of civil wars. In fact, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, child soldiers became a major component of many armed conflicts.

According to the Watchlist 2004 report on Colombia, the principal recruiters of child soldiers were illegal armed groups such as the FARC, ELN and AUC:

The UN Secretary-General (S/2003/1053) approximates that 7,000 children are associated with illegal armed groups and an additional 7,000 are associated with urban militias. HRW estimates that over 7,400 children are in the FARC EP [The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] forces, including those in associated urban militias. At least 1,480 – or at minimum one third – of all UC-ELN's [National Liberation Army] fighters are children. Approximately 2,200 children under age 18 are in the AUC [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia] ranks. All of these are considered to be conservative estimates. The government no longer recruits or uses children as soldiers; however, the armed forces continue to use children as informants (Watchlist 2004).

According to a study by Natalie Springer, an expert on international law and human rights, the percentage of children in illegal armed groups in Colombia has increased since 2004. Her 2013 report, supported by over 500 interviews with former child soldiers, states that 40 per cent of the country's currently active guerrillas are children. She also maintains that 50 per cent of the criminal gangs that have emerged from the demobilized paramilitaries are youths under 18 years of age (Infosurhuy 2013).

For many child rights activists, an important issue is the level of a child's agency in these situations. What is the definition of meaningful choice in a civil war? In instances such as the conflict in Northern Uganda, it is clear that children were forcibly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army. In Colombia, however, these lines are blurred. For example, a 2005 UNICEF survey stated that approximately 80 per cent of child soldiers in Colombia claimed that they had voluntarily enlisted (Bjorkhaug 2010).

These issues must also take into account definitions of a child, the meaning of voluntary action and respect for individual decisions. Bjorkhaug highlights some of these factors as follows:

[C]hildren do not constitute a homogeneous group of passive victims, but rather one of vital agents – each one with their own choices shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances. The way in which the children are enrolled falls into a gray zone between voluntary and forced recruitment, with elements of forced circumstances and elements of voluntary actions (Bjorkhaug 2010).

### **An Overview of the Colombia Situation**

Colombia is a country of contradictions and extremes. A strong and creative human rights movement functions alongside high levels of violence and violations against the most basic of human freedoms. Colombia also has a youthful population, with 36.9 per cent being under 18 years of age.

Colombia's gross national income stands at US\$8,315 per capita (UNDP 2012), making it a middle income country. Inequalities are extreme: approximately 49.2 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line and ten per cent of the population earns about 46.1 per cent of the country's income (Bjorkhaug 2010).

Many young people have been displaced<sup>2</sup> by the war, and typically live in extreme

poverty. However, they are exposed to ostentatious displays of wealth, which are common among members of paramilitary groups. In fact, paramilitary groups have used these displays as recruiting tactics, enticing youths with offers of beautiful girlfriends, gold necklaces, cars and other signs of material success. Participants in discussion groups stated that these promises are often irresistible for displaced young people, particularly when they have just arrived from the countryside and are trying to establish an identity.

Many youths claim that there is little to distinguish legal and illegal armed groups, as both the police and paramilitary groups target young people. Youths fear the police and complain that they are always being harassed by them. Young journalists in Soacha were easily able to identify dangerous places, where both the FARC and paramilitary groups operate. They spoke of how the 'paras' would try to intimidate and control girls, and force boys to run errands for them. Other youths claimed that there are informal partnerships between the police and the paramilitaries, with the police assisting in the 'pick-up' of likely recruits. In both Usme and Soacha, young people have 'disappeared' with no action from the police, despite endless entreaties from their parents. Youths also speak of the constant monitoring of their actions by members of these groups. Even in towns such as Ibaqué, a fairly peaceful community, they describe incidents where acquaintances were grabbed by paramilitary motorcyclists patrolling the streets at night.

While Colombia's government recognizes that young people have been greatly affected by the civil war, the state has had limited success in addressing this issue. The government's demobilization program is a case in point. During this process, which occurred from 2003 until 2006, a total of 31,167 paramilitaries were formally demobilized. Only 391 minors participated, even though it was estimated that 20 per cent of paramilitary groups' members were youths (Microcon 2010).



**Figure 1:** My home before (left-hand image). My home now (right-hand image).

Colombia is a volatile world in which young people's situations are constantly changing. In the following section, a comparison is made between the socio-political environment of the early 2000s and that of 2010–11, as seen through the eyes of young people.

### Looking Back: Inside Young People's World in the Early 2000s<sup>3</sup>

In the early 2000s, I conducted a series of workshops with displaced children in Usme, a community outside Bogotá. Participants were asked to make drawings of their previous and current homes as a prelude to discussions about their adjustment to their new situations.

The pictures in **Figure 1** were made by an eight-year-old boy. The picture of his previous village life is idyllic. In contrast, his new home in Usme looks a lot like a prison.

While we were talking about his picture, he asked if I was new to the area. When I replied yes, he offered some advice: 'Best to close your eyes as much as possible, otherwise they will hurt from looking at all the ugliness around here. I often wear sunglasses; that helps too.'

This story shows how civil war infiltrates all aspects of life. On a survival level, it demonstrates a child's coping skills: the world is ugly, so one should limit one's interaction with it.

This attitude has consequences. Instead of being actively engaged with the world, one must distance one's self from it. Perhaps this is a small example, but it is part of the overall situation in Colombia where self-protection requires passivity and withdrawal.

In the workshops, displaced youth complained that the skills they had developed to avoid violence in their home villages were not much help in these new situations, where paramilitary groups imposed strict restrictions on their appearance and behavior. As one participant explained:

My friend and I spend all day on the street corner. That is what we used to do in our villages and that is what we like to do here. But you have to be careful. Last time they came and got me. It was because of an African hairstyle. They beat me in the head so much I had to go to the hospital – 15 stitches.

Participants also identified family life as a major casualty of war. Two themes were evident in their responses: fierce loyalty and a puzzled concern about what had happened to their parents. They repeatedly spoke of their fathers as being absent or "not themselves." While there were concerns about money, violence inside their homes was just

as important. They insisted that this was a function of being displaced people.

Whether the stark contrasts between home and displaced lives are true or the products of somewhat idealized memories, they translate into feelings of great loneliness. Instead of sheltering them from the war, their homes became mirrors of the violence. In their view, this was a terrible deal. They had left dangerous situations with promises of better security only to find that, in many ways, they had become more vulnerable:

When you get displaced, you change from a life of no problems to an unbalanced life with no border. So you get fragile in your thoughts and your feelings. You can lose your head, maybe do something that wouldn't be right, and that's not good for you.

You get to a stage when you see everyone as an enemy because they are forcing you to be a certain way. You don't know if you should fight against this, join them, or just be indifferent.

I asked workshop participants how youths joined armed groups. I wondered about the security protocols, and if they had to prove themselves. They laughed at my naivety, giving instructions as if providing directions to the local supermarket:

It's easy. The army will take you when you are a teenager and teach you how to kill. They tell you, 'Everyone is a guerilla, kill everyone.'

*And if a boy wants to join the guerrilla?*

Even easier! If you want to be part of that all you have to do is go up the road and there you are. You say, 'I want to be here.' They say, 'Fine,' and give you a gun and train you.

*And for the girls?*

They can join too. All they have to do is say, 'I want to stay. I can cook and wash the clothes.' So they tell you, 'Fine, you can stay.'

There appeared to be no one reason why young people decided to join armed groups. The young people that I consulted made it clear that it was their decision to join and that it was not imposed on them. Some common factors in these decisions included poverty, a desire for revenge, hopes of status and rebellion. The following quotes from workshops held between 2000 and 2004 illustrate these views:

A man killed my dad. So I would like that man's son to be killed so he knows what it feels like. And if he doesn't have a son, then a nephew. And if he doesn't have anybody who loves him, then he should be tortured.

Sometimes a boy wants a new experience, so he joins the guerrilla. He thinks that he will be more powerful and be able to dominate people. Some boys join the guerrilla for protection or because members of their family are with them. And they think they will have good food and be able to do what they want. But after they realize that it's not true or easy.

A lot of girls are escaping from horrible home situations, especially with their fathers. So if the girls go out with these guys from the paramilitary it gives them a sense of rebellion, of power. A guy with a gun. It is very common.

Youths who had enlisted with the FARC frequently explained their decision in terms of political commitments and family connections. They spoke of their admiration for the principles of equality that they believed the FARC stood for, as well as its claims to fight against corruption. Even if they

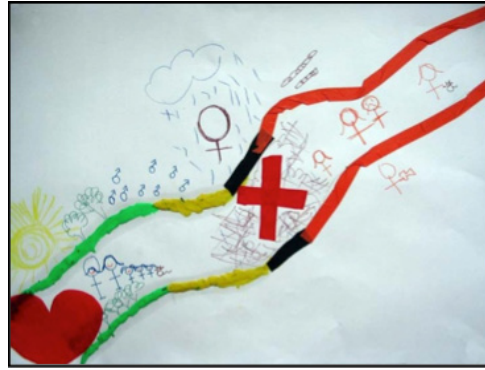




**Figure 2:** Black and White. You can see the river where I went to swim with friends. Why is it in black and white? That's how I saw things: what one learns is what gives color to one's life. Friends involve one 'in things.' One gets caught up and all this is because one has nothing more to do. To hold the weapon gives you strength. I never had the dream of being an astronaut or a pilot. I dreamed of having a rifle. But I wasn't born like this; circumstances lead me. But when you start to understand it, you think, 'What have I done? What am I doing here? Where am I going?' It is hard to see a way out. I fear that it's too late.

later became disillusioned, they admired what the FARC was supposed to stand for. Young people who chose the paramilitary were less forthcoming, often just saying that one thing led to another. Those who had been with the FARC frequently demonstrated a kind of superiority to youth who had been with the paramilitaries. This created an interesting dynamic at the project's workshops.

During workshops held in the early 2000s, the most commonly expressed motivation to become a child soldier was the need to survive, to get along. This contrasts somewhat with later workshops in which youths spoke of the need to make changes in their lives and to be actors rather than mere survivors. This is partly because of the opening up of political space in the country. This shift is also rooted in young people's lived experiences and their conscious efforts to make



**Figure 3:** Inside My Heart. My picture shows the movement in my life between love and death, between joy and sadness. In life there has been a lot of love but also a lot of sadness and loneliness. Death has touched me since I was very little. I learned to be a man among these troubles: death and love. Several persons close to me have died, they have fractured the dreamed-of path, but others have taught me love; to get up again, to recover myself again. There are parts of me that are very hard, but I am also sensitive. I know I don't want to die; I have several things that are clear for my life. I am light and that's where I'm going.

changes in their lives. These changes are primarily based on a commitment to non-violence, either by dissociating themselves from an armed group or by participating in community actions to promote a more peaceful way of life.

### Young People and Armed Groups in the Early 2010s

The artwork in **Figures 2, 3** and **4** was produced in workshops conducted in 2010.

These images and words portray many of the qualities and consequences of growing up in a world dominated by violence and the presence of armed groups. The boundaries between personal and military life are blurred. For those who feel overwhelmed by their environment, the capacity to be agents of their lives and to make decisions about what they want to do has limited meaning.



**Figure 4:** Water of Life. This represents what we've lived and what we can become. The road begins on the right side and then it joins the other. At the beginning there is a moment of silence, then it opens to two sources: on one hand there is destruction, slaughter, the dark side. On the other is the possibility of harmony, of a joyful community, where happiness can begin. Very few will be in contact and in balance with nature. The sacred place for us is where we purify ourselves, where an elder refreshes us. Because on the road one can be convinced and go to the dark side. But there is another road above, it turns and once more toward the river. The river represents the water of life. In life there are many options and many possible roads.



**Figure 5:** Public installation in Pereira.

Nevertheless, the youth activists that I met and worked with are struggling to define new ways of being. They increasingly see their homes and relationships as reflections

of the *machismo* norms embedded within armed groups; however, they understand that a life of violence is not the only option. Understanding that the norms and patterns of 'La Violencia' are imbedded within them, these youth activists speak of the need to transform their ways of being to set the stage for the possibility of peace. Central to the transformation is a reordering of gender relationships. As one workshop participant explained:

Relationships between us [males and females] have been fractured by suspicion and an undercurrent of violence. We need to work against this and establish bridges of connection if there is to be any hope for lasting peace.

They understand that their silence and passivity has allowed armed groups to gain control of their living situations and the direction of their lives. In their view, the best defence is to create individual and collective buffers against this world, to establish a resistance against the identities inscribed by the armed groups.

Above all they understand that the notion of choice has to be redefined. The idea that choice is an individual act divorced from the context in which it is made must be challenged. In order for it to be a true choice, that context has to be widened, and children must be given resources to fortify themselves against the false promises of the armed groups.

For these youth, the first step is to reveal the truth of their lives with armed groups, their homes and communities. To do this, they have used theatre, performance art, hip hop and street journalism. Young people explain their work and the approaches they have used below.

Theatre gives us a way to be listened to. It is quite risky to do a speech about what happened and who did it. You take a risk to be killed if you talk on TV or radio. But in theatre you can



**Figure 6:** Special installation that uses cement blocks to imitate gravestones and pay tribute to the young people who have died because of violence during the war.

do it, because it is called something artistic. The theatre we do is a cruel truth told in a strong way.

For me, Hip Hop is more than singing, more than painting or graffiti, though it can include that. I see it as an intellectual construction. It allows me to think about my future, using these tools. It allows me to find other young people and for us to share identities, to build relationships with others. Hip hop can be a tool for this kind of education, one that focuses on rights. This helps me to grow into a human being, to build possibilities in our community. To transform realities.

The photograph in **Figure 5** is of a public installation in Pereira. Female victims of violence created small wax statues to portray how their bodies have been hurt. The picture in **Figure 6** is of a special installation that uses cement blocks to imitate gravestones and pay tribute to the young people who have died because of violence during the war.

In describing the installation in Barranquilla, a participant said:

We stood in silence for one hour in the main plaza to commemorate our

dead. It is pretty scary doing this. Some people sympathize and even provide more names. But other people are watching us for other reasons.

In discussing the impact of violence on young people's lives, these young people are creating new relationships and increasing levels of agency in relation to the war. They are not naïve; they understand that direct confrontations with armed groups are likely to be more dangerous than productive. Instead, youth leaders usually work with their peers, helping them to make positive choices in their lives. They link this to a reordering of social relationships and the cultivation of a strong cultural identity that promotes links to collective identities rather than individual options.

This approach is expressed most forcibly by indigenous youth leaders in Northern Cauca, where there are high levels of youth recruitment. Indigenous youth leaders believe that this is partly due to the indigenous Nasa people's identity as warriors. Another issue is the erosion of the Nasa culture. In the absence of a cultural connection, they see young people floating aimlessly, making decisions for short-term gains.

Youth leaders believe that the solution is to strengthen young people's sense of belonging to the spirituality and collective values of the Nasa culture. They believe that this will provide an internal defence, one that can resist the entreaties of armed groups. They have begun a strong education program which includes the involvement of youths who have formerly been members of armed groups.

Indigenous culture is based on spirituality. Our ancestors ask us to care for our culture and nurture relationships between Mother Earth and people living on the earth. If we grow up inside this perspective, it becomes the basis for the realization of our rights as indigenous people.

They say that young people have to be a part of the capitalist system, to



give up their identity as a Nasa youth. Young people have the tools to change this, to make our society stronger.

This is a collective stance. Instead of speaking about individual experiences, it focuses on the agency of the youth as a group; as a force of resistance. This is an initiative taken by young people – it is not a protection being provided for them by professionals.

## Conclusions

The armed conflict in Colombia continues to evolve. Current peace processes offer hope that a lasting solution for this protracted war can be found. To date, most of the attention has been given to an analysis of macro level politics and the national economic and security structures. Less attention has been paid to an examination of changes at the community level. However, these are vitally important if a meaningful response and resistance to the country's war is to be established. Without this, the patterns of violence are unlikely to change.

Youths have played a vital role in Colombia's war, as actors, victims and witnesses. Young people's challenges to the prevailing culture are important as they raise critical questions about the value of civil defence strategies. As a youth participant in one of the project's workshops stated: 'We are working for the world we want rather than the one they are giving us.'

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Colombia has a massive displaced population, the largest in the world (UNHCR 2012), with approximately nine per cent of the population displaced. The actual percentage of displaced youths (in comparison to the overall population) who are recruited into armed groups has not been determined. However, areas with

high populations of displaced people are known to be major recruitment areas for armed groups.

- <sup>2</sup> The quotes provided in the following sections are taken from workshops with displaced youths. All participants agreed to be quoted, with the understanding that no one would be named and specific details would be removed to protect their anonymity. These workshops were conducted with youths from seven regions of the country.

- <sup>3</sup> This project was first imagined and led by Rayuela, a cultural organization based in Bogotá. Through the guidance of Ivan Torres, it was implemented by youth groups in several regions of the country.

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