

# Investing in Change: Education, Transitional Justice and Impact in the Colombian Peacebuilding Process

Invirtiendo en cambio: la educación, la justicia transicional, y el impacto en el proceso de paz colombiano

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**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Conceptualising education: The power to intervene, mobilise, transform. 2. Education and transformation in Colombia. Conclusion. References.

**Abstract:** Investment in educational initiatives as transitional or transformative mechanisms in societies trying to build peace is often limited by several assumptions. First, it is often held as that education is largely a tool of prevention, and that the impact of the initiatives cannot be measured. Second, children are considered only as the «future generation» who will «inherit» the society, reducing their value to their future potential and undermining their agency in the present. Third, since introducing sensitive issues into the formal education system is politically difficult and risks reopening old wounds, it is held that educational initiatives are dependent on, and thus secondary to, a sustained reconciliation or peacebuilding process. As a result of these assumptions, education is often shelved as a long-term, developmental issue in post-conflict societies, and does not benefit from the resources brought by the «peace dividend.» This article seeks to deconstruct these assumptions, and argue that educational initiatives in fact have an observable, measurable, transformative impact on individuals, groups and societies. If this impact is supported and sustained by economic and political investment, education can play a central role in peacebuilding and transformative initiatives.

**Keywords:** education, peace, transitional justice, Colombia.

**Resumen:** La inversión en iniciativas educativas como los mecanismos transnacionales o transformativos en sociedades inmersas en procesos de construcción

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de la paz está limitada por varios presupuestos. Primero, la educación es ante todo una herramienta preventiva, y no se puede medir el impacto de las iniciativas. Segundo, los niños y niñas se consideran solamente como «la generación futura» que heredará la sociedad, reduciendo su valor a su capacidad futura y subestimando así su agencia en el presente. Tercero, dado que la introducción de temas sensibles en el sistema de educación formal es políticamente compleja y puede abrir viejas heridas, se mantiene que las iniciativas educativas dependen de, y por ende son secundarias a, un proceso sostenido de reconciliación o construcción de la paz. Como resultado de tales presupuestos, la educación frecuentemente está representada como un asunto de desarrollo a largo plazo, y no se beneficia de los recursos que se disponen durante el «dividendo de paz.» Este artículo busca deconstruir estas presupuestos argumentando que las iniciativas educativas en realidad tienen un impacto observable, medible, y transformativo sobre los individuos, los grupos, y las sociedades. Si la inversión económica y política puede apoyar y sostener este impacto, la educación puede jugar un papel primordial en los procesos transformativos y de construcción de paz.

*Palabras clave:* educación, paz, justicia transicional, Colombia.

## Introduction

Transitional justice, which in its essence consists of a range of interventions designed to put society on the path of peace and democracy, has traditionally prioritised legal mechanisms and top-down institutional reforms. Such interventions are often intended to restore the rule of law and end impunity, with the trial and punishment of key perpetrators during the conflict considered the ultimate proof of impact. Although this vision often fails to materialise or is impractical for political reasons, it is assumed that such top-down reforms demonstrate an immediate and visible “change” from the past means that the increased financial and human resources received by societies when emerging from conflict, often referred to as the “peace dividend,” are invariably invested into this form of “transition.”

Education has traditionally been excluded from this paradigm of change. With the release of the Education and Transitional Justice report co-published by the International Centre for Transitional Justice and UNICEF, the synergies between education, transitional justice and peacebuilding are finally beginning to receive more attention (Ramírez Barat & Roger, 2015). However, whilst many governments pay lip service to education’s capacity to empower the youth, they rarely provides the funds or resources to mobilise this capacity. The primary beneficiaries of the “peace dividend” are seldom students or teachers, but lawyers, politicians, and international bureaucrats.

This prioritisation is founded upon several assumptions. First, it is often held as an unfortunate truth that the impact of educational initiatives cannot be measured. This is because education is considered purely as a preventative measure for future conflict, and not a remedy to past conflict. It would follow that any impact would only be realised in the long-term, and even then, it would be difficult to measure this impact without resorting to the tenuous “if not for the initiative” conjecture. As a result, resources are instead invested in other initiatives that are considered to bring immediate, observable, measurable “change.” Second, this assumption is reinforced by the characterisation of children, presumed to be the key recipients of education, as the “future generation” who will “inherit” the society left by the transitional justice process. This view reduces children to their future potential and undermines their agency in the present, again relegating education as a long-term, albeit important issue. Third, since introducing sensitive issues into the formal education system is politically difficult and risks reopening old wounds, it is held that educational initiatives are dependent on, and thus secondary to, a sustained reconciliation or peacebuilding process. As a result of these

assumptions, education is often shelved as a long-term, developmental issue in post-conflict societies, and does not benefit from the resources brought by the “peace dividend.”

This article seeks to demonstrate the fallacy of these assumptions. It will also argue that educational initiatives can have a transformative impact on individuals, communities and societies. They are therefore essential to consolidating a sustainable peace, “localising” transitional justice, and constructing a culture of human rights indispensable to guarantees of non-repetition. First, it will provide a theoretical conceptualisation of how educational initiatives can have an impact in societies characterised by high levels of conflict. Second, it will demonstrate this impact in practice using the examples of two educational initiatives in Colombia, a society currently engaged in a peace-building process after five decades of armed conflict between the State, guerrillas of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), right-wing paramilitaries, and various other illegal armed groups. These cases will demonstrate the transformative impact of educational initiatives, and the need for governments, civil society organisations, and individuals to invest in education as a tool for change.

## 1. Conceptualising education: The power to intervene, mobilise, transform

The relationship between formal education and wider society is essential to understanding education’s transformative capacity. What is taught and learnt at school often mirrors and transmits the values, attitudes and beliefs prevalent in society at the time. More specifically, schools themselves can be identified as microcosms of democratic systems, where student-student and student-teacher relationships emulate citizen-citizen and citizen-state relationships. The formal education system thus forms the moral framework of society, and ensures the replication of this framework into the future.

Where these values are antithetical to cooperation, peace, and human rights, education can contribute to conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). This is the case where the right to available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable education is not respected. Where availability or access to education is a problem, the absence of a teacher translates to the absence of the State, creating a vacuum of influence and support often filled by illegal armed actors. Many scholars have argued that combatants are often predominantly young males who have not received an education, and are easily manipulated by propaganda and the allure of taking up arms (INEE, 2013: 7). By neglecting rural areas, or failing to invest in infrastructure and

access to schools, states also permit an exclusive education system which exacerbates grievances leading to conflict, including poverty, inequality, and division. Furthermore, education considered “unacceptable” by human rights standards, such as curricula that exclude or vilify a certain group, or simply “privilege the history, culture, religion and language of one culture over another,” (INEE, 2013: 6) transmits division and discrimination to children. Violence in schools also reinforces a culture of conflict, particularly where authoritarian pedagogy and corporal punishment are utilised, where bullying is tolerated, or where sexual harassment goes unpunished. The failure of the State to take a rights-based approach to education can therefore be identified as a structural cause underpinning conflict. Given that conflict itself violates the right to education, societies can find themselves caught in a vicious cycle described as a “conflict trap” if the right to education is not addressed (Collier, 2003).

Mary Joy Pigozzi has argued that conflict can provoke “crisis situations,” which catalyse change and “provide an opportunity for transforming education” (Pigozzi, 1999: 4). However, when the State engages in such a process, it is often guided by an impulse, common to various transitional justice processes, to guarantee security and shut down spaces of potential conflict. This can compromise a rights-based approach to education. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, schools were segregated under the “two schools one roof” system to minimise contact between children of different ethnic groups, which was considered a threat to peace in the country. Although this was only supposed to be a temporary measure, the failure to introduce initiatives for desegregation resulted in the consolidation of this divisive system of education. Consequently, children still have little contact with children from other ethnic groups, and learn histories that promote nationalism, derogatory stereotypes and vilification of the “other.” This has undermined reconciliation processes and sustainable peacebuilding, as demonstrated by the violent resistance from parents and communities to attempts at desegregation.

The example of Bosnia thus demonstrates that education as the “moral framework” moulded after conflict can ossify over time, causing the values and attitudes it transmits to harden into the core of social relations, national identity, and culture. If basic principles such as non-discrimination, the right to human dignity, democratic participation and the right to education are not included in this core, the education system is likely to transmit and perpetuate division, discrimination, and violence. This makes future outbreak of conflict more likely, returning society to the “conflict trap.”

Given the inherently divisive nature of conflict, societies emerging from conflict are often characterised by mistrust, segregation, and negative

stereotypes of the “other.” To contribute to sustainable building, education must therefore cease to be a passive receptor and transmitter of societal values, and instead must positively intervene to challenge and transform such a culture. There are a number of mechanisms capable of creating this intervention, including historical memory projects, promotion of human rights in schools through reform of the curriculum and school policies, and initiatives such as teacher training directed towards encouraging critical thinking and democratic debate among learner. Given the high visibility of schools in the local community, such mechanisms are capable of raising awareness about the conflict and victims, mobilising citizens to engage with the peace process and identify themselves as agents of change, and building the critical mass necessary to sustain transformation. This impact is often immediately observable, measurable, and suitable for qualitative and quantitative analysis. It also attests to value of children as active agents of change in the present. Finally, the participatory methodologies necessary to encourage critical thinking also give initiatives a bottom-up dimension that makes them more locally relevant, and less politically sensitive to introduce.

In short, the aforementioned assumptions about investment in education are undermined by their preoccupation with its “long-term” objectives, and their failure to consider the *procedural aspect* of introducing the initiatives, and the impact that it has. The following section will analyse examples of such initiatives in the Colombian context, demonstrating their transformative impact on children, teachers, and wider society.

## 2. Education and transformation in Colombia

The Colombian conflict has several characteristics that make it necessary to have a bottom-up, localised approach to transformation, including educational initiatives. First, it is the world’s longest running internal armed conflict, going back over five decades to 1958 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013: 20). Any peace-building process therefore requires a genuinely participatory process mobilised from the bottom-up to recognise the deep structural roots of violence. Second, the conflict has had a distinctly regionalised impact, with large urban centres like Bogotá experiencing conflict very differently to smaller cities, surrounding “*comunas*,” (slums) and the countryside. Peacebuilding must therefore be localised to remain relevant. Third, since the Colombian government has been democratically elected throughout the conflict, “transition” in the classic sense of regime-change is not a relevant mechanism for change. The locus of change is shifted from elite to everyday spaces, and democratisation is understood in

terms of empowering citizens as active agents in society, rather than merely political reform. Finally, the Colombian conflict has disproportionately affected children, and has involved violation of the right to education as a cause and consequence of violence. It follows that children are stakeholders in any peacebuilding initiatives, and that the right to education must be a central tenet of any transformative process.

This section will demonstrate that educational initiatives have had a transformative impact in the Colombian peacebuilding process. The information for this section was compiled predominantly from a series of face-to-face interviews conducted in the Colombian cities of Bogotá and Barrancabermeja in May 2015. Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders including adults, young people, children, government representatives, NGO workers, teachers, and local civil society leaders.<sup>1</sup> The interviewees were selected for their direct experience participating with educational initiatives that contribute to transformative justice.

Two principle case studies have been selected for analysis. These cases demonstrate how educational initiatives can be strategically organised to maximise impact. Clearly, limiting analysis to two case studies has the drawback of omitting information from various other experiences that also have a transformative impact. The cases have been chosen, however, as for their different approaches and the different contexts in which they were implemented, demonstrating the flexibility of education. The first received its impulse primarily from a national initiative led by a State-affiliated organisation, and uses examples from schools in middle class neighbourhoods of Bogotá less exposed to open conflict. The second derived from local initiatives organised on a regional level by civil society, and focuses on peacebuilding in an area of high conflict. It should not be inferred from this distinction that the initiatives function exclusively in these spaces; on the contrary, it will be argued that their ability to integrate different levels of society contributes towards visibility, participation, sustainability and coherence.

## 2.1. *The significance of the Havana peace process and “peace dividend”*

With the announcement in October that the Colombian government and the FARC hope to conclude peace negotiations within six months, an agreement to end the fifty year conflict is tantalisingly close. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated by the author.

this prospect, those I interviewed during my visit shared the opinion that an agreement between the government and the FARC would have little impact if is not supported by local initiatives. Many stressed distrust of elite politicians and lawyers, or emphasised the diverse armed actors excluded from the negotiations, the persistence of structural causes such as poverty, inequality and state abandonment, and the prevalence of violence in everyday life, at school, and in the home. Without addressing these issues, peace would remain an abstract political concept with little tangible benefit for ordinary people.

Nevertheless, an agreement provides a platform for transformative initiatives. Colombia President Juan Manuel Santos has spoken of the “peace dividend” he expects the agreement to bring, referring to the extra financial resources made available by reducing military spending once an agreement is reached.<sup>2</sup> This dividend is complemented by increased investment from foreign corporations following improved regional stability, the absorption of land and resources held by the FARC and other illegal groups into the legal economy, and money invested by international non-government and government organisations to support the peace process. In short, the conclusion of the peace agreements will provide the Colombian government with significant extra resources to invest in the country. Where this money is invested is key to the impact and sustainability of the agreement.

Despite their reservations about the official peace process, stakeholders engaged in the defence of human rights stressed that the Havana negotiations were essential in opening the space and stimulating dialogue about peace, victims, and memory. Under the previous Uribe administration, the politics of “señalamiento” (stigmatisation) of human rights defenders and promotion of military “National Security” policies limited freedom of expression by associating human rights with the guerrilla, making them highly politically sensitive and dangerous to discuss. The new government’s acknowledgement of the state of armed conflict and commitment to peace and human rights, demonstrated by the negotiations in Havana, provide official recognition of the importance of such processes, reducing stigmatisation and enhancing security. Recognition of human rights has also contributed to increased government investment in civil society organisations, which under Uribe was almost non-existent.<sup>3</sup> Shifting official

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<sup>2</sup> El Espectador, *Paz en Colombia dará “dividendos” económicos, sociales y ambientales: Santos*, (25/09/2015), Retrieved online at <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/paz-colombia-dara-dividendos-economicos-sociales-y-ambi-articulo-588655> on 08/12/2015.

<sup>3</sup> Informal conversation with Government Representative, Bogotá, May 2015.



rhetoric from focus on war to peace has thus provided the political and economic support necessary to make educational initiatives possible, opening the space for transformation.

Furthermore, rather than diluting interest in peace, questioning the impact of the peace agreement often stimulated a sense of civic duty to participate in the peacebuilding process. One 15 year old boy, a victim of forced displacement from the North Santander region, captured the sentiment, arguing that “peace doesn’t consist only of an agreement, of something from high society. Peace begins with dialogue from every person... everyone has to put their grain of sand.”<sup>4</sup> Other young people identified themselves as the “generation of peace,” acknowledging their responsibility to turn a political concept into reality. As one interviewee summarised, “this is a crucial moment for Colombia to get answers, so we want to move, to guarantee, to offer alternatives.”<sup>5</sup> This momentum is also visible in schools, with one teacher explaining that the issue “has greatly stimulated the class, and has made the students put forward their opinions, take more interest in what is happening, ask lots of questions.”<sup>6</sup> It could therefore be conceived that an official process permits and stimulates debate and interest in human rights, contributing not only financial resources, but in the form of increased enthusiasm and commitment to peace, human resources too. By investing in educational initiatives, it will be argued that the momentum behind peace stimulated by the agreement be sustained and multiplied, building a critical mass to support peacebuilding from the bottom up, and supporting a genuine transformation in the country.

#### CASE 1: THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL MEMORY

Engaging citizens in debate and self-reflection is thus a foundation of any bottom-up peacebuilding process, and of reparation packages including genuine guarantees of non-repetition and means of satisfaction for victims. The State has recognised this by creating the “National Centre for Historical Memory,” (CNMH), as part of the 2011 Victim’s Law outlining reparations for victims of the conflict. The Centre is responsible for the recovery and construction of national memory of the conflict, which has been pursued primarily through the documentation and reporting of

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with 14 year old boy, Barrio Las Cruces, Bogotá, 10/05/2015.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ms. Jaramillo, Rosario. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Bogotá, 06/05/2015.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Ms. Duran, Ana. Teacher, Bogotá, 14/05/2015.

massacres, mass displacements, and other major human rights abuses. The reports produced by the CNMH contribute towards breaking the silence imposed by the perpetrators of human rights violations. However, their impact on society is limited, since as Maria Rocha of the CNMH states:

“these reports, if they remain on the bookshelves in libraries, if they are only read by historians, anthropologists and political scientists, in reality we would not be contributing to non-repetition. We need to turn these academic bricks into pedagogical tools.”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, to extend the reach and impact of the reports, they must engage learners in the examination of conflict.

Many interviewees identified schools as the most important space to carry out this process. When interviewees were asked why schools were appropriate spaces for discussion about the conflict, they stressed the importance of the classroom as a space for identity and culture formation. Pre-empting the counter-argument that the conflict and human rights are too politically sensitive to be discussed in schools, many interviewees pointed out that children are already exposed to the conflict in informal spheres, such as with family and from the media. These sources often give a selective interpretation, communicated in an authoritarian “matter-of-fact” manner or without permitting debate (López de la Roche, 2003: 99). The “cost of inaction” is clear; conceding the space for debate about the conflict to the media and the home risks ignoring victims, feeds pedagogies of violence and perpetuates conflict.

A representative of the Centre for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá also stressed the historical role of education in perpetuating conflict, arguing that historically, schools “have been the place of “forgetting” (olvido), the imposition of impunity, of silence in the face of what is happening.”<sup>8</sup> Silence was also imposed by armed actors, particularly against victims and children, as a weapon of terror, as demonstrated by the threat used as a title of a 2003 Human Rights Watch report, “You’ll learn not to cry” (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Thus, whilst discussing conflict and human rights in schools is inherently political, so too is silence and “olvido,” and in a way conducive to violence. Given this reality, the formal educational sphere should avail of the opportunity to create a peaceful space for collaborative learning, democratic debate, and promotion of a

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ms. Rocha, Maria Andrea. Centro de Memoria Histórica, Bogotá, 05/05/2015.

<sup>8</sup> Researcher. Centro de Memoria y Reconciliación, Bogotá, 15/05/2015.

heterogeneous narrative of conflict that does not stigmatise, discriminate, or exclude the “other.”

In this sense, the pedagogical approach is essential, since the purpose is not for teachers to instruct learners in “knowledge,” but to encourage the development of competencies and respect for peace and diversity. Again, this mirrors the State’s relationship with its citizens, since democracy implies the existence of an active and critical citizenry, not a passive recipient of unbalanced narrative. Building citizen’s capacities to challenge these narratives is also essential to peacebuilding, given that absolutist narratives that do not permit debate or deviation have historically contributed to violence, whether in the case of religious extremism, fascism or communism. As Marco Fidel Vargas, a representative of the *Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular* (CINEP) argues:

“the war is a war of perceptions, of people who have fundamental, immovable truths... as they are absolute, they consider that they have to relate to everybody else in a violent manner. Changing this mentality through education is fundamental.”<sup>9</sup>

Education can achieve this by training learners to challenge extremist narratives that incite a call to arms, and by promoting a “pedagogy of peace” over the “pedagogy of violence” historically favoured as a tool of problem solving where ideas clash in Colombia.

However, as one teacher from a secondary school north of Bogotá pointed out, the CNMH reports themselves have limited value for teachers in schools, since

“The reports are very academic and not very pedagogical. It’s very difficult for professors to work with these reports in the classroom. Neither the language nor the format invites the students to work...”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, to mobilise the transformative and reparatory capacity of the reports, they must be transformed pedagogically, and introduced into the classroom. The CNMH has undertaken this challenge with the *Caja de Herramientas* programme, which seeks to assemble a “toolbox” of pedagogical approaches to facilitate teaching about the conflict. This toolbox seeks to make conflict-education sensitive to the local context and feasible to teach in regions of conflict, considering the need to balance promotion

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ms. Duran, Ana. Teacher, Bogotá, 14/05/2015.

of memory and “Nunca Más” (Never Again) principles with the “do no harm” principle and the risk of re-traumatisation or attack.

Promoting a participatory approach is essential to this endeavour. This is achieved in part through the use of primary resources in classrooms, including press cuttings, extracts from laws, opinions of politicians, and victims’ testimony.<sup>11</sup> From these sources, students are invited to debate and form their own opinion, rather than receiving a pre-constructed “official” version of events. This encourages student participation and develops critical thinking skills, teaching students to question and analyse information they receive from the media and other informal sources. It also develops democratic debate and communication skills, and permits a heterogeneous, dynamic narrative of conflict in place of an exclusive “official history.”

The variety of methods and pedagogical approaches in the toolbox allows for the lessons to be localised, and recognises the different regional experiences of the conflict. It is also appropriate to acknowledge the sensitivity of the subject matter, and assuages teachers’ fears about raising sensitive issues, being criticised by parents, or traumatising learners. As Rocha explains,

“In the case of El Salado, you don’t need to work with an eight year old child about the massacre, but you can run workshops about stigmatisation. You don’t have to go into detail about the cruelty of what happened, but you can discuss what caused it, so that from there you can encourage non-repetition.”<sup>12</sup>

Such a flexible pedagogical approach permits a variety of teaching styles and possible approaches to the conflict, giving teachers the freedom to use the method they consider appropriate for the local context, target group, and their professional capacity. Consequently, the toolbox has been well received by teachers, who have not complained of lack of training or fear of discussing the conflict.<sup>13</sup> Finally this bottom-up dimension provides the initiative with a degree of independence from political processes, making it more difficult to calumniate or obstruct from above. The toolbox is thus designed to be sustainable and practical, whilst simultaneously promoting multiple voices and a participatory approach to learning.

Whilst the assembly of the toolbox is coordinated predominantly on a national level, regional and local processes are also fundamental. This is necessary in order that the process of assembling the toolbox, as well as its

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

content and delivery, encourages local participation and is context sensitive. The assembly process therefore seeks to “systematise” local experiences of conflict education by integrating the initiatives into the toolbox. It is from these local initiatives that the impact of educational initiatives targeted at transformation and peacebuilding can be truly observed, documented, and evaluated.

For example, professor Ana Duran, from the Colegio Campoalegre secondary school in the north of Bogotá, took her students to El Salado, the site of the massacre of sixty people over five days in 2000, which led to the displacement of the entire village.<sup>14</sup> Literature on visiting sites of memory, many of which are based on the Holocaust Museum at the Auschwitz concentration camp, emphasises the potential for such visits to encourage transformation and promote “Nunca Más” attitudes, but warns of the danger that such spaces become marketised and “consumed” as sites of “thanatourism” (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015: 3). Actively engaging with the space and, where possible, the survivors, is identified as a means of avoiding voyeurism and commodification (Cowan & Maitles, 2011: 166).

Accordingly, the students in El Salado lived for a week with the local returned population, conducting interviews, visiting the educational facilities, and learning about the agricultural work carried out by locals in the fields. Duran explained the importance of the trip by arguing that:

“For me it was very important to take them to El Salado because there is a connection with their guides, they are impacted by emotions and not simply the rationality that dominates in some classes, and they live the experience of what happened up close.”<sup>15</sup>

This personal experience living and working with children from a part of the country with a radically different historical and cultural context impacted the students greatly. One effect was to “humanise” and dignify the “other” in the eyes of the students. Duran explained how students came to realise that “the victims are people, farmers, students; they have the same desires, aspirations, dreams as themselves. They recognised them as people, they lack opportunity, they had to suffer something very tragic, but with spirit and desire they can move forward.”<sup>16</sup> Such exchanges therefore promote the agency of students and “victims” alike, deconstructing the negative stereotypes associated with victimhood.

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<sup>14</sup> The massacre was recognised by the CNMH as an “emblematic case” of the Colombian conflict with the report “La masacre de El Salado: esa guerra no era nuestra” (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ms. Duran, Ana. Teacher, Bogotá, 14/05/2015.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The element of exchange between students from different backgrounds was fundamental to the transformative impact of the trip. This is consistent with the “contact thesis,” which states that social exposure to the “other” and interpersonal contact is a prerequisite for the deconstruction of prejudice and stereotypes, and the formation of tolerance, trust, and understanding (Natalya, 2010: 350). Encouraging exchange is therefore capable of transforming Colombian context of “cognitive segregation,” where students in urban regions like Bogotá students consider the conflict and rural populations as distant and largely irrelevant to their lives. The reaction of the students demonstrates this transformation:

“there was a very deep questioning, firstly for why did I not realise? Why did the media give us one-sided information? Why didn’t I find out? And afterwards, what can we do? What I can do to avoid this? How can we get out of this cycle?” (Natalya, 2010: 350)

The trip thus developed the students’ critical thinking skills, their understanding of the conflict in the national context, and their agency as citizens.

Following this “conscientisation,” feedback from the trip was overwhelmingly positive, with many students pursuing further study of the El Salado case, and students supporting another exchange bringing a student from El Salado to the college in Bogotá. Despite initial concerns before the trip, feedback from parents was also positive, with many explaining that the trip had encouraged conversation and debate in the home, integrating parents into the learning experience and multiplying the impact of the initiative. The El Salado trip is therefore an important example of how local educational initiatives can encourage understanding of the conflict and victims, thus transforming identity and mobilising support for peace.

Even within urban cities like Bogotá, new communities formed predominantly from displaced families remain segregated, on a physical and cognitive level, from the urban centre. As Mónica Álvarez explained, “the children from the north of Bogotá don’t recognise the other side of the city.”<sup>17</sup> In some cases, resources might not be available to facilitate student exchanges or site visits, and other forms of facilitating “contact” must be considered. Much of the literature on collective memory and nation-building identifies museums as sites capable of providing this exposure (Maceira, 2012). Another initiative supported by the CNMH that has taken this into account is the *Museos Escolares de Memoria* (MEMO)

<sup>17</sup> Interview with researcher. Centro de Memoria y Reconciliación, Bogotá, 15/05/2015.

project. Like other museums of memory, this project pursues the objective of “promoting the elaboration of the past to convert it in the pivot of social debate for reconciliation and the construction of the present and the future” (Maceira, 2012: 75). By promoting agency and critical thinking, this project has also had an observable impact on the participants.

The project involved asking students to speak with friends and family and find an object that evoked a memory of conflict.<sup>18</sup> This was done with students from two schools in Bogotá: Los Nogales, a private, bilingual college in the north of the city and considered one of the most elite educational institutions in Bogotá, and La Giralda, in the *barrio* of *Las Cruces*, located in the south of Bogotá, with a high internally displaced person (IDP) population and associated with high levels of poverty, crime and drug abuse. The students interviewed the owners of the objects and then connected the objects with the testimony, alongside a quantitative section entitled “modality of violence,” which contains statistics that contextualise the testimony in the wider conflict. This connection of the object, testimony and data encourages learners to understand how multiple individual narratives can fit into a broader narrative of conflict, makes the conflict tangible by exploring it on the level of people’s everyday lives, and appeals to emotional values that cut across politics and promote a unified, human opposition to conflict.

The various objects were then collected together to form a “Museum of Memory,” presented at the Colombian Book Festival in April 2015. An example of an object was a toy plane accompanied by the words:

“I have a toy plane that helps me remember him. They gave it to my brother in Christmas 2002. It was his favourite toy... it was the only thing I brought when I arrived in Bogotá, and the only thing I had left of my brother before they murdered him” (MEMO, 2015).

The object is accompanied by facts and statistics relating to internal displacement and assassinations in Colombia. The objects thus become “legacies condensed in stories” which “seek to be heterogenous and divergent but whose central values are not negotiable” (Maceira, 2012: 88). These “central values,” of human dignity and suffering socialise the pain of conflict, and weave the separate testimonies into a collective narrative. They also encourage student agency, as demonstrated by the positive reactions of the students to the project, with one girl commenting that

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mr. Charria, Arturo. Teacher, Bogotá, 14/05/2015.

“it’s very important that these museums are formed in a scholarly environment so that children realise that peace is not only constructed sat at the negotiating table in Havana or by important or powerful politicians... but can begin to be constructed from things as simple as memory and recognition of victims” (MEMO, 2015).

Similar projects are to be integrated into a “Museo de la Memoria” mandated by Article 148 of the 2011 Victims Law and assembled by the CNMH. Recovering and publicising testimony is thus considered a prerequisite to an education about the conflict that dignifies victims and facilitates the *tejido* (*weaving*) of a narrative that integrates marginalised groups with the “elite” centre considered more removed from the conflict.

In both the aforementioned projects, a pedagogical approach encouraging student participation is fundamental. Promoting student participation encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, and to become “gestores de paz” (agents of peace) (El Espectador, 2015). The CNMH explained in their analysis of the MEMO project:

“From the classroom the students construct historical memory involving teachers, students, friends and family, ensuring that reflection over the armed conflict unfolds from the textbooks and permeates the everyday lives of the participants. In this way, the students learn the armed conflict from the impact it has inflicted on the civilian population, and they become agents of peace...” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015).

This idea of students as “historical agents” was also identified by Ana Duran as key to the El Salado Project, stating that “a principle that we have in my class is that those who study the conflict are historical agents, they are responsible for the opinions they take.”<sup>19</sup> By participating actively in the recovery and construction of memory and by directing their own learning process, these pedagogical approaches invert the traditional educational model, where information is delivered from above to below, from teacher (and often by extension, society) to student. This participation and the shared sense of agency in the construction of memory and pursuit of peace could also serve as the “common thread” that unites the various educational initiatives across the country (Sarmiento, 2011: 33). This is fundamental given the regional or local focus of many of the initiatives, and the risk that such an approach causes the conflict narrative to fragment, thus perpetuating division and conflict.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Ms. Duran, Ana. Teacher, Bogotá, 14/05/2015.



In summary, promoting participatory methodologies in educational initiatives can expose the fallacy of the various assumptions limiting investment. First, it opens the space for politically sensitive topics to be introduced into the classroom, given that the approach is not for teachers to “hand down” debateable or controversial “facts,” but that students engage in their own debate and investigation. It also encourages approaching these issues with values that cut across rival political groups, such as human emotion, experience, or anecdotes, which humanises victims and stimulates desire for peace. Furthermore, the process of engaging with these methodologies has a demonstrable impact, on participants’ critical thinking skills, understanding of victims, and consideration of their agency in society. Given that the absence of such factors contributes to conflict, it follows that by promoting them, educational initiatives make a demonstrable impact to peacebuilding.

#### CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The most significant challenge identified by teachers and NGO workers to the systematisation of such initiatives across the country is the *subvaloración* (undervaluing) of education. Despite the acknowledgement of many politicians that education is important for peace and development, Vargas argued that in practice:

“The sphere of education and pedagogy is a suppressed sphere... it is an undervalued knowledge, a dominated knowledge... the educator knows that professionally they are discriminated against, and the discrimination is in their salary.”<sup>20</sup>

The poor salaries received by Colombian teachers reflect a wider lack of investment in education and teacher training. The injustice created by this *subvaloración* was manifested in a strike in April 2015 involving 300,000 primary and secondary school teachers, supported by 1,500 students and parents in the Plaza Bolívar on the 5th of May (Terra Noticias, 2015). As one teacher told me, “we feel undervalued... they talk about education for peace, but still they invest more in war.”<sup>21</sup> This lack of investment reduces the quality of public education, and limits the professional capacity of teachers to support educational initiatives targeted at transformation.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

<sup>21</sup> Informal Conversation with Teacher and FECODE member, Plaza Bolívar, Bogotá, 05/05/2015.

Lack of investment also creates huge inequalities between private and public education, reinforcing exclusion and segregation so severe that it has been described as an “educational apartheid” (Villegas, 2010). If educational initiatives fail to bridge these divisions, the transformative capacity is limited, since as Vargas explains, in some regions “there is no exchange - they speak of citizenship, but citizenship between themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, segregation leaves children in marginalised spaces, like teachers, feeling undervalued and ignored by the State. One fifteen year-old girl from the barrio *Las Cruces*, a highly stigmatised neighbourhood with a high IDP population situated just a twenty minute walk above the *Plaza Bolívar* and Colombian Congress, visited the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva to represent Colombian children. After congratulating her on this responsibility, her response was revealing:

“Thank you, but what to me seems incredible is that we have the government right here next door. That we had to go to Switzerland... because they don’t listen to us here, that we had to go all the way there to tell our story, when here is the nucleus where it happened.”<sup>23</sup>

Inequality in the educational system and exclusion of “peripheral” groups thus limits the transformative effect of initiatives by reducing bridging capital between groups, “invisibilising” the victims of conflict, and perpetuating segregation incoherent with the core values of peace, human rights and memory.

Finally, there is a risk that if discussion of the conflict is introduced into a schools in a way that does not give a voice to victims or engage students, it could be ineffective or counterproductive. For example, on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, the Colombian government passed the *Ley Cátedra de Paz* (The Podium of Peace Law) to make the teaching of the conflict obligatory in schools (Colombian Ministry of Education Press Release, 2015). However, as Charria points out, the conflict is to be taught within the Basic Standards of Teaching Social Sciences, designed in 2004 when speaking of victims, human rights and peace was still politically suppressed. Consequently, standards applicable to teachers such as “I explain the origins of the guerrilla, paramilitaries, and drug trafficking groups” prioritise “the view of the perpetrator, hiding the impact on civil society” (Charria, 2015a). Charria has also criticised text books for considering the conflict “in a superficial and decontextualised way, which could explain why Colombians know so little about our reality” (Charria, 2015b). Victims are largely invisible,

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with 15 year old girl, Barrio Las Cruces, Bogotá, 10/05/2015.

or appear only as “shadows and spectators” in a narrative dominated by armed actors, and framed as an “inevitable war” without social or political origins (Charria, 2015b). The law has also been criticised for failing to consult with teachers, lacking regulation, and taking a legal approach to a pedagogical issue, overlooking the importance of teacher training and guidance (Villa, 2015). There is a risk that without investing in this training and reforming the content to prioritise victims, new educational initiatives fail to challenge the traditional narrative, and have a minimal transformative impact, or are even counterproductive.

There remains, therefore, a chasm between rhetoric and practice regarding the role of the Colombian state in education and peace. It is thus essential that resources obtained from the “peace dividend” are invested in the education system and in teacher training, and directed towards making the system inclusive and human rights friendly. This investment can sustain and scale-up the impact of local initiatives, mobilising a critical mass behind peace, and stimulating the peacebuilding process.

### 3. Education in zones of conflict: Peacebuilding & the Magdalena Medio

In some regions of Colombia, it is highly likely that armed conflict will continue even after the Government-FARC negotiations are concluded. Proximity to illegal armed groups (IAGs), particularly in the walk to school, is cited as one of the most fundamental causes of child recruitment, and most of these IAGs are not involved in the Havana negotiations (Downing, 2014: 42). Many of these groups recruit minors by targeting rural areas or urban *comunas* neglected and highly stigmatised by the city centres, and consequently, characterised by poverty, unemployment, crime and lack of available education. Whilst financing security for such “red zones” is clearly necessary, it will be argued that investing in more innovate peacebuilding initiatives based in education can also have a significant impact on the ground.

Any initiative responding to the conflict must be localised, since as Vargas argues:

“Colombia is a country of regions, and to a great degree, conflict and violence in the country has unfolded on a local and regional level. In other words, the macro national conflict is composed of various conflicts on the micro level. Therefore, the resolution of the conflict must necessarily pass through the micro level, and the diverse regions.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

Participatory educational initiatives are a hugely effective means of engaging this “micro level,” given the visibility of schools, and their ability to engage various stakeholders including children, teachers, and parents. Whilst it is true that conflict-sensitive educational initiatives can be highly sensitive to introduce, they can be supported by amassing a network of partners including civil society, business leaders, government representatives, and international government organisations. This network can also support and sustain the impact of the initiatives, and mobilise young people and communities behind education as a key peacebuilding tool.

One example of such a network is the “Programme for Development and Peace of Magdalena Medio,” (PDPMM) initially formed in 1995. This programme operates in the Magdalena Medio region, comprising of municipalities along the River Magdalena and traversing the departments of Bolivar, Cesar, Santander and Antioquia. Despite being the principal oil zone in the country, the State has historically lacked presence across the region, and the extractive model of development has failed to redistribute wealth and created high levels of inequality. This vacuum of authority and economic opportunity was filled in the 1980s by guerrilla groups like the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and FARC, who exerted de facto control in the region and supported illegal economies including coca cultivation. In the early 1990s, this presence was countered by the emergence of paramilitary groups, principally the Bloque Central Bolivar of the *Autodefensas Unidas Colombianas* (AUC) (Sarmiento, 2011). During this period, the region of Magdalena Medio had one of the highest rates of conflict across Colombia, with murder rates at around fourteen per day.

In this violent context in 1995, the largest oil company in the region, ECOPETROL, and its labour union (USO) united with the Diocese of Barrancabermeja in calling for “a regional diagnostic that would establish the structural causes favouring violence and poverty, and would propose methods and solutions to overcome them” (Jesuitas Colombia, 2015). Questioning how a region so rich in natural resources could produce such violence and poverty, it was concluded that the problem lay with the model of development. The report recommended the formation of a Programme for Development and Peace (PDP) for the region, with funding from the World Bank, the EU, and ECOPETROL. As Vargas explains, a PDP:

“seeks in essence the construction of the social rule of law, through the participation of citizens throughout the territory. The strategy to achieve this supreme objective consists in the empowerment of the inhabitants, that is, the strengthening of human capacities on an individual level for the transformation of social relations, and the

strengthening of social organisations on a collective level to manage conflicts, generating conditions for a dignified life" (Vargas, 2015: 1).

Educational initiatives were identified as key mechanisms in this process. Under this vision, education is not considered as conditional upon peace, but conversely, as "a condition for peacebuilding" (Vargas, 2015: 6).

Whether a society chooses to pursue negative peace, considered as the absence of open conflict, or positive peace, as the existence networks and mechanisms that promote cooperation and peaceful relations, can have significant implications for the type of peacebuilding mechanisms utilised. As a microcosm of society, the debate is as relevant within schools as with the local community:

"On the one hand, there is the protectionist view, which seeks to make the school a place of neutrality or "peace". On the other, there is the pedagogical view, based on the idea that the school and education are responsible for forming a culture of peace. Another view is that of empowering subjects, based on the idea that education corresponds to generating citizen capacities and presenting options, discussions, and alternative means to violent solutions" (Sarmiento, 2011: 259).

The PDPMM recognise this provision of "alternatives" as fundamental to the empowering and transformative capacity of education, thus favouring a positive peacebuilding approach. Education is viewed as a tool that can intervene in zones of conflict to promote debate, democratic competencies, and pedagogies of peace.

Such a model inevitably brings risks, and must be reconciled with a "do no harm" approach. As CINEP explain, "for the act of presenting themselves as an alternative to violence and offering the youth an alternative to life proposed by the armed groups, the participants of the project were threatened, forcibly displaced, and in some cases murdered." (Sarmiento, 2011: 88). During the politics of *señalamiento* under the Uribe administration, human rights defenders were stigmatised as supporters of the guerrilla and targeted by paramilitaries. Consequently, "speaking about human rights could literally cost a teacher their life."<sup>25</sup> Following the principle of "do no harm," human rights education programmes were therefore highly dangerous to implement.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Ms. Jaramillo, Rosario. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Bogotá, 06/05/2015.

The PDPMM did not, however, conclude that education could not play a transformative role. On the contrary, education was recognised as “part of the little institutional and social capital maintained despite the violence,” and as one of the only spaces where transformation was feasible (EAS, 2011: 169). As Vargas explains:

“In zones of maximum conflict and high confrontation, for example in the case of Magdalena Medio, education was the only space where human encounters could be generated. If I speak of the political, economic, environmental sphere, education is the space of reconciliation, for the construction of the community, to listen to oneself and listen to the ‘other.’”<sup>26</sup>

Seeking to mobilise the formative and transformative potential of education whilst recognising the reality of conflict, the PDPMM promoted a shift of pedagogical approach from a focus on politically sensitive concepts of “human rights” to more abstract concepts of life and dignity. This approach, highly dependent on emotion and self-reflection, was termed “bio-pedagogy.” The key principle of bio-pedagogy is that:

“the starting point of any action, proposal or educational project should be the subject living in their local context and the world. A subject situated in his or her territory, conscious, with experiences, needs, dreams, frustrations, existential problems. A subject that affirms their autonomy, that dialogues with others and with the world. It is a proposal, a process and a mobilisation of the subject’s potential and capacity” (Sarmiento, 2011: 193).

This approach cuts across politics, class, and ethnicity, and uses humanity as a tool of union. Given that peace and human rights are philosophically rooted in this concept of humanity, such an approach permits engagement with these more politically sensitive subjects without putting the subjects at risk.

One example of such an initiative is the “Album of Life.”<sup>27</sup> This project encourages children to produce an “album” of memories, both positive and negative, from throughout their childhood. The timeline is then projected forward, where children are invited to represent their hopes and aspirations for the future. Following this introspection, it is sought

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Ms. Rocha, Maria Andrea. Centro de Memoria Histórica, Bogotá, 05/05/2015.

that children learn to value their own life, and by extension, respect that of others. By rooting peace in everyday issues, subjects are sensitised to their position in the conflict context, and by extension, made aware of their own agency. They therefore invest in peace as a concept and take ownership of the process, moving away from the understanding of peace as a nebulous and intangible political issue debated by elites in Havana.

Teacher training is indispensable in sustaining the impact of such initiatives. Institutions like the Escuela Normal Cristobal Rey provide specialised training for teachers in rural areas and in conflict zones, and have embraced a participatory approach as key to their mission and values. Their aim is to teach teachers how to adapt the national standards to the real needs of children in a specific locality by understanding the community and the children's way of thinking, helping children to make sense of their world. Such a pedagogy maximises education's capacity as a "life-affirming activity," making it an invaluable tool for peacebuilding and transformation in the present, and not simply a means of formation for the future. The Escuela has been praised for "stimulating rural education" in an area where the lack of education has historically led to conflict (Escuela Normal Superior Barrancabermeja, 2015). Investment in education must therefore target teacher training as an integral prerequisite to any transformative initiative, particularly in areas of high conflict where teachers may fear introducing sensitive topics into the classroom.

#### COMUNA 7 AND LA CIUDELA EDUCATIVA

The transformative impact of investing in education is demonstrated by the experience of the "Comuna 7," a neighbourhood in south-east Barrancabermeja with a population of around 18,000. Like wider Colombian society, Barrancabermeja is highly segregated. Resources and services are concentrated in the urban centre: Comunas 1 and 2, home to around 25% of the population (Molina, 2007a: 216). The "afueras" (surroundings), Comunas 3-7, are characterised by a high IDP population, stigmatisation, state absence, lack of educational investment, and poverty (Molina, 2007a: 263). This contributes to crime and IAG presence, causing further stigmatisation and exclusion, and sealing the vicious cycle.

This physical segregation extended to the education system, with huge disparities of educational opportunity. In Comuna 7, there was no secondary school before 1998, and enrolment rates were just 59% at primary level, and 33% at secondary (Molina, 2007a: 261). This contributed to high levels of teenage pregnancy and child recruitment into armed groups and youth crime (Molina, 2007a: 264). Given the role of education in perpetuating exclusion and conflict, alongside the fact that

Comuna 7 has the highest concentration of children in the city, it was clear that education would be at the centre of any transformative process (Aldana, 2013).

In this context in 1997 the Merilétrica electricity company, which was investing in Barrancabermeja, was confronted by high levels of kidnapping and attacks from guerrilla groups including the FARC and ELN (Sarmiento, 2011: 35). In response, the company and the government designed plans to construct military bunkers to protect its workers. Viewing an opportunity, a group of parents, teachers, religious organisations and civil society leaders united as the “Equipo Gestor” and offered to negotiate with the guerrilla to end attacks, provided the money spent by Merilétrica on security was invested instead in a new secondary school for the community (Sarmiento, 2011: 35). When violence intensified following the incursion of paramilitaries into the region, climaxing with the massacre of 32 community leaders and young people on May 16<sup>th</sup> 1998, the PDPMM, ECOPELROL and Merilétrica committed to an organisation named the “Educational Citadel (Ciudadela Educativa) and Integral Development Corporation of Comuna 7 of Barrancabermeja,” to institutionalise support for educational peacebuilding initiatives in the community. The Ministry of Defence designated 196 hectares as an “educational zone” for the Ciudadela, which would be free from arms and violence. With the financial support from the EU and international oil companies, the “edificio Paloka” secondary school was completed.

The Ciudadela has since evolved and contains a number of non-formal educational initiatives. One of the key pedagogical principles of the Ciudadela Educativa has been the importance of art, culture and self-expression. In recognition of this, a cultural centre termed the “Centro Cultural Horizonte” was established as part of the Ciudadela. The Centre has the objective of constructing “a space where art and pedagogy combine in search of new forms of relationships and dignified living between the inhabitants of the marginal zones of Barrancabermeja” (Centro Cultural Horizonte, 2015). The group run regular workshops with children from the Comuna 7, organising activities involving theatre, literature, art, and break-dance. This space of self-expression, reflection and imagination not only occupies children’s free time, keeping them off the streets and out the reach of drugs, gangs and violence, but helps children discover their capacity to create, shows their value to society, and promotes peace as a form of relationship with the outside. As Director Guido Ripamonti explains, “we started with theatre, but we showed them that they were not here just for theatre itself, but for human transformation and to construct movements for peace” (Henriques, 2013). Such workshops serve purposes of integration and prevention in the



sense that they bring children together and distance them from war and violence, on physical, cognitive and spiritual levels.

The Centre is warmly recognised within the community and by the PDPMM, who also emphasise the value of the projects for integration and reconciliation, stating that “the proliferation of dance, music, theatre, art and literature in Barrancabermeja is an enormous strength for the establishment of platforms of cross-sectoral and intergenerational dialogue” (PDPMM, 2009: 45). Taking the importance of this intergenerational dialogue into account, the Centre undertakes projects that combine art and culture with memory. Every 16<sup>th</sup> of May, for example, the anniversary of the 1998 massacre in the Comuna 7 is commemorated with a theatre production, which features youths from the community and an improvised monologue from one of the victims, who lost his son during the massacre. When asked why such initiatives were important, one fifteen-year old girl from the community, a member of the youth collective *Jóvenes Constructores de Paz* (Young Peace-Builders) argued

“I think it is very important for young people to be part of memory processes because we are living the legacy of conflict: drug-trafficking, drug addiction, forced recruitment. Although we weren't here when they committed the massacre, there is still pain, and we feel it.”<sup>28</sup>

The centre has also promoted youth participation through culture and memory with the production of a film, *Mateo*, about the violence in Comuna 7, and has sought to spread their pedagogical model across the country with initiatives like the *Ciclogira*, where the actors cycled across the Magdalena Medio, performing and running workshops. The high visibility and popularity of the Centre in the Comuna 7 demonstrate that combining art, culture, memory and pedagogy can facilitate prevention and integration on a micro level, and encourage personal and social transformation.

There is much qualitative and quantitative evidence to suggest that these initiatives based in formal and non-formal education have contributed significantly to peacebuilding in the community. Almost 5,000 students currently study within the Ciudadela, and educational coverage has increased from 30 to 97% in the area (Aldana, 2013: 7). Investing in the availability of education has had a transformative

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with 15 year old girl, *Jóvenes Constructores de Paz*, Comuna 7, Barrancabermeja, 12/05/2015.

impact on the community, as testified by the dramatic decrease in child recruitment and violence in the region.<sup>29</sup> Improving quality and adaptability by favouring a pedagogical approach that promotes student participation, the Ciudadela has been said to provide “a rich education for the poor,” and has been recognised as “the clearest and most successful example of civil society in Magdalena Medio as an agent promoting social, political, and environmental development” (Molina, 2007a: 269).

Facilitating dialogue and reducing violence has also had the impact of challenging segregation and stigmatisation of the region. As Molina López explains,

“A central aspect of the formation of the plan is its concern for reducing segregation and erasing the stigma of violence that has characterised the eastern communities, and for advancing in real proposals for urban development. In this sense, the transformative proposal suggested the construction of collective meeting spaces, which would give a place to representatives from each group and social organisation present in the *comuna*” (Molina, 2007b: 13).

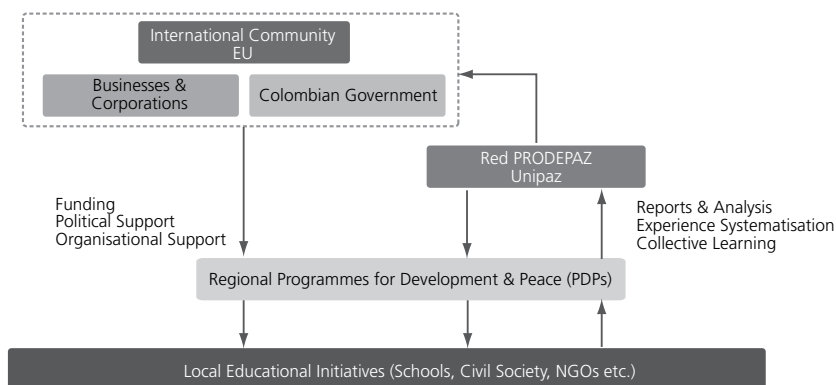
By opening the space for the community, the State, private corporations, civil society leaders, and children to contribute to “life-affirming” education, several stakeholders have been encouraged to “invest” in peace and development. This investment has had a visible impact on peacebuilding, since as former PDPMM member Rosario Jaramillo explains, the Equipo Gestor “has been at the majority of the negotiation tables, and has created territories of peace, with the achievement that arms remain on the outside.”<sup>30</sup> Since high levels of violence was a key factor behind the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the community by politicians and businesses, the initiative has had a positive economic impact, since “a relationship and dialogue between the community and public and private institutions has been generated, improving relations, the recovery of credibility and trust, and the level of public and private investment in Comuna 7” (Aldana, 2013: 8). The programme therefore demonstrates how investing in education can have a transformative impact even during conflict, by mobilising the youth and civil society, uniting groups with radically different interests, and providing an alternative to violence.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with researcher. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Barrancabermeja, 11/05/2015.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ms. Jaramillo, Rosario. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Bogotá, 06/05/2015.

Educating for peace in Magdalena Medio is therefore an integral process involving a range of different actors and programmes. Such initiatives need to be coordinated to find synergies and encourage cooperation, ensure coherence, and facilitate collective learning by sharing good practices. Partnering with academic institutions can facilitate this. For example, the University of Peace (Unipaz) in Barrancabermeja is currently creating a College Programme in “Ethics and Political Science,” targeted at training prospective teachers in the region. As Rosario Jaramillo, coordinator of the project describes, the process of forming the course has involved stakeholders from across the Magdalena Medio, and seeks to “take these ideas of peace and development and convert them into a curricular proposal that would collect and multiply this spirit” and to “prepare a new generation of educators and leaders” (Sarmiento, 2011: 129). In this sense, higher education contributes to “a community that continuously learns to transform conflicts in a positive, caring, and intelligent manner” (Sarmiento, 2011: 129). This ensures that educational initiatives can be collected, shared, evaluated and reproduced in the future.

Another initiative with similar objectives is the “Red Prodepez,” an association of the various PDPs across the country. This “network of networks,” as Jaramillo explains, allowed experiences to be shared and “generated trust, since people said that if they had success, it can work for us.”<sup>31</sup> The network is also supported by national and international busi-



**Figure 1**

PDPMM: “Virtuous Cycle” of between top-down and bottom-up processes

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Ms. Jaramillo, Rosario. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Bogotá, 06/05/2015.

nesses like ECOPEL, as well as Government Ministries and international organisations like the UN, EU and World Bank, who cooperate to organise funding (Vargas, 2015: 24). In this way, the Red Prodepaz “began weaving together a territory, an entire region, generating the critical mass necessary for transformation,”<sup>32</sup> contributing towards coherence, sustainability, and visibility. Systematising local experiences therefore magnifies the impact of micro-level educational projects onto a macro scale, multiplying impact and generating the “critical mass” necessary to repair the social fabric torn apart by conflict.

## CHALLENGES / OBSTACLES

Despite these achievements, deep structural problems remain to the right to education, rooted in the lack of State investment. In the region of South Bolívar, for example, schools re-opened four months late in April 2015 due to a lack of available teachers.<sup>33</sup> There remains a demand for human rights education; one leader of the youth group *Jóvenes constructores de paz* in Magdalena Medio argued that “they have to teach us about human rights so that we can claim them when they are violated.”<sup>34</sup> However, as one CINEP representative pointed out, many teachers in the Magdalena Medio are unfamiliar even with the concept of citizenship. Teaching human rights or memory of conflict would therefore require significant investment in teacher training.<sup>35</sup> Since education remains under-prioritised, such investment has yet to materialise, leaving educational initiatives limited by the low quantity and quality of teaching professionals. Consequently, Molina argues that

“the greatest enemy of the process hasn’t been the illegal armed groups... but the lack of political will of different administrations, which haven’t made significant advances in the implementation of public policies and strategies that reduce socio-spatial inequalities and segregation of the urban periphery” (Molina, 2007a: 263).

Even where initiatives are directed from the bottom-up, the transformative capacity of education must therefore be supported by State investment

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with researcher. Corporación Plan Desarrollo y Paz de Magdalena Medio, Barrancabermeja, 11/05/2015.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with 15 year old girl, *Jóvenes Constructores de Paz, Comuna 7, Barrancabermeja*, 12/05/2015.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mr. Vargas, Marco Fidel. CINEP, Bogotá, 07/05/2015.

and public policy to be truly realised. Such support may entail a radical shift in mentality and priorities, redirecting resources away from defence and unstable economic extraction, and towards education and sustainable human development.

To conclude, whilst children's education is a core aspect of peacebuilding proposals in the Magdalena Medio, the initiatives go far beyond simply nurturing the "future generation." The process of investing in child participation and education has been fundamental in promoting alternatives to conflict in the present, and opening spaces for dialogue, reconciliation, and transformation. The case of the Magdalena Medio thus demonstrates that education can have a transformative impact on culture, identity, and opportunity, on individual and societal levels, even during conflict. To sustain and maximise impact, various stakeholders must be involved to secure a critical mass behind peace, government must increase investment in education and local peacebuilding initiatives.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Colombia provides several examples of initiatives that challenge traditional stereotypes and assumptions about the role of education in peacebuilding. These assumptions, such as that peace and human rights are too politically sensitive to discuss in the sphere of formal education, that children are passive subjects unable to participate in peacebuilding, and that it is impossible to measure the impact of such initiatives, tend to limit investment in educational initiatives.

However, a participatory approach to education can help children to take responsibility of their learning process, make learning about human rights and peace less politically sensitive, and reduce the burden on teachers. It focuses on tangible concepts like human emotion and the human body, that cut across politics, class, or ethnicity, to approach sensitive issues from unifying, rather than divisive values. It also recognises local contexts and cultures, makes the learning process relevant to children's lives, and makes children realise their self-worth. This helps them understand their own position in the conflict, mobilising participants as active citizens and agents of peace.

The impact of such initiatives is observable, measurable, and significant. Individual participants have displayed greater awareness of the conflict, understanding of victims, and critical thinking skills. They have questioned why the conflict occurred, how it has been reported to them, and what they can do to avoid it happening again. Such awareness forms the basis of the "Nunca más," (never again) mentality essential to

genuine guarantees of non-repetition. On a community or societal level, investing in education has created “zones of peace” even in areas of high conflict, and has contributed to a significant reduction of violence and child recruitment. It has also challenged and transformed structural causes of conflict, such as segregation, exclusion, and stigmatisation of certain communities. Young people, teachers, other staff working in education have been essential to this process. It is clear, therefore, that education is more than just a nebulous “investment in the future,” but can also have a tangible, transformative impact in the present.

In order to support and sustain the impact of these initiatives, networks have been formed that integrate a localised approach with regional and national processes, ensuring a dialogue and information exchange between each level. This strategic approach increases visibility, coherence, and collective learning, and sustains the initiatives with resources and political support. It facilitates involvement of the State and mitigates the risk that initiatives are manipulated or appropriated for political motives. Similarly, it provides structures and institutions that the international community can support financially and politically, without the initiatives becoming dependent on foreign aid. At the same time, it encourages exchange of experiences, promotes dialogue and narrative construction on a national level, and ensures that the educational process is not fragmented on the basis of region, class, or experience of conflict.

Many obstacles and risks remain pertinent to the initiatives, including the segregation of the educational system in Colombia, the undervaluing of teachers, political indifference and ongoing crime and insecurity. It should be noted, however, that by promoting transformation of culture, identity and opportunity, education itself has the impact of deconstructing these limiting factors. It follows that the transformative capacity of in education is exponential if it is sustained with financial and political support. An initial investment of the “peace dividend” in education can therefore stimulate the flourishing of further initiatives and provide society with the momentum to construct and reconstruct after conflict. By promoting reconciliation, integration, and creation of cultures of peace across society, education can transform the fundamental structural causes of conflict, and contribute to the construction of sustainable peace. It is therefore time to move beyond assumptions of education as a speculative “investment in the future,” and begin to recognise and invest in its transformative impact in the present.

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