

COLOMBIA: OVERCOMING A CONFLICTIVE PAST THROUGH COMMUNITY BASED SOCIAL INNOVATION

Colombia has an exciting history of transformation: homicide and poverty rates were reduced dramatically within 15 years. A part of this story is related to urban and social innovations, as well as their official support through policies, government agencies and public projects.

Nicolás Martín Bekier

A NEW COUNTRY

In the last couple of decades, Colombia has made great efforts to leave behind its troubled image from the 1980s and 1990s, when many considered it a near-failed state controlled by violent mafias. Since then, it has increasingly been known for more positive references, including its economic revival, famous singers, athletes, natural landscapes and biodiversity.

Poverty in Colombia has dropped from 53.7% in 2002 to 28% in 2016, and extreme poverty from 19.5% to 8.5% [1]. Most importantly, violence levels have shrunk dramatically from the days of Pablo Escobar and the peak of paramilitary and guerrilla groups' activities. In 1991, Colombia was widely known for its violence, where cities like Medellín had a horrific rate of 433 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (6,810 homicides). Since the fall of the drug cartels, the paramilitary groups and the peace agreement with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) guerrilla, there has been a big reduction of violence levels, where in 2016 Medellín had 18.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (more than a 20 fold reduction from past levels), while there were 15.8 in Bogotá [2]. Although levels are still high compared to Europe, they're lower than for many other main cities in Latin America, or the United States of America.

INNOVATING THE WAY TO PROSPERITY

In addition to economic growth, the path for improving life conditions and reducing poverty and extreme poverty is full of stories and policies fostering social innovation. For a

long time, the reduction of poverty was a national priority and triggered the creation of the "Social Prosperity Department" (DPS) which, without being a ministry, had several times the budget and size of many of them, as well as a seat in the Council of Ministers. Within DPS, a special area named National Agency for the Superation of Extreme Poverty (ANSPE) was created, which among others coordinated "Red Unidos", a national network of more than 10,000 'social co-managers' selected based on local leadership experience. Red Unidos was created with a capacity to directly partner with and monitor 1,5 million families in poverty conditions in order to provide preferential access to social services and conditioned subsidies, focused on overcoming poverty conditions and traps, based on a multi-dimensional poverty approach.

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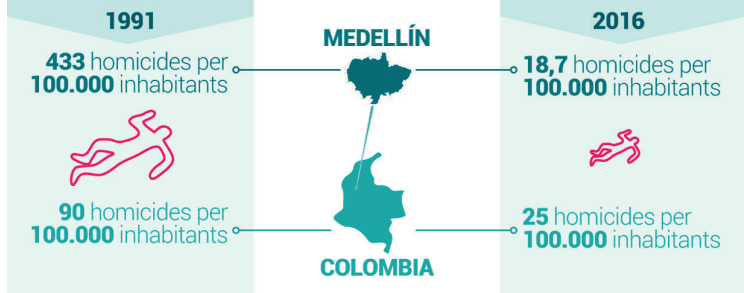
Within ANSPE, there used to be a Center for Social Innovation (CIS). The CIS promoted constant activities to share best innovative practices from local communities, while mapping and disseminating social innovations identified to overcome extreme poverty. The CIS mapped several local social innovations, many of which influenced public policy in several ways.

An example is the Agrosolidarity experience, a community based national network of rural agriculture families, that come together both to improve their life conditions and influence public policy for having fair conditions and

POVERTY REDUCTION



VIOLENCE REDUCTION



Reduction of poverty (2002-2016) and violence (1991-2016) in Colombia

sustainable agriculture practices. They do so relying on a decentralized structure with self-management and sustainability principles that integrate direct participation from peasant families in a multi-level aggregation model. This allows them to combine cooperative and circular economies with advocacy and citizen mobilization activities towards structural problems such as land ownership inequalities. In Colombia, land is highly concentrated: the rural Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, was 0.9 for 2016, i.e. 25 % of owners own more than 95 % of the land [3]. These topics are of such importance that within the six sections of the Colombian peace agreement signed on November 2016, the first two concerned land ownership and use, and local political participation and representation.

effect on children. For example, Escuela Nueva's Learning Circles, a case included in SI-DRIVE's global mapping, was created for forcefully displaced children who have trouble integrating in formal schooling systems. Based on student-centered principles that consider students as active participants and teachers as guides, they have used the infrastructure of community spaces for educational activities, while integrating formal education institutions, parents and social leaders. As with many other community based innovations, they have influenced public policy and adapted to respond to wider social challenges. For instance,

INNOVATING THE WAY TO PEACE

As reported by the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, the Colombian peace process with the FARC integrates multiple innovations that may be helpful for other peacebuilding efforts around the world. Many of the innovations integrated into the Colombian peace process come from previous lessons learnt during multiple unsuccessful negotiations during the 50 years of conflict with the FARC, as well as close cooperation with experienced international leaders who were also part of other peace processes [4].

In parallel, many community based innovations have emerged to respond to the humanitarian crisis prompted by the armed conflict which affected the main population, including an



The creation of community based social innovations

Learning Circles have expanded beyond children that have been forcefully displaced to also integrate families from various contexts that face problems adapting to the school system.

THREE STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

Despite the support of social innovation actions and policies to overcome poverty and violence, including those within the peace agreements, there are big concerns of their sustainability in the long term as well as recent setbacks. In 2016, for the first time in 14 years, poverty and extreme poverty levels grew, going from 27.8 to 28%, and from 7.9 to 8.5% respectively. During 2016 DPS had a 25% budget cut, and ANSPE, including its Center for Social Innovation, closed and merged with the general DPS team. Also, the process for creating a national Social Innovation Policy halted. Furthermore, the social innovation teams in some of the government agencies have shrunk or disappeared.

Regarding the peace process, it lost political support after the plebiscite resulted in more than half of participating citizens rejecting the peace agreement. Although the agreement was adjusted, approved by congress and later formally signed, the implementation and many of its structural proposals have been threatened. Adding upon this, an increasingly polarized political climate, and the presidential elections of 2018 – with some candidates highly critical of the peace process – can affect its stability. Although the FARC has already handed in their weapons, the possibility of overturning some of the agreements by a next government can influence the creation of new violence and the continuation of structural inequalities.

COMMUNITY BASED SOCIAL INNOVATIONS AS A PATH FORWARD

In Colombia there are many territories in rural areas with high poverty levels, where the government has not been present, or has been very weak. In these contexts, people are

used to rely on each other for solving collective challenges, more than on government institutions and regulations. As documented by the Colombian cases reported in SI-DRIVE, many community based social innovations help to address the needs of basic rights, and influence the creation or adjustment of public policies.

At the same time, citizen movements combined with actions based in local communities had a big influence in special historical moments. The ‘Septima Papeleta’ movement organized by students mobilized more than 7 million persons to cast a symbolic vote that pushed for the creation of a new constitution in 1991. The ‘No Mas Farc’ street mobilization of 2008 was probably the most relevant political setback for the FARC, where more than 8 million people marched on the streets demanding them to stop armed violence, including kidnappings and other actions affecting citizens.

Community based social innovations will continue having a key role for building and maintaining the path for further prosperity and peaceful coexistence in Colombia’s new historical chapter.

Currently, both government officials as well as peace activists of different political ideologies agree that the only hope for a continuation of bringing violence levels down and to avoid new surges of violence, depends on the capacity of citizen mobilization towards the protection of life as the most basic human right. As well as with other moments in history, the impact of these mobilizations depends on the capacity of citizens to organize and innovate through specific actions with enough power and momentum to create new political realities. It is to expect that community based social innovations will continue having a key role for building and maintaining the path for further prosperity and peaceful coexistence in Colombia’s new historical chapter.

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