



# POLICY BRIEF: BEYOND DIVIDING LINES

## Youth-led Civic Engagement for Peace in Colombia

- Even before the peace agreement came into force in 2016, young people across Colombia have created and led their own initiatives to promote peace and reconciliation in their communities.
- Young people's inner-drive to contribute to a more peaceful and secure society, which is strengthened by positive peer influence and support provided by solidarity networks.
- Youth-led civic engagement takes various forms in Colombia, including advocacy, educational activities, activism via traditional media and social media, and art-based peacebuilding.
- Young people's struggles for secure livelihood and negative community perceptions hamper their motivation to participate in such activities.
- Governmental actors and other stakeholders should ensure meaningful participation of youth from diverse backgrounds at decision-making levels and in governmental institutions. Public youth policies should address young people's needs comprehensively, by shifting the focus beyond job creation and productivity to their broader economic inclusion.

### Introduction

Even before the peace agreement came into force in 2016, young people across Colombia have created and led their own initiatives to promote peace and reconciliation between the government, paramilitary and rebel groups, and inside their local communities.

Youth-led civic engagement takes various forms in Colombia, including advocacy, educational activities, activism via traditional media and social media, and art-based peacebuilding. They are driven by an inner motivation to change situations that affect them personally and their communities, which is strengthened through positive peer influence and support from youth

solidarity networks. Young people's struggles for secure livelihood and negative community perceptions hamper young people's motivation to participate in such activities.

The key objective of this policy brief is to propose a number of recommendations to stakeholders in Colombia to facilitate young people's engagement in peacebuilding by increasing motivators and breaking down the barriers.

### Context

Colombia is a country of 45 million inhabitants, of whom 8 million are aged between 15 to 24 years old. Though most of the population is of mestizo origin, there are important indigenous and Afro Colombian groups and 68 ethnic lan-

guages and dialects, making Colombia a culturally diverse country.

Since the late 1970s, the country has suffered from an armed conflict between government forces, leftist guerrilla groups and right wing paramilitaries. The conflict escalated in the 1990s, as a result of the influence of drug trafficking groups, and has had devastating effects for the civilian population. Especially in rural contexts, young people have been forced to join armed groups, subjected to sexual violence, and killed by mines and explosive remnants.

The armed conflict has also affected young people through lack of opportunities to access quality education and jobs. Approximately 18.5% of the Colombian youth population is unemployed and has limited access to stable and meaningful employment opportunities outside of illicit economies.

As youth policies have become part of the country's public policy agenda, young people have emerged as a subject and political actor in Colombia. Law 375, adopted in 1997, was the first regulation that recognises young people as subjects of rights. This regulation calls for the full participation of young people in society, recognising the Colombian government's responsibilities to formulate and identify youth-specific public policies. The 2013 Youth Citizenship Act and the subsequent Law 1885 of 2018 on Reforming the Statute on Youth Citizenship, established an electoral political system for people from 14 to 28 years old in Colombia, through the creation of district, municipal and regional youth councils.

Despite the existence of new laws and attempts to develop the institutional frameworks to implement them, there are multiple challenges to put these regulations into practice, including the

formation of youth platforms, the lack of training by young people to appropriate the mechanisms and the lack of interest of some groups.

## Youth-led civic engagement in Colombia

### Types of youth-led civic engagement

A wide variety of activities were mentioned by young people. Advocacy and educational activities were clearly the activities that youth engaged in most, followed by activism via traditional media and social media and art-related activities.

While advocacy activities were most frequently mentioned, it is important to note that these were youth-led activities in the context of civil society organisations and other informal groups and not in the framework of traditional party politics. It appears clearly that youth are able to organise around the issues that most matter to them and decide to create their own spaces and channels of expression.

*"Young people are motivated by transformation, the search for internal and external peace, to find something to do that gives meaning to our journey"*

Young woman from Medellín, Colombia

When the 2016 peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was rejected by a small minority (50.2%), over 30,000 young Colombians took to the streets of Bogotá and around the country in support of the peace agreement. Social media channels were employed to spread messages of peace and to build bridges across a deeply polarised society,



through young people's usage of social media hashtags. These expressions of support were important for the Colombian government to revalidate a new peace agreement on November 2016.

Education is also an important means to promote a culture of peace, human rights and social justice. Activities are initiated by young people within school and universities, but often as an extra-curricular activities addressing gaps in formal education curriculum. These activities include setting up school councils, workshops on disability access, virtual learning activities on human rights, and peace-themed weeks, among others.

*"I led a community radio station and there we talked about literature, politics, art, we had people from all political currents, then we all debated and started to understand how the political world was moving."*

Young man from Medellín, Colombia

Many of the activities described by respondents made use artistic ways of expression, either to create a channel for young people to share their views, to foster awareness about an issue or to denounce social injustice in the public space as in the case of murals or street paintings. Examples include the poetry festival and cultural activities at the public library of El Castillo, Meta, and cultural house of El Codito in Bogota, which were all initiated by young community workers.

Youth-led community development activities in Colombia have a strong gender dimension. Youth provide psychological support and medical care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) youth, victims of gender-based violence, and pregnant adoles-

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cents. Founded by a group of young people in 1997, Un Techo Para Mi País (TECHO) builds transitional homes for families displaced by violence and those living in extreme poverty in slums.

### Boosters

Youth in Colombia feel a strong inner drive to change situations that affect them personally and their communities. They seek a sense of belonging and recognition from the community, where they can exercise solidarity and empathy. Interviewees expressed their interest in ending issues of social justice that the government has not been able to solve, by creating their own spaces that are uncorrupted by tokenistic practices and political manipulation.

Their motivation is strengthened by being exposed to peer-led civic engagement activities. Respondents desire to be part of wider social networks and working in a safe environment with like-minded people. Hardship faced by family members also drive young people to engage in civic activities, in hope of building a more peaceful and secure future for themselves and their families.

Youth expressed that technical support and opportunities created by civil society organisations were enabling factors for them to engage. For example, youth spoke about the trainings, scholarship and exchange opportunities, materials made available, and overall the support of the international community through NGOs. Respondents also mentioned the prospects for self-development and employment that may emerge from these opportunities, as an additional motivating factor.

### Barriers

The most frequently mentioned factor limiting youth-led civic engagement were issues of

poverty and employment. Youth in Colombia struggle to make means end, which limits their motivation, time, level of education and mobility to engage. The feeling of exclusion is more acute in remote regions and rural areas where there are fewer educational, civic engagement or employment opportunities for young people. Respondent additionally commented that they struggle to find meaning and social security in the income generating activities that are available to them.

Negative community perceptions of youth were mentioned as another limiting factor for youth-led civic engagement. Youth expressed they were often not taken seriously by elders, that people do not believe in youth and that adults did not only mistrust them but often censored and discouraged young people from expressing their ideas. Activities and expressions of young people that challenge or are not part of that system of norms are discouraged and even rejected. Some youth are discouraged by their family members, who perceive civic activities as a distraction from finding paid work, or who fear their children will be exposed to situations of violence and insecurity.

The negative impact of social perceptions were felt more strongly by young women, who are expected to nurture caring and reproductive roles. These restrictions are reinforced by masculine identities that prescribe young men to take up more public roles of “providers”, who do not share caring and household tasks.

Persistent issues of insecurity, violence, drug trafficking and organised crime pose serious risks to young people who seek to address human rights issues and social injustices. These security issues affect young people both in rural and urban settings, who feel the government does not adequately respond to the killings of

social leaders. Lastly, trauma and unhealed wounds prevent young victims or those who witnessed the conflict from civic peacebuilding processes. These conditions are exacerbated by the security situation, since there are no guarantees for human rights defenders.

## Policy Recommendations

1. The Government of Colombia should build on existing instruments and processes for youth civic engagement by: (a) localising the Youth Citizen Law through regional entities, (b) providing training to public officials responsible for youth affairs on existing youth policies, and (c) enhancing policy integration and coordination on youth participation among all levels of decision making.
2. Governmental actors and CSOs should open up existing spaces for youth participation to youth from rural contexts, young women, youth with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups that lack access to social and educational opportunities. To enable their meaningful engagement, stakeholders must support innovative approaches including arts, sports and music-based activities.
3. Governmental youth policies should address young people’s needs comprehensively, by shifting the focus beyond job creation and productivity to their broader economic inclusion. Governmental actors, donor community and CSOs must advance the development of conflict-sensitive, inclusive and youth-centred employment programmes.
4. Governmental actors, CSOs, youth organisations should work together on educational reform, and improve access to quality higher education for young people in Colombia. National curricula should incorporate educational activities that enhance young people’s

peacebuilding knowledge, competences for civic engagement, and overall life skills so that they can be more effective change agents.

5. Police and national armed forces behaviour should be sensitised about the work of youth-led groups and organisations and show exemplary behaviour, by upholding human rights principles and the justice system. They should provide security guarantees for young social leaders and human rights defenders, and promote prevention strategies for avoiding recruitment of young people in illegal armed forces or criminal bands.
6. Governmental actors, UN agencies, CSOs and youth groups must partner up to develop national strategies for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2250 on youth, peace, security. Young people's meaningful participation in the implementation and monitoring of the peace agreement and in ongoing disarmament, disengagement, and reintegration processes should be supported, as called for by UN Security Council resolution 2419.
7. Media, CSOs and youth group should commit to covering positive youth stories to challenge fears and negative societal perceptions of both youth and youth civic engagement, especially for young women and youngers from ethnic groups.

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## Project description

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