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EDUCATIONAL PEACEBUILDING IN MEDELLIN AND ACAPULCO

Understanding the role of education, culture
and learning in responding to crises

RESEARCH REPORT



Low and Middle Income Countries Research Network (LMIC)

Research Report

This research report summarises findings from the project Educational Peacebuilding in Medellín and Acapulco: Understanding the role of education, culture and learning in responding to crises, which aims to contribute towards reducing the negative impacts of drug related violence in Mexico. The project is a partnership between the School of Education (University of Glasgow), El Colegio de Sonora (Mexico) and Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Colombia). This report has been prepared by Evelyn Arizpe, Alejandro Bahena-Rivera, Sinead Gormally and Sergio Hernandez Mendoza.¹

Background:

The implementation of non-formal education and cultural policies and strategies have been fundamental to building peace in Medellín, Colombia. This research explores factors such as infrastructure, community engagement, and allocation of resources and institutions to understand their role in the peacebuilding process. The pathways to peace building will be highlighted in both Medellín and Acapulco by mapping out community educational spaces, initiatives, and programmes where culture, non-formal education, and the arts have played a crucial part in the peace processes.

The motivation behind this project draws on the different processes that these cities have experienced in relation to urban violence. In the 1950s, Acapulco was considered a top tourist destination and refuge for celebrities, but in the past 20 years, the resort has changed dramatically becoming one of the most violent cities in the world, struggling day to day to cope under the strain of urban gang warfare and drug cartels². Medellín was considered the most violent and murderous city in the world in the '80s forcing authorities and stakeholders to rethink the city's development, governance and strategies. Through an ambitious shift in policy, Medellín transformed spaces of violence into arts and literacy centres, libraries and parks giving rise to an innovative way to reduce crime rates and homicides (Vulliamy, 2013). In recognition of its success in overcoming the challenges of uncontrolled urban expansion and violence, the city was awarded the [2016 Prize Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize](#), and in 2019 gained a [UNESCO Learning Cities Award](#) for its achievement in promoting an inclusive lifelong learning strategy. Objective

The research project seeks to create a detailed understanding of the types of infrastructure, engagement, resources, engagement processes, and public policies required to transform a community and contribute to the reduction of the negative impacts of drug-related violence and urban crime. More specifically it aims to investigate the circumstances,

policies, interventions, and practices through which the city of Medellín in Colombia was able to develop and implement an inclusive, lifelong learning strategy which led to the successful reduction in drug-related violence and crime. The project will transfer these learnings to Acapulco, Mexico by devising approaches tailored to the particular characteristics and circumstances of the city³.

Project Methodology:

Through a participatory methodology that includes semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a survey, the project will identify the role of non-formal education and culture in peacebuilding processes. The project will also create an index for transferability of good practices, for the creation of a vision for 'The Acapulco we want'.

Policy dimensions of Medellín and Acapulco:

Medellin, Colombia

The social transformation that has occurred in the last 30 years in the city of Medellín has been the subject of many publications, awards, discussions, and presentations around the world. Medellín was a pioneer city in the development of social policies associated with culture in Colombia and Latin America. In its first Cultural Plan developed in 1990, it was established that culture would play a key role in the city's future. Culture was considered a fundamental element in the response to the social crisis that originated several decades before, largely due to the actions of organized crime and drug trafficking. Since 1990, the public policy agenda has focused on culture and education, solidarity, civility, tolerance and the recognition of individual and collective rights as crucial aspects to the development of people and society ([Medellin Cultural Development Plan, 2011-2020](#)). Medellín went from registering a rate of 266 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 23 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 ([National Police](#)). The numbers show that there are still challenges for the city. However, it is undeniable that there have been significant advances, which could in part be attributed to a set of actions aimed at promoting culture and education. According to the documentary analysis of municipal public policy implemented between the 1990s and 2019, actions can be grouped into the following five dimensions:

1. Education and culture as a vehicle for social inclusion

Through social urbanism, policies which aimed at reducing socioeconomic inequalities, it was possible to decentralize culture and bring large investments in infrastructure to the most vulnerable sectors in Medellín. The most significant experiences were the Library Parks, and the Cultural Centre for the Development of Moravia implemented under the Comprehensive Urban Projects Framework. In addition to

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² <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/dec/13/gunfire-tourist-resort-acapulco-mexico-torn-apart-violence>

³ Although it is important to highlight that each country, city or region has unique characteristics and circumstances that must be considered by policy-makers when defining and adopting these approaches, i.e. every peacebuilding setting requires precise considerations and it is unique (Berdal and Mousavizadeh, 2010).

the adaptation of public spaces and infrastructure, a series of programs were developed which enabled the access and “democratization of culture in the city”. One of the key initiatives in this area was the Network of Artistic and Cultural Practices that included the Dance Network, the Performing Arts Network, the Visual Arts Network, and the Music Schools Network. Furthermore, programmes such as “Medellín Un Gran Escenario” and “Salas Abiertas” promoted a dynamic and open cultural agenda for the citizens, encouraging free entry to museums and recreational parks for the most vulnerable populations.

2. Cultural policies for youth towards a social transformation

“Medellín la más educada” was one of the first government plans to focus on the provision of lifelong learning opportunities from early childhood to higher education. A set of actions were established in the Medellín Development Plan 2004-2007, which had as a premise the move from fear to hope, and sought to address two major problems: inequality and deep-rooted violence. Education was considered the best tool for the social transformation of the city (Mayor of Medellín, 2007).

As a result, important investments were made in the educational infrastructure, such as the Library Parks, the Network of Kindergartens and the 10 Quality Schools located in the poorest areas of the city. In addition, the University Citadels programme was designed as a technological platform to integrate higher education programs, education for work and human development. Several of these programs and actions remained in place during the following administrations, ensuring the continuity of the agenda in the long term.

3. Citizen coexistence as a city planning instrument.

Citizen culture programs began in Medellín in the late 90s drawing on the achievements and learnings from the capital city Bogotá in this area. Citizen culture became a cross cutting theme in the development plans of Medellín between the years 2004 - 2019. Under this framework, several programs aimed to encourage citizen participation and improve interpersonal trust. The Manual of Citizen Coexistence, for example, has been a key pedagogical tool to promote peaceful coexistence and respect for norms. It was built in a participatory manner and has been widely socialized in different parts of the city. These initiatives continued throughout different administrations. Also noteworthy is the construction of the Casa de la Memoria Museum in 2012, as a dedicated space to support reconciliation and peacebuilding processes.

4. Culture and learning to promote the city

Since the early 90s culture was also considered to be a pathway to promote economic competitiveness of Medellín. This vision was ratified in the city's 2011-2020 Cultural Development Plan, where a set of specific guidelines were proposed, to strengthen the relationship between culture and development. Formal education programmes were created which aimed at preparing citizens to compete in local and

global labour markets. The City English Language Training Program, for example, capitalised on the city's infrastructure of the library parks and fostered entrepreneurship by integrating other strategies and facilities such as the seedbeds of entrepreneurship, Park E and the Zonal Business Development Centres (CEDEZOS).

5. Intervention and articulation between the public and private sectors in education.

The private sector has played an active role in the design of public policies for education and culture. One of the most relevant examples has been the creation of the Proantioquia Foundation, a non-profit private organization established by entrepreneurs in the region to promote regional development. Since its creation in 1975, the Foundation's work has focused on overcoming inequality in access to opportunities especially in relation to education. It has also played a key role in developing the city's capacity to innovate and compete. Proantioquia has participated actively in public policy spaces and formed alliances with local and regional government. This approach considers education as a right, and sees the increase of schooling among young people as a mechanism for urban competitiveness, economic reactivation, and the international projection of Medellín.

Acapulco

The Municipal Development Plan 2018-2021 outlines specific regulations to promote and encourage better access to quality education and cultural opportunities in the city. Nevertheless, some of the interventions and strategies seem to be disarticulated or lacking impact on individuals' genuine access to better opportunities.

Different actors and institutions have been designing and implementing concrete actions towards building a more peaceful and prosperous society in Acapulco. However, in most cases there is a lack of community level infrastructure and there are very few non-formal educational or cultural centres. Thus, it is crucial to identify and establish connections with key community leaders and local stakeholders, for example, the Catholic Church, universities, and local foundations who play an important role in supporting peacebuilding activities.

The lack of visible, sustainable community infrastructure is vitally important when analysing the context of Acapulco. The absence of safe spaces and sites to support the move towards eradicating violence highlights the need for investment, negotiation, and the engagement of community leaders within the process.

KEY MESSAGES

- Despite the institutional interventions, such as the Plan Merida and Plan Colombia, and approximately one trillion dollars spent by the US government since the 1970s to dismantle the operation of drug cartels in the region (Huey, 2014), many challenges remain. Latin America is still considered one of the least peaceful areas in the world, where corruption, weak institutions, systematic impunity, lack of opportunities and historic socio-economic inequalities continue to affect its prosperity. Development initiatives have become even more relevant during the current global pandemic.
- A core element of our “Educational Peacebuilding” research project is to recognise that peacebuilding processes concern every member and actor in society, and thus, peacebuilding must emerge from a shared vision and collective actions.
- An inclusive approach turns city residents into actors, builds social cohesion and fosters reconciliation, which in turn reinforces sustainable peace.
- We observe that the active participation of different actors and organizations coupled with sustained public policies and active leadership from local authorities have been decisive factors in the construction of a more peaceful Medellín.
- Culture in Medellín has been conceived as a contributor to peacebuilding efforts. It has enabled new forms of interaction and non-violent solutions to long standing differences. Culture and education have been used as strategies to promote equity, link residents with their environment and promote tourism.

To find out more about the project go to <http://cradall.org/research-and-development/cradall-projects/educational-peacebuilding-medellin-and-acapulco>
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