Educational Peacebuilding in Medellin and Acapulco: Understanding the role of education, culture and learning in responding to crises

Briefing Paper 5: Medellin's cultural transformation

In Medellin, culture has played a key role in peacebuilding. This briefing summarizes emergent findings from public policy analysis and interviews with 50 citizens of Medellin from a variety of sectors in 2020, many of whom had directly participated in the societal transformation that began during the 1980s.

The social and political crisis in Medellin created a climate of violence fuelled by the conflict between guerrillas and paramilitaries in which young people were seen as the main protagonists of homicides and cases of *sicariato* (hired killers) due to drug trafficking. From the mid-twentieth century, the dynamics of violence were mostly experienced in the peripheral neighbourhoods that were increasingly populated with displaced families from other parts of the country and region due to political violence.

During this time, one of the first tasks in peacebuilding was for policy makers to attempt to change the 'story' of Medellin. However, for this to be successful, citizens needed to be part of this new story themselves. Artists and other cultural actors began to offer alternative portrayals to the negative impressions of certain sectors and social groups. They did this through cultural productions that included art, literature, and cinema. The film "Rodrigo D: No futuro" (Rodrigo D: No Future), by Víctor Gaviria (1990) and the novel, "No nacimos pa' semilla" (We were not born for seed) by Alonso Salazar, published in 1990, are examples of this narrative change.

Current inhabitants of Medellin still refer to these initiative as cultural milestones perceived as an effective way of representing a more realistic portrait of the lives of those affected by violence and inequality across Medellin, in both the suburbs and the outskirts of the city (Interviews, August 2019).

As part of the transformation, citizens began to organise, setting political and ideological positions aside and initiating cultural processes for social change. Neighbourhood communal organisations also rose to the challenge of 'changing the story', working within communities and supported by private organisations, businesses, and the government political will. This synergy between different groups and organisations contributed to establishing long-term actions based on cultural initiatives that remained a central feature in following administrations.

Based on our research on public policies and the perspectives of the inhabitants of Medellin, we identified three main aspects to describe the policies and the perceptions of the role culture has played in the transformation of this city: cultural inclusion, democratic culture, and civic culture.

1. Cultural inclusion

The recognition of diverse cultural expressions relating to the identity of different social groups in Medellin is considered by interviewees as important in the new inclusive vision of the city. As a result of forced displacement due to violence across the region, Medellin's history is marked by several decades of immigrants arriving from different parts of the Antioqueña region.

However, with artists involved in changing the narrative, portraying the array of identities and lifestyles of Medellin's inhabitants and inviting the collaboration of different local groups, social cohesion increased.

The city's urban transformation is linked to cultural policies and impacted social life in different areas in the city. The changes in the physical infrastructure (streets, aqueducts) helped destigmatise these areas and foster greater community cohesion. Recognising diverse cultures – whether citizens came from the coast or the mountains – and spaces to share artistic and cultural expressions through which symbolic features related to violence and drug trafficking could be re-signified. According to the interviewees, the inclusive artistic and cultural initiatives and programmes played a role in promoting this coexistence through the use of public spaces created and adapted for cultural purposes.

An interviewee provided an example of a young man who like many others was set on a path to maintain the structures of violence and how his life was changed through these inclusive cultural initiatives:

> […] a boy who lived there on the corner was one of the most reluctant to participate and said precisely that he wanted, when he grew up, was to have a gun and go with the *combo* (local gang) ... A little while ago, we did a virtual meeting about the engagement of girls and boys during the pandemic, he was a guest and moderator, and in the presentation, he said "… I am a music teacher."

2. *Democratic Culture*

Another cultural transformation associated with public policies is the promotion of cultural actions under the idea of a "historical debt" on the part of local government towards all Medellin citizens for a better quality of life, starting with the democratisation of culture.

The idea of a "historical debt" towards the most vulnerable population was spread across sectors and it served to compensate the lack of previous support and fuelled actions and interventions to benefit Medellin's citizens. Public policies were perceived by the population as vehicles to "repay" this "historical debt", and culture played a central role. As one interviewee noted:

Another important consensus (…) to share the diagnosis on the historical social debt, on the heritage that we have or should be overcome from the *paisa* culture and drug trafficking, and the need for citizen consultation. They were elements that later unleashed other scenarios.

This strategy led to the creation of a transformational framework where educational institutions, community, and social organisations, as well as the private sector, collaborate to meet the citizen's needs and contribute to the city's cultural development. For example, the strategy included funding libraries with the aim of improving access and knowledge transfer and thus to create a better-informed citizen who could participate in political and social decisions for the city. Libraries would become a sign of culture and education since their geographic distribution meant they would reach inhabitants in both the suburbs and the outskirts of the city.

As the notion of culture was reformulated, from being a vehicle for the aesthetics and recognition of social groups to being an engine of development, it also became more affordable for all citizens. Even those who did not directly participate in cultural activities, gradually benefited from the ripple effect providing scope and access to different spheres that were not solely focused on the drug-related lifestyle.

There was a situation in which the agreement was that a cultural change had to be made and that this cultural change was guided by art, aesthetics and education. In other words, there was a consensus that they are the mechanisms of change that had to be generated new imaginaries that would break with the idea of drug trafficking. I believe that there is a very strong commitment from this entire sector, in which it was necessary to start having other ways of life that are not oriented only to the car, to the motorcycle, which was criticised a lot. Alonso Salazar's books served a great deal to illustrate the crisis. That book *No nacimos pa' semilla* (We were not born for seed) triggered at that moment what they did not want to do; but you have to plant the seed. And that's where it started then. Well, you have to support art, culture, but you also have to have a long-term educational agenda.

3. Civic culture

In Medellin, behaviours, and relationships in public and private spaces enabling coexistence have been reinforced with programmes and interventions. The aim of these interventions was to increase an awareness of civic attitudes and community engagement as primary notions of community life, and to remove antisocial behaviours.

In the last four administrations (2016-2019), the promotion of a citizen culture was established in a cross-cutting manner throughout all areas of local government. One attempt to improve social interactions were the efforts to maintain trust between citizens and public institutions as a vital element for governance (although the success of this has been debatable). Another attempt involved artistic and cultural expressions to enhance

the learning of peacebuilding rules and values, reducing the tension among groups from different backgrounds living in the same *comunas*.

According to the participants, previous administrations have tried to involve groups and associations of artists in the expansion of culture and lifelong learning in public spaces at the community level. This cultural expansion has meant artists have not just been performers, but they have tried to become agents of change.

Finally, learning and education have also been perceived as promoting peace, including diverse forms of non-formal education. The interviewees mentioned that non-formal education represents a significant vehicle for lifelong learning, and at the same time, it has been a source of artist development and networking. One interviewee pointed out that these cultural policies had successfully generated new audiences in sectors that had historically not had much access to cultural opportunities:

> At that time, there was work with artists in public areas, graffiti artists, people who made mosaics, processes with artist groups, and animations that tell about the processes of today, for example, in every context of great intervention—articulated in the integral urban planning process, for example, Commune 1 and 2. This entire sector was articulated with pre-existing cultural pressures, such as, for example, the training of these people in how they helped to be supporters within the communities, with the neighbourhoods, with the inhabitants, with the owner of the store, with the lady [who sells] orange juice and all this, to explain to her what types of processes we are involved in.

The *ciudad-escuela* (city-school) concept developed in the city to learn beyond formal schooling has also influenced cultural activities and teachings that citizens themselves generated in their neighbourhoods. The initiative was part of synergy between public and private universities along with different areas of the local government. Also, as part of this initiative's progress, a new synergy now between NGOs and the local government gave birth to *Conoce tu ciudad* (Know your city) and later the project *Medellín también educa* (Medellin also teaches). Both initiatives aimed to promote education using different approaches across the city.

There are significant lessons from the in-depth description of the experiences of different local stakeholders and their perceptions of the impact of public policies and initiatives over the last 20 years. In particular, the recognition and inclusion of the array of cultural expressions and the democratisation of cultural and artistic activities shows how important they should be within the vision of local governments in their planning for further interventions and initiatives.

One lesson to consider when planning culture and non-formal education initiatives to promote social cohesion is taking advantage of physical and urban development for cultural and social policies and programmes to destigmatize areas.

Another lesson is that artistic and cultural expressions can be successful as vehicles to decrease social tension among different social groups that live the same neighbourhoods

Political will and leadership have been shown as significant elements of successful initiatives. For instance, promoting the idea of "historical debt" from the government

which symbolically summons all the city's residents, was a crucial tactic to gain citizens' trust as it situated the government in a more proactive position in the government-citizens equation. However, this trust remains fragile, and the confidence in the policies on cultural inclusion and citizen culture could be easily eroded if it is not continually strengthened through communication between citizens and government institutions.

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