



The Role of Children as Peace-makers in Colombia

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ABSTRACT *Sara Cameron reports on the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia which, with the support of organizations like UNICEF, has put into practice the fundamental principles of child rights and participation. Cameron shows how the Convention on the Rights of the Child gave the power to these children to protest against war in ways that have profoundly transformed communities across the country. She argues that the Children's Movement for Peace provides many lessons for other countries and communities in conflict for children to exert a strong influence on adults to make peace.*

KEYWORDS *ballots; community; guerrilla war; peace carnivals*

Introduction

In 1995 the mayor of the beleaguered, war-torn municipality of Aguachica in eastern Colombia announced that a referendum would be held asking residents to choose, quite simply, whether they wanted war or peace. Aguachica had become a microcosm of Colombia's decades-long guerrilla war. Guerrillas and paramilitaries fought each other by attacking anyone they believed guilty of supporting the other side. Husbands were slaughtered in front of wives, parents in front of children, community leaders in front of entire villages. Many families had been forced out of their homes by violence.

Shortly after the announcement of the municipal referendum – the first of its kind anywhere in Colombia – a group of children went to the mayor to ask if they could also take part. With the mayor's blessing they set off around the town, singing peace songs, condemning violence and urging children to come out and choose peace. Many children took part in that historic ballot in Aguachica, but their votes were seen as purely symbolic and were never even counted.

Violence in Colombia and the Declaration of the Children of Apartadó

The war began in 1948 with a brutal conflict between the two main political parties that escalated into a guerrilla war in the mid-1960s. In the 1980s right-wing paramilitaries entered the war and are responsible for most of the worst human rights violations. The guerrillas profess to be fighting a war of social justice, opposed to the extreme inequalities in Colombian society – yet the rural poor, the intended beneficiaries of the struggle, have always been its major victims:

- Since 1985, 1,500,000 people have been displaced from their homes by violence, out of which over half are children (CODHES, 1999).
- In 1998, the rate of displacement rose by 20 percent over 1997 figures; eight households were displaced by violence every hour (CODHES, 1999).
- Sixty percent of displaced children drop out of school (Truyol, 1999).
- There have been over 5000 kidnappings since 1995 (*El Espectador*, 1999: 6A; Reuters, 1999).
- Child soldiers include about 2000 under the age of 15 in guerrilla and paramilitary forces, some as young as 8 years old (Defensoría del Pueblo, 1997).
- Six thousand people are killed every year as a result of war. Twenty-five thousand people are murdered every year in street, domestic or other criminal violence. Homicide is the leading cause of death among adults over 15 (Policía Nacional, 1998).
- Murders of children under 18 rose over 40 per cent from 2508 in 1994 to 4322 in 1996 (Defensoría del Pueblo, 1997).
- Impunity is widespread. Out of more than 3600 murders in Bogotá in 1996, police arrested fewer than a hundred people (Defensoría del Pueblo, 1997).

The following year, on the other side of the country, children in Apartadó set about forming their own government of children dedicated to peace making. Apartadó lies in the Urabá region, close to the Panama border. It had been a virtual fiefdom of the

guerrillas for decades. They dominated the banana workers' unions. The families of disaffected labourers were a good source of recruits for the struggle. The nearby Gulf of Urabá gave shelter for illegal trade in drugs and arms which, along with kidnapping for ransom and extortion, generated revenue of more than a hundred million dollars a year to keep the revolution alive.

In the 1990s right-wing paramilitaries started taking on the guerrillas in Urabá. They worked systematically through farms and villages, murdering, mutilating and driving out guerrilla support. Thousands of displaced families poured into Apartadó and nearby towns, seeking shelter – yet Apartadó itself was suffering under a wave of massacres caused by both sides in the struggle. Children spoke of walking around bodies on their way to school. Sometimes schools became battlegrounds between the armed groups, even while class was in session (Cameron, 1998).

In April 1996 Graça Machel visited Apartadó, conducting research for her United Nations report on the *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (Machel, 1996). The mayor summoned student leaders to ask what they wanted to tell her. Eventually, 5000 children from more than a dozen townships became involved in a Week of Reflection backed by the Church, the Red Cross and UNICEF. They wrote stories, poems, letters, painted pictures and constructed sculptures to create a compelling exhibition for Ms Machel. The combined student council also drew up the Declaration of the Children of Apartadó. The Declaration is direct and wrenching:

We ask the warring factions for peace in our homes, for them not to make orphans of children, to allow us to play freely in the streets and for no harm to come to our small brothers and sisters . . . we ask for these things so our own children do not suffer as we have done.

Things might have ended there as they so often do – a dignitary comes to town, children perform, and then everyone goes home – but the combined student council of Apartadó researched their nation's constitution. This had been re-written in 1991 and provided extensive rights to children and many guarantees of democratic freedom, most of which had remained dormant. The students

decided that they had a constitutional right to form a local 'government of children'. They sent notices to schools in the municipality and soon up to 200 children were pouring out to peace meetings three times a week, gathering on football pitches and in parks. There was considerable chaos at first and argument about what children could and could not do to make peace.

One of the leaders at that time was 15-year-old Farliz Calle. She says, "To have peace you need to solve poverty and children cannot do that, but we found other things that children could do".

They set up 'peace carnivals' that encouraged children from feuding communities to play together because they believed that children having fun was a good way to help peace. Other children worked with the municipality and the Red Cross on dental and health campaigns. Later, hundreds trained as counsellors in play therapy and went on to help thousands of other children who had been displaced by violence.

Children's Mandate for Peace and Rights

Young people from Aguachica and Apartadó were not alone in feeling that they had something to offer Colombia's failing peace process. In May 1996, 27 children aged 9 to 15 and 30 adults representing organizations working for peace and/or with children in some of the most violent municipalities in the country gathered at a workshop organized by UNICEF. The young people took turns to describe what violence was doing to children in their communities and how they were trying to respond. It became clear that children living in Bogotá or Medellín did not have the same experience of war as children living in Apartadó or Aguachica, yet many were all too familiar with violence. Some spoke of gangs roaming the streets, terrorizing children on their way to school. Medellín had its own brand of violence – a mix of gangs, urban militias and drug cartels plus the cult of the *sicarios*, the young assassins.

Many of the children were amazed. They had not realized until then that so many other children lived under such conditions of violence. Three main ideas emerged from the workshop. First, that

most Colombians were unaware of the impact of the war on children. Second, that no one would be more effective at getting that message across than children themselves. Third, that to do so they needed a bigger platform to reach a wider and more influential audience. As a result, they began planning a special election in which children would be asked to choose which of their rights were most important to themselves and their communities.

The election became known as the Children's Mandate for Peace and Rights. Backed by UNICEF and the local National Network for Peace (*Redepaz*), it also drew important support from the Catholic Church, the Scouts, the Colombian Red Cross, World Vision, the YMCA, Save the Children, the Christian Children's Fund and the Defense of Children International, among others. The National Electoral Commission also agreed to run it like a real election.

Children were deeply involved throughout. They helped to design materials explaining child rights in language other children would understand. They devised child-rights games and taught them in schools and public meetings. They designed and starred in advertisements and ran press conferences and town meetings, talking publicly about the war, peace and their rights.

On 25 October 1996 children went to the polls. The colourful ballot listed 12 rights summarized from the Colombian constitution and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to education, to justice, to a safe environment and to peace. At some locations children ran out of voting cards, but they copied the ballot onto paper napkins and still cast their votes. In Bogotá voting had to be held on two consecutive Saturdays to meet the demand.

It had been hoped that perhaps 500,000 children would participate in the election but more than 2.7 million children turned out to vote, about a third of all children aged 7 to 18. This was all the more remarkable because, for financial reasons, it had only been possible to run the election in about a third of the more than 1000 municipalities. In 100 of the most violent and impoverished municipalities especially targeted by the organizers of the vote, the turnout was higher than 90 percent. Colombian Children voted overwhelmingly for the right to

survival, the right to peace and the right to love and family (Registraduría Nacional, 1996). Many of the organizations supporting the Children's Mandate had seen the exercise as primarily educational, to teach children about their rights and duties as citizens. The results were so powerful, however, that the children effectively turned the tables and taught that same lesson to adults.

Impact of the Children's Movement for Peace

Before the children's vote, the peace movement in Colombia had been weak and fragmented. Thousands of human rights activists had been assassinated or forced to flee the country. Plans to hold a national referendum on peace had been put on hold because it seemed too difficult and dangerous. But the timing of the Children's Mandate was perfect and became an inspiration.

A year later, the Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty, backed by UNICEF, *Redepaz* and the anti-kidnapping group, *Pais Libre*, went before Colombians. It asked them to support the children's vote, reject the atrocities of the war and make a personal pledge to build peace.

The previous presidential election had drawn only 4.5 million people to the polls – less than 25 percent of the electorate. But more than ten million Colombians pledged their support for the Citizen's Mandate. As a result, peace was catapulted to centre-stage and became the basis on which the presidential elections were fought and won in May 1998 by Andres Pastrana.

Pastrana said later that the Mandate 'gave him his agenda for the presidency. If he did nothing else during his term in office he had to make peace' (Cameron, 1999.)

For many months Colombians rode on a tidal wave of hope that 50 years of war would be suddenly swept away, but it was not that easy. A year after Pastrana's election, the government and the guerrillas lurched unsteadily towards peace talks. Massacres and assassinations continued. Kidnappings were up by 20 percent over the previous year (*El Espectador*, 1999: 6A). There was enormous frustration among many adults and unofficial emigration had risen dramatically (*Semana*, 1999.)

Against this backdrop of continuing violence, the Children's Movement for Peace continues to define itself. A core group of about 25 children drawn from different institutions and municipalities forms the Children's Council in Bogotá. The Council functions as an advisory body to the supporting organizations (UNICEF, *Redepaz*, the Scouts, the Red Cross, the Catholic Church, World Vision, among others), helps develop peace activities involving children and operates as a publicity arm. Since 1996 several Children's Assemblies, involving between 100 and 200 children from across the country, have met to discuss child rights and peace-making. The last assembly, in 1998, led to the development of Children's Councils for Peace in other municipalities. Results of the assemblies have also been formally presented to the government and have led to a national peace project between the Children's Movement, UNICEF, the Scouts and Victor G. Ricardo, and the Colombian High Commissioner for Peace.

The bulk of the membership of the Children's Movement, about 100,000 children, is found in the extensive networks of the supporting organizations. Through these, thousands of adolescents have become 'peace constructors', who work with other children promoting conflict resolution, tolerance and non-discrimination. Over 10,000 children have received training and are helping others learn how to avoid accidents with landmines. Hundreds of children have been trained and volunteer as counsellors to thousands of displaced children. When a devastating earthquake struck the coffee town of Armenia, 30 young volunteer counsellors from Urabá helped to train Armenian adolescents in play therapy for traumatized children. Many more adolescents volunteer to work with parents and children to help reduce family violence.

Through the *Redepaz* network, which includes about 400 human rights and peace organizations across the country, children gained a much higher profile. As one human rights activist explained, 'We listen to them more. Until the Children's Mandate came along, we really had no idea that children understood' (Cameron, 1998). The level on which most children 'understand' a situation as complex as that in Colombia is different from that of adults, yet their views are nevertheless valid. The children's

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perspective tends to be based less on political and economic concerns, and more on ideas of justice and fairness. Perhaps as a result, they are also less inclined to make much distinction between the violence generated by the war and the violence perpetrated in homes and on the streets. The latter is also much more profound. While approximately 6000 people die every year as a result of the war, some 25,000 are murdered in domestic, street or other criminal violence.

The level of child abuse is another special concern. Trends are always hard to fathom because of the uncertainty of the statistics, but it seems that millions of Colombian children suffer abuse, nearly a million seriously enough every year that they warrant hospital attention. Child murders are also rising. They almost doubled between 1994 and 1996 to more than 4000 per year (Defensoría del Pueblo, 1997; Conferencia Episcopal, 1999).

The Children's Movement sees that making peace in homes and on the streets is just as important as making peace in the war. As a result, their responses about how to make peace also tend to differ from adults. Interviews with adolescent peer counsellors working with the family planning NGO *Profamilia* reveal that they considered their activities to be a contribution to peace, 'because we help to reduce unwanted pregnancy among teenagers which is a big source of violence in the family'. Another child gave the example of his efforts to refurbish an arts centre in his community as a peace-making activity (Cameron, 1998).

Children were suggesting, in effect, that virtually anything that helps to improve the quality of life in a community affected by violence counts as peace-making. By extension, any child who is involved in such activities in Colombia is considered a *de facto* member of the Children's Movement for Peace.

When she was 14, Mayerly Sanchez, said: 'People never used to care about the war unless they were directly affected by it, but when children talk about pain and sorrow we make adults feel the pain as if it was their own' (Cameron, 1998). Experience has shown that the voices of children against violence can be an inspiration for adults. Their power seems to lie not just in the eloquence of their words, but in the fact that they are said by children.

Yet speaking out publicly against the war can also be dangerous. Human rights activists and peace-workers are frequently targeted by armed groups and children involved in the movement also face risks. 'We never accuse any of the armed groups', says Farliz Calle. 'All the children in the peace movement in Apartadó know this. If we did we could become targets. We will always denounce the violence but we never know who is responsible. We simply do not know'. All children are urged to follow this same strategy. It not only protects them, it also helps the Children's Movement to retain its neutrality which is crucial for its survival and growth.

Lessons for countries and communities in conflict

The energy and vision of young people is the driving force behind the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia, but a critical element has been the almost unprecedented level of support they have received from organizations like UNICEF, *Redepaz*, the Scout Federation, the Colombian Red Cross, Save the Children, World Vision and so on. That support has been forthcoming because of the acceptance by these organizations of child rights and participation as fundamental guiding principles. Without the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Children's Movement for Peace would never have achieved the same impact. Thanks to the CRC it is possibly the most profound example to date of the power and potential of child rights to change our world.

In the context of Colombia's brutal conflict, the successful linkage between the Children's Movement and the supporting organizations has been strongly influenced by the perceived neutrality of the latter. The Catholic Church, the Colombian Red Cross and even UNICEF (despite its obvious need to work with the government) are perceived as neutral in the conflict. Another critical factor is that many of the backers already possessed extensive networks. The structures for bringing children into the peace movement were already there and resourced. What was needed was a shift in the focus of the adult partners that would provide a framework in which the Children's Movement could

flourish. That 'shift in focus' presents an on-going challenge as adults continue to struggle and learn how to work with children and how to generate environments that promote genuine participation. The energy of the children is already there. The response of adults is the key.

The Children's Movement for Peace provides many lessons that have relevance for other countries and communities in conflict. It suggests that even in very difficult circumstances, the empowerment of adolescents through involvement in social development can be important for discouraging their inclination to join in a conflict. It has shown that the voices of children against violence can

exert a strong influence on adults and have a transforming effect on their communities. It also demonstrates that if you ask children serious questions, and take their answers seriously, they will often provide considered and even insightful responses that open up fresh opportunities for dialogue and development. Their perspective is often different and worthwhile.

Juan Elias Uribe, aged 17, said: 'We do not want to inherit the country that adults have created for us. We want to live a different kind of life, and to get it we have to be involved in creating it. We will never give up'. That is Colombia's chief hope for the future.

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