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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH:

Causes and Effects of
internal migration of
youth in Colombia



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I. Introduction

This report covers the scope of a one-year process carried out by nineteen youth researchers who seek to understand the causes and effects of the internal migration of young people in Colombia, and the relationship this has with social investment. The researchers of this study come from 14 municipalities and cities throughout Colombia, and the analysis of this document is centered on national findings and recommendations.

This report consists of two sections. The first part of the report provides a summary of the process as well as the history of the research methodology itself, which was done through a distinctive methodology known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). The focus of this report, with its emphasis on constructing collective knowledge, is explained in detail, as well as PAR's origins in Colombia. Over the last decade, PAR has become an important peacebuilding tool.

The report highlights the research process in detail, as well as how the development of the research question, the data collection phase, the data analysis phase, and finally, the community finding-sharing events, which served to exchange, validate, and return the findings back to the community. This report also explains how, after all the activities took place and after all the feedback was given, the researchers were able to produce findings and recommendations and to collectively produce and write this report.

The second part of the report is focused on the findings and recommendations of the research study and is centered on the key drivers of the internal migration of young people in Colombia. These factors are related to: 1) social dynamics at the local level; 2) ongoing violence and conflict; 3) corruption; and 4) a lack of citizen participation. Each factor is described first via a narrative story to illustrate the issue, which includes both the challenges and hopes of young people in building a better country. These vignettes are supported by data and citations derived directly from the data collection activities at the local level. After each story, the authors of the report present the main findings and recommendations.

II. Participatory Action Research Methodology

Definition of Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research is understood as a research approach that places emphasis on the intentional and comprehensive participation of community members and the development of collective action. It is also known as a collaborative research process in which different stakeholder groups that are directly involved in an issue or problem are committed to finding the drivers and effects of that problem, and as a result, creates positive social change through the clarity generated by the data collection and data analysis processes.

It's important to understand that PAR is based on working with people who live and experience the studied issues at a local level, and it holds special consideration for the knowledge and lived experiences of those at the center of the study (USIP, 2023).

Definition of Conventional Research Methods

Conventional or traditional approaches to research can be understood as processes of data collection and analysis of information, centered on the deep understanding of complex phenomena through empirical data (quantitative) as well as qualitative information and using instruments such as interviews, observation, surveys, analysis, controlled experiments, or case studies. These methods provide different perspectives, as well as varied levels of analysis to study the problem or dynamics that are the object of the research (Creswell, 2014).

Additionally, conventional research usually uses processes for collection and analysis of data about people who are its subjects of study and is not usually developed in collaboration with those same people and communities. This way of carrying out research can often be perceived as an extractive process, where information is rarely returned to the community for their knowledge, validation, or for the development of ideas for collective action.

Traditional research methods can also be seen through the lens of power, with external parties as the researchers who are in control during the entire research process. Conversely, PAR approaches are centered on communities, giving power and voice to stakeholders from the community who possess the lived daily experience of the issue at hand in the research. Researchers and community stakeholders work collaboratively and iteratively throughout the process, particularly during data collection and analysis. Such collaboration helps to embed capacity within the community, deepening the research abilities and competencies of community members and local facilitating organizations. This allows those same localized ecosystems to develop reliable, accurate, and useable information to make local-level decisions.

History of Participatory Action Research in Colombia

Participatory Action Research has its roots in an early era of Colombian sociology, which began in the 1960s through the groundbreaking work of Colombian thinker Orlando Fals Borda.

Fals Borda, a sociologist and academic, first began developing the PAR methodology in the Colombian department of Córdoba in 1972. During this time, there were three important milestones, according to Negrete (2008), that allowed its advancement: 1) the creation of a group of thinkers known as “La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social” in Bogotá and its work in Córdoba; 2) the rise of the National Peasant (Campesino) Association of Colombia (ANUC); 3) the nascent interest of some people in Montería in beginning research processes with peasant communities of that region.

The innovative approach developed by Fals Borda and La Rosca placed elements of traditional sociological research in service of the goals of Colombian social and indigenous movements, codifying popular knowledge through visual narratives and others accessible methods in order to mobilizing it for action at the local level (Rappaport, 2021).

These lived experiences and knowledge of the peasant movements of Montería and Córdoba became the basis that Fals Borda would begin to use as PAR in Colombia (Negrete, 2008).

The cultural, personal, and political relationships that Fals Borda had with the Peasant Association, his interest in agricultural issues, history, and literature, and his commitment to the Caribbean region made possible his seminal work *Historia doble de la Costa*.

Fals Borda’s work has left an indelible legacy in the collective PAR work that is still seen today in Colombia. For example, in 2021, Joanne Rappaport, researcher at Georgetown University in Washington,

D.C., wrote the book *Cowards Don't Make History: Orlando Fals Borda and the Origins of*

Participatory Action Research. The book reflects on the recent and historical experiences of PAR in places like Córdoba and examines the impact that these processes have had on localized communities and social movements in the region.

The National Center for Historical Memory in Colombia, one of the most important instances of collective memory and truth-telling about the Colombian armed conflict, has based part of its methodology and approach in participatory action research so as to collect the information, data, testimonies, and memories of hundreds of individuals and collective movements and their expressions—many of whom were victims of the armed conflict. One of the books of the National Center for Historical Memory focuses on the lived experiences of a regional association from the region Montes de María, titled *Un bosque de memoria viva, desde la Alta Montaña de El Carmen de Bolívar* (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). It tells a story of a collective experience and its hopes for a territory whose people seek to live in peace.

The roots of participatory-action research are endogenous to Colombia, which demonstrates the importance of maintaining, elevating, and advancing these collective processes and participatory practices.

Participatory Action Research as a Tool for Peacebuilding

Sustainable peacebuilding in the territories must address not only issues of overt violence, but also its root causes at the social, economic and political levels. PAR and its various methods engage communities to analyze these roots causes, heightening awareness in order to generate locally-led responses to violence, vulnerability and conflict.

In other words, PAR generates safe spaces for community dialogue between different stakeholders and groups in society, providing a genuine vision of the problems that affect them while allowing assertive, effective, and focused decision-making that strengthens the sense of belonging and empowerment of communities and contributes to peacebuilding with a territorial approach. Likewise, PAR as a community process intrinsically promotes social justice and equity, addressing the underlying causes of conflict such as inequality, exclusion, and injustice by benefiting the processes of reconciliation, leadership, mediation, and consensus necessary for building more peaceful, just, and resilient societies.

Participatory Action Research in the Context of the U.S. Institute of Peace

PAR in the context of the United States Institute of Peace has a fundamental role because of its focus on peacebuilding, and the empowerment and development of skills for youth leaders. Collaborative research methodologies have become a central tool for strengthening the capacity of youth leaders and communities affected by conflict and violence worldwide, allowing them transform their realities and contexts, as well as providing young people with the ability to generate practical and applied solutions from research and community action processes.

Peacebuilding is complex and multidimensional, requiring the engagement and active support of local stakeholders. USIP's Generation Change Fellows Program strengthens the capacities of young social leaders to contribute to peacebuilding process affecting their communities. Since its first inclusion in in the

Generation Change Program in Kenya in 2017, PAR has offered Fellows new tools and mechanisms to support and catalyze peacebuilding activities. It has proven effective for making visible localized agendas and goals which are often overlooked in broad national peacebuilding programs. Additionally, PAR highlights the value of bottom-up ideation and collaboration amongst local stakeholders, resulting in new interventions and practices which prove meaningful because of the changes in relationships and understandings between stakeholders, regardless of the size and scope of the project (Amambia et al., 2018).

In Colombia, peacebuilding poses multiple challenges due to the consequences and effects generated by decades of armed conflict and violence on the country's population and its communities. The configuration of lasting peace processes, then, implies the need for the participation of diverse stakeholders around the same objective. This is where PAR and its initial implementation by USIP with 19 young peacebuilders at the national level in 13 municipalities of Colombia (USIP, 2023) undoubtedly contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, tools, and capacity building in processes of research and problem solving through community action.



III. PAR Methodology

Designing the research question

Nineteen young people from different regions of Colombia (Atlántico, Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Caquetá, Córdoba, Chocó, and Cundinamarca) were selected by USIP to become PAR researchers and to develop a research project using the PAR methodology.

To shape the research process, the program team established 4 strategic phases. The first phase was focused on research design (April to June 2023), where 11 virtual sessions and one in-person session were held in order to understand and deepen the PAR concept and identify its impact on the participation of the community that was affected by the research topic. The second phase (July-August 2023) consisted of data collection in the communities using four participatory methodologies, which are described below. The third stage (September-October 2023) focused on data analysis collectively among the entire group, using various tools such as Excel, technical worksheets, and local and national information mappings. The fourth stage (November 2023) focused on the socialization of findings with the communities that participated in the process, in order to be able to return the information and validate the findings and recommendations that had been reached.

During the **first phase** of the PAR methodology, the participants' research interests began to be queried and collected to create the possible research question based on topics of interest. The initial themes included: violence, migration,

and social investment. These three themes were perceived as significant and recurring problems for young people in the research group's communities.

Through a democratic exercise based on building consensus, the researchers collectively agreed on the issues of migration and social investment and how these affect the youth population in Colombia. The researchers developed three possible questions, which included:

Why have local social investment strategies failed to reduce migration and violence and to ensure the social well-being of rural and urban communities in Colombia?

What is the role of young people in community processes, and how can their involvement contribute to the development and strengthening of communities to mitigate violence?

What effects does the lack of social investment have on the migration of young people from different municipalities?

Subsequently, a meeting was held in Bogotá (May 29 to June 2, 2023) with the purpose of reflecting on the previous proposals and their scope and then reformulating the research question, incorporating new attributes, arriving at the question: ***“What is the relationship between social investment and internal migration of young people in Colombia?”*** Compared to the initial options, this new question, being an open one, allowed the group to explore new perspectives and even discover unexpected or unforeseen aspects.

Data Collection Process

Once the research question was agreed upon, the researchers identified five (5) interest groups to prioritize in their study. These five sectors included youth, community members, government/local officials, private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These five were prioritized due to their role and impact on decision-making, or in other cases, because they are part of sectors of society who generally do not participate in policy spaces or in the design of social investment programs. These five stakeholder groups were the focus of the data collection activities.

The researchers, with USIP, agreed to implement the following data collection tools to collect information on the research question. These participatory tools include World Café, Forum Theatre, Learning Circles, and Semi-structured Interviews.

• **Forum theater or theater of the oppressed:** The objective is to use theater as a tool to reimagine relationships of conflict and power, first developed by Brazilian artist Augusto Boal. (The Cross Border Project, 2017)

• **v** Its objective is to facilitate deep and substantive conversations between people who have not met or interacted before, just as might happen in a café setting, first developed by

Juanita Brown. (Innovation for Social Change, 2012).

• **Learning Circles:** A method that is based on collaborative action and the significant exchange of knowledge, used to mobilize shared learning and joint action.

• **Semi-structured Interviews:** “Semi-structured interviews, for their part, are based on a sequence of anticipatory questions, but the interviewer has the freedom to introduce additional questions to clarify concepts or obtain more information on the desired topics (that is, not all questions are predetermined)” (Hernandez Sampieri et al 2010, 480).

To answer the research question, the team began with a data collection and analysis process, where the leaders participating in the program designed a plan and a timeline between the months of June and August that identified the activities, key stakeholders, timeframes, materials, and responsible parties.

In addition to creating a timeline for outings, activities, and the data collection process with the stakeholder groups, the USIP team, along with the co-researchers, developed a protocol for an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although Colombia does not have an institution similar to the IRB, since this this was a research project with human subjects, an ethical review with an independent committee was required to ensure that the data collection activities would not have a negative impact on the participants. This included ensuring that all subjects who participated were 18 years of age or above, and that the methods implemented had theoretical frameworks, informed consent, and protocols established by all researchers.

Seeking to enhance the participatory approach of research, USIP’s research teams developed by geographical proximity, and with the support from USIP, each team undertook their activities

for data collection, linking the stakeholders in their communities. Between July and August 2023, 102 activities were carried out, which included engaging with 601 interested parties with the following characteristics: 45.5% youth, 45.4% women, 35% community leaders, 30.6% ethnic population, 2% private sector, and 2% public officials.

The data collected derived from the 4 participatory methods: Semi-structured Interviews (63), Learning Circles (20), World Cafés (13), and Forum Theater (6), which allowed the researchers to collect qualitative and quantitative information.

Data Analysis Process

After the data collection phase, the researchers met again with the purpose of analyzing the data they collected, identifying findings and formulating recommendations first at the local level, and then looking at systems and factors at the national level. First, guided by a data analysis matrix, the information was extracted from the collected inputs and organized by regions and interest groups. A second layer of analysis included identifying recurring, common, and particularly relevant themes and words by interest group. A third level of analysis was carried out at the national level, where the findings from different regions

were compared to identify similarities and differences between the topics cited by the interest groups.

Using Systems Mapping (Burns and Worsley, 2015), two large analysis groups were organized, particularly focused on rural and urban settings, and organized at a second level of categories focused on migration and social investment. Recognizing the data obtained in each municipality, the different perspectives, findings, and recommendations for each group (Rural and Urban) were presented visually. These were finally summarized in the co-creation of the first draft of National Findings and Recommendations, which makes visible the voices of 601 people who participated in the data collection phase.



Socialization Events

After the data analysis process, the participants of the PAR program took on the challenge of organizing events to exchange findings with the stakeholders who participated in the data collection sessions. The purpose of these events was to share the initial local and national findings and to collect additional information to validate and enrich them. In the same way, the events were spaces that invited representatives of the stakeholder groups to establish commitments to adopt and act on the shared recommendations, strengthen relationships for future phases of the program, and promote dialogue between interest groups that often do not work together directly.

In preparation for the community finding-sharing events, the researchers designed communication materials, methodologies, and strategies to share findings and recommendations in a clear, simple, and dynamic way at the local level. In total, 11 data exchange events were held that brought together 476 people under a wide variety of formats, including workshops, fairs, and discussions where the findings were shared through infographics, flipcharts, summaries, posters, fanzines, and even cultural and artistic activities.

Refining Initial Findings and Recommendations with the Community

After the phase of socialization of findings and recommendations in each territory, the young researchers, together with the USIP team, met in the city of Santa Marta with the aim of formulating the refined findings and recommendations of the research

project. This exercise was enriched by the analysis and incorporation of the additional inputs collected in the framework of the local socialization of findings events and the information collected in the first phase of the research project. This validation process is particularly relevant in participatory action research, as it allows researchers to include the voices of all stakeholders and formulate findings and recommendations that are faithful to the perspectives of the people consulted.

Subsequently, each local finding and recommendation was analyzed, reviewed, and refined, paying particular attention to how the new supporting data that had been collected through the local findings sharing events augmented and clarified the national-level findings and recommendations. Consequently, refining the national findings involved analyzing the qualitative and quantitative variables present in the data to ensure that the construction of the refined findings and recommendations were grounded in clear and



verifiable information. It is important to highlight that within the framework of the formulation of refined findings and recommendations, the youth researchers analyzed the commitments that the stakeholders undertook during the socialization events.

IV. National Findings and Recommendations

4.1 Social dynamics and their impact

In a small Colombian town called Esperanza, where the streets vibrate with the energy of young people who project the desire for a better future to the community, there is a group of young people who are facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge. They feel that the barriers that society places in their path, as if it were an obstacle course, are preventing them from growing individually, affecting not only their personal dreams, but also the possibility of contributing to the development of their territory.

Among them are Valentina, a young woman passionate about the arts, and Felipe, an enthusiastic defender of education. Both share the conviction that, despite obstacles, they have the potential to change the course of their lives and, therefore, the destiny of their community.

They are walking along the El Caudal neighborhood, and as they walk along the narrow paths and share stories, Valentina and Felipe realize that other young people also face similar challenges¹.

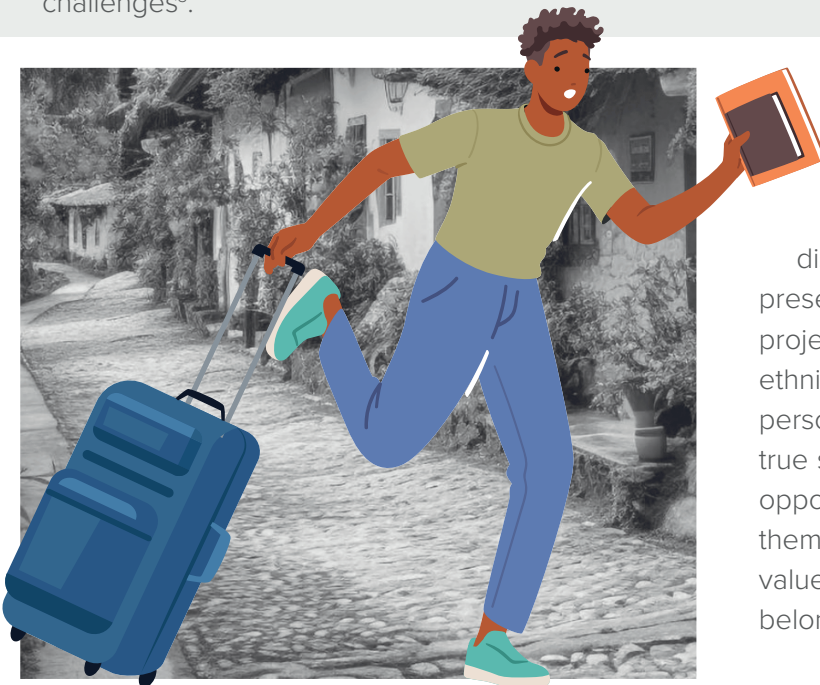


¹ Young people, Learning Circle, Cartagena, August 22, 2023: "The lack of employment and education opportunities for young people generates youth migration in Colombia."

Despite their arduous efforts, limited opportunities and lack of resources continue to be a constant obstacle in their pursuit of individual and collective growth. For this reason, they have decided to go live in other territories, looking for a place where opportunities allow them to flourish and allow them to have a better quality of life, where they are guaranteed the basic needs for a decent life.²

Time has passed, and some of the other young people in the group have been forced to make difficult, even painful decisions. The need for broader opportunities and an environment conducive to their development and security has led them to consider migrating to other places in search of a more promising future. Valentina, Felipe, and several of their friends face the devastating reality that, to fully flourish, they may have to look outside their roots.

With all their enthusiasm, they have decided to embark on a journey in search of a place that offers them the necessary opportunities to grow personally and professionally, and also a place where their voice is heard and taken into account as representatives of the young people of the Esperanza community and of the youth of Colombia. However, this journey has become a journey full of challenges³.



On this journey, Valentina, Felipe, and their friends have discovered that the challenge of heading to a new destination is not only marked by geographical distance, but by the pressing need to preserve their identity and build a life project in accordance with their culture, ethnicity, dreams, aspirations, needs and personal projects. They have realized that true success not only lies in obtaining new opportunities, but in being able to reach them without losing sight of their roots, their values, and their essence as individuals belonging to a community⁴.

² NGO, Semi-structured interview, Soacha, August 16, 2023: "We assume that social investment is the fundamental basis for municipal administrations to meet many of the social needs that the inhabitants have, issues of public services, education issues, issues of employment, issues of access to well-being, food." "Meeting people's basic needs."

³ NGO, Semi-structured interview, Soacha, August 16, 2023: "An indigenous person is on a street begging for alms; it cannot be because he was simply a victim of the armed conflict and displacement and was never able to return to his territory, and now he is asking for coins. Well, this is something that sometimes happens, sometimes they may suddenly get used to that, but it's not easy for that type of person to adapt to this culture, city culture. So, it's not going to be easy to look for a job, it's not going to be easy to educate yourself, it is not going to be easy to access health services."

⁴ All actors (youth, community, public sector, private sector, NGOs), Local socialization event, Soacha, November 3, 2023: "It is important to diversify the offers of opportunities and cooperation, since the current offer is mainly aimed at sports and entrepreneurship activities. However, art and culture are segregated from the same offer. There is a need to include all populations (LGBTIQ+, Afro, indigenous, neurodivergent, special abilities, ROOM, inclusion, displaced people, farmers) in these initiatives."

Unexpected opportunities are emerging that could change the course of their lives. A national entity has launched an institutional offer with vacancies, offering employment opportunities that could mean a new chapter in their individual and family careers.

However, this call has not been without ambiguities. The entity faces the challenge of raising its level of credibility and the level of citizen participation in its selection processes based on merit and not clientelism. Young people have realized that, despite the tempting offer, the image and trust they have in the institution and in the equity of the selection processes are essential for the opportunity to be truly transformative⁵.

Beyond their individual aspirations, they share a common dream: to make access to education, employment, health, recreation, sports, and culture more equitable for all young people in the country.



With this goal in mind, they have decided to continue building on the understanding of the current situation⁶. This group of young dreamers has come together for a common purpose: to change the destiny of their community. Inspired by the idea of creating opportunities for youth, they have decided to establish an organization that is a catalyst for positive change⁷.

⁵ Public sector (National civil service commission entity), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 16, 2023: "The entity manages employability processes and offers, but there is little credibility in the institutions regarding the competitions [...]" "There were just over a thousand vacancies at the district level. We closed registrations and most of them were not filled."

⁶ Public sector (Ministry of the Interior), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 19, 2023: "It is not possible to know how much and where to invest, to the extent that precise figures are not known for the number of young people who have migrated or are in risk of doing so [...] so that we can understand through data the current situation of young people as we reach more rural or urban contexts."

⁷ All actors (youth, community, public sector, private sector, NGOs), Local socialization event, Soacha, November 3, 2023: "Establish an organization around the Youth Council or through subcommittees in each commune or township of the municipality of Soacha. The creation of support networks among these youth groups will allow their work to be highlighted both nationally and internationally. It is crucial to maintain a continuous training process in areas of leadership and project development, preparing to present proposals to both national and international entities."

Guided by the desire to represent the young people of each community, these visionaries decided to structure their efforts around a Youth Council, with the conviction that change begins from the foundations. Thus, they are forming subcommittees in every corner of Colombia, making sure to address the specific needs of each community. The creation of these subcommittees is not only strengthening the connection between young people but is also fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility towards collective well-being.

With the aim of amplifying the impact of their efforts, the young visionaries have decided to build support networks between the different subcommittees. They have realized that by working together, they can not only enhance their own initiatives but also highlight the work of youth at a national and even international level.

The organization is becoming a center of ideas where young people share experiences, learnings, and challenges. To further enhance their leadership capacity, they have embarked on a continuous training process in areas of leadership and project development⁸. Workshops, seminars, and mentoring have become essential tools to prepare them and enable them to formulate and present solid proposals to both national and international entities.

This youth organization is now a reference for youth empowerment. Their innovative projects are not only transforming the physical landscape of the municipality but are also inspiring other communities to follow the example of Colombian youth.

The tireless work of these young visionaries is demonstrating that when youth are given the opportunity to lead, progress, and develop, youth can become agents of change that transcends borders⁹.

⁸ All actors (youth, community, public sector, private sector, NGOs), socialization event, Chocó, November 2023: "An interethnic school for strengthening leadership in young people, so as to motivate participation in decision-making spaces."

⁹ All actors (youth, community, public sector, private sector, NGOs), socialization event, Chocó, November 2023: "An interethnic school for strengthening leadership in young people, so as to motivate participation in decision-making spaces."

Given the different **social dynamics and impacts** that Valentina, Felipe, and the other young people have identified regarding social investment, migration, and youth, the group expresses the following **findings and recommendations**:

Main finding:

Internal migration of young people is a phenomenon that is often not discussed in Colombia, and as a result, there is not much attention paid to engaging in public policy on this issue within decision-making spaces or strategies. Migration can be forced or voluntary and can have negative and positive aspects in regards to opportunities for education, employment, well-being, and quality of life. Social investment can be an important factor in the geographic stability or migration of young people in different territories.

Main recommendation:

Generate and maintain incentives to promote entrepreneurship, employment, and education for the youth population in order to provide better opportunities for the well-being of young people.

Recognizing that educational opportunities are outside some territories, create initiatives and strategies for them to return and remain in the territories after having studied elsewhere.

Sub-findings:

- There is a lack of access to opportunities, which is why young people must migrate to other cities.
- We found a loss of cultural identity and roots in the act of leaving one's own territory, particularly in ethnic and rural populations.

Sub-recommendations:

- Promote long-term policies and programs that promote generational renewal and the geographic stability of young people in their communities.
- Have more adequate and precise planning for social investment in education, the development of social-emotional skills, employment, and sustainable opportunities for young people and their families.

4.2 Conflicto y violencia

In Bellavista, another community located among the mountains of Colombia very far from the Esperanza community, a young leader named Camila has repeatedly heard the young people of her community say that the social issues generated by armed conflict and violence are one of the main causes that lead them to involuntarily migrate from their territory¹⁰, as also happens with their friends in other communities in Colombia¹¹.

Some of these young people and their families will soon have to migrate involuntarily due to the armed conflict in the community, but this is not the only reason why they leave. For Juliana, a young woman who has migrated from La Flor community to the Bellavista community, her relocation was due to gender violence and family problems¹². Pablo, another young man from the community, had to leave his community in Las Rocas and go to live in the Bellavista community due to a conflict with a gang to which he was being wrongly linked, receiving constant threats¹³.

Something that the young people agreed on is that they have not generated a bond as a community, especially between young people and the local authorities, for fear of being judged and receiving reprisals or their status as youths. They have a distrust of authorities because, on some occasions, they have been judged and stereotyped for the way they dress, speak, for the place where they live, and for their place of origin¹⁴.

The young people of the Bellavista community say that it is nice to be able to live in their communities and have opportunities right there, but unfortunately, that is not their reality. They will have to leave their homes, their families, and roots to go to the big cities, and face unrest and the constant fear that something could happen to them¹⁵.

¹⁰ Young man, Semi-structured interview, Pavarandoncito, Mutatá, August 6, 2023: "In 1995, my parents had to flee their lands and leave everything because, one night, some armed men came in and threatened them. That's why we live in this community."

¹¹ Community (Las Américas neighborhood community, La Esperanza, Bello Horizonte and the religious community), Learning Circle and Forum Theater, El Doncello, Caquetá, August 5 to 14, 2023: "We migrate to have a better support network, greater growth, better opportunities, and more economic stability [...] In some cases, migration is positive or negative because many leave the countryside for the city to access academic and work opportunities [...] We migrate because there is no good social investment"

¹² Differential and ethnic approach community, Learning Circle, El Doncello, Caquetá, 2023: "Domestic violence, the armed conflict, citizen coexistence. Domestic violence makes people migrate, but it also causes more violence."

¹³ Young people, Teatro Foro, El Doncello, July 20, 2023: "After having problems with the police, I left my area of origin"

¹⁴ Young people, Forum Theater and Learning Circle, Soacha, August 10, 2023: "We receive contempt for the way we dress, speak, where we live, for smoking marihuana."

¹⁵ Young people, World Café, El Carmen de Bolívar, July 31, 2023: "It is nice being in your community and having opportunities, but when there are none and you have to leave and there is that unrest in your daily life... Because in the city, you do not have peace of mind because you fear that you will go out and something could happen to you, that someone will come and take away the little bit that you acquired during the day... But, in the community you do not have that restlessness."

Young people also mention that there is a lot of discourse about citizen security and peace, but for them, these issues that are on the public agenda are not supported by solid public policies. This is why they have not felt a presence of the State¹⁶.

Given all these situations that young people and other people in the community experience, they consider that the most effective way to be heard by the Government is through protesting existing institutional processes and mechanisms. They normally carry out peaceful demonstrations to publicize certain experiences in their territories when there is no adequate implementation of community development plans and social projects. However, these peaceful demonstrations ultimately end in violent demonstrations since, on some occasions, unscrupulous people sneak in and undermine the purpose of the demonstration, which has generated a stigmatization of young people.

One of the civil society organizations that works together with the Bellavista community and that focuses on community development, shares that the majority of informal settlements are in Bogotá Colombia. These are mostly people and families affected and displaced by the internal armed conflict, and they face security problems in their territories, where they lack quality education and employment opportunities for their progress. This mostly affects young people who drop out of secondary school. Likewise, they emphasize that migration itself, regardless of its type, should be considered one of the main humanitarian crises faced at this time¹⁷.

This organization has been working with young people in the Bellavista community and has been able to identify that mental and physical health is what the young population values most (75.1% with respect to other aspects), followed by access to housing (42.3%) and personal security (36.1%)¹⁸.



¹⁶ Young people, Learning Circle, La Calera, August 12, 2023: "The topic of planning is very heavy, very heavy, because decisions are being made in the municipality, but without knowledge of what the specific realities are in statistical issues, that I know who I am going to impact [...] there are public policies that were formulated, let's say, in a previous administration and that administration left those policies defunded."

¹⁷ Grassroots organization (TECHO), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, July 27, 2023: "In almost all the informal settlements in host communities... We do not know of any informal settlement where there are no migrants.[...] I feel that human migration, along with climate change, is the second great crisis that humanity has."

¹⁸ Grassroots organization (Corona Foundation: GOYN Bogotá Program), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 11, 2023: "GOYN Report 2023 - Young People with Potential: Mental and physical health (75.1%) is what the young population values most, followed by access to housing (42.3%) and personal security (36.1%)."

Juan, who works in the Government, identifies that young people migrate for two reasons: when it is a voluntary migration—in search of employment and/or education— or due to forced displacement—when fleeing violence and intimidation from armed groups. In fact he says that he can divide Colombia into 3 versions of Colombia: (1) the connected, cosmopolitan Colombia, modern and technological, i.e. cities like Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and perhaps Barranquilla; (2) another is the Colombia of intermediate cities that have connectivity with the world and with the rest of the country, but that still have an unstable development and employment force; this is the unconsolidated Colombia; and (3) the other Colombia, mostly dispersed and rural, that is in another cycle and level of development and connectivity¹⁹.

Juan also shares that around 80 - 85% of young people who enter the military service belong to socioeconomic strata 1 and 2,²⁰ and it is mostly low-income people who are forced to provide this service. Juan had the opportunity to talk with Sergio, and Sergio told him that he and his young male friends concluded that, at 18 years old, they are people capable of serving in the military and waging someone else's war but are not able to be elected as congressmen. In order to be elected congressmen, in the case of the House of Representatives, the minimum age is 25 years old. So, for Sergio and his friends it is shocking when others tell young people that they are useful for war but not yet able to influence the decisions of their country, even when being a congressman does not have any other requirements than having a high school diploma.

Manuela, who works in a private sector company, and has a corporate volunteering program with the grassroots organization, shares that her company is working with 250 youth enterprises in 8 of the nation's municipalities²¹, some of them affected by the armed conflict. She says that these enterprises are territorially based, and in some contexts, due to their vulnerable situations, they work with people who have had to migrate. On the other hand, 80%²² are working with projects that focus on educational communication aimed at transforming social behaviors, conflict resolution, de-stigmatization of the migrant population, and countering xenophobia.

¹⁹ Public sector (ICETEX), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 25, 2023: "One can almost identify Colombia and divide it into 3 Colombias: the connected Colombia, the cosmopolitan, modern, technological Colombia, that is to say cities like Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, and perhaps other large ones like Barranquilla; intermediate cities, since they have connectivity with the world, with the rest of the country, but that still have development and an unstable employment force that are not yet consolidated, like Ibagué, for example; and another Colombia, which is a mostly rural and dispersed Colombia that is in another cycle, yes, and if we don't develop that, it will be difficult for someone to say 'I'm not leaving, I'm staying' or 'I want to develop here simply because I am going to have everything here'. So, I think there is a challenge and that implies an effort from the State."

²⁰ Public sector (ICETEX), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 25, 2023: "Around 80-85% of young people who enter military service belong to socioeconomic strata 1 and 2, and the majority are low-income people who are forced to serve. Young men mention that many of them say that at 18 they are fit to serve in the military, but NOT to be elected as congressmen. Because, to be elected congressman, in the case of the House of Representatives, the minimum age is 25 years. So, it is shocking when they tell a young man that he is useful for war but not yet fit to be able to influence the decisions of his country, even when being a congressman in this case does not have any requirement other than being a high school graduate, and, when having a degree is not a guarantee of being a good or bad politician."

²¹ Private sector (Quantica), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, July 24, 2023: "We are working with 250 youth enterprises in 8 of the country's municipalities, territorially based as well as remote, some marginalized, and some affected by the armed conflict, and let's say that, naturally, because they are contexts in vulnerable situations, there are people who have had to emigrate."

²² Private sector (Common Sense Organization), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 2, 2023: "80% of the projects are educational communication projects for the transformation of behaviors that have to do with social issues."

Manuela shares that, although she has not migrated, her family did due to the nation's armed conflict, and they now live in the Nelson Mandela neighborhood in Cartagena²³. Living there and through her work, she has been able to learn about the violence in the country's different territories that causes the migration of young people. These young people move from their municipalities seeking more tranquility and opportunities to other cities where perhaps they do not find this tranquility and opportunities either.

Thanks to what Camila, the young people of the Bellavista community, Juan, and Manuela have shared about conflict and violence from their different perspectives and experiences, the following findings and recommendations have been identified:

Main findings:

Violence and insecurity derived from the armed conflict persist as some of the fundamental causes of internal involuntary and forced migration of young people in Colombia. The conflict increases insecurity and finances illegal economies, affecting the physical integrity and mental health of young people, disintegrating families, and stripping them of their support networks. The conflict drives young people to seek safer environments and generates barriers that prevent certain stakeholders from investing in social programs in the affected territories.

Violence and conflict do not only refer to the internal armed conflict, but domestic violence and gender violence were also referred to as determining factors for migrating to other cities or neighborhoods.

Main recommendations:

Continue the implementation of the Peace Agreement, particularly of elements focused on peace education. Likewise, create oversight spaces where citizens can monitor the progress of the Agreement.

Make the hotlines for domestic and gender-based violence more effective, as well as strengthening the response of authorities in order to have an adequate response in these cases of violence.

Sub-findings:

- Conflict, violence and insecurity in rural and urban areas persist as some of the fundamental causes of the internal involuntary and forced migration of young people in Colombia at the interregional, intermunicipal, and inter-neighborhood/inter-community levels;
- Fear and mistrust prevail in interactions between young people and the community and local authorities when addressing situations of conflict, violence, and insecurity;
- Public safety and peace are common topics on the public agenda, but they are not supported by solid public policies, which is why the State has not been able to address them efficiently through social investment.



²³ Private sector (DRAN DIGITAL S.A.S), Semi-structured interview, Cartagena, August 25, 2023: "Although I have not migrated, my family did due to the Colombian armed conflict, and they live in the Nelson Mandela neighborhood." In this sense, violence in the country's different territories will cause the migration of young people, who move away from their municipalities looking for more tranquility."

Sub-recommendations:

- Socialize those projects and programs that are implemented and whose purpose is to work with young people and reduce conflict and violence in a simple way. These programs should include the aspect of forced migration in the young population.
- Establish support networks and strengthen care routes operated by control entities, where emotional support and vocational guidance are provided to young people who migrate within Colombia due to causes of conflict and violence.

4.3 Corruption

In addition to everything that young people, the community, Juan, and Manuela have shared with Camila, there is a shadowy, hard-to-see factor in society that undermines the dreams and potential prosperity of the Bellavista community: corruption. In the central square, where laughter and joy used to resonate, there is now palpable tension. Bad decisions and the diversion of resources destined for social investment have created deep gaps of inequality, especially affecting youth²⁴.

Marcela lives in this context. She is a young woman with hopeful eyes that reflect her dreams and goals and a heart committed to her community. Marcela is tired of seeing how corruption affects the lives of her friends, neighbors, and family, especially those who have decided and are deciding to migrate in search of opportunities that her own community is denying them²⁵.

Determined to change things, Marcela has become involved in the exercise of citizen oversight and social control. However, she has had to face the misinformation and ignorance that surrounds this practice. Distrust in institutions and fear of reprisals are obstacles that she must overcome.

With courage, Marcela has decided to take action and educate her community about the importance of and how to exercise citizen oversight and social control. She has organized talks and workshops to share knowledge and dispel misinformation. Now, a group of committed young people has joined her, willing to be the guardians of transparency and truth in the Bellavista community.

Together, they face these challenges and overcome the mistrust that surrounds the oversight of social investment programs. They are establishing mechanisms to ensure that resources earmarked for community projects actually benefit those who need them most²⁶.

²⁴ Grassroots organization, Semi-structured interview, Bolívar, July 7, 2023: "In the department of Bolívar, social investment mostly does not reach rural areas."

²⁵ Community, Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 20, 2023: "There are resources, but these do not reach the population that needs to be served in the communities, or sometimes, priority is given to the care of part of the population instead other sectors for example, investment in older adults and attention to young people."

²⁶ Young people, Forum Theater and World Café, Doncella, July 16, 2023: "Every time a resource arrives, it goes through many filters in which money and lack of control are lost."

As the youth watch-group gains confidence, the community has begun to experience visible changes. Social investment programs have become more effective and focused on the real needs of the population. Inequality gaps have begun to close, and the migration of young people in search of opportunities has decreased, and those who have left have returned to the community.

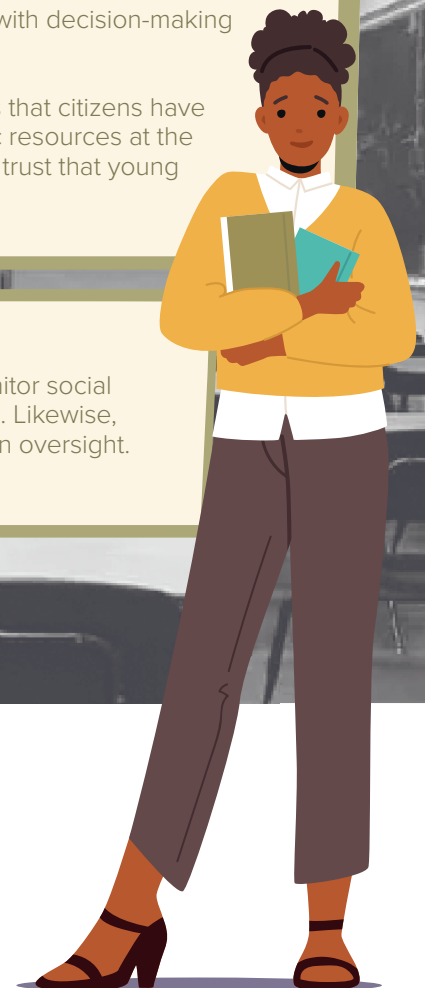
Marcela has been able to identify the following findings and recommendations regarding corruption:

Main findings:

- Corruption, represented by the diversion and inadequate execution of social investment, leads to the creation of inequality gaps and problems that encourage the migration of young people, weakens institutions, and affects territorial development.
- There is a perceived lack of transparency in accessing public information, including social investment programs, which increases citizen distrust towards government and local authorities. Young people perceive that in order to obtain real information about the execution of public resources or to be a beneficiary of a project, they must have personal connections with the people with decision-making power.
- There is a lack of knowledge about citizen oversight and the rights and duties that citizens have in accessing information and participating in the control and execution of public resources at the local and national level. This lack of knowledge largely derives from the lack of trust that young people have towards institutions.

Main recommendation:

Establish a digitalized tool (portal/application) that works in real time to monitor social investment projects and resource execution at the national and local levels. Likewise, provide advice and instructions to create, participate in, and maintain citizen oversight.



4.4 Lack of Participation

In the heart of Bellavista, there also lives a young man named Carlos, son of a family that has migrated from the Esperanza community.

Carlos has always dreamed of contributing to positive change and progress in his community, but social barriers and a lack of guarantees and opportunities have prevented him from achieving his goals²⁷. He says that, in his community, there is also the frustration of not being able to have active citizen participation²⁸ in the planning processes for social investment. This only leaves a dark veil over the dreams of citizens, of young people, their families, and of the community's people in general.

One day, while walking through the worn-down central square, Carlos met a wise, elderly couple, Mrs. María and Mr. Elías, who perceived the frustration and hopelessness in Carlos's eyes.

Mrs. María and Mr. Elías shared stories of times past with Carlos, of the challenges that have always existed in the territory for active participation. Inspired to see change, Carlos decided to undertake the challenge of changing the situation in Bellavista²⁹.

With determination, Carlos began to gather the young people of his community and organized meetings and talks where he managed to identify the most pressing needs of local youth. The most relevant ones were the lack of access to quality education and formal work, and for this reason, several young people were preparing to migrate to other cities³⁰ in search of access to higher education, a well-paid job, and to, therefore, be able to have a better quality of life³¹.

Also, Carlos identified that a lack of government support and limited resources remain a significant obstacle to the progress of youth and community development.

To overcome these challenges, Carlos and his colleagues decided to involve local leaders and establish alliances with civil society organizations. As the movement gained strength, they managed to capture the attention of politicians and authorities, demanding more adequate and precise



²⁷ Public sector (Icetex), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 11, 2023: "For 52.8% of young people, the lack of economic resources is the main barrier that the young population faces in accessing opportunities, followed by 10.5% lack information and 7.3% lack motivation."

²⁸ Community (President of the San Miguel Norte neighborhood community action board), Semi-structured interview, Bogotá, August 20, 2023: "Young people need opportunities for education and training in politics so that they can be decision-makers in society and not so "They act under political pressure."

²⁹ Young people, World Café, Cartagena, July 19, 2023: "There is a lack of more opportunities in Cartagena for young people, and for that reason, many migrate to other cities, seeking to improve their living conditions."

³⁰ Young people, Learning Circle, Cartagena, August 22, 2023: "Due to the lack of educational and employment opportunities, they are forced to seek more opportunities in other cities, leaving behind their beloved territory, their families, their friends, and the many memories of their childhood that they have stored in a small suitcase where they also carry the desire to get ahead and improve their quality of life."

³¹ Young people, Forum Theater and Learning Circle, Soacha, August 10, 2023: "Seek opportunities and a decent life and a good quality of life [...] Seek work and earn money to cover needs."

planning for social investment in education, the development of social-emotional skills, employment, and sustainable and formal opportunities for young people³².

In this journey, Carlos, the young people, and community leaders also discovered findings and recommendations regarding the lack of participation, which drove them to develop initiatives for young people's strengthening, empowerment, and ability to have an impact in their communities and at the national level.

Main findings:

Local governments do not carry out strategic planning with citizens, which leads to a lack of participation of different population groups, including young people, in the creation of social investment projects. This leads to projects that prioritize political interests and do not respond to the needs of communities, increasing the gaps and social inequality that promote increased youth migration in the country.

There are participatory spaces for young people, such as the Municipal Youth Councils, but they face administrative challenges and unequal conditions in guaranteeing the participation of young people on a permanent basis. The commitment of local governments to ensure successful operation is lacking, since they have little knowledge about this instance. Therefore, it is necessary to improve education and pedagogy in this instance of youth participation.

Main recommendations:

- Promote spaces for dialogue and participation between civil society and decision makers at the national level, where participants, including young people, can articulate their demands and be decision makers in the identification of the needs of their communities at the local, regional, and national levels for the design of social investment programs.
- Carry out an administrative restructuring of the Municipal Youth Councils, where young people, upon being elected, can receive remuneration for 100% of their time dedicated to representing young people at the municipal, departmental, and national levels. Strengthen coordination with the vice-ministry of youth to guarantee the proper functioning of the Municipal Youth Councils and everything that concerns them at the national level.

³² Young People, World Café and Learning Circles, Cartagena, August 22, 2023, "More resources should be invested in education and employability for young people." [...] Public Sector (National Planning Department), Semi-structured interview, La Calera and Tenjo, August 24, 2023: "The lack of opportunities becomes one of the main problems that lead young people to make the decision to migrate."

V. Conclusion

This report focuses on both the process and findings of this youth-led participatory research. The authors consider both of equal importance, not only what was discovered through the research but also how the research process itself was conducted.

The research results are significant in their articulation of grassroots perspectives from communities across the country. Their aim is to further catalyze discussions about policies and programs specifically designed to support youth migrating within Colombia.

The authors also advocate for the broader use of PAR as a peacebuilding approach to engage young people and communities in actively analyzing challenges and collectively developing solutions and policies that can better address the problems that affect them directly and daily.

Ultimately, the research team hopes that this report will spur action on both fronts: to address the causes and effects of internal youth migration more deeply, and to support the proliferation of participatory action research as an accessible and scalable mechanism for building inclusive peace in communities throughout Colombia.

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