



Case Study: Schools of Youth Leadership for Social Transformation in the Department (Region) of Nariño, Colombia



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Acknowledgements Section

Acronyms:

ACCD: Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation

FARC-EP: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army

PAR: Participatory Action Research

IOM: International Organization for Migration

UNO: United Nations Organization

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund

UNV: UN Volunteers

Youth GPS: Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace

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Case Study: Schools of Youth Leadership for Social Transformation in the Department (Region) of Nariño, Colombia¹

Introduction

This case study takes place within the framework of the UNDP's Youth Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (Youth GPS), the UN Volunteers (UNV) and United Nations Development Programme – UNDP Volunteers for Peace Project as contributors to the Progress Study requested by the UN Security Council, regarding Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security.

As part of Colombia's contribution to the Progress Study, it is worth mentioning that in addition to this study, a National Consultation took place in Bogota, February 24th to 26th 2017, and it was the second of a series of national and regional consultations for inputs to the Progress Study worldwide.

These efforts attempt to highlight the Colombian youth contributions towards building sustainable peace and their role, in general, in the peace process in Colombia. It particularly takes on great relevance within the historical context the country is currently experiencing, that is, the early stages of implementation of a Peace Agreement, which has allowed the ending of an armed conflict that lasted for more than five decades between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) and the Government of Colombia.

Colombian youth has worked tirelessly for peace and has rallied together to demand a peaceful political solution to end the armed conflict. This generation of young people has taken an active role as the natural social and political actors they are, getting increasingly involved in decision-making and participatory spaces in the face of the Peace Agreement implementation and building a more peaceful society.

In this connection, the Security Council Resolution 2250 is a strategic document for Colombia in its search for peace and the end of armed conflict, since it acknowledges the important and positive role of youth in the prevention of conflicts and their contributions in building and sustaining peace as well as development.

Thus, the document does correspond to an in-depth analysis of a contextualized experience in Nariño, known as the Schools of Youth Leadership. The aim is to identify how these Schools have promoted and supported youth empowerment and have provided valuable input in reducing vulnerability, within a context of violence and conflict that have affected the country

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during the last decades. Ultimately, drawing valuable lessons that will help to design tools for the implementation of Resolution 2250 about youth, peace and security.

Analyses are based on the information provided by relevant stakeholders through in-depth interviews during different stages of the process that took place in the Schools of Youth Leadership between 2009 and 2017. The paper is organized as follows: Section 1 describes the origin and context where the Schools of Youth Leadership arise; Section 2 describes the nature and main goals of these Schools; Section 3 lays out the methodological foundations of the whole process; Section 4 presents the main discussion topics in the Schools; Section 5 discusses the influence of the Schools in strengthening advocacy processes and youth mobilization.

Section 6 describes current processes in the Schools and their most recent commitments; Section 7 makes a recap of lessons learned and recommendations. Finally, Section 8 summarizes current and persistent challenges of some young people facing the Schools of Leadership experience.

Clearly, an important proportion of young Colombians all over the country still faces the same concerns and problems that inspire the creation of the Schools of Youth Leadership in Nariño, which makes this experience all the more advisable to be implemented in other areas as a pragmatic way of implementing the Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security. However, cultural nuances should be taken into account in order to make this proposal better suited and more relevant.





1. Context of the Experience - Nariño 2007

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"A young person was viewed as trouble, as a drug addict, a young person who is committing crimes within illegal organizations. The purpose of founding those Schools was precisely the reason to start thinking of youth as an opportunity" (C. Díaz, personal account, August 17, 2017).

Nariño is a department in Southern Colombia with a diverse geographical landscape and cultural diversity. The Andean Mountains run across Nariño which also includes territories next to the Pacific Ocean, the Amazon and a border with Ecuador. Its population is ethnically diverse including Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, peasants, including young people, men and women from urban and rural areas, each one facing different realities.

Diversity in Nariño has been a factor in building up social processes and social struggles. This region "stands out in the country for championing alternative political ways to figure a way out of problems that have piled up during decades" (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 15). Indeed, this is one of the regions hardest hit by war and the worsening of the conflict in Colombia due to structural and juncture causes. To name a few, geostrategic land disputes, social exclusion, poverty, inequality, a weak economy, underdevelopment and a weak State, illegal armed groups, socioenvironmental damages to the environment, extensive illicit crops and drug trafficking (PNUD - Colombia, 2010).



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To better understand the existing circumstances in Nariño during the time when the youth movement was born, and particularly the Schools of Youth Leadership, is important to take into account the Local Development Plan 2008-2011 (Nariño Governorate, 2008). The Plan, which was formulated with assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), presented in detail the conditions of violence that Nariño was going through, as well the troubled situation affecting directly young women and men.

By 2008, Nariño was going through its most difficult times due to the violence and the armed conflict. In fact, between 2005 and 2007 the homicide rate increased and Nariño was ranked 14 points above the national rate (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 32). Homicides took place as a result of “combats between the military forces and irregular armed forces, and as a result of direct assaults from guerilla groups who accounted for 7% of homicides in 2003 and 17% of homicides in 2006” (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 32).

With regards to illicit crops, despite the aerial spraying policy implemented by *Plan Colombia* in 2006, the number of hectares planted with coca increased by 12% compared to 2005 going from 13,875 to 15,606 hectares, whereas in the country as a whole decreased by 9% (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 34). Sprayings were criticized for their environmental impacts and negative effects on public health.

Other serious problems identified between 2005 and 2007 included deaths and injuries caused by anti-personnel mines. In Nariño, there were 196 injured people, among them 89 fatal casualties, that included farmers, indigenous inhabitants and Afro-Colombians, among them children, adolescents and young people (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 33). The presence of anti-personnel mines brings along not only physical harm but also psychological harm to inhabitants of the area limiting their mobility. Adolescents and young people are worst-affected in their access to health care, schools and participatory activities.

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This conflict scenario produced forced displacement as well, primarily affecting young people, women and peasants mostly from rural areas, with an increase of 51,54% between 2006 and 2007, where in the rest of the country for the same period forced displacement decreased by 22,28% (Nariño Governorate, 2008, p. 34). Displacement and the risks associated with forced recruitment interrupt formal school attendance of young people who are thrust into a situation in which they have to adapt to a new reality in urban areas permeated by micro-trafficking and other associated problems. In this regard, “the population of displaced teenagers and young people in search to provide sustenance for their families, perform informal jobs, discontinues their attendance to school and likely get involved in illegal and criminal groups, increasing in this way urban violence in the communities” (López, 2013, p. 12).

By 2009, there were diverse reasons for starting a public debate about youth issues, among them, the fact that adolescents and youth represented more than a quarter of Nariño population leading to a situation in the economy known as demographic bonus or demographic dividend.

“The rate of people in working age grows in a sustained way with respect to the rate of people in potentially inactive ages (younger than 15 and older than 60). Currently Colombia is going through a period of demographic bonus that could extend beyond 2020. (UNFPA, s.f.)”



In this regard, the message sent by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to the institutions and the general public was to take advantage of this demographic bonus, “never before in Colombia’s history the population of young people was going to be as big as in that particular moment, whereby any (social, public or private) investment made in favor of this population segment would have a considerable impact not only onto young people but also, in general, onto the development of the region”. (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017).

The Schools of Youth Leadership for social transformation were born in Nariño within the framework of a Regional Strategy for Adolescence and Youth as an alternative proposal for the participatory formulation of the Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth. This strategy is the end result of joint efforts among several sectors and institutions like the Nariño Governorate, the municipalities, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD) and UNFPA. They are the advocates who came together around a unified purpose: to formulate a Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth.

Nariño’s Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth seeks to overcome the negative conception prevalent by that time about young population, highlighting at the same time their potentials in contributing to development and peace. In this scenario of dialogue and participation, the Schools become creative arenas to bring about ideas and to evaluate proposals which later were included in the regional development plan and policies at the local level.

These policies highlight four different situations identified in 2009 whose transformation prospects prompted the start of the process (Nariño Governorate, 2011). The first one is “adults vs youth” where a distance between the adult world and the youth world is assumed, ignoring youth potentials while attributing to adults the exclusive ownership of experience and knowledge in decision making.

The second gap is called “welfare policies vs affirmative policies” and it consists of invalidating the capacity of this young generation. Thus, instead of encouraging participatory processes, there were policies that created dependence on young beneficiaries.

The third gap refers to confronting two perspectives “youth as a problem or social risk vs youth as a peace and development agent”, in other words, challenging the posture that stigmatizes and mistrusts young people and then shift that view in order to value them as rights holders.

Lastly, the fourth gap, called “sectoral policies vs public appropriation of youth issues and inter-institutional articulation” refers to how public policies are focused, in general, to issues like the first job, housing and education, among others, and how only at that particular moment youth is given direct priority as a relevant actor for local development.

“In connection with the Nariño’s Strategy for Adolescence and Youth, the Adelante Nariño (Let’s Move Forward Nariño) Youth Project is born in 2009, a joint commitment between Nariño Governorate, UNDP, the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation (ACCD) and local partnerships like the Nariño Mixed Cultural Fund and the Noah’s Ark Foundation” (López, 2013, p. 18).

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2. What Are the Schools and What Are Their Goals

Leadership Schools, though intended for young people, are not only a stake in them, but also a commitment to the social transformation of Nariño, to resist armed conflict and to find ways to become more resilient to withstand pressures. (Paladini, 2012)

Most definitions by stakeholders about the Schools of Youth Leadership evoke the image of young people as founding actors of the experience and their ability to transform reality as their main trait. Schools are forums ratified by young people “where they can think, deliberate, dialogue and review their collective interests, needs and expectations” (López, 2013, p. 23), thereby consolidating the tools to spearhead transformational social and individual processes.

Leadership Schools, though headed in most cases by young people, “are not just a stake in young people, they are a stake in Nariño in order to resist armed conflict and to find ways to become more resilient to withstand pressures (Paladini, 2012).

In defining Schools of Youth Leadership there is no allusion to classrooms, teachers and students, since nobody thinks of them as substitute academic environments for high schools or colleges.



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Schools of Youth Leadership are also associated and defined as a process which in and of itself requires planning and articulation so that all actions are systematically carried out. The influence of the Schools will persist in time and they tend to become more effective insofar as more and more participation opportunities are offered to young people. In addition, words like “peace”, “war” and “armed conflict” in the context of a schools, reveal that schools are a contextualized experience emanating from a complex social, cultural and economic reality in Nariño (See Figure 1). Among the social perceptions of what the Schools of Leadership are all about, one that stands out is that they are a strategy to mitigate young people’s vulnerability to succumb to violence and that they promote among them a mission for peacebuilding through actions and participation.



Source: Original material with an arrangement of interviews to key stakeholders.

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In recent years, Schools like these have consolidated as the most sought after and implemented initiative by government and non-governmental institutions, social organizations and youth movements. However, the immediate goals of this initiative have changed in time. Initially they were conceived as “the driving force in the building process of the Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth in Nariño, intended to empower young people to proactively participate in the whole process.” (López, 2013, p. 19) The process took place within the framework of a wider strategy set on making them more visible and reinforcing their role as key actors in the human and sustainable development process and the peacebuilding process (Mora, Itinerant School of Leadership, “Nariño Adelante con las y los Jóvenes Adelante”. Executive Summary (Spanish), 2011). At the time, youth debates and reflections in the Schools ensured a participatory deliberation in public policy, revealing a young perception, previously unknown, on Nariño’s social reality (Escuelas de Liderazgo Juvenil, 2010).

While apparently the policy critical analysis would have been possible through surveys and personal interviews, from beginning the goal was to go a step forward and to propose a qualified participatory exercise. The notion that it should be an educational process in the Schools was to limit the role of young people as mere “informants”, and instead allow them to build capacity as key actors in the fate of their region”. (A. Muñoz, personal account, August 14, 2017. J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017. G. Montenegro, personal account, August 9, 2017). To that end, Schools propose debate topics encouraging young people to come together and express their views.

Thereafter, the immediate goals of the Leadership Schools have expanded and have also supported exercises in strategy building to influence local development plans, strengthening the youth subsystem of discussion panels and platforms, and promoting generational relays. (N. Riascos, personal account, August 14, 2017). Furthermore, recent experiences with explicit goals in this respect, aim to strengthen the capacities and infrastructure for peace in the territories that are represented by youth movements, leaders and organizations.

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Over the years, Schools have been the space of integration that has revitalized other advocacy processes and participation in several instances. However, as a meaningful experience in youth mobilization, the process is not proprietary, thus allowing other institutions, organizations and even generations to take ownership of this strategy and implement it according to their immediate goals. In fact, in Nariño several initiatives have been tracked as inspired by the Schools of Youth Leadership model and to this day the number of such schools keeps growing.

It does not mean that the Schools don’t have their own role models and it does not mean that they absolutely represent this type of process in Colombia or either Nariño. For instance, actors often mention that the youth process was formed on the basis of the women’s process, in turn, initiated within the same context of social unrest of the region (Paladini, 2012); however, the education on gender policy made the academic component much more rigorous and it continues to be so, emphasizing legislation topics and introducing new theories into the debate. On the contrary, the focus at the Schools of Youth Leadership has not been the academic debate but rather the space for dialogue and encounter that the schools represent in order to express and articulate interests and trust building.





3. Methodological Foundations

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A space that brings together young people and that allows their empowerment, but above all that allows them to make friends. Here young people were front and center, as well as the building of trust and the development of local processes among them (M. Mora, personal account, August 16, 2017).

Schools of Youth Leadership reduce youth vulnerability they face in the context of violence and conflict in the region based on a clear strategy: empowerment. In this case, empowerment is understood as the acknowledgment of youth as social and political actor performing fully aware of their rights and their potential (López, 2013, p. 25). As it was clearly stated at the beginning about the circumstances and events that led to this experience, young people had to fight against a social paradigm that kept them out of strategic circles of influence blocking the real range of their capacity and potential. Somehow the notions about the State, politics and the economy were instrumental in youth distancing themselves from those entities and bringing them back was not an easy task.

The Schools of Youth Leadership materialize a special empowerment strategy in which trust is the cornerstone. In fact, non-formal educational processes are not new means to encourage participation. A distinctive trait of the Schools of Youth Leadership is that the spaces for



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dialogue are not focused on the content that young people are supposed to appropriate: “here young people were the front and center, as well as the trust building and the development of local youth processes among them” (M. Mora, personal account, August 16, 2017).

“This space has always been conceived as a gathering place in which special attention is given to creating a bond of trust both among young people and between young people and the coordinating team and the institutions accompanying the process” (López, 2013, p. 5).

According to this concept, empowerment and its manifestation as advocacy is not understood individually but orchestrated with others. The Schools allow young people to feel supported in their causes and to find endorsement in other young people, and in other movements and organizations.

From this conception, the empowerment and its exercise in the social and political life are not understood in the individuality, but in the articulation. Schools allow each young person to feel accompanied in their causes and find support in other young people, movements and organizations. The most extreme version of this kind of empowerment implies that it does not matter if at the end of a session the young people have not adopted a theoretical concept such as human development, but instead have developed bonds of friendship and trust with other young people who share their perceptions, motivations and support their causes. Even building trust is possible with institutions under the principle that these are represented by people who also build and participate in the space of the Schools.

“The dynamics of the Schools is an experience of non-formal education. It allows young people to get together (this is what it was required at the beginning and I believe it continues to be a necessity) in spaces where they can address the issues they want to” (A. Muñoz, personal account, August 14, 2017).

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In general, the Schools allowed the creation of some sort of network among young people to keep communication alive, to continue meeting up, to form groups, organizations and to create and explore new instances of participation. In time, this network would be the social structure to the youth subsystem, a key factor to thrust the institutionalization of youth issues in Nariño as an organic part of the local government.

On the other hand, the non-formal educational strategy in the Schools of Leadership includes as one of its pillars the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach which encourages empowerment and putting together loose efforts of civil society to defy and counterbalance the traditional power of the State (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1992). At the same time, PAR is present during the conference sessions in four stages (López, 2013, p. 27) (Nariño Governorate, 2011):

- » **Reading the context.** This stage is a description of the reality and raising concerns about social phenomena intended for reflection from the youth point of view.
- » **Analysis of the context.** In this stage analytical tools are designed to be able to make comparisons, differentiations, similarities and to organize information gathered during the first stage to start providing answers to questions raised.
- » **Transformation of the context.** In this stage proposals for change are presented regarding those conditions deemed as troubling and seen from an open perspective that includes



diversity and multiplicity of expressions, dynamics and trends.

- » **Materialization of Change.** This stage represents the implementation of actions for change raised by young people interacting with other social groups and communities.

“In each session a planned series of content were discussed regarding how to analyze the territory, how to include the views from others, how to think about politics and how to elicit interest in political culture. After this stage of analysis of the context followed a stage of transformation of the context, which promoted the preparation of proposals and alternative ways of local management of a community to be included into the public policy. That was the model followed by all schools in all of Nariño” (C. Díaz, personal account, August 15, 2017).

Other important foundation of the Schools of Youth Leadership is constructivism (pedagogy), where the purpose is to understand that Schools are forums of reflection building upon each person's knowledge and their own personal experiences that they want to share with others. Here “knowledge is an authentic process of individual elaboration and not simply a display of innate knowledge nor a replay of external knowledge gathered from the external world” (González-Tejero & Parra, 2011, p. 3). For this reason, even though schools have their own facilitators, the figure of the “expert” has been reconsidered thus allowing young people and people close to them to adopt a guiding role. Accordingly, schools are built up based on horizontal relationships where young people share experiences and get to know each other better. In general, Nariño is a favorable scenario to create and strengthen constructivist experiences like these since diversity is part of its very nature and also because the young population segment has the ability to reinvent every day new ways of observing and living each context.

From its inception, Schools have relied on two cross-cutting strategies which have materialized at varying intensities throughout the years. The first one is a communication strategy from which tools have been created to expand the scope of School debates to other social and geographical spheres. The purpose is to do a sort of translation of youth school debates so they can be shared among peers.

Among other proofs of the communication strategy implementation is Awaska, a Youth Communication and Production Center in Nariño, whose purpose is sharing youth knowledge and experiences among participants of the youth process, making more visible young people group dynamics in the towns of Nariño and ultimately strengthening youth participation, organization and advocacy (Awaska, 2015). In addition, we can also mention within this strategy the creation of schools and motivator teams for youth processes, as well as seed leadership for youth, which as a whole helped young people to replicate and mobilize schools, expanding their impact (López, 2013, p. 16).

The second school cross-cutting strategy has been the systematization process, seen as “a systematic and collective learning exercise led by young people” (Mora, 2011). The materialization of this strategy allowed the first general characterization of what it means youth in Nariño, how they think, how they interact with each other and how they assemble and organize (Escuelas de Liderazgo Juvenil, 2010). This fact has also allowed building up the memory of the process in their different stages (Jácome & Paz, 2017).



4. Content Series

We cannot ignore the fact that the main methodological support to the process to the Schools of Leadership has been provided by UNDP, an agency of the United Nations that carries out its mandate within the framework of Sustainable Human Development. For that reason, a first series of content revolves around human development, gender equality, identity, territoriality and cross-culturalism, and environmental sustainability.

In addition, considering the complex violence and vulnerability scenario in which Nariño youth lived, plus the distinguishing characteristics of the territory, in the second series of content the methodology team proposed topics related to peacebuilding, human rights and peaceful resolution of conflicts, because for youth ***“peace is socially built in each territory”*** (A. Muñoz, personal account, August 14, 2017). Thus, schools were conceived within a context of conflict that would allow adolescents and youth to dodge and diminish the risk factors that they were facing.

“we had the experience of a school of leadership in the middle of a conflict. We prepared materials, modules and content with the thought we were in a conflict and that it would last for years on end, and that perhaps what we had to do was to learn to live with that. In fact, I remember, and today we can say it, when we set up schools with the help of IOM in some villages at the foothills by the Pacific Coast, the main goal



was to avoid forced recruitment by illegal armed groups” (G. Montenegro, personal account, August 9, 2017).

A third series of content focuses in the concept of active citizenship in which young people are considered political actors who participate in different arenas. The topics covered were project formulation and management, the interaction with public entities, mechanisms of social and political organization, social and political influence of youth.

Content was not randomly chosen, and it is not the product of learning lessons. Content had a meaning and a purpose; it served as proactive guidance to debate, constructive criticism, opinion and taking a reasoned stance from youth.

Thereafter, the processes of replication made it clear that content had to be reviewed and contextualized and, as suggested by young people themselves, it had to be more practical. Thus, to each module or specific topic was attached a “practical guide”. In other words, a specific set of activities was organized more systematically, for instance social mapping, brainstorming, trivia games, actor mapping and role playing. This process made sessions more dynamic and practical, thus reducing desertion and attracting new young people with diverse interests.

“We were really thinking of our region Nariño from a youth perspective, thinking of a relevant methodology, thinking of adults from a youth perspective. Then, we, as facilitators, witnessed how these young people re-designed the modules it went “upside down” once we told them: all right, think of this in youth language, in youth methodology” (G. Montenegro, personal account, August 9, 2017).

This anecdote become a particular trait of schools, that is, since Nariño is a multi-ethnic and multicultural region, it is inconsistent to consider universal topics and methodologies. That’s why the content was designed in such a way that it was adjustable to allow facilitators to adapt it to a particular context. Each school therefore becomes a particular process that adds up to the experience of youth participation.

Finally, content has evolved, updated, new methodologies have been incorporated, but the meaning of giving young people tools, concepts, motivations, has opened doors in other leadership scenarios. A number of schools go deeper into a subject than other schools (gender, human rights, participation, peacebuilding, environment, etc.) but the essential goal in search of empowerment through a reasoned participation has not vanished. Clearly, nowadays we have at our disposal conceptual and participatory mechanisms obtained on the road to change, like the Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth, the Statute of Youth Citizenship and even the Resolution 2250 of the UN Security Council, let alone the very contributions of young people regarding content and methodologies.



18 5. Youth Mobilization

When young people began to understand that even everyday life and their interests (music, extreme sports, etc.) had something to do with public policies, only then they started to commit to the process” (D. de los Ríos, personal account, August 11, 2017).

Since the Public Policy on Adolescence and Youth was formulated and adopted under ordinance 011 of 2001, originated in the Schools of Leadership, there is now in Nariño a wide social base, organized youth groups in more than 15 municipalities. At that time, inspired and motivated youth, with a sense of leadership to transform their communities, realized that their new challenge was to ensure the implementation of public policy and to make it a tool for enforceability of rights. Their influence will continue when they decide to participate in the formulation of city and local development plans.

It is worth mentioning that the process required political willingness and commitment from the local authorities, a situation that did not happen in some municipalities due to lack of political affinity or due to the fact that violence issues did not allow advancement in social processes. Notwithstanding the lack of support from some mayors, there were several municipalities where young people took the lead in making creative proposals for peacebuilding and for the youth movement. For instance, in the Telembí sub-region there were cultural events that included interventions to avoid forced recruitment by illegal armed groups.



Also, there were municipalities where local leadership realized the importance of working with youth and included initiatives proposed by the processes within the Schools of Leadership. In these municipalities youth became a proactive force, not limited to just demanding actions, but rather submitting feasible proposals to the local authorities, which in turn prompted the local authorities to work under the premise of co-responsibility. This allowed create common agendas and enabled, during a critical context in election time, a dialog between young people, local and regional candidates, influencing the proposals for local development plans.

Discussion panels with candidates, open talks and presentation of proposals became strategies to keep alive the participation process, proving to society in Nariño that youth views are also valuable in developing proposals. The process encouraged other young people producing a meaningful positive effect in local planning.

In some municipalities, the youth movement reached such influence that they were key to promote the creation of administrative offices or youth facilities in charge of promoting the youth processes at the local level. Equally valuable was the fact that young people from the Schools of Leadership were in charge of those jobs at the Town Hall, contributing with their experience to the implementation of the public policy on adolescence and youth at the regional level. In fact, in some cases in Pasto, Ipiales, Túquerres and Tumaco they were the leaders in establishing municipal public policies on youth.

“a lot of young people who attended the Schools are now in charge of municipal departments of youth and culture, foundations, political movements, cultural movements, youth platforms, etc., and that is something that draws attention in a powerful way as the main achievement (...) they are already setting in motion the process, carrying out their autonomous initiatives, accompanied by City Hall or the Governorate. That is great, I believe that is already a good outcome” (D. de los Ríos, personal account, August 11, 2017)

In addition, the organizational social process emanating from the Schools of Leadership supported by Nariño Governorate and UNDP, was able to set the basis the Youth Regional System. In this system converge institutional and social actors to facilitate an interaction and dialogue through the youth sub-system, which is comprised of round tables known as panels, that is, municipal and regional youth panels, which later were recognized as platforms by the Statute of Youth Citizenship at the national level.

These youth panels were representative, deliberative and coordinating bodies with delegates from social processes, whether formally organized or not, as well second-level organizational processes of collective, not particular, interest. These scenarios that otherwise would not have been possible without a formed and experienced social base, originated in the Schools of Leadership, took youth participation at another level and became a youth participation benchmark at the national level. Even though it was not possible to consolidate youth panels in all the municipalities, other processes were promoted like the “UNDP Growing Up Together program” and “Wellbeing Generations” programs and the “Building Together Protective Environments for Peace” strategy, providing young people with opportunities to showcase their ideas and proposals.

In addition, actions of youth oversight were developed to proposals like the Youth Municipal Council, an open budget scenario where young people themselves decided the destination of

the funds to favor the well-being of every young person in the municipality. In this connection, the oversight processes were more than necessary as a legitimate exercise of participation and constituted a valuable experience, both for young people and youth organizations regarding the control and management of public affairs. Thereafter, other oversight actions took place like the **Galerías Rock** music festival and also the supervision of sexual and reproductive health programs.” Nowadays youth are well aware of the importance of the oversight and control of public affairs as scenarios where they can have their rights guaranteed and upheld.

A case worth mentioning is the “Youth Municipal Platform” of the city of Pasto, this is a good example youth who are well organized and have strengthened their capacities, to exercise their influence over a number of institutional issues. Young people of Pasto, in addition to impacting the Development Plan with concrete and well thought-out proposals, were able to influence the election of the officer in charge of the Youth Administrative Authority of Pasto’s City Hall. This was a process carried out by young people, where they proposed the most suitable candidate profiles, made the official announcement and interviewed each prospect, presenting in the end a short list to the Mayor Pedro Vicente Obando (2016). The person on top of the list, with the highest score, was elected, according to criteria defined by youth.

This is an example of youth leadership, a skill and a process that, in the absence of non-formal education, an exchange of knowledge, a forum and an institutional commitment, runs the risk of vanishing over time. Youth will eventually grow up, ending a life cycle, calling for a generational relay which is important to keep the spark in the youngest children to lead cultural, peace, sport, environmental protection and communication processes. This paper can also be thought as a tool to tell other generations the good and the bad, but also to tell them that we were also young.

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Adolescents and young people are motivated to participate according to their interests; however, it is also important to have them participate in decision-making processes, an action that does make all the difference between participation and social mobilization.

“if you don’t sit down with young people to create, to think over the events and to think over what needs to be done, you are basically doomed to failure in respect to youth participation, simply because you will not reach anyone. If a call for action fails, it is not young people’s fault, it is our fault, who are not planning activities consistent with their reality” (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017).

A successful mobilization strategy presented within the context of the peace talks in Colombia was promoted by UN Volunteers (UNV) and it is known as “Hagamos las Paces”. This strategy was focused on empowering young people and their organizations to launch initiatives in the region that contributes to the peacebuilding process in their territories. For instance, the **Rap-Paz** workshop was supported, which consists of Hip Hop schools in the neighborhoods of Pasto where topics such as armed conflict, human rights, sexual and reproductive rights and peace are discussed, they also use break dance, rap and graffiti. This work produced alternative dynamics in which young people were able to talk openly about the things that troubled them and then propose alternatives to the violence that surrounded them in their neighborhood and at home and then “make peace”.

... by providing youth with an environment where they were understood and listened and where they could contribute to solve the problematic, then, once they felt



empowered, in charge and accepted, they worked harder, participated and wanted to do more in their neighborhoods. (A. Delgado, personal account, August 17, 2017).

In Nariño there are numerous experiences led by young people according to their interests, some of which are accounted in the mapping of Youth Organizations in seven municipalities (Mora, 2016). It is worthy also to highlight other young people processes like the Nariño Youth Minga that promotes leadership and the rescue of traditional knowledge and territories, or **Fundación Visiones** (Visions Foundation) which has been given the opportunity to partner with institutions like the Nariño Governorate and UNDP in setting out strategies like the “Territorial Partnerships for Peace - Nariño Youth Strategy 2015-2016”

“for the first time, a youth organization born at the heart of the regional youth process like Fundación Visiones had the chance to be a leader in the implementation of the main activities of the regional youth strategy. This entailed an opportunity for young people, previously involved in the process, to put into practice their apprenticeship and to apply their youth views born from experience so that the whole process constituted in so many levels a real ‘peer-to-peer strategy’” (Jácome & Paz, 2017).



22 6. Current Developments

The outlook of youth participation processes, education and mobilization is currently very favorable. Young people themselves are setting out advocacy processes at a local level based on their culture and identity values. This can be seen in the trust placed in youth by the institutions, a fact that has made possible that nowadays there are bigger investments of resources in youth issues in Nariño and in the city of Pasto. Because of this process, today many entities have the resources to invest in new spaces to meet, debate and qualify youth leadership as a contribution of the social construction of peace coming from the regions.

It is important to point out that the trust placed by the institutions is giving greater autonomy to young people to develop methodologies and influence the dynamics of the schools of youth leadership, that so, youth processes with experience are the ones who determine the scenarios for youth to discuss, without depending on managers or the local administrations. This trust is not created overnight; it requires small and concerted steps between the institutions and young people, clearly defining who is in charge, acknowledging each other's potentialities, bringing the rewards when goals are met, having a sense of gratitude when partnerships are created and succeed and firmly believing that mistakes are also part of learning and part of the joint efforts to build the whole experience. For young people, it is important that the institutional framework has the face of people close to them and, on the other hand, for institutions it is



important that young people show a sense of shared responsibility to achieve common goals.

Today the country's political situation has made of peace an important benchmark of the public agenda. In this context the newer Schools of Leadership had stressed the importance of peace and how youth processes can contribute to peacebuilding.

The most recent model of these Schools corresponds to the "Itinerant Schools of Youth Leadership", in 2017. Young people and institutions have understood that the biggest influence comes from interaction and therefore the innovative of these Itinerant Schools is that they go straight to where the rural and urban initiatives are taking place. The purpose is to make young people aware of other realities and other initiatives to transform reality to develop critical thinking and to promote joint efforts.

"Social processes, autonomous or not, rely on other processes to create a culture where youth empowerment springs into action. Considering that life always keeps us in a continuous learning experience, it is necessary to belong to a school in which other youth processes take place, learn from them, exchange experiences and words and even entertain other types of discourses and views of which we are not part of. All of this brings up even more knowledge and this fact allows to improve processes and not kept it as isolated experiences" (A, Hernández, personal account, August 17, 2017).

In the "Itinerant School of Youth Leadership" with the assistance of the Youth Administrative Authority and in partnership with UNDP, 28 experienced young leaders participated in representation of various rural and urban processes. In this exercise, a team of skilled young people designed the methodology and played the role of facilitators in the roll-out of the school. As a result of this exercise, these 28 representatives are now in charge of a new process called Schools of Peace, where they now play the role of facilitators adapting methodologies to replicate the experience. This second stage of the process is implemented in 34 schools located in the communes and townships of the municipality of Pasto, intended to engage more than one thousand young people from the school governments, student representatives, as well as from other internal school initiatives related to youth participation in the region.

Accordingly, the school has become a key strategy to the generational relay, to keep alive the process and to provide empowerment to the spaces built with the dedicated efforts of many young people. Same young people who have put their dreams and their willingness at stake from the very beginning of this long and satisfactory journey.

In addition, the youth process in Nariño has also inspired young people from Sibundoy Valley in the region of Putumayo, who suggested the creation of Schools of Leadership in their region, considering the distinguishing characteristics of their territory and their youth.



24 7. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

"I am sure it would not be me, just the way I am, if I wasn't being involve in the youth process; it left me with a lot of things, it molded my view about the world and gave me hope" (M. Morea, personal account, August 16, 2017).

The youth process in Nariño and the Schools of Youth Leadership for social transformation were, from 2009 and up until today, an opportunity to boost youth abilities, take advantage of youth innate critical thinking, and their encouraging spirit.

"in youth, there is a kind of rebellion and an outstanding critical eye that should always be valued and validated and that, for sure will always provide us with guidelines to transform the world" (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017).

Below it will be highlight a series of lessons learned in the Schools of Leadership process. From each one of them we get some recommendations that most likely will enlighten the development of strategies for the implementation of Resolution 2250 of the UN Security Council on Youth, Peace and Security locally.



7.1. Participatory Implementation of Youth Strategies

Experience has shown that for the process to be sustainable over time and to keep advancing it is indispensable an active youth participation, not just as guests, but taking ownership and influencing the decision-making process. ***“the process was a success, because we built it together with the young people”*** (D. de los Ríos, personal account, August 11, 2017). This is only possible if officers of private and public institutions trust in the contributions that they

may receive from youth and then get them involved in planning and delivery of projects, in public policy and in development plans. In other words, ***“if you don’t sit down with young people to create, to think over the events and to think over what needs to be done, you are basically doomed to failure in respect to youth participation, simply because you will not reach anyone.”*** (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017).

“Whoever leads this youth process has to be really passionate about this issue, since young people keenly perceive when their initiatives are supported sincerely and in earnest, or if, on the contrary, they are being used to meet management goals” (D. de los Ríos, personal account, August 11, 2017).

One of the predominant characteristics of young people is how dynamic they are, and how their interests are continually changing and in the same way processes that may involve them should be able to adapt to these changes too. When processes produce the required cohesion for young people to be motivated and additionally it serves their interests, they ***“always really give more than what is requested from them”*** (C. Díaz, personal account, August 15, 2017). In this regard, the institutional frameworks and the leading authorities should be ready to appreciate this young generosity.

Considering this lesson, it is recommended that the involvement of young people be a cross-cutting component in the process of strategies design and implementation through the peer-to-peer approach. This approach consists of involving young people in all the stages of a decision process and, particularly, that young people be themselves the leaders of education spaces intended for them. The peer-to-peer approach became alternatively a way of conveying messages in a more relaxed language that allows to internalize knowledge while at the same time it allows to build up knowledge in a collective way. ***“The primary lesson from peer-to-peer interactions is that young people can become the best partners of the strategies, as long as the passive notion of “beneficiaries” is replaced by the active notion of “partners”*** (Jácome & Paz, 2017, p. 41). Schools brought on horizontal dialogues among assistants, motivators and facilitators.

Having no “expert’s” figure nor people being given knowledge, provides greater freedom to young people to express their ideas and it gave them the confidence to interact at the institutional level with councilmen, youth coordinators, mayors and governors.

The most notable learning process comes from the process related to the Schools of Youth Leadership jointly developed with Fundación Visiones in 2015. The “peer-to-peer” education produces empathy among young people, reducing school defection” (Felipe Herrera 2017).

7.2. Adapting Participation Mechanisms

It is worth noting that the Schools of Leadership were more than just a learning process; they were scenarios of reflection, critical thinking and, above all, friendship. The trust that was

built allowed the creation of groups and cliques, i.e. of people who found common interests and put into action shared dreams. In order to achieve this, the process had to accept as a premise that young people exercise their citizenship differently to the traditional way. They don't limit their participation to the ballot or to becoming a member of the community action board. In fact, they distance themselves from these conventional ways of participation and **"they create the State in a different way"** (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017), they have a tendency to gather around alternative topics like animalism, environmentalism, music, sports, the arts, dance, etc. "It is not easy to categorize their organizational processes when their motives are diverse, although the incentive is the same: **"we want recognition and we want to prove that we are able"** (Mora, 2016, p. 12).

Consequently, the recommendation that we get from this lesson is that youth strategies should be based on a wide notion of participation, a participation that encourages building bonds of friendship between youth and organizations. When participation is limited to formalities, it will isolate young people from their natural ways of interaction with their peers, thus diminishing the strategies impact. It is necessary to be creative in the way of conveying and adapting participation tools to the scenarios where young people move and interact freely and naturally.

In fact, a good example of the implementation of these kinds of strategies has been the Itinerant Schools of Leadership, The Schools moved to the province villages to visit other youth processes and experiences with the aim of getting a better understanding of the realities and strained relations in the field. **"To set up an itinerant school with young people involves (...) making an exchange to strengthen bonds and readings of reality at a local level"** (C. Díaz, personal account, August 15, 2017).

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7.3. Qualified Advocacy

The Schools of Leadership transformed the mindset of the young people who attended them, making them more critical actors of their own realities: **"discovering other realities with other young people allows us to share and to show solidarity with others and that we ask ourselves what are the needs of our fellow human beings"** (Salas, 2013). In addition, the Schools provided the means to create mobilization processes about subjects relevant to young people. This fact influenced the election agendas to include their proposals on Development Plans at the local and regional levels.

"The exercise about building public policy was a process to contribute to social transformation since it strengthen the process of young people and their systematic preparation for a qualifying participation, in creating scenarios to participate, organization and influence arenas, in generating social mediation processes in the search of alternatives with diverse public and private actors and thus positioning the topic in the public agenda" (Nariño Governorate, 2011).

In this case, a useful recommendation emerges for the youth strategies and that is the importance of favoring a systematic and critical participation over a participation based



exclusively in numbers. Starting the advocacy processes on a solid foundation of qualifications and participatory knowledge that generates a sense of wanting to achieve common objectives, a sense of belonging in the processes and a significant boost to youth brainstorming.

7.4. In Search of Comprehensive Transformations

At this point, it is pretty clear that the Schools impact takes place at different levels: individuals, groups, communities and institutions. At the individual level, in particular, young people who have attended the Schools state that this process has changed their lives. *“before, I used to dream of being a great military person and to serve my country; now I dream of other ideals and I see myself as a great social worker”* (Rodríguez, 2013).

“as a teenager my dream was to become an engineer (...), but, I realized that opportunities are more and more limited. To make my life more valuable I joined the military service (...) due to the knowledge acquired during the military service I became victim of forced recruitment and therefore displaced. I was a victim of armed conflict and continue to be so. However I learned about the youth spaces where, as a young person, I was able to know my rights (...) I met the Youth Panel² (...) this space allowed me to receive guidance to pull through and to not get into a vicious circle of violence in my country” (León, 2013).

The Schools debates also promote the integration of young people to different social spheres. Through this process young people have proven that in this region it is possible to dream and to translate into practice all the initiatives; that it is possible to transform the political culture and the collective power from the bottom up, at the grassroots. Schools are forming honest and engaged leaders and they are sowing seeds of new generations for a new region.

“A process like the Schools of Youth Leadership, that aim at capacity strengthening through learning by doing, through facing everyday reality, gives young people a sense of belonging and empowerment to contribute with solutions. Young people are given the opportunity to know how the system works and their role in society so that they become law-abiding citizens. It is therefore recognized that young people are positive transformation agents in society and they are key actors in peacebuilding and violence prevention” (F. Herrera, personal account, August 10, 2017).

The recommendation here is the need to develop strategies that include comprehensive learning and lead to youth action, allowing synergic relationships between each individual person and the group they belong to.

Implementing this recommendation may have a meaningful impact in the design of strategies such as schools of leadership for teenagers and young adults, who had been recruited by armed groups, transitioning to civil life. Thus, helping them to build new life projects that are intertwined with other social aspects.

2 Youth panels are local level spaces for dialogue.

7.5. Observing Youth Processes Timing

When institutions support youth processes they should pay careful attention to what stage of life young people are going through. If the organizations are new in the field they will surely require more coaching, whereas other more advanced organizations will strive for autonomy and the right tools to materialize their proposals through specific projects.

Therefore, it must be understood that youth processes timing is different to institutional times, and the point is that in most cases they don't coincide. When the institutional framework exerts pressure so that processes advance, with the sole purpose of complying with legislation, some social organizations end up skipping important natural milestones in their maturation processes. A case in point is the implementation of the Statute of Youth Citizenship which has pressed municipalities to create Youth Platforms without an adequately strengthening grassroots organizations, thus limiting their sustainability.

A similar problem occurs when endless bureaucratic approval procedures stop youth initiatives in their tracks.

“a limiting factor is this time-consuming bureaucracy where processes are stalled or not followed through (...) interrupting these processes is dismaying for young people when there are no results in sight” (N. Riascos, personal account, August 14, 2017).

Overall, all important considerations regarding respect for youth processes timing boil down to one recommendation, which is adapting strategies in terms of the young people and their organizations. Depending on the stage of maturity of youth leadership and youth advocacy, there are some projects that may be more relevant than others. For instance, there is evidence to indicate that disproportionate budget support has been given to new-comer organizations, a fact that has stirred up disputes among members not to mention poor project execution. On the other hand, gradual budget increments tied to results cause that organizations feel more motivated to keep working harder, assess the results in each stage and acknowledge progress made in their growth progress.

“What we need today is that young people fix the State from the bottom up, fix political trustworthiness from the bottom up, that they implement gradual processes of leadership”. (A. Muñoz, personal account, August 14, 2017).

Finally, regarding the importance of observing youth processes timing, there is also the issue of the appropriate time to involve people in this process. To this effect, it is recommended to start strategies like the Schools of Leadership during childhood and adolescence years to guarantee the generational relay and the teaching of values right from an early age.

7.6. Leveraging On-Going Youth Processes

Currently, the Resolution 2250 of the UN Security Council on Youth, Peace and Security, recognizes in youth a strategic and positive role in peacebuilding within nations. The implementation of this Resolution is of particular importance to Colombia, a country going through a process of a pacification, post-conflict and post-peace agreement. However, the effectiveness of the implementation of this Resolution hangs on the ability of the stakeholders to unify it to the current institutional framework in each country. But above all, to integrate it into the on-going youth processes which are the most valuable peace assets that these regions



have at their disposal.

Despite the fact that the Schools of Leadership were born in 2009 and the Resolution 2250 was adopted in 2015, the current analysis presented in this paper helped identify that Schools are an on-going effective strategy that corresponds with the major goal of this Resolution which is “to ensure the active, systematic and meaningful youth participation in matters relating to peace and security (...) and preventing their marginalization and participation in armed conflicts” (UNOY, 2016).

To that end, the youth process at the state level and the Schools of Youth Leadership become valuable tools which is advisable to keep in Nariño and replicate in other territories. These Schools offer empowerment opportunities to prevent the infringement of youth rights within troublesome social realities.

7.7. Further Exploring Youth Research

Both the communication strategy and the systematization process have been a key in the recollection of knowledge about youth in Nariño. It is recommended that they are included in the implementation strategies in the territories of the Resolution 2250 of the UN Security Council on Youth, Peace and Security. Thus, allowing to monitor the effectiveness of the strategies and to build the historical memory, sustainability and sense of belonging in these processes.

In addition, the communication and systematization strategies highlight the need to go further in research for relevant subjects and to improve decision making and the relevance of the strategies. Some lines of research in the present analysis are as follows:

- » The impacts of violence and armed conflict over young people and their families in Nariño, at the individual psychological level and at the community level (C. Díaz, personal account, August 15, 2017).
- » Youth perceptions on socially relevant problems and the changes in participation, mobilization and advocacy across generations.
- » The feasibility of alternative proposals made by youth organizations to mitigate problems like teenager pregnancy, stigmatization of youth and infringement of their rights, youth unemployment and violence.
- » Effectiveness of public investments in young people and the relevance of implemented strategies and projects to make a reality those related public policies.
- » The relevance of implementing strategies like the School of Youth Leadership in order for teenagers and young adults recruited by armed groups to initiate a passage to civilian life.
- » Taking into consideration the diversity in young people and their contexts, it is important to clearly work out an analysis of the life-cycle, categories like gender, social class and race, and how this analysis proves that each group is affected in a different way. By making a cross-sectional analysis, more relevant needs-based youth strategies will be formulated. For instance, it is recommended to further research gender gaps, not only between men and women but also between young women, young Afro-Colombian women, young mothers, etc.

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8. Challenges

Nariño has become a benchmark with regard to youth participation, mobilization and empowerment. However, key challenges persist and those should be assumed both by the institutions and youth, considering the view, the way of think and the way of living in the territory. One of these challenges is understanding that the youth sphere should not exclusively be seen from an institutional viewpoint. It is important to understand that mobilization, empowerment and youth advocacy come out essentially from a place of creativity, dreams and irreverence. These factors are not to be circumscribed to any institutional model of doing things, something that, on occasion, restrict their energy.

“the word institutionalization may sound very nice, but it may also hide some stiffness; therefore we need to find a balance between keeping that flexibility involved in the process, and that institutional framework that is nonetheless important, but it should not become little cliques around the concept of youth in some municipalities and even at the state level; I believe we have to look for a balance point between that care-free spirit and that flexibility that has been a trait of the process particularly those schools; in fact, those schools, real dynamos of energy vs the need to institutionalize the whole process” (Paladini, 2012).

The balance between institutions and the essence of youth should also face the challenge of special interests taking over collective interests. The reason, is the integration of youth issues



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in the public agenda has brought about collateral effects like confrontations among youth organizations to steal each other's thunder or due to budget issues. As a result, new sectors and youth dynamics are marginalized and their impact limited. That is why it is important to insist upon the consistency between what is developed in the Schools of Leadership and the performance in everyday life. While there is a substantial contribution to the transformation of the cultural imaginary and the political practice, the school arena is too small in comparison to the social structure that mirrors corruption.

“One must first observe a bit how young people's interests sometimes divert, how their goals vanish and how organizations start to give priority to special interests and budgets. This has been, therefore, one of the biggest and most recent challenges” (N. Riascos, personal account, August 14, 2017).

Another challenge can be identified when more rural youth needs to be integrated into the Schools of Leadership and into youth movements at the state level. This situation requires more efforts to support the struggles of rural youth to overcome obstacles like neglect of the State and low investments in the agricultural sector.

Taking into consideration that the ramifications of the armed conflict still impact young people, indigenous inhabitants and Afro-Colombians, it is crucial that the development and operation of Schools of Leadership, and other youth actions, be framed within the specific context of the peacebuilding and post-conflict processes now in progress in Colombia.

In addition, it is critical to increase the awareness of the existence of other types of violence, like violence against women, social exclusion of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, environmental damages caused by mining, criminal gangs and numerous forms of social unrest in which young people are immersed. Understanding this realities, in terms of the conflict, is the key to building peace starting from the commitment of young people.

“Peace is a comprehensive concept which must include not only the actors actively involved in war, but also the whole society, so we cannot think of peace if we don't start with some preparedness exercises to the communities” (J. Jácome, personal account, August 10, 2017).

Lastly, another challenge that the Schools of Leadership are facing now is the various contexts in which youth is immerse. There are three main new characteristics of the process today. First of all, acknowledgment of technology as a useful tool to help in the promotion of youth messages in new settings. Second, new topics originated in debates which young people want to promote, for instance, the implementation of the **Public School of Gender**, the **Peacebuilding School** or the **Human Rights School**. Third, the new partnerships between the institutional framework and youth organizations since the process has strengthened trust and a shared responsibility among these stakeholders whereas a bigger budget for new proposals is available.

“Young people have not changed, they are the same. What has changed is the context (...) one sees youth with the same impetus, the same rebellion and the will to destroy things and to create things, that is, the vitality of the young person remains and the need of an interlocutor as well, only that young people are now surrounded by a bunch of tools that did not exist before, with new cultural referents” (M. Mora, personal account, August 16, 2017).



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