Involving Non-Organised 'Outcast' Youths in Peacebuilding

Existing Challenges and Lessons Learned in the Colombian Case

Graphic 1 – Graffiti in Medellín, La Sierra. The words read "Pactemos la paz" (Let's agree on peace).

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The Author

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Graphic 2 – The author conducting fieldwork in Medellín, Colombia.

This Paper

This paper is based on the author's 16-month-long fieldwork in Colombia with adolescents and youth living at semi-rural and urban margins. The research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ES/J500112/1) and received ethical approval by the University of Oxford (SSD/CUREC1A/14-SSH_C2_15_014). All the pictures are copyright of the author and have received the consent of the people portrayed.

Acknowledgements

Participatory documentary

During her long-term fieldwork in conflict-affected areas of Colombia, the author coordinated the realisation of the participatory documentary 'Somos' (trailer), where a group of youths share their life stories and views about peace. The documentary can be seen as an audiovisual complement to this paper. Those interested in watching the documentary in its entirety are welcome to contact the author. A version subtitled in English is available.

Abstract

With the aim of contributing to the Progress Study to Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, this paper addresses the question of how to better involve non-organised outcast youths in peacebuilding. It does so through an in-depth exploration of the Colombian case, where the author has conducted 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork with adolescents and youths at the urban and semi-rural margins. While there is increasing recognition of the link between marginalisation and violence, the literature often refers to 'marginalised contexts', or to 'marginalised youths' as coherent wholes. There has been little attention to the dynamics of marginalisation and exclusion *within* the youth population, and *within* already marginalised contexts. This paper argues that what lies at the root of youth violence is a feeling of being stigmatised and marginalised by others within their own – already socioeconomically disadvantaged – communities, and as compared to their peace activist peers. The 'outcast' youths at the centre of this study find themselves at the intersection of different types of marginalisation. This position generates in them a frustration to which the turn to violence is an automatic response. Their daily experiences of physical and symbolic violence at home and school starkly contrast with the peace rhetoric currently permeating Colombia, which generates in them a sense of alienation and disenchantment with the peacebuilding project. How can the cycle of violence be disabled? How to meaningfully involve self-excluded, sceptical youths in peacebuilding? The last section of this paper describes four initiatives that are attempting to do so in the Colombian context. In conclusion, the author outlines recommendations to various actors under the five pillars of Resolution 2250.

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Introduction

Within the peacebuilding field, there is increasing recognition that long-lasting peace does not merely involve lack of violence, but rather requires tackling broader issues with the aim of building what Galtung (1969) termed 'positive peace'. Addressing the structural causes of violence is a long-term enterprise, and thus requires the involvement and commitment of the younger generations (Parmar et al. 2010).

The youth population has often been portrayed as a threat to peacebuilding, mainly based on quantitative studies showing that that violence around the world, and particularly in Latin America, is largely perpetrated by young men between their mid-teens and early thirties (Imbusch et al. 2011). However, it is also important to keep in mind that the vast majority of young people actually do not participate in violence. Violent behaviour is thus not innate to the youth population, but is rather induced by external factors, which in-depth qualitative research can help to uncover. What leads some young people, and not others, to engage in violence? What are the external circumstances that may them to do so, and how can they be changed? This paper aims to contribute to answering these questions.

The childhood and youth studies literature dealing with participation often portrays youth as a marginalised segment of society *as a whole,* in what it tends to frame as adult-centered societies

(Hart 1992). This has generated a push for greater youth inclusion in decision-making processes, including peacebuilding, a tangible result of which is UNSC Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security. But while youth inclusion is welcome, it is important to recognise that not *all* youths are marginalised in the same way, nor to the same extent. Different levels of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), determine power hierarchies between different groups of youths. Some are more vocal, more prone and better equipped to engage in institutional or organised processes than others. This determines a selection of voices where initiatives for youth inclusion often end up privileging the voices of those youths who are more easily reachable and more clearly willing to engage, thus furthering the marginalisation of other youths.

Resolution 2250 constitutes a unique occasion to reflect on dynamics of marginalisation *of* and *within* the youth population, and on how marginalisation relates to youth violence. The resolution stresses the importance of "identifying and addressing social, economic, political, cultural and religious exclusion" of youth (*preamble*) and of "promoting social inclusion" (*para 16*). But in recognising that "their marginalisation is detrimental to building sustainable peace" (*para 2*), the Resolution, too, portrays the youths as a structurally marginalised segment of society, somewhat overlooking that "degrees of exclusion

exist within the masses of excluded [youths]" (Sommers 2015: 102).

In his landmark *The Outcast Majority* (2015), based on comparative research in Sub-Saharan Africa, Sommers argues that successful interventions in post-conflict countries require a better understanding of the perspectives of non-organised, socially marginalised youths. These may diametrically differ from those of young peace activists who often belong to economic and/or intellectual elites. As Utas (2012) argues in the Liberian context, "elite youths will never be role models for poor youths". Non-organised young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living at the margins of society are much less studied, much less heard, and much less understood than their activist, elite peers. They are also, not surprisingly, those who more often engage in organised violent crime (at least in Latin America, see Imbusch et al., 2011: 119), and whose voices feature less in peacebuilding processes.

The peacebuilding literature has, for its part, increasingly recognised the link between violence and social exclusion (Baird 2012: 181). In Colombia, for example, Moser and McIlwaine (2000: 3) have shown how structurally disadvantaged conditions such as poverty, lower quality education, and fewer job opportunities are linked to higher levels of domestic, social, economic and political violence. However, socioeconomic disadvantage cannot be the sole variable explaining youth violence because, clearly, not *all* youth growing up in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts turn violent.

This paper argues that what lies at the root of youth violence is a feeling of being stigmatised and marginalised by others *within* their own – already socioeconomically disadvantaged – communities, and as compared to their peace activist peers. This leads these youths to develop a sense of profound detachment from the rest of society, and of disenchantment with the future, to which violence is an automatic response. While marginal, poor and violent communities tend to be stigmatised in their entirety as 'no-go areas' (Koonings and Kruijt 2007: 12), people living *within* these areas tend to engage in even stronger stigmatisation of certain members of their communities than people in higher social strata do. As Caldeira (2000: 80) argues in the Brazilian context, people living in the midst of socio-economic disadvantage "need such stereotypes much more than others do because their social proximity to [the stigmatised] makes it important for them to assert their differences." Those stigmatised are often youths, but not just *any* youths. As intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1991) suggests, the identity of the most stigmatised youths lies at the intersection of a number of variables, including age, gender, social class, education, and others.

As Graphic 3 illustrates, two layers of marginalisation shape the lives of those defined in

Graphic 3 – Illustration of the double layer of marginalisation affecting outcast youths. Elena Butti ©
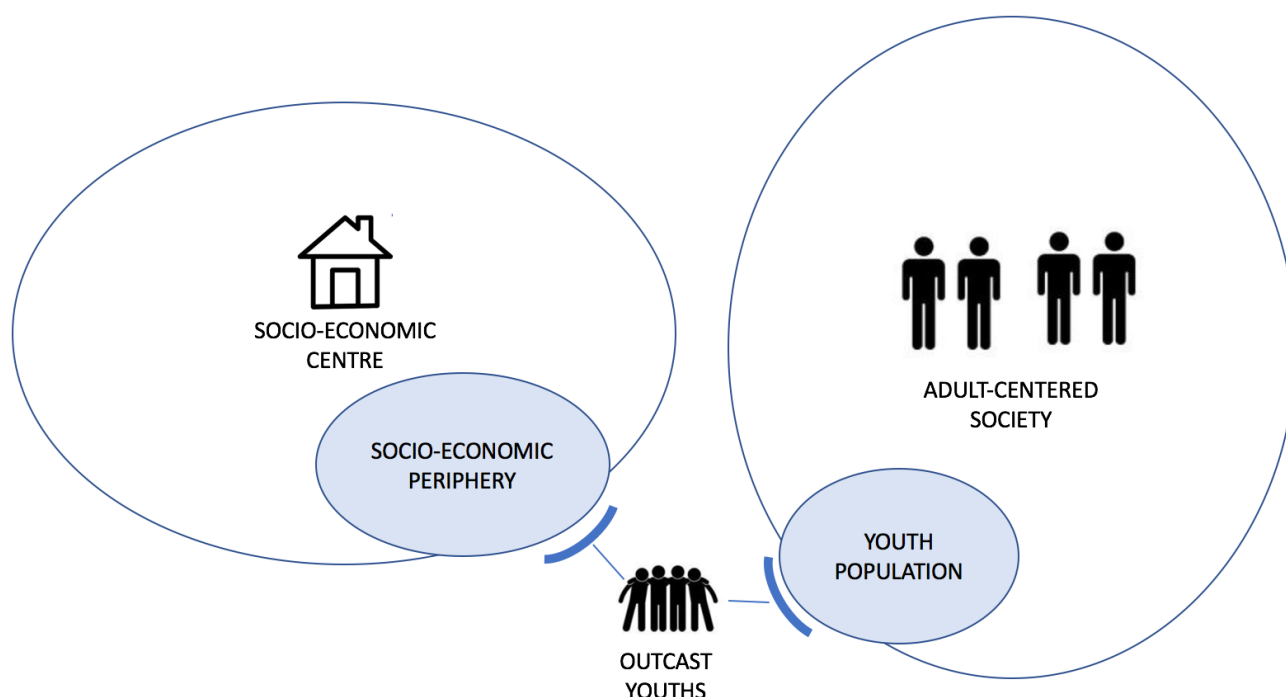
this paper as 'outcast' youths:[1] they grow up in socioeconomically marginal context, and they are socially marginalised *within* that context. While opportunities to engage in violence certainly flourish and are readily available in marginal contexts more than in others, it is those youths who, in virtue of their intersectional identity, feel marginalised *within* those marginal contexts that eventually take them up. Hence, tackling micro-level dynamics of stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain youth appears to be as important as addressing macro-level structural and systemic social justice issues in order to counter youth violence.

With the aim of contributing to the Progress Study requested by Resolution 2250 (*para 20*), this paper seeks to offer policy-relevant recommendations on how to involve in peacebuilding processes those youths who are less prone to be engaged. Through an analysis of the Colombian case, it illustrates who these outcast youths are, how they become marginalised, what motivates them to engage in violence, and what initiatives and policies can help prevent that. By focussing on non-organised youths at the margins of society, it aims to complement the important, but partial, perspective offered by studies centering on young peace activists in Colombia and elsewhere.

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[1] It is important to be reflexive on the use of this label. 'Outcast' was not a term employed by the youths themselves, but rather a term the author chose to identify this specific group. Any label imposition, including this one, is somehow problematic, in that it risks crystallising categories and, in this case, indirectly reinforcing the stigmatisation these youths are subject to. On the other hand, calling this group simply 'youths' would not seem appropriate, because, as it has been explained above, this is a specific group of youths, quite different from others. Moreover, as the findings section illustrates, these youths do see themselves as belonging to a 'different world' than others in society, suggesting that they at times appropriate the stigma in their self-definition.

Believing in the importance of bringing young voices to the table, this paper presents first-person accounts by adolescents and youths collected by the author during 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the country. Because Colombia is often portrayed as a successful example of post-conflict peacebuilding, the findings presented here are relevant both for and beyond the Colombian case. While acknowledging the enormous progress Colombia has made in terms of transitional justice and peacebuilding over the past decade, it is important to flag persisting issues and alternative ways forward if the country is to serve as a model for transitions elsewhere.

Contextual framework

Affected by decades of violence, and today a celebrated model of successful peacebuilding, Colombia is a complex case combining exemplary experiences with persisting structural challenges. The country is home to the longest conflict of the Western hemisphere, which has produced almost eight million victims and has seen opposition between various guerrillas, peri-urban economic mafias and governmental armed forces. At the end of 2016, after over four years of negotiation, the main guerrilla group FARC signed a peace agreement with the Government headed by President Manuel Santos. Despite being rejected by a thin majority in a historic plebiscite, a revised version of the agreement has been passed by Congress and its implementation started in 2017. Negotiations with the second biggest guerrilla group, the ELN, also started in 2017. President Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, and *the Economist* picked Colombia as the country of the year 2016 for the 'colossal achievement' of 'making peace'.

However, these achievements remain, for now, a fragile and temporary success. The threats posed to the stability of peace by structural factors like persisting inequality, endemic corruption, social discrimination and a dysfunctional legal system should not be underestimated. The issue of violence in Colombia is broader than the political conflict and blurs with the problems of organised crime, delinquency and urban insecurity. One of the main concerns in the post-agreement phase is the rise of new violent non-state groups that are currently taking over territories previously controlled by the guerrillas, as well as feeding the 'urban war' at the margins of big cities. Although levels of explicit violence have generally decreased over the past few years, the control exercised by violent non-state groups through their so-called 'social cleansing' practices (CNMH 2015) is far from disappearing.

This is a known story from neighbouring countries in Central America, like Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Despite the peace agreements signed between guerrillas and government in the past decades, these countries have today some of the highest rates of social violence in Latin America, mostly perpetuated by urban youth gangs. How can Colombia avoid following the same steps? As this paper illustrates, part of the answer lies in better addressing the issue of youth violence and understanding its interconnections with dynamics of marginalisation and exclusion.

Graphic 4 – Location map of Colombia. Google maps ©

Methodology

This paper is based on a 16 months-long fieldwork in Colombia conducted by the author between August 2015 and December 2016 as part of her doctoral research at the University of Oxford. The aim of the research was to understand how marginalised adolescents and youths perceive and relate to the peacebuilding process their country is undergoing. The majority of the fieldwork was conducted in the small town of San Carlos and in the city of Medellín, which were selected among the many locations visited[2] because they are highly representative of both conflict dynamics and peacebuilding policies.

Affected by all the actors in the conflict, the small town of San Carlos saw the almost-complete displacement of its population, many of which migrated to the urban margins of the closest city Medellín (CNMH 2011: 185). Since 2006, with the weakening of the guerrillas and the paramilitary demobilisation process, armed violence in the town progressively disappeared, and various institutional programmes facilitated people's return to San Carlos (CNMH 2011: 390-397).

This dynamic of displacement and return between Medellín and San Carlos allows us to explore the link between urban and semi-rural contexts. Officially, no armed actors are present in San Carlos. However, everyone in the town knows of the highly functional microtraffic network which makes extensive use of under-aged people to carry out low-level tasks. This network has close ties to the urban gangs which control Medellín's peripheries, and which many youths from the city itself and from the towns close-by end up joining.

The ethnographic fieldwork carried out in San Carlos and Medellín was complemented by expert interviews in Bogotá and Medellín. This allowed the author to compare the institutional discourse around young people's needs and attitudes with the experiences, needs and concerns of youths on the ground.

In the course of the ethnographic fieldwork, a mixed methodology was employed. Part of the research was carried out with a participatory approach through various visual and creative methods (see Groundwater-Smith 2015; Boyden and Ennew 1997; Rodriguez and Brown 2009; Mirra et al. 2015). The main output of this part of the research was a participatory documentary in which 24 youths aged 10-23 talk about their daily needs and concerns and express their views on peace.[3] Over the course of eight months, the author met weekly with the youths, who were trained on how to use cameras and collectively decided on the content and format of the documentary.

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[2] Preliminary research trips were carried out in Quibdó and surroundings (Chocó), Montes de Maria (Bolívar/Sucre), Tarazá and Ituango (Antioquia).

[3] Click here for a trailer of the participatory documentary 'Somos' (We Are). Those interested in watching the documentary in its entirety are welcome to contact the author. A version subtitled in English is available.

The documentary-making process provided a rare occasion for youths from different ages, gender and social class to engage in dialogue with each other. However, this participatory approach to research did not work for all youths. The institutional structures in which participatory exercises are hosted, and their pre-organised format, discouraged the participation of certain youths whom life has led to distrust institutional or formal processes. Alternative methods were used to approach these youth in a different, less organised, more informal way.

Ethnographic 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998) proved to be the most effective method with these (self-)excluded youths. By starting to engage in marginal spaces like the outskirts of town, at marginal times like evenings and nights, the author got to know a group of predominantly male adolescents and youths between their mid-teens and early twenties,[4] who spend their time in secluded places of the town, often taking and selling drugs, and, in other people's view, "doing nothing productive" with their time. They would not even get close to the building where the meetings for the documentary were being held – let alone participate in it. However, they had much to tell – but learning it involved a time-consuming and personally challenging process of building trust. Because of the obvious difficulties in accessing

them, the voices of these 'other youths' are rarely, if ever, portrayed in participatory research and development practice. It is for this reason that this paper primarily focuses on them.

Detailed daily records of observations and informal conversations were kept during the fieldwork in the form of jottings, then transcribed in more organised notes. These were subsequently analysed using the NVivo software to produce various levels of coding and to link them together. Because of the heavily empirical nature of this study, the contribution this paper offers to the Progress Study is stronger in terms of empirical evidence rather than theoretical development. Moreover, a focus on these outcast youths certainly limits the scope of the findings to this part of the youth population – but it allows, in turn, to better understand the specificities of their particular perspective.

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[4] While Resolution 2250 defines youth as people aged 18-29, it also recognises variation in this definition at the national and international level, and explicitly mentions the definition adopted by the General Assembly as 15-24. The author also notes that any discussion around youths needs to take into account the earlier phases of childhood and adolescence that are crucial to the development of young people. The author thus considers the findings presented in this paper to be relevant for the age group to which Resolution 2250 refers.

Findings

The youth-problem nexus

"Young people cause nothing but problems. Drugs addiction, self-harm, microtraffic, petty crime...this town is getting rotten again." These were the first words adults in San Carlos told me about the youth. Indeed, the tendency to associate 'youth' with 'problems' is a common one in Colombia, which has also been noted in other studies (Berents 2015, Alvis Palma 2008). But, obviously, people do not refer to *all* youths in town this way. Rather, they are concerned with a specific group of predominantly male youths, between their teens and early twenties, who engage in behaviour considered 'problematic', like drugs and alcohol consumption, occasional petty crime like robberies, and the lowest levels or organised crime like drugs selling. They typically have fragmented life stories, deeply intertwined with the conflict, have gone through multiple instances of displacement, are out of school, and experience serious difficulties finding a job. Many have grown up in marginal urban neighbourhoods in Medellín and express this urban culture in their use of baggy clothes, passion for rap music, display of tattoos, and so forth. Many have been involved in gangs, while others fantasise about moving back to the city and joining one.

Marginalisation and conflict dynamics

People avoid physical proximity with these youth and refer to them as "the disposables", "those who are worth nothing/serve no purpose", "those who have already been lost". Not surprisingly, these expressions bear strong resemblances to those used by the armed actors in their 'social cleansing' practice, which consisted in 'cleansing' society from what 'makes it dirty'. These are all those 'deviant elements' who do not conform with conservative notions of decency and productiveness, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, beggars, thieves, and also, in large numbers, young drug-addicts. This practice is generally legitimised by the local population, which often signals to the armed group the 'deviants' to be cleansed.

In places where the armed groups' control has diminished and their 'social cleansing' practice has ceased, the number and visibility of people engaging in 'deviant behaviour' is likely to increase. This is certainly the case of San Carlos, where people identify a steep rise in youths' visible drug use at the time of the 2005 paramilitary demobilisation. Hence, these youths become the object of heavy signalling as society's 'problem kids', and start to be perceived as an urgent social dysfunction to be tackled. This is what people refer to when saying that "the town is getting rotten again" and that "some cleansing is needed". But how do these youth perceive and react to the stigmatisation they are subjected to? It is to their experiences that this paper now turns.

Growing up as outcasts

"We are children of dead parents, either because our parents are dead, or because it's as if they were dead." This was a common way for youths to talk

about their families. Indeed, the domestic environment is often described as one of distance, lack of dialogue and misunderstanding. In fact, the feeling of being judged and rejected within one's family constitutes one of the deepest causes of suffering among the youths. Consider this quote by a 16-year-old:

> I left home when I was eight years old. My mum found me smoking weed and told me to pack my things and go. She said she didn't want a drug addict at home and so… bye bye. She did try to look for a rehabilitation programme for me, but back then I felt that she did that because she wanted to get rid of me. So I left. […] A normal kid has their parents worrying about him… but I used to spend more time in the street than at home, and my mum didn't care. My mum never cared, she only lived to work.

Obviously, being a parent in such setting is an extremely complicated task, the daily difficulties of which we can only imagine. The purpose here is not to suggest that bad parenthood is the root cause of the problem, but rather that the experiences of judgment and abandonment within the family are consistently reported by the youth as a fundamental cause of suffering. This also strongly emerged in our participatory documentary, where the youth identified the home environment as the source of all problems. The family is the first realm where marginalisation is experienced, and the one where it is experienced with the deepest suffering.

Parents in these settings often consider that beating their children is the only way to educate them, to keep them on the right track. Indeed, corporal punishment is a widely-legitimised practice in Colombia, especially in lower socio-economic strata. Those considered to be 'naughty kids' are typically beaten more often, and more harshly, than others. Consider this quote by a 15-year-old:

> I basically grew up all my life being beaten up. My grandma used to beat me for everything. Because she didn't like niggers, she said. Every time she beat me, she insulted me: "Nigger, weed-smoker, useless kid, son of a bitch"'. She used to beat me for anything. If I didn't greet her, she beat me. If I didn't obey, she beat me. If I wasn't tidying up the house every single moment, she beat me. If I went to the street corner without permit, she beat me. She said it was for me to learn. But as she beat me harder, I became worse! [laughs]. You get used to it… And that's what makes you become like this [points at himself]. That's what makes you do many bad things in life. I know that I am able to do bad things because I don't have feelings, and I don't have feelings because they beat me so much.

This young person's account shows how corporal punishment intersects with marginalisation. His grandmother's habit of insulting him while beating him suggests that she was punishing him not only for what he did, but also for his identity altogether. Being beaten so randomly and frequently led this young person to learn that violence is a normal way of solving problems. Not surprisingly, he was one of those who, later in life, entered a Medellín gang.

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Things don't get better when these youth enter the school realm. Despite recent reforms in the school rules, which encourage a more restorative rather than punishment-driven approach, the practice is often still punitive. In many socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, punishment, discipline, obedience and coercion are still the pillars through which offences to school rules are addressed. Consider the account of this 20-year-old:

> I was a naughty kid. My mum was working all day long, so who controlled me? No one. [...] Other parents always told their kids not to play with me because I was a bad influence. That made me feel like shit. [...] I've never known what being beaten at home means. And at school, they noticed that [laughs]. One day I found a mobile phone in the toilet and just took it for myself. I thought no-one saw me, but a teacher got there and told me: "Here's the little thief of the school! Oscar,[5] where is the mobile?" So he took me to the school director's office. There, the director slapped me on my face: "It seems nowadays no one punishes these kids in their house, so it's necessary to punish them at school!" he exclaimed. So I started beating him back. As a result, they expelled me from school, and that damaged my cv. They wrote that I am aggressive, and they will never receive me again to study in a school, because they say I am a danger to other students.

This young person's detailed account of how he was expelled from school sheds further light on the

connection between marginalisation and punishment in the school realm. His notoriety as a 'naughty kid' led school authorities to immediately recognise him as the likely thief. This triggered in him an aggressive reaction that reinforced the image of him as a 'little criminal'. The negative mark that expulsion left on his 'cv', as he calls it, further crystallised the stigma attached to him, making him even more convinced that he cannot change. For as much as he sees, he is punished forever. This youth's account illustrates a vicious circle: being stigmatised as a 'bad kid' leads to higher chances of being punished. Being punished leads to increased violation of norms which leads, in turn, to further stigmatisation. After he was expelled from school, this young man started spending more and more time with his dad, the chief of an urban gang in one of Medellín's marginal neighbourhoods. He 'worked' with the gang until his twenties, when his life was threatened in an internal gang fight, and he sought refuge in the quiet town of San Carlos. He still keeps his ties with drug-trafficking networks in Medellín, however, and is today one of San Carlos' most active drug sellers. His story is similar to that of many others in his situation. It is during the youngest years that these youth start developing a conception of themselves as 'bad kids', different from others, which crystallises as they grow older.

Appropriating the outcast identity

Feeling rejected and stigmatised within their own families and schools leads these youth to seek alternative spaces of belonging. Hence, they spend more and more time on the street, where they

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[5] The name has been changed to protect anonymity.

encounter ever heavier drugs and get involved in low-level microtraffic, with the result of being stigmatised even further. As this 19-year-old explains:

I left home because of that, because of how they treated me. Every so often, they threw my stuff in the street, because they said I was selling drugs. Back then, it wasn't true that I was selling […] but I started so that they would see that I was able to do it for real.

This quote shows that being stigmatised from a very young age can lead these youth to appropriate the label of 'bad kid', and act accordingly. Indeed, childhood and adolescence are crucial stages for individuals to develop a sense of self and of their relationship to the rest of society. Being constantly marginalised thus leads to the creation of an outcast subculture, detached from the rest of society, enacted and crystallised in the world of the street. As this quote by a 15-year-old powerfully illustrates:

In fact, there are two worlds. The first is the one that you see all the time, people working… while the second is the one which no one sees. But many things happen there. That world happens at night [excited]. That's why they say it's prohibited to go around at night.

The distinction these youth draw between society and themselves is not value-free. On the 'good versus evil' binary, they inevitably locate themselves on the 'dark', 'low' or 'evil' side. They call this existential space the 'low world', and conceptualise it in direct opposition to mainstream society's 'high world'. As a 15-year-old explained:

Don't you know what the 'low world' is? Criminality. The 'high world' is people like you, professionals, civilised people. On the other hand, we… we are from the 'low world'. In the eyes of the government and the police, we are shit. We are nothing for society. For us, they are shit, but for them, we are big rats. They treat us like criminals – even if we haven't done anything bad, they treat us like criminals.

The lot of the outcast is thus an identity which these youth appropriate as they grow older, and which crystallises through a particular clothing style and music taste. A young person who was always wearing clothes displaying the marihuana leaf and had piercings explained he was doing that because "I want to let society know that I don't care about what they think of me". When asked why he liked rap music so much, another informant said: "It's because it talks about us, about the low world."

Belonging to the 'low world' is, however, also experienced with great ambivalence, regret and self-blame. The youth often engaged in internal dilemmas on "which path to go down, the good one or the bad one." As this quote by a 15-year-old shows:

There are only two types of people in the world: good people and bad people. The good people don't sell drugs, don't steal… but I lead a very bad life […] I am the contrary of the perfect, obedient girl who

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stays at home, who does not drink… I used to be that girl. I had the best grades in school, I was the star of the class. I never went out in the street, never drank, never took drugs… until one day I did. You understand? From good I became bad.

Interestingly, this young girl also self-identifies as lesbian. The transition she marks from 'good' to 'bad' girl is also a transition from a behaviour compliant with social expectations for young girls in that social context, which requires obedience and decency within the domestic sphere, to one more typical of young men, deployed in the realm of the street, in close contact with 'deviances' such as drug consumption. Her sexual orientation leads her to a desire to be masculine, but her sex does not allow her to embody 'good' or 'mainstream' masculinity. Hence, becoming a 'bad guy' is the only option left to her – among other 'deviants', her 'deviant' sexual orientation can find its place.

Realising that her nature is fundamentally uncompliant with society's expectations leads this young girl to experience belonging to the 'low world' with a great degree of self-blame and guilt. Desires to change life and attempts to do so are not uncommon among outcast youths, but they are often accompanied by a fatalist conviction that change is, for them, fundamentally impossible, because belonging to the 'low world' is an intrinsic feature of their identity. As the same 15-year-old explained a little later:

I was assigned to this life. Bad people like me just go downwards. Deep down, to Hell. I don't know how life up there is. They say it's

a Paradise. But my life… my life is full of problems, and mistakes, and bad habits. My reality is full of lies, alcohol, sex, money, pleasure, lust, bad people… Would you like a life like that? I don't like it, but I have it. It's my cruel and sad reality. If my life was mine, I would shape it differently. But my life is just like that. I was assigned to it. That is just who I am.

This young person's insistence on the fact that she was *assigned* to that life illustrates her profound conviction that belonging to the 'low world' is not something she chooses, but rather something she was born to. "There is something that tells me that nothing is ever going to be able to change me," another 15-year-old said. "It's not that I don't *want* to change…. It's that I feel changing is just not possible. The Devil doesn't allow me to."

Frustration and the turn to violence

While they appropriate it as part of their identity, marginalisation is also something these youths experience with a great degree of frustration. 'I hate this town,' they said over and over again. "It's full of gossipmongers, people who say fake things about you all the time." Consider this quote by a 15-year-old:

Since I take drugs, I am nothing for society. A piece of shit. They think we are killers, all of us. If someone gets robbed, people immediately insult me: "You son of a bitch weed-smoker thief vicious disposable nigger"… that's what they say. Alright, I like drugs. But it's unfair that they keep judging us this way.

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Another 15-year-old deals with frustration by developing a sense of careless indifference:

> Let them think whatever they want! They say the worst things about me anyways. "Alexa,[6] you are trash. You are vicious. You are an alcoholic. You are a useless kid, you are dirty, you are nothing." They always repeat that to me. Society labels you: good or bad. No need to do that: I'm deep down in a shit hole, I know that by myself, without the need for others to tell me.

As our participatory documentary also suggests, the frustration at being marginalised generates in youth a sense of detachment from the rest of society which leads them to turn violent against it, as this quote by a 15-year-old illustrates:

> Sometimes anger takes over, and I'm not able to control myself. I feel anger towards everyone […] I really don't care what happens to others. I feel so lonely, that seeing others so united makes me feel "I wish I could be that way too"… but I know I'm not, and I will never be. Everyone ignores me: my brother ignores me, my dad ignores me, my step-mother ignores me… So what alternative do I have? If you feel alone, everyone humiliates you, and no one shows you love… That's what turns you evil […] I am like that, I don't have feelings for anything. I have a mind like that of… how do you call them? Professional murderers. I have a gene that is called the gene of evil. If I decide to use it, this gene enables me to do tons of

> things that no one else in this world is able to.

This 15-year-old was convinced he had become a bad person, a killer, and that this transformation was irreversible:

> I'm not able to change anymore. Since I was a small kid, I have always liked evil. Believe me, since the first day of life you show what you are going to become. That's why I say that I can kill. But you know… killers are not killers. People become killers not because they want, but because it is the only option they see.

The frustration emerging from the stigma attached to them by the rest of society clearly generates in these youths a desire to react. Having being raised in a context where violent interaction is the order of the day, violence appears to them as the automatic venue to channel their frustration. And often, joining an urban gang in Medellín appears as the most readily available opportunity to do so.

Feeling unable to gain that recognition through the 'standard' pathway of getting a 'normal' job, because of their lack of qualifications and the stigma attached to them, these youths see working for the gang as their only 'job' option. While youth involvement in gangs is often attributed to a desire to access money, motorbikes, and guns, it is important to understand what these items represent to these youths: a way to obtain social recognition. Consider this quote by a 15-year-old:

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[6] The name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

I don't even care so much about money. The only thing I want is for the world to know who I am. As Carlos Castaño and Pablo Escobar[7] did. So that people know that I exist. Not like now, that I'm just like an ugly insect which doesn't exist for people. That's what I want you to understand: regardless of how bad someone may be, every person exists. Every person is useful in some way, and no one should be ignored. Because being ignored leads people to do many bad things.

The disenchantment with peace

Considering their life experiences, it is not surprising that peace is, for these youth, a far-away concern. In the traditionally conservative, Uribe-supporting[8] Antioquia region, most people dismiss the peace process as "a corrupt political business" and, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly voted against the peace agreement in the plebiscite, or did not vote at all.

Peace is also something not often talked about at home or school. Parents generally prefer to avoid discussing a topic which they consider "mere dirty politics". Despite the [introduction] of a new school subject on peace education (the *Catedra para la Paz*), no implementation was observed during the fieldwork. In the rare instances where individual teachers took a personal initiative to talk about the peace process with their high school students, they

were accused of "doing politics at school" and were asked to stop.

In this context, the predominant and politically correct narrative around peace is a domestic one. "Peace starts at home," is the refrain repeated by adults and children alike – one which also strongly emerges from the participatory documentary. This push for better inter-family relations and the end of domestic violence is certainly welcome. However, it does deprive the idea of peace of an inherent political element. Children and youth learn to associate peace with images of nature and ideas around tranquillity, which stands in contrast with a view of peace as active political engagement, participation in society, and a struggle for one's rights. As a 15-year-old told me: "Peace is being quiet with others […] Less noise. Staying more silent. Everything stays silent. Quiet. You stay relaxed and quiet. That's peace."

While this is the general attitude towards peace in the socio-economically disadvantaged contexts where the research was conducted, the attitude of the outcast youths at the centre of this paper is even more denialist. While most people around them have a domestic, apolitical conception of peace, the outcast youths at the centre of this study often dismiss the concept of peace altogether. "You need to smoke lots of weed in order to even just start imagining peace!" a 17-year-old told me, playfully. These youths, who are personally involved in violence and illegality, have a much clearer idea of the connection between

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[7] The first (†2004) was a paramilitary chief, leader of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). The second (†1993) was a well-known drug trafficker, leader of the Medellín Cartel.
[8] Álvaro Uribe Vélez is former Governor of Antioquia and predecessor of Santos as President.

illegal trafficking and violence, and fail to see how that could ever end. As a sceptical 25-year-old said:

After the agreement, there is only going to be more war, but more hidden. A silent war. […] The war doesn't end. The paramilitaries, the gangsters remain… if the war ends, then what? That doesn't end, because it's like a chain. If they kill one, the other continues. The only way for the war to end is that they make lots of drugs and give it around for free. The war is determined by drugs and by extortions, but mostly by drugs.

Violence and illegality are what has regulated these youths' lives since they were born. This leads them to doubt about the very possibility for peace to exist, anywhere, at any time. "There is never going to be peace in Colombia," a 16-year-old said. "Not in Colombia, in the whole world," continued another. "It's the same everywhere. Haven't you heard the news, that the Koreans are creating a new atomic bomb?"

Such a deeply-grounded belief that peace is an impossible attainment leads these youths to become indifferent to it. "Peace and war is the same for me," a 15-year-old said. "If you misbehave, they kill you. If you behave well, they also kill you. they always kill you, it's all the same." "To be honest, I don't want any peace," a 19-year-old said. "In fact, if there is peace, or not, for me it's exactly the same."

This is obviously not to say that these youths do not care about improving their situation, and the situation of those around them. But they do not see

in the peace process, nor in the very idea of peace, a means to achieve that. When asked what he would do, if he was the President of Colombia, a 15-year-old said: "Helping poor people. If we all had the same wealth we'd never fight. All fighting is for money. If we all had the same why would we be fighting?" His words are a lucid reminder of Colombia's huge inequality problem. His disenchantment with peace should not be interpreted as suggesting that he does not care about improving his society, but that he believes much more structural issues need to be tackled for peace to be, if not achieved, at least approximated.

Engaging outcast youths in peacebuilding

How can peacebuilding processes meaningfully engage young outcasts? These are people who have lost faith in institutional and organised processes, actively seek disengagement from the rest of society, claim they do not care about peace, and at times even actively counter it. Engaging them in peacebuilding is no easy task. Of the many, and all important, youth-targeted initiatives observed in Colombia during the fieldwork, four of them (two in San Carlos, two in Medellín) are to be commended for their ability to engage self-marginalised youths.

Graphic 5 – Santiago and Andrés doing 'consciousness-raising rap'. Photo courtesy by them.

Consciousness-raising rap: self-portrayal and building bridges between sectors of society

If there is one thing marginalised youths are enthusiastic about, it is rap music. They often mention it as a source of evidence, citing dozens of verses they know by heart. The most popular group is by far Crack Family, a Bogotá-based rap group whose songs talk of life in the street, drugs, violence, and family problems. As requested by the youth, one of their songs, *Más que real* (More than real), is also part of the soundtrack of our participatory documentary. In a society that tends to ignore them, these youth get enthusiastic about rap because they recognise themselves in this 'underground' music which becomes, in turn, a source of wisdom. However, the focus of some rap songs on the 'low world' has the effect of crystallising in these youths the conviction that they belong to a different world than the rest of society,

thus strengthening the barriers they draw between themselves and others.

Two youths in San Carlos have, however, started to practice a different kind of rap, called 'conscious rap', which aims to use music as a form of social activism. Their aim to transform the stigma attached to violent youths underground culture achieve change in society. Their texts talk about building peace through de-stigmatisation and social acceptance of outcast youths. As one of them said:

What I really want to do is awaken people's consciousness. Mine is a popular artistic revolution. It doesn't come from anger, but from a necessity to talk about the reality of our neighbourhood. I would like for this to be heard by people who normally don't listen to rap, so that they are aware of our reality. And I would like for other youth like me to listen to this, so that they don't feel judged,

but they realise the mistakes they are making in life. I take my responsibility seriously, I do this work as an artist, from the heart.

This duo is not part of an organisation, nor do they have any funding. However, their public shows in San Carlos are greatly appreciated both by outcast youth and people in town more generally. Out of their own time and effort, they are doing the important work of building bridges between two realities, that of the 'low world' and that of 'the rest of society'. Projects like this should be supported and encouraged, especially in small towns where they are less common and receive less support than in big cities.

The Young Entrepreneurs Association: Generating employment for social recognition

One of the most common reasons for stigma attribution to youth is their perceived unproductiveness. "They are of no use to society," people often say when they see these unemployed youth smoke weed at street corners. But their lack of educational qualifications and the stigma attached to them makes finding employment all the more difficult. The Association of San Carlos' Young Entrepreneurs (ASJOVEMSAC – *Asociación de Jóvenes Emprendedores SanCarlitanos*), entirely composed of young people, attempts to address this issue by creating opportunities for youth employment. The story of the association is in itself fascinating and emblematic. Its two founders initially called it Association of San Carlos' Young Victims of the Conflict (ASJOVISAC - *Asociación de*

Graphic 6 – Logo of the Young Entrepreneurs Association. Courtesy of ASJOVEMSAC.

Jóvenes Victimas del Conflicto SanCarlitanos), in order to make use of a funding opportunity that was only available to victims of the conflict. But that association never took off, because most youth had not lived the conflict directly, and did not like to self-identify as victims. Therefore, the association quickly dropped its old name and acquired its current one. As one of the founders explained:

> *We were tired of identifying as victims! We want to propose! We, the youths, are dreamers, entrepreneurs. We are victims, of course, too, and we cannot change that, but we are also everything else. Youths are very stigmatised in San Carlos, people say that they are worth nothing, that they are just a problem, that they are not productive. We want to change this conception by generating employment opportunities for these youth.*

ASJOVEMSAC aims to generate such opportunities by creating projects around sustainable tourism in

San Carlos' beautiful natural surroundings, and by seeking funding from external sources to provide leadership and entrepreneurship courses to the youth. While they do not talk about violence and peace, their work contributes to tackling the consequences of the conflict such as the stigmatisation of unproductive youth, and to build a peace that is sustainable by preventing these youth from relapsing into violence. However, their promising and much-needed work is often discontinued for lack of funding, and would certainly benefit from more financial and institutional support.

Agroarte: Linking territoriality and hip hop

The environment of a big city presents different challenges for youth than that of a small town. In Medellín, the issues of stigmatisation and lack of opportunities are enhanced by the ongoing urban war and by the presence in the territory of urban gangs, which constitutes, for the youth, a readily available livelihood option. Part of the appeal of urban gangs rests in their close relationship to the territory they control, and many of its members genuinely believe that they are doing a service to the community by 'taking care' of the neighbourhood.

The youth-led organization Agroarte seeks to foster young people's sense of belonging to their own neighbourhood in different, peaceful ways. The Comuna 13, where the organization works, has been one of Medellín's most violent neighbourhoods, highly affected by fights between different gangs and against the State. This has led to its stigmatisation as a violent neighbourhood, an image that Agroarte is striving to change. By combining hip hop with agriculture, this organization involves youths in projects to improve

Graphic 7 – Agroarte member in Medellín, Comuna 13.

the neighbourhood's look and social fabric, for example by painting colourful graffiti and planting trees. They often do not do this alone, but seek the collaboration of the people living in the surroundings of the interventions. During these processes, as one of the leaders said, "the youth talk to the elderly, to the women, to all those people they would not normally talk to, and by doing so we strengthen the neighbourhood's social fabric." An adolescent who had just recently entered the organisation said: "What I like about this group is that you never feel judged. I feel I can talk about all my problems with them, something I don't normally do, not even at home. The group leader is like a father to me." It is striking that various youth who got involved in gang violence said the same about gang chiefs. What many youth find in the gang – a sense of belonging to a group and to a territory, and a model of successful adulthood – others have found in Agroarte. The usefulness and urgency of more projects of this type in gang-controlled urban neighbourhoods is clear.

'The Rebellious Weed-smoker': Transforming stigma into positive identity

'The Rebellious Weed-Smoker' (*Kanábico Insumiso*), as he calls himself, is one of Medellín's most committed peace activists. A concentration of possibly all the characteristics that trigger stigma in his society, this 25-year-old is antimilitarist, of a relatively darker skin colour, of a lower socio-economic stratum, non-conformant with what he calls the 'heterosexual normativity', a human rights defender, a declared and proud marijuana-smoker,

and member of a local peace organisation, the *Corporación Convivamos*, that operates in the gang-controlled neighbourhood Villa de Guadalupe. He is well-known and admired by international and local peacebuilding organisations, and always participates in the city's discussion fora around peace. Last but not least, he is extremely popular among non-organised outcast youths. What is Kanábico's secret? In his words:

I was raised in a context where weed is really stigmatised. For a very long time I had this idea of self-marginalisation, this idea that as a weed-smoker you are worth nothing. There is this common conception that a weed-smoker is someone who stands all day long in the street corner, smoking, without doing anything. I wanted to change this. I wanted to create a recognition that I could at the same time be a serious guy, an activist, and a weed-smoker. My name, Kanábico Insumiso, involves a social and political recognition of weed. For me, consuming weed is a political act, because it takes away the taboo related to it. We were raised in a society that tells us that consuming weed is bad, but they never explained why to us. What I try to do is to show that weed-smokers are people who can also contribute to society. That they are worth something, that they are useful for something. Consuming weed makes us speak of freedom, the freedom to smoke, and also all the other freedoms. We are starting a campaign for the peace plebiscite entitled "A joint to vote yes for peace". Of course, the problem with marijuana is that it finances

illegal economies. But people should understand that the problem is not weed, it is the illegal trafficking around it. That is why I stand for the legalization of weed.

Kanábico's words are not mere rhetoric. The work he and his companions do in the neighbourhood is real, and risky. They have often stood up to the local gang, by refusing their offers to collaborate, and organising programmes to discourage young people's involvement in the gang. When the gang got to the point of threatening them, what protected them was the support of international organisations who knew about their work. But Kanábico's fight is not only focused on the de-stigmatisation of youths and weed. It is a much wider fight for social justice in Colombia. As he explained:

*I talk about peace because it's the cliché and a strategically smart discourse, but I don't believe in peace as they are doing it now. To build real peace, we need to overcome social inequality by tackling the concentration of power in the elites. If we have to worry about food we are never going to have peace. That's a shitty lie. We are obliged to look for alternatives to survive and that is why we get involved in gangs. This has created, in Colombia, the idea of 'the youth of no future', and this image has prevented youth from really taking a stance, from engaging in politics (*lo político*), which is not the dirty politics (*la política*) of corrupt politicians, but rather politics in the sense of contributing to society, to others. Now they are starting to say that youth have to be*

leaders and revolutionaries. But in the territories, being a leader is dangerous. You can be identified as a guerrillero, and you can be killed. What revolution are we talking about?

Kanábico's lucid, blunt, politically incorrect words leave no escape: meaningful peace requires much more than a peace agreement. It requires change in the structural factors that lead to youth stigmatisation and their subsequent involvement in violence. His ability to speak so eloquently to different audiences, from UN agencies to the local government, from concerned mothers to outcast youth in his neighbourhood, is certainly a quality that distinguishes him from many others. But he also embodies evidence of the fact that any youth stigmatised as a weed-smoker can turn into a youth leader and peace activist, just as he can turn into a gang member. What differentiates between one or the other is not so much a question of personality or willingness, as much as it is a question of context and opportunities. International support to protect these 'politically incorrect' activists is key to encourage more youth to follow the same steps.

In conclusion, these four experiences offer useful inspiration to meaningfully engage outcast youth in peacebuilding. They all address, in different ways, young people's need for social recognition and identity-building, which also often lies at the root of youth violence. While not all of them explicitly employ a rhetoric of peace, they all certainly contribute to building a broad conception of positive peace (Galtung 1969).

Recommendations under the five pillars of UNSC Resolution 2250 (2015)

I. Participation

The 'inclusive participation' Resolution 2250 calls for needs to be grounded in a recognition that youth are not all the same, and hence do not speak with one voice, even within the same context. It is important to include the perspectives of different groups of youth, those organised and those non-organised, those eager to participate in and those who purposely stay away from institutional processes. This requires anyone hoping to secure inclusive youth participation in its processes, including governments, UN agencies, and international and national organisations, to be prepared to make use of different methods, in different spaces, at different times, to engage different youth. It also requires a deeper reflection on how to restore the trust in institutions and organised processes that many youth have lost. Where full inclusion is practically impossible, such limitation should be openly acknowledged, being careful not to claim that selected youth can meaningfully speak for all youth.

The academic community, for its part, should be critically reflective of participatory approaches advocated for use in youth research. Researchers should be equally ready to acknowledge the limits of the 'youth perspective' any study may claim to represent. Where possible and relevant, they should increase the focus on the perspective of non-organised outcast youth, which has been, so far, given much less attention compared to the perspective of organised young activists.

The authors of the Progress Study to Resolution 2250 should similarly reflect on the limits of the youth voices they plan to incorporate. The regional consultations undertaken for the purposes of the study purposely target youth leaders and young peace activists and thus represent a partial perspective. While focus group discussions with 'hard to reach' youth are being commissioned to peacebuilding organisations in 20 countries, there are significant limits to this methodology. Moreover, according to official documentation, the category of 'hard to reach' youth includes youths as diverse as "young former combatants, young forced migrants, young men and women in security institutions, young prisoners, rural and indigenous youth, out-of-school youth, etc." All of these different youth are likely to have different perspectives which may not be fully captured using a focus group methodology, which inevitably privileges some voices over others, and typically involves one-off engagements rather than sustained consultations. The local organisations running these focus groups may also be pursuing their own agendas, which may end up influencing the results. While time and resource constraints may make it impossible to be fully inclusive, it is of the utmost importance, given the global reach of the Progress Study, to fully recognise both the limitations and the mediated character of the youth

voices collected. It is recommended that the authors of the Progress Study, as well as others conducting future work on the topic, including the multilateral system, governments, international and local organisations, rely on in-depth, long-term ethnographic academic studies with these 'hard to reach' youth, which may constitute a better, albeit undoubtedly mediated, way to capture the perspectives of these youth, rather than focus groups.

Ensuring inclusive youth participation goes beyond providing spaces for youth to voluntarily participate. It also involves fostering a culture of participation among young people, so that more youth will be naturally inclined to participate. Cultural change is obviously a long-term enterprise, but can be facilitated through a number of interventions. In the Colombian context, the government should seriously consider a structural reform of the school curriculum, moving towards a curriculum that supports and encourages critical thinking skills. If children learn, from a young age, that good grades come from originality, critical thinking and constructive criticism, rather than from memorisation and obedience, they may be encouraged to act accordingly, with creativity and independence, as they grow older. The practice of school regulation also needs to concretely transition from a punitive to a restorative approach.

Finally, the recommendation to young activists is to avoid stigmatising their non-organised outcast peers who may be engaging or prone to engage in violence. While it is important to condemn violence,

stigmatising those engaging in it is only likely to lead to their further (self-)marginalisation, which ends up being detrimental to peacebuilding. Organised youth and peace activists may more helpfully work with communities to reduce the stigma against their outcast peers, and to build bridges of understanding between segments of society.

II. Protection

In relation to protection, this paper provides two conceptual considerations that are important to be kept in mind by all actors working on issues of protection, including governments, UN agencies, and international and local organisations.

First, while protection is often referred to in relation to physical violence, it is important to understand that symbolic violence like stigmatisation may cause equal, if not greater, suffering in the youth subjected to it. As this study has shown, this suffering is often a trigger for youth to engage in violence against others in society. Hence, protecting youth from symbolic (as much as from physical) violence should be seen as an investment to protect not only the youth concerned, but also people around them.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that environments traditionally considered to be protective ones, like the family and the school, are not always so. In the context studied, corporal punishment as well as symbolic violence make home and school unwelcoming spaces full of suffering for

some youth. While it is crucial to work to restore the protective nature of these environments, it is also important to be sensitive to alternative protective environments where youths may find acceptance and a sense of belonging. Youth organisations may constitute those environments for some youth, but other youth may find the same sense of belonging and protection in youth gangs. Rather than simplistically portraying children's and adolescents' involvement in gangs as forced recruitment, it is crucial to be sensitive to what it is that many youth look for and find in gangs – a task to which the academic community can usefully contribute to.

Having reached this understanding, it is important to provide alternative spaces of engagement where these youth can find what they look for without engaging in violence and illegality. These can be initiatives which use 'underground' urban culture like hip-hop, rap and graffiti, which is so appealing to these youths, to allow the youths to capitalise on their abilities to gain social recognition by other youths and the broader community. Initiatives around concrete employment possibilities with and for the community are also crucial to give these youths a sense that they are playing a role in the social fabric surrounding them, and to give others the impression that they are an important resource, rather than an unwanted problem.

III. Prevention

It is crucial to keep in mind that prevention of violence against youth is intrinsically connected to prevention of violence perpetuation by youth.

Prevention of youth violence and of violence on youth is obviously intrinsically linked to preventive work with children and adolescents. The boundaries between these different phases of life are blurred and it is important that policies and programmes address these life stages as a continuum rather than separately. In the Colombian context, the government, UN agencies, international and local organisations have an important advocacy and educational work to do against corporal punishment within families and (more rarely) schools. This practice should be discouraged and condemned even in its lightest forms, because what matters are not only its physical effects, but also the idea passed on to the youth that violence is a legitimate way of solving problems. Seriously addressing this issue involves the politically inconvenient task of questioning the often unquestioned authority of parents (especially fathers) within families, and of teachers within classrooms.

Resolution 2250 refers to the importance of peace education under its 'prevention' pillar. Any actor working in peace education, including governments, UN agencies, and international and local organisations, should be sensitive to the fact that in certain contexts, rhetoric about peace may have the

undesired effect of alienating those who would benefit from peace education the most. In Colombia, for instance, peace tends to be associated with the political peace negotiations, and as such is often subject to scepticism and disenchantment. In situations like this, different wording related to the various dimensions of positive peace, like coexistence, respect, sense of belonging to the territory, social justice etc. may be more appealing to segments of the (youth) population who may otherwise distance themselves from such processes. Employing elements from the underground culture of outcast youth, such as, in Colombia, rap, hip hop and graffiti, can also prove very effective in making peace education appealing to outcast youth.

It is also crucial to bear in mind that peace education should not only target youth prone to engage in violence, but rather entire communities. As this paper has shown, stigmatisation can be a major driver of youth violence. Where this is the case, educational work with communities on discouraging open stigmatisation can be a powerful way to disable the cycle of violence.

Finally, as Resolution 2250 stresses, employment is key in prevention of violence. It is important for employment opportunities to be accessible to those youth who may appear as the least qualified for any type of job, but who are also, for this very reason, often more prone than others to engage in organised violence. Governments in particular should provide on-the-job training opportunities that may facilitate access to unskilled youth, and

provide incentives for the private sector to do the same.

IV. Partnership

It is crucial for any stakeholder engaging in partnership with youth, including governments, UN agencies, international and local organisations to carefully consider with whom partnerships are developed, in order to avoid perpetuating power hierarchies and discriminatory selection of voices among different groups of youth. While developing partnerships with non-organised youth may prove difficult, identifying and linking with those organisations and initiatives which purposely target marginalised youth, like the four presented in this paper, is a good way around this problem. These 'bridge' organisations and initiatives are, however, often less visible than organisations of young activists. Academics, especially who have the time and resources to conduct long-term locally-embedded fieldwork, can play an important role in identifying such initiatives and in making them known to policymakers – as the author of this paper has tried to do for the Colombian context.

V. Disengagement and reintegration

Effective disengagement, be it through a formal demobilisation process, or through an informal process of leaving the group, requires taking the possibility of relapse into violence seriously. The Colombian context is a good example of how approaches that frame youth violence through the narrow lens of illegal recruitment are simplistic, as they overlook the underlying reasons why many youth voluntarily decide to engage in organised violence. The issue is not only that these youths cannot develop employability skills whilst they are engaging in violence; it is also that they often search for and find some returns in joining a violent group. If what they look for is, as this study shows, social recognition, as well as a way to secure a livelihood, both aspects must be tackled simultaneously at the time of disengagement and reintegration. Employment opportunities that meet labour market demands are important, but it is also crucial that the youth find such opportunities attractive, rather than boring or even shameful. For many in the context studied, becoming a farmer, a coffee grower or a builder were not attractive options, neither in economic nor in social terms. Investing in modern industries, considered 'cool' by young people, like technology and music, may be a better way forward. It is particularly important for governments, which are often in charge of designing reintegration programmes, to be sensitive to the passions and aspirations of youth, without solely focussing on productivity and employability issues.

Concerning who gets access to these opportunities, the recommendation is for the threshold to be as low as possible. The Colombian case shows that the landscape of organised violence is often much more blurred than a clear-cut distinction between conflict-related armed groups and urban delinquency. Thus, thresholds like the requirement of a demobilisation certificate to access reintegration opportunities, as it was initially done in the Colombian case, do not make sense to the eyes of the youth, to whom engagement in a formally-recognised or non-formally-recognised group is not seen as fundamentally different. While academics have long pointed at these issues, policies still often fall short. Closer dialogue between policy-makers and academics may prove beneficial in this respect.

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