



Troubled Reflections: A small window of opportunity for transformation in Colombia

Written by [Emily Morrison](#) (British Council)

In Colombia on a recent visit as a Co-Investigator for Changing the Story in 2018, I learned the government narrative is shifting from the narrative of peace and transition [\[1\]](#) to a narrative which foregrounds resilience, stabilisation and growth. The implications of different discourses could seem trivial, yet are critical when considered in the current context of Colombia: a country taking breath amidst a ceasefire from a war driven by ideology as well as land, geographic complexity, failed institutions and a fight for civil rights.

Peace or Resilience?

The definitions for peace are many and varied in the field of peacekeeping, humanitarian work and politics. Peace can mean the transition from active conflict to ceasefire – ‘the end of violence’ or a state of stable peace [\[2\]](#). It can mean the sustained condition of non-violence and, often linked heavily to democracy – the active process of citizens and leaders exercising and maintaining their rights in peaceful co-existence with each other. It can mean being at peace with oneself – a more personal, internal condition, harder to define beyond each individual. A definition which encapsulates elements of all the above is Galtung’s positive peace [\[3\]](#) which acknowledged that peace is not a single event: it is a state of continuous social conditions within which communities do not only live peacefully but can also flourish. Galtung proposed an idea which has been criticised as overly theoretical on occasion, perhaps because it is constructivist in nature, requiring the building of new ways of living and of new social realities [\[4\]](#). In the world of geopolitics and international relations, the time frames for such extensive, far-reaching social change are often regarded as too long to be accommodated within the ‘realist’ – often short-termist – world of global policy.

Resilience, our second term, can be conceptualised at the individual, community or institutional level as ‘the ability of individuals, households, communities and institutions to anticipate, withstand, recover and transform from shocks and crises [\[5\]](#). Whilst some studies do suggest certain qualities of resilient individuals to be self-cultivated – known as personal resilience resources [\[6\]](#) such as adaptability, confidence and purposiveness – the importance of external systemic change and layers of support to enable communities to recover from crisis is clear. Communities suffering daily in food poverty, insecurity, or refugees surviving in precarious temporary accommodation may be resilient and not at conflict – but that does not mean the conditions are acceptable or do not need to radically change.

In light of these definitions, what we must be careful with in a resilience or stabilisation discourse in the context of Colombia is two things: firstly, that it does not deflect the responsibility for sustaining the conditions of peace onto individuals alone; secondly, that it does not imply that peace is a static condition within which organised violence ends but where negative conditions remain or indeed, emerge. After over half a century of violence in Colombia, the recovery and transition to a new, stable state cannot be expected to be swift. There may be or have been a ceasefire, but the realisation of peace and recovery for everyday communities is far from achieved.

Troubled reflections

The Colombia strand of multi-national project Changing the Story is driven by the concept that also informs its title, known as ‘Peace on a small scale’. The name reflects the ambition of the project – to work from the grassroots with remote communities in different regions in Colombia, to understand and support how they can reconcile their own sense and experience of peace. In November 2018, the team

led by Professor Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, Universidad de Los Andes and Dr Simon Dancey, CEO Creative and Cultural Skills, travelled via road through the winding Andes to Ginebra Paramo, a town in the centre of the Cauca valley, bordered by mountains that also mark a territory line and former battleground between FARC and paramilitary forces. We travelled to conduct a mixed methods approach, namely ethnographies and participatory workshops with communities, interviews with community leaders and most crucially, to co-create sonic biographies with young people acting as community researchers.

Ginebra Paramo is a town where the experience of 'peace' is very recent. Violent acts and raids, including on the agricultural bank, are a recent memory – the ceasefire has only been felt in the last three years. In the villages and towns that border Ginebra such as Buga, murals and graffiti to insurgent leaders remain on the walls of buildings:

“They have not removed them less they come back; they can not believe they (the violent groups) will not return.’ (Youth guide, Buga)”

The continued presence of these stark murals reflects the sense of the precariousness of peace in Colombia. In these remote communities, the sense and demonstration of progress – of some transition beyond the ceasefire – has not been felt. What is observable is the silence in the hill towns and the absence of external intervention or resources; perhaps a continuum of reports that the extent to which state governance and intervention is recognised and felt within Colombia’s populations outside of the major cities which is consistently reported as weak [7]. This is acutely felt in the context of Ginebra’s young people. The young people we interviewed reported they felt ‘hopeless’, confronted by the lack of opportunity and the absence of visible change in their community and what they saw as very uncertain futures.

Changing the Story are exploring with young people in Colombia what this change looks like. In collaboration with Andres, a sound engineer from Medellin, and with local guides including the leader of the town’s renowned Andean Music School, the research team were welcomed into the local community and established a series of training workshops for groups of young people in the art of sound collection, sound production and recording and editing. Participatory sound production workshops convened over two days first explored the nature of sound in the immediate environment, with participants choosing what sounds reflected their experience and relationship with the landscape. They then had the opportunity to go out into the communities – both town and rural – to create their own soundscapes using new found recording, editing and production skills.

The participatory workshops have been a process of reflexive learning for the research team and for the communities taking part on how the nature of sound can respond and capture the social conditions observed today and those experienced during the fifty year conflict. The combination of sound and indeed of silence speaks to the aspect of memory, of the multitude of individual testimonies of loss, victimisation and violence central to the Truth and Reconciliation process in Colombia. The choice of soundscapes by the young people expressed the innumerable causes and sites of the violence in the country, the qualities of insurgent and often unrecognised destructive acts and the complexity of accord and resolution to conflict. Furthermore, the focus on their immediate natural ecosystem of the Cauca valley and surrounding mountains speaks to the relationship of communities to the small-holdings, land and natural environment which formed such a central part of the conflict and to the small efforts by which young people are seeking to reconstruct their livelihoods within Colombia. The soundscapes in this way captured a critical essence of using arts based approaches in such settings of peace and transition; arts can help us to connect with and recapture the past, yet the act of production and creation is in itself a step towards the future. The role of arts in ‘imagining alternative ways forward’ in post-conflict settings (Crossick and Kaszynaska 2016: 118) thus has a unique potential in moving forwards towards the realisation of a non-static, positive peace.

The small window

What was most evident from this fieldwork visit was that the term peace on a small scale reflects the lived experience of the peace process in regions such as the Cauca in a more urgent way. Repeatedly we were told this is a brief moment in which social change could happen, before what these communities see as the new threats – such as new drug trafficking operations, insurgent groups and increasing poverty and lawlessness – take root in the remote regions of the country. Statistics support this: more than 40% of young Colombians claim to feel insecure in their neighbourhood and that their neighbourhoods are more insecure now compared to previous months [8]. There has been an increase in the number of gangs, mainly affecting the most marginalized and disadvantaged

neighbourhoods and areas. Whilst young people are by no means the only group experiencing these conditions, they are all too often disproportionately affected.

“This is a very small window of opportunity. The time for transformation and action is now – and that time is dwindling. (Local guide, Ginebra Paramo)”

What mechanisms exist to assure the participation of communities, particularly at local and regional level, in determining the rebuilding of Colombia is still an open and largely unanswered question next to the established Truth Commissions and much-needed mechanisms for social reparation and justice uncovering and acknowledging the past. In a moment of relative peace, the need to empower community action is urgent and paramount before this brief window of opportunity closes.

[1] Juan Manuel Santos Calderón GColIH GCB was President of Colombia from 2010 to 2018 and signed a controversial yet landmark peace agreement with the FARC in 2016. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016.

[2] Boulding, K (1991) *Stable Peace among Nations: A Learning Process*, in Boulding, E, (ed) *Peace, Culture and Society: Transnational Research and Dialogue*. Boulder. CO: Westview Press.

[3] Galtung, J (1964; 1996) *Peace by Peaceful Means: Development and Civilisation*. Oslo: PRIO.

[4] Galtung, J (1996), *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilisation*. Oslo: PRIO.

[5] 3RP (2015) *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (2015-2016 pg. 17)*.

[6] See Cooper, Flint-Taylor & Pearn 2013

[7] Nauke, 2017 Peacebuilding upside down? How a peace community in Colombia builds peace despite the state, 2017, *EASA Journal of Social Anthropology*, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1469-8676.12447/full>

[8] Next Generation Colombia study (2017) British Council. Next Generation is a nationally representative study of the voice, attitudes and aspirations of young people in Colombia at critical junctures in the country's political and social history.
www.britishcouncil.org/research/nextgeneration

[9] Ibid

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