

## Children and Youth: Lessons from the Colombian Truth Commission

On the 28th June 2022, the Colombian Truth Commission released its final report. The report comprises 10 volumes in which the Commission documents the impact that half a century of armed conflict has had in different sectors of Colombian society. It also unveils the pattern of the violence and the factors, which contributed to repetition of violence.

Over three years the Commission collected nearly 30.000 testimonies within and outside Colombia. One of the volumes condenses the findings and over 60 recommendations for overcoming the conflict. Another volume presents the innovative efforts to document exile in 24 countries around the world and another documents gender-based violence and the role of patriarchy in the continuation of the conflict.

Although all the volumes include testimonies from children and youth, there is a specific volume dedicated to them: *No es un mal menor. Niñas, niños y adolescentes en el conflicto armado*, “It is not a lesser evil. Children and youth in the armed conflict.” This volume is based on almost 3.000 testimonies and has important findings for Colombia and the world to understand the impact of the armed conflict on children and youth, and it offers key recommendations for how children and youth can play a significant role in peace and reconciliation.

Six months after the investiture of Gustavo Petro, the first leftist president, who committed to fully implementing the Commission’s recommendations, it is a timely moment to discuss the findings and recommendations regarding children and youth, and the role that civil society has played during the work of the Commission, as well as the implementation of some of the recommendations. To do so we have invited two expert women to the UK who have played a fundamental role both in the work of the Commission with children and youth, and on the side of civil society to support the work of the Commission and advance in the implementation of some of the recommendations.



Paola Forero Acosta



Karen Arteaga Garzón

Paola Forero Acosta is a political expert from Rosario University, and a specialist in the Resolution of Conflict with a master’s degree in Peace and Resolution of Conflict Studies from the Javieriana University. She worked as an advisor to the Victims Unit and to the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace in the context of the talks between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – The People’s Army, known as FARC, regarding the Comprehensive System for Peace. Her work in these roles included coordinating teenagers and young people leaving the ranks of FARC and participating in the Specialist Board that was in

charge of designing the program called “Differential Way of Life”, which worked to ensure that these young people got back their rights. As the child and adolescent care manager for the International Organisation for Migration’s Reintegration and Recruitment Prevention Program, she advised and coordinated the comprehensive protection and rights guarantee approach, with particular emphasis on the reintegration process of children and adolescents. She led the drafting of the volume on children and youth of the Colombian Truth Commission.

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In this event hosted LSE Latin America and Caribbean Centre and sponsored by Children Change Colombia and Rodeemos el Diálogo you will be able to find out more about the recommendations and the progress made after the publication of the Truth Commission’s Final Report and the ways in which from the UK you could support the long path to reconciliation in Colombia.



## **IT WAS NOT A LESSER EVIL CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS' CHAPTER**

What has been the effect for more than three generations of children and adolescents growing up in the context of armed conflict? This was the question that formed the basis of the investigation and writing of this chapter from the Final Report of the Truth Commission, a question which was answered by more than 2,744 people who were interviewed and who spoke about violence against this demographic.

From listening to victims who have been directly affected, as well as relatives, witnesses and experts, from reviewing research backgrounds and reports from international organisations and civil society, and from analysing the Commission's own data, it is clear that violence against children and adolescents is the result of historical frameworks of inequality, vulnerability and discrimination in which the armed conflict took place. Thus, Colombian children and adolescents were victims. Firstly, when they were not protected properly and were allowed to grow up in an uncertain and discriminatory environment, secondly, when the armed conflict started and changed their life trajectories, stripping them of the freedom to decide what they wanted to do with their lives, and thirdly, when they were disregarded and not given back their rights after the violence.

Inequality and discrimination meant that girls and adolescent women, as well as ethnic minority and peasant children and adolescents suffered disproportionately from violence. For example, girls were forced into caregiving roles, treated as sexual objects and obliged to adopt typically feminine behaviours, whilst boys were forced to develop masculinity based on violence. When patriarchy and racism came together, children and adolescents were assigned specific physical or cognitive characteristics, and that is how their subjection to arduous tasks and despicable treatment was justified. This intersected with the precarious institutional development of rural areas which makes them particularly vulnerable contexts.

During the armed conflict, stigmatisation, in its various forms, affected the majority of civilians in Colombia. Children and adolescents could not escape exclusion nor being categorised. Whether due to where they lived, their skin colour, sex or belonging to certain families, they were and have been the inheritors to a fragmented Colombia that made them targets and put them at risk.

In these contexts of inequality and uncertainty, children and adolescents were victims of multiple types of violence: their family members were murdered and went missing, they were displaced, kidnapped or conscripted, their schools were occupied or destroyed and their efforts to try and survive made them even more vulnerable. The continuity of these incidents and the lack of certainty in the guarantee of their rights were the result of their lives, suffering and struggles being hidden. The Truth Commission confirms that the historical prejudices against children and adolescents resulted in their needs and interests being ignored and what happened was considered a lesser evil. Thus, when they suffered violence, they were not given proper attention: measures to restore their rights were insufficient and no policies were implemented to prevent situations that threatened their wellbeing. Just look and see that in a country that has been in conflict for six decades, only in the last twenty years have any programs to restore the rights of young victims been implemented.

All of this translates to the high figures of violence against children and adolescents in the armed conflict. From the statistical work of the Truth Commission, it was established that between 1964 and 2019, 85,212, children and adolescents lost their lives due to the conflict; 51,624 were forcibly disappeared; 7,092 were abducted; 17,756 were recruited and 4,383,755 were displaced from their home regions by force. These figures show that the violence experienced by people under the age of eighteen was not collateral damage; from the way it was carried out and the frequency with which it happened, it is clear that it arose from a specific objective of the war.

The unrecognised suffering of this population is particularly evident as they lost their fathers, mothers or caregivers due to the conflict. Despite the impacts of orphanhood and absences, these went unnoticed by the country for decades and even today there is no figure that approximates the reality of loss. The existing records are relatively recent and only refer to people who have been cared for since 2011 by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF), who from 2011 until May 2021 reported 1.161 cases of orphans under the age of eighteen who receive or previously received care after having been victims of the conflict. Although this figure is high, it is far from representing the real magnitude of loss in a conflict of more than sixty years, as it does not include any of the victims from before 2011 nor does it include any children who lost just one parent or who were left in the care of relatives and therefore were not cared for by the ICBF.

Growing up without caregivers, which meant living in a context of poverty and persistent violence, resulted in these children and adolescents not having the space, time or support necessary to process their grief. Quite the opposite in fact, they had to quickly get over their grief in order to respond to the new demands that arose in the family: raising younger family members, making enough money to survive, being displaced, rebuilding the family nucleus, amongst other things, which put the mourning process on hold. As a result of this, children and adolescents grew up experiencing a lot of sadness and in some cases, they thought that what had happened could have been their fault, either because they behaved badly or because they had stopped doing something. Guilt and sadness were followed by feelings of loneliness, abandonment and anxiety about possible losses, and the feeling that everything that represents care and affection can easily be destroyed, which led to enormous emotional distress manifested even during adulthood.

Absences also entered the lives of children and adolescents when themselves or their parents were kidnapped. This fact is one of the clearest expressions of the degradation of the Colombian armed conflict. Such was the level of cruelty and inhumanity that armed groups used children and adolescents to pressure adults and gain funding for the war, so they kidnapped more than 7,000 people under the age of eighteen, mostly during the worst part of the war (between 1996 and 2006).

These figures are in addition to the numbers of displaced children and adolescents. More than four million had to leave their hometowns, on many occasions without the company of their communities or family members. Of the 2,045 victims of displacement during childhood or adolescence whose story was heard by the Truth Commission, 22.59% were displaced alone; 68.12% with their families, and 9.29% in a large group. Although it is heart breaking in general, the experience of displacement becomes even more dramatic when children and adolescents flee alone, without family or support to help them overcome the impacts and build a new life. Furthermore, forced displacement particularly affected girls and adolescents. Of the 4,017,040 displaced women, 2,179,618 were children or adolescents at the time of the events.

Although the Colombian State has created different tools to attend to the needs of the victims of displacement, these have not been sufficient enough to protect and guarantee the rights of displaced children and adolescents.

This is reflected in the repetition of high-risk situations and in the distinguishing impacts of this violence on the lives of people under eighteen years of age, who, after leaving their home regions, saw their rights violated, were victims of new violence such as child labour in its worst forms, sexual violence and links to urban criminal networks and illegal armed groups, amongst others.

The main victims were rural children and adolescents and the city was the main destination they were taken to; a fact that disrupted familial roles and destroyed their traditions. In the countryside, the family is a unit of production and therefore usually all members contribute to the domestic economy. Children and adolescents have roles that allow them to learn the trades of the countryside as they grow up. Upon arrival in the city, the situation changes and displaced families start to require all members to earn an income in order to survive. It is no longer a question of contributing the family unit of production, but of working in the unofficial economy or in conditions of labour exploitation. In addition to what this meant for their physical and psychological wellbeing, they were sometimes exposed to destitution and begging.

The large-scale departure of younger people caused important changes in the demographic composition of rural areas, which had effects on the peasant economy and culture which could not be passed on to the next generation. Furthermore, the Commission found that those who have spent most of their lives in the places they arrived at, do not wish to return. This is because violence does cease in the countryside regions, there is no guarantee they can return and the disparity in services between the countryside and the city continues to be a problem. Thus, those who decide to return find that the state's lack of protection in the countryside continues.

Schools and their environments were also impacted by the war. All of the armed participants in the conflict made use of schools and put the lives of students, teachers and the educational community at risk, ignoring the rules of International Humanitarian Law. The Truth Commission, working together with Educapaz, documented that between 1980 and 2021 there were 881 school communities affected by the armed conflict. This includes acts that threatened the life and wellbeing of children, adolescents and teachers and that damaged school infrastructures. The increase in violence against schools occurred from 1997, with an increase between 2002 and 2009, years in which 41.4% of the incidents against school communities occurred. The regions that were most affected were Antioquia (13.7%), Cauca (10%), Norte de Santander (7.9%), Valle del Cauca (5.6%), Arauca (5%), Nariño (4.8%) and Putumayo (4.7%), where 52% of human rights violations and violations of International Humanitarian Law occurred.

In general, public officials were primarily responsible. However, the type of violence varies from one armed participant to another. The armed forces usually use these facilities on the grounds that they are public whilst illegal armed groups use them because they are a space where the community convenes or because, in rural areas, they are the place that has the best infrastructure.

In the case of paramilitary groups, they created and co-opted educational institutions as part of a strategy for territorial control, which allowed them to mould the school to suit their interests. This is how control was established over what was taught, the behaviour of the students and the community in general. And although the founding of schools by illegal organisations was not a widespread practice during the Colombian conflict, its existence demonstrates that there was a conscious implementation of different strategies to gain legitimacy and social control.

Control was also exercised through the occupation of schools. In particular, the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, People's Army) entered schools to give classes in which they talked about the purposes of the organisation and carried out other indoctrination activities with the students to persuade them to join the armed group.



In all cases, the teachers spoke of the censorship of the lectures and teaching content given by the FARC members and the interference they had in the relations with their students.

In rural areas, schools often have a social function that goes beyond their pedagogical vocation as community relations are cultivated there. This characteristic, in addition to making it a strategic place to develop surveillance activities, also implies that when impacted, the social fabric of villages and municipalities is destroyed. For this reason, when schools were affected by the conflict, not only were children and adolescents prevented from returning to their classes, but also the collective sense of belonging and cohesion of the communities was attacked. In addition, there were mines around the school environments which impacted the under eighteen population that travelled through the area. According to the Comprehensive Action Against Antipersonnel Mines (AICMA), of the total 12,152 victims of accidents with MAP-MUSE, between January 1990 and January 1992, 1,266 were cases of children and adolescents. The regions in which this situation was concentrated were Antioquia (22.8%), Nariño (11.2%) and Cauca (10.5%).

Violence also reached children and adolescents when they were directly involved in war activities through recruitment and being exploited. Between 1964 and 2019, at least 17,254 people under the age of eighteen

were victims of recruitment: 12,036 (67.8%) male and 5,718 (32.3%) female. This magnitude reflects that it was not a minor nor random practice, but obeyed a rational logic and determined action of illegal armed groups. Each identified and took advantage of the vulnerability in which children and adolescents grew up in order to recruit them and strengthen their military capacity. The decision to recruit them is evident in the absence of internal control mechanisms – such as sanctions – to avoid recruitment and return those who should not have been recruited. For example, although the statutes of illegal armed groups prohibited the recruitment of anyone under the age of fifteen, this did not prevent 10,599 children and adolescents who had not reached that age from joining the ranks. The guerrillas were mainly responsible for this with more than 60% of these recruitments.

The Truth Commission reiterates, as other reports have said in the past, that the main factors that facilitate the involvement of children and adolescents in armed groups are: the precarious conditions in which they live and the few options for developing their potential; the presence of armed groups that control and define the dynamics of the regions, the negligence or impossibility for families and society to protect them; the adaptability that facilitates them developing useful skills for war; and the disdain of the State that does very little to prevent this violence. The existence of these factors does not exempt the armed participants from taking responsibility, as it is not possible to justify the link with the argument that the children and adolescents wanted to enter, or that in their situation of poverty it was a lesser evil or a job option. In no case are armed ranks a space of protection and refuge for people under eighteen years of age, regardless of how long they last there or whether or not they participate in combat.

Recruitment aggravated the vulnerability of children and adolescents who were subjected to new violence. For example, girls suffered different types of violence due to being women. Although all of the armed groups abused them, the interviews showed that reproductive violence (contraception and forced abortion) corresponded mostly to the guerrillas, especially the FARC-EP. Although there are records of sexual harassment, abuse and torture from all members of the different armed groups, this type of violence was more recurrent in the paramilitary ranks. In the testimonies, heart-breaking voices of women recruited as children and adolescents are heard recalling how they were subjected to mockery and rape. A common feature of these accounts is that the rape was perpetrated by several people and in the presence of others who took turns doing it. This usually did not just happen once, but was a continuous and collective occurrence.

Furthermore, in paramilitary training, children and adolescents had to learn to torture. The goal was to harden them so that they could fulfil their roles in the armed group. They had to obey regardless of the atrocity of the act they were forced to execute, under the threat of suffering it themselves if they refused. The cruelty and brutality that characterised this training were a way to instil terror and normalise horror.

When they were not recruited, they were used for the purposes of war, which posed an enormous risk, as they were assimilated to the enemy and turned into military targets. In particular, the armed forces used them intentionally and recurrently to carry out intelligence, surveillance and control work. In all cases, military interest prevailed regardless of the lives and integrity of children and adolescents, which is a clear violation of the principle of distinction of International Humanitarian Law for involving the civilian population in hostilities.

To date, the Colombian State does not have a policy, plan or program to recover the children and adolescents who have been recruited. This suggests that for individual governments, military action against armed groups has been more important than respecting the right to life of the victims of this violence. This lack of interest leads these young people to decide to try and escape from the armed groups regardless of the risk, so this has been the main mode of getting away. Those recovered by the security forces were recovered in the midst of military operations in which they surrendered, were captured or wounded. Once again, the State's passivity aggravates the situation in which children and adolescents find themselves with a serious lack of protection.

All of this violence has transcended generations. The horror has passed from parents to their descendants as a burden to be inherited. Displaced grandparents tell the stories of the past history of peasants to their grandchildren, the children who lost their parents try to answer the questions of the new generations about the whereabouts of their grandparents, and the indigenous and minority ethnic communities try to recover ancestral traditions in territories that are often foreign to them, places to which they were expelled by violence. In this way, transgenerational impacts have marked the fate of families and communities.

Violence, however, has not negated the enormous capacity of children and adolescents to cope, resist pain and demand a country in a state of peace. From their understandings and possibilities, they have responded to violence: silence, art, the search for truth, social mobilization, participation in politics, among others, have been the ways in which they have manifested themselves. Thus, they have raised their disapproval and have strongly urged for the country to change. With their voices they have pointed out that, more than the future, they are the present and their requests cannot continue to be put off, because they have so much to say and do to build a country of opportunities and peace.