Iglesia Colombiana
Metodista

Choosing Dance over Guns

Introduction: Where are we coming from?

Colombia is the fourth largest economy in South America, a peace treaty was signed after many years of armed conflict and the country is renowned for some of its innovative social projects. However, this success story does not ring true for all Colombians.

We work in areas where the armed conflict carries on. Buenaventura is one of those places: with high levels of poverty and violence which cause foreign governments to advise strongly against visiting (the same advice is issued, for instance, for the border areas between Afghanistan and Iran). The homicide rate within the department is reaching a staggering 60 per 100,000[i] and is the highest in the country. Only 60% of the residents have sewage systems and even though 8 in 10 households are connected to a water supply network, this provides water only once or twice a week[ii]. Less than a quarter successfully finish secondary education leaving the majority unemployable. Two thirds of the population live below the poverty line.[iii] And the household income of Afro-Colombians and indigenous families we work with remains well below the minimum wage (£173 a month, i.e. below £1.15 per day per head).

Poverty

Lack of opportunties

Violence

The city of Buenaventura is home to the most important port in the country - 60% of the nation's import and export passes through this port. The power struggle between FARC splinter groups, ELN and drug-traffickers for domination over this lucrative territory, coupled with the inaction of local government, leave behind daily human losses. The disruption of all social areas is manifested by the increase in the sale and consumption of narcotics, of sexual aggression against women and **recruitment of children and youth into armed groups.** The latest research on this topic found that between 11,000 and 14,000 minors were active in the ranks of armed groups, representing 20-30% of militants, with an average age of 12-13[iv].

Whilst the recruitment is often forced, at times the minors actively opt in to the ranks of armed groups to avoid economic poverty. Sometimes the recruitment is unconscious and the involvement of a new recruit very gradual. Children are given cash in exchange for vigilance tasks, for example, and youth can initially be used to perform the roles of messengers. Given that the alternatives of decent employment, self-employment and good quality education are out of reach for the vast majority, involvement in the armed groups naturally increases and the group becomes a new family for the recruit.

It is often assumed that schools, non-governmental organizations and other institutions will take on the responsibility to design programs and establish routes for improving lives of the most vulnerable. However, the regional Development Plan[v] confirms the personal experiences of many, stating that any progress in Buenaventura is hampered by the absence of state institutions in vulnerable areas, its structural failure in not being able to guarantee fundamental human rights and by high levels of domestic violence.

This mix of abject poverty combined with lack of opportunities, alongside the ongoing armed conflict between drug cartels and rebel groups[vi], results in a population that is subject to displacement, marginalization and is an easy target for forced recruitment into armed groups - thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty, exclusion and violence.
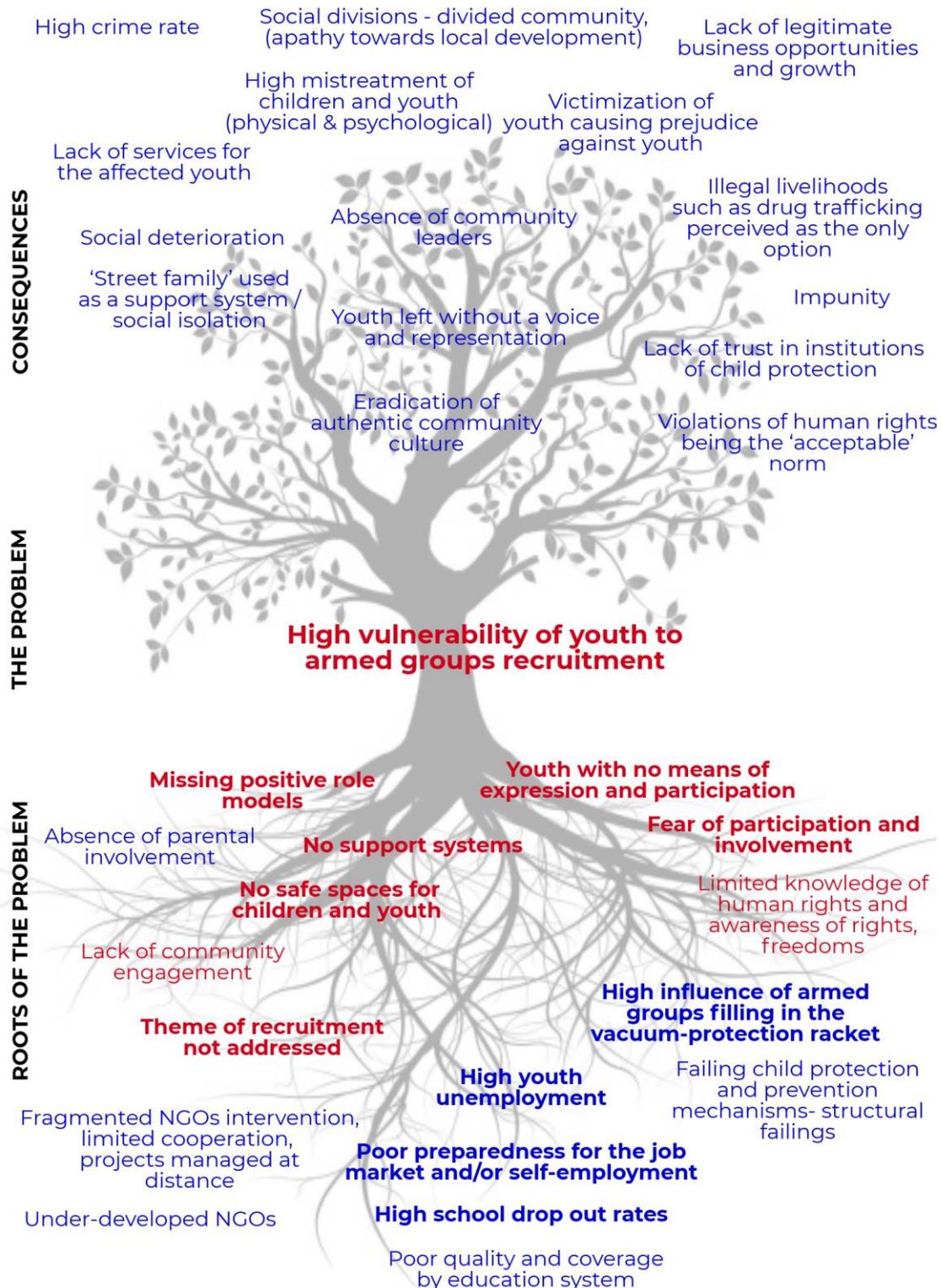
Lack of accountability and high levels of corruption of local government is widespread, and the under-resourced communities are left without a voice nor opportunities for change.

In the neigbourhood
. . . .

Situation analysis: What is the problem?

As a part of a community consultation, we (the three Methodist churches active in the area) have worked with two community groups (Juntas de Acción Communal: JAC la Cima, JAC Isla de la Paz) and with SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) on a situation analysis using the Problem Tree Method. The graphic below summarises our findings indicating the root causes of the problem as well as some of the consequences, as experienced and identified by the community. The points in bold represent direct causes leading to the recruitment, and the items in red represent problems that we are qualified and well positioned to address within the scope of this project.

CONSEQUENCES

High crime rate

Social divisions - divided community, (apathy towards local development)

Lack of legitimate business opportunities and growth

High mistreatment of children and youth (physical & psychological)

Victimization of youth causing prejudice against youth

Lack of services for the affected youth

Illegal livelihoods such as drug trafficking perceived as the only option

Social deterioration

Absence of community leaders

'Street family' used as a support system / social isolation

Impunity

Youth left without a voice and representation

Lack of trust in institutions of child protection

Eradication of authentic community culture

Violations of human rights being the 'acceptable' norm

THE PROBLEM

High vulnerability of youth to armed groups recruitment

ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Missing positive role models

Youth with no means of expression and participation

Absence of parental involvement

No support systems

Fear of participation and involvement

No safe spaces for children and youth

Limited knowledge of human rights and awareness of rights, freedoms

Lack of community engagement

High influence of armed groups filling in the vacuum-protection racket

Theme of recruitment not addressed

High youth unemployment

Failing child protection and prevention mechanisms- structural failings

Fragmented NGOs intervention, limited cooperation, projects managed at distance

Poor preparedness for the job market and/or self-employment

Under-developed NGOs

High school drop out rates

Poor quality and coverage by education system

Colombia: Safe Spaces for Children and Youth
What are we going to do about it?

The purpose of the project is to increase resilience to recruitment into illegal armed groups among children and youth. We aim to achieve this through the following strategies and outcomes:

- Increased awareness of recruitment and recruitment strategies used by the groups
- Empowerment of the youth to advocate for their human rights
- Increased participation of the youth in community led advocacy
- Increased representation, increasing positive presence of youth in public spaces
- The creation of a network of 100 youth promoters of resilience to recruitment

For the full details of proposed interventions and expected results please refer to the table below:

Objectives	Results and indicators	Key activities
To give youth a voice	The youth have the knowledge of human rights, their violations, and strategies available to youth at risk - *2/3 of targeted youth demonstrate their knowledge of human rights- what constitutes human rights in their context* - *more than a half of youth able to identify practices of recruitment and resilience strategies*	Youth-suitable messaging regarding the issues of recruitment through community theatre / psychodrama Engagement workshops Y2Y (Youth to Youth) in schools, reaching over **5000 students** KAP survey (knowledge-attitudes-practices) baseline and end-line
	Increased proportion of community advocacy actions focusing on youth and steered by youth - *number of community organised events featuring youth issues increased by at least 1/3* - *increased number of events that youth help to steer* - *greater visibility of youth leaders*	Community engagement sessions on issues confronting youth/communities (including the issue of recruitment and strategies to overcome them) **across 5 comunas** Awareness campaign: Finding Answers in Our Communities: Youth Challenges Community leaders' meetings to set up mechanisms for development of 'new leaders' Identification of and ongoing support for emerging youth advocate leaders
	Increased positive presence of the youth in public spaces - *youth in public discourse is portrayed as a positive agent of change (compared to current predominantly negative messaging: youth as an agent of trouble)* - *healthy youth activities, as an alternative to recruitment, are known and accessed by the communities (evaluated by JACs)*	Develop, publish and distribute, in collaboration with partners, user-friendly fact sheets on selected topics (e.g. forced and unconscious recruitment), media promotions, interviews, community group discussions. Activities encouraging positive youth development and social engagement incl. meetings with families, teachers, JACs as gatekeepers to the communities Production and screening of a video on Youth Success Stories
	Youth equipped with skills in arts, and for participating within and influencing culture - *120 youth actively using their skills* - *Increase in perceived ability to influence culture*	Identification of creative skills among the participants Purchase of equipment for training sessions **120 youth** undergo artistic and cultural formation Ongoing monitoring of participants by Welfare Officer and provision of psycho-social counselling on an on-demand basis Collection of case studies of culture as a means to conflict resolution
To empower local actors in building youth resilience to recruitment	Local HRD (Human Rights Defenders) networks strengthened - *Self-evaluation by NGOs* - *A network of 100+ youth promoters of resilience to recruitment formed*	Mapping exercise of all organizations and individuals who work with youth development on the topic of prevention of recruitment Creation of networks of mutual support between the youth that underwent formation and CSOs and churches in the area
	Youth program established - *Endorsement by local government* - *Featured in media*	Local networking, partnerships and alliances formed, MOU signed Ongoing promotion of safe spaces and workshops available locally Ongoing attendance and new intake of youth

Colombia: Safe Spaces for Children and Youth
Value for money

The cost of the project is 28,000 USD. We will reach 5 vulnerable comunas and over 5000 youth (which equates to a cost of 5.60 USD per beneficiary) thus improving their resilience to voluntary and involuntary involvement in illegal armed groups. Beyond the duration of this project, we expect to see a lower crime rate, lower numbers of youth involved in drug trafficking, and a decrease in the stereotyping of youth as 'troublemakers'.
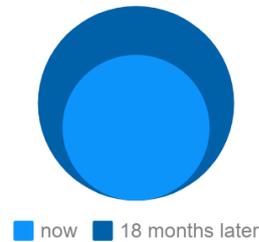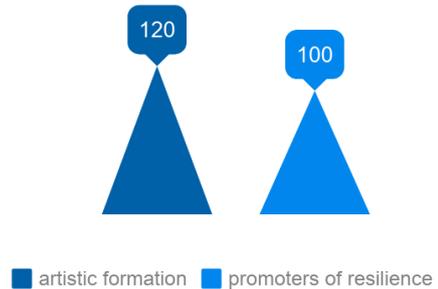
1 — Youth with knowledge

Number of people

5000 — 3300 — 2500 — 2500

- Participate in workshops
- Know what human rights mean
- Identify recruitment practices
- Know resilience strategies

2 — Youth influencers

Community events featuring youth issues

- now
- 18 months later

3 — Positive youth role models

Youth engagement

120 — 100

- artistic formation
- promoters of resilience

4 — Support networks

Transforming country

[i] Diagnóstico Batería de Indicadores, 2016

[ii] CARACOL, https://www.dnp.gov.co/Paginas/Buenaventura,-la-puerta-de-entrada-al-Pac%C3%ADfico,-comienza-a-dise%C3%B1ar-su-desarrollo-a-20-a%C3%B1os.aspx

[iii] Plan de Desarrollo de Buenaventura 2012-2016, Plan_de_Desarrollo_del_distrito_29_de_mayo_de_2016

[iv] COALICO, Reclutamiento Invisible pg.5

[v] Plan de Desarrollo del Distrito: Buenaventura con Responsabilidad, Primero la Gente para el período 2016 – 2019

[vi] https://colombiareports.com/peace-farc-marked-new-phase-armed-conflict-colombia-report/