Citizens’ Media as a Tool for the Local Construction of Peace in Colombia: Opportunities for Youth

By Lorenzo Vargas

Research to Practice Policy Briefs
PB-2013-14 | lorenzo.vargas@mail.mcgill.ca
Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary

2. Summary of Policy Recommendations
   a. Policy Goal
   b. Significance of the Issue
   c. Canada’s Interests in the Issue
   d. Recommendations

3. Background
   a. Context of the Colombian Conflict
   b. Citizens’ Media
      i. What is Citizens’ Media? How Can it Contribute to Peace?
      ii. Citizens’ Media Experiences in Colombia
      iii. The Role of Communication Policy in Colombia
      iv. Issues and Constrains
   c. Canadian Development Programming in Colombia
      i. Canadian Development Programming Serving Children and Youth

4. Policy Recommendations

5. Suggested Reading

6. Works Cited
1. Executive Summary

The role of media in peace-building can be critical. However, citizens’ media, a form of media that is ‘embedded in communities in ways that create opportunities for networking, reaching, communicating, and connecting’ and can lead to active and engaged citizenship, has traditionally been ignored in contexts of peace-building as media has been seen simply as ‘a tool for mass persuasion’ (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 21). Similarly, youth are often ignored as key actors in processes of peace-building, despite the fact that adolescents and people in their early to mid-twenties may ‘have direct experience of political imprisonment and [may] have witnessed or perpetrated acts of violence’, while at the same often being ‘in the front lines of peace building’ in many cases of armed conflict (McEvoy-Levy 2006, pg. 7). This policy brief explores how Canada’s development efforts in Colombia, under the priority area of Securing the future of children and youth, can support local youth-led citizens’ media initiatives as a way to contribute to the local construction and sustainability of peace in Colombia.

Colombia, one of Canada’s key allies in the Western hemisphere, is going through a crucial moment. Having experienced drastic changes in security and strong economic growth over the past decade, the country is in the midst of a peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that could put an end to the ongoing armed conflict. The current government has also begun land restitution and victim compensation project that could be the first step in the long road to reconciliation, and which Canada has openly supported (Canada 2012). Nevertheless, there have been significant social mobilizations in recent months against the national government, particularly against its agricultural policies on the part of small-scale agricultural producers and other social sectors (BBC News 2013), which demonstrate that issues stemming from the grassroots need to be taken into account as a way to achieve peace and sustain development in the Andean country.

Under Canada’s current development work in Colombia, which aims at improving ‘human rights and reducing the inequality and poverty of the most vulnerable, with a specific focus on children and youth’ (Canada 2013d), Canada contributes at least $80 million to at least 9 different projects serving the needs of children and youth (Canada 2013e). However, while these projects meet crucial education capacity building needs, Canada’s development contributions also have the potential to stimulate grassroots dialogue processes among youth that can lead to active engagement for peace. Drawing from early research into the growing citizens’ media movement in Colombia, this policy brief proposes the
creation of a pilot project to provide financial and organizational capacity support not currently available to existing and future youth-led citizen’s media projects working for peace in Colombia.

2. Summary of Policy Recommendations

**Policy Goal:** youth-led citizens’ media projects can contribute to the local construction and sustainability of peace in Colombia by stimulating local dialogue processes, supporting active and engaged citizenship, and increasing the capacity of local communities to carry out peace-building work. In this context, this policy brief argues that, given Canada’s commitment to securing the future of children and youth in Colombia, Canada’s development efforts should support youth-led citizens’ media projects, which can contribute to making Colombian youth central actors in the construction of peace. Furthermore, in addition to complementing the efforts of the national government to bring about peace by providing an opportunity for grassroots peace efforts to flourish, youth-led citizens’ media projects can strengthen local communities by providing them with increased communication capacity to advance future peace and development projects.

**Significance of the Issue:** the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)’s February 2013 review meeting, WSIS +10, concluded that the development of information and communication technologies is critical to ‘peace and sustainable development’ (UNESCO 2013). WSIS +10 also stressed the importance of ‘building capacities of people to leverage information for sustainable development’ by working for universal access to information and knowledge (UNESCO 2013). In the context of the Colombian quest for peace, the role of information and communication technologies can be critical to stimulate local dialogue and active citizenship among specific sectors of the population, such as youth. As McEvoy-Levy points out, youth play a key role in the sustainability of peace agreements because, in the long term, ‘a peace agreement’s endurance depends on whether the next generation accepts it or rejects it, how they are socialized during the peace process, and their perception of what the peace process has achieved’ (McEvoy-Levy 2006, pg. 7).

**Canada’s Interest in the Issue:** the links between Canada and Colombia are strong. Both countries enjoy a strong commercial relationship, with $1.6 billion in two-way merchandise trade, $1.7 billion in Canadian direct investment in Colombia in 2011 alone, and an existing free trade agreement. Canada and Colombia also work together in matters such as ‘development cooperation, collaboration on humanitarian issues, labour rights, mine action, peace and security, counter-narcotics and defense’ (Canada 2013f). Canada also officially supports the current peace process with the FARC (Manriquez 2012). In addition, since the end of the 1990s, Canada has received more than 15,000 Colombian refugees (Riano-Alcala et
al. 2008). In this context, it is clear that Canada has strong diplomatic and commercial interests in Colombia, and would benefit from a successful and sustainable peace settlement. Youth-led citizens’ media projects can contribute to these interests.

**Policy Recommendations:** This policy brief argues that Canada should consider a pilot project to provide financial and organizational capacity support to youth-led citizens’ media projects working for peace in Colombia. This pilot project should:

- Engage in a consultation process with leaders of existing citizens' media projects in Colombia, as well as with Colombian academics and civil society organizations supporting citizens’ media work.

- Identify general parameters for the establishments of youth-led citizens’ media projects based on the consultation process with local communication leaders.

- Consult with civil society organizations advocating for changes in communication policy that may result in more state support for citizens’ and community communication. Changes in communication policy can foster the financial and organizational sustainability of citizens’ media projects in ways that will allow the projects to continue operating once Canadian funding has ended.

- Identify existing youth-led citizens' media projects and policy advocacy groups CIDA could potentially support. This process should draw from the consultation processes with local communication groups mentioned above.
3. Background

a. Context of the Colombian Conflict

Armed conflict in Colombia has its origins in the exclusion of certain political groups from the political arena. The current conflict in Colombia can be traced back to the assassination of liberal popular leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948, an event that marked the beginning of *La Violencia*, a violent period of armed confrontation between liberals and conservatives that left an estimated 200,000 dead (Uribe Alarcon 2007 pg. 63). Though the conflict was officially ended in 1957 in the form of an agreement between liberals and conservatives for the alternation of power, a number of political actors, particularly peasant-based guerrilla movements fighting for a more equal distribution of land, were excluded from the settlement and continued fighting the Colombian state (Uribe Alarcon 2007 pg. 63). Over time, some of these guerrilla movements, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the group currently engaged in peace negotiations with the government, evolved to become structured military organizations that control large portions of territory (Uribe Alarcon 2007, pg. 190).

However, the nature of the conflict has changed significantly over the past 30 years as paramilitary violence and drug trafficking also became important factors. The continued insurgency of guerrilla groups such as the FARC into the 1970s and 1980s led some sectors of landowners to organize private armies, many of which enjoyed the approval of official security forces, in an effort to secure their claims of land ownership. In the 1990s, paramilitary groups organized themselves into a single organization, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) (Leal Buitrago 2004, pg. 90). Both guerrilla and paramilitary groups are documented to have engaged in human rights violations such as massacres, kidnappings, and acts of terrorism over the course of the conflict (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica* 2013). Additionally, a number of Colombian criminal organizations entered the global drug trade during the 1980s by importing coca paste from Peru and Bolivia and exporting processed cocaine to the United States and Europe (Holmes 2003, pg. 88). Though most of the drug economy was initially controlled by the Cali and the Medellin cartels (Felbab-Brown 2010, pg. 72), other actors in the armed conflict, such as the FARC (Gonzalez Bustelo 2005, pg. 220) and paramilitary groups (Gutierrez & Baron 2008, pg. 16), eventually became part of the drug economy. The armed conflict, which was
Lorenzo Vargas  
*Citizens’ Media as a Tool for the Local Construction of Peace in Colombia: Opportunities for Youth*

initially about access to land and political representation, has morphed into a drug-fuelled conflict made up of multiple groups with competing interests.

The conflict has had a very high human cost. According to Colombia’s *Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica*, the conflict has left approximately 220,000 dead since 1958, including both civilians and combatants. There have been 27,023 kidnappings since 1970, 25,077 forced disappearances and 10,189 mine victims since 1985 (BBC News 2013, quoting *Centro Nacional de Memoria Historica* 2013). Internal displacement is also a salient humanitarian issue, with an estimated 3-5 million internally displaced people since the mid-80s (UNHCR 2012c; Mendoza Pineros 2012, pg. 173, quoting CODHES 2009), many of whom are peasants, Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, women, and youth (Mendoza Pineros 2012, quoting CODHES 2009; Dawson and Farber 2012, pg. 155). In the realm of media and communication, journalists often experience violence at the hands of armed actors as some paramilitary groups ‘continue to impose a reign of terror, killing independent journalists or forcing them to censor themselves or flee the country’ (Reporters Without Borders 2012). Issues such as child soldiering have hit youth particularly hard. In 2004, the estimated number of combatants under 18 ranged from 6,000 to 14,000, making up at least one out of every four irregular combatants in the conflict (Alvis Palma 2008, pg. 233, citing Human Rights Watch 2003 and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004). Even though both boys and girls are recruited, and both are socialized in violent environments where they often witness gross acts of violence, girls often face the additional threat of being victims of sexual violence (Alvis Palma 2008, pg. 235).

Various Colombian governments have engaged in peace processes in an effort to bring an end to the armed conflict. The governments of Virgilio Barco, Belisario Betancur, Cesar Gaviria, and Andres Pastrana engaged in peace processes with guerrilla organizations, which resulted in the demobilization of a number of smaller groups, but not to peace settlements with the FARC or the ELN, the two biggest and most powerful guerrilla armies (Bouvier 2009, pg. 9-10, 39-64). More recently, the government of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) unsuccessfuely attempted negotiating peace with the FARC (Bouvier 2009, pg. 11), and negotiated a questionable peace pact with paramilitary groups that allowed many former paramilitary combatants to regroup into dozens of criminal and drug-trafficking organizations that are still active today (Bouvier 2009, pg. 10, quoting Haugard 2008).

The current peace negotiations between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC were announced in late 2012. Though the FARC continue to possess military strength, the Colombian state’s increased military capacity, boosted by the United States’ Plan Colombia (Crandall 2008 pg. 91-
Lorenzo Vargas – Citizens’ Media as a Tool for the Local Construction of Peace in Colombia: Opportunities for Youth

93; Saab & Taylor 2009, pg. 463; Gutierrez & Baron 2008 pg. 128; Gonzalez Bustelo 2005 pg. 228), has translated into heavy military and moral blows to the guerrillas (Bouvier 2009, pg. 12), making the possibility of military victory for the FARC slim. By the same token, the government of Juan Manuel Santos was elected largely to give continuity to Uribe’s policies, such as the focus on security and a market-oriented economic development model, but the continued hostilities with the FARC has made the possibility of a negotiated solution to the armed conflict seem more attractive. The current peace process counts on Cuba and Norway as intermediaries and guarantors, and Venezuela and Chile as observers (Presidency of Colombia 2012, BBC News 2012), and hopes to reach tangible agreements within a two years. So far, there has already been agreement on the first point of the agenda, land reform and agricultural development, while the remaining points - political participation, the logistics for the end of the conflict, drug trafficking, reparations, and victim’s rights - are still being discussed.

In recent months, however, the peace process has become an important political issue in Colombia. A number of sectors, such as political groups sympathetic to former president Alvaro Uribe, have expressed their opposition to the peace process, arguing that it will lead to impunity for war crimes. And while support for the peace process is generally strong, some sectors, such as small-scale farmers, have expressed their discontent in recent weeks with some of the government’s agricultural policies, which have impacted access to seeds, fertilizers, and other goods needed for agriculture, as well as crop prices (Crowe 2013). This situation will most likely lead to an intense presidential race in 2014, as there are a number of sectors that, while supportive of the peace process, are in opposition to some government policies.

In this context, while the peace process is clearly a step in the right direction, there exists a risk of implementing a peace agreement with the FARC without also creating opportunities for communities to discuss local issues in relation a potential peace settlement. Given the history of exclusion of vulnerable groups from peace agreements, youth-led citizens’ media projects can serve the purpose of including Colombian youth, a group particularly affected by the conflict, in the construction of peace at the grassroots level by creating new forms of citizen engagement in ways that lead to tangible social change. For instance, citizens’ media projects can produce media content on issues such as gender equality, children’s rights, and conflict resolution. An interesting example of this is the work of the colectivos de participación y comunicación (PACOS) operated by Save the Children under its Protecting Children's Education in South-West Colombia, a CIDA-funded project (Save the Children International 2013). The PACOS project, whose objective is increasing critical communication skills among youth, is structured around media centres where children and youth participating in Save the Children programming receive training in media production and writing, and are then given the opportunity to produce media content,
such as radio shows, on issues that affect them (Save the Children International 2013, pg. 65). Save the Children currently supports at least 8 PACOS, each of which serves an average of 30 children and youth. Importantly, there is a growing number of similar initiatives in Colombia, and there exists appropriate legislation to support grassroots media. However, many of these other citizens’ media projects struggle with financial sustainability and capacity development issues, which will be discussed in more detail below. In light of this, a pilot project to support youth-led citizens’ media projects would begin to address some of these issues.

b. Citizens’ Media

i. What is Citizens’ Media? How Can it Contribute to Peace?

Citizens’ media hails from participatory approaches to communication for development, an area of development that employs communication technologies and strategies to promote social change. Participatory approaches propose communication processes where participation, defined as ‘the need to think, to express oneself, to belong to a group, to be recognized as a person, be respected, and have a say in important decisions that might affect one’s life’ (Diaz Bordenave 1989, quoted by Melkote 2000, pg. 138), is central to development. The idea of dialogue is also pivotal in participatory communication, as dialogue is seen as a process where both sender and receiver are equal partners (Diaz Bordenave 1976, quoted in Rogers 2006, pg., 111) and as an exchange that can provide a sense of ownership to people through ‘the sharing and collective reconstruction of ideas’ (Waisbord 2003, pg.152). In this context, citizens’ media emerges as a communication approach concerned with the construction of citizenship and democracy though dialogue and participation (Bosch 2009, pg. 72). Citizens’ media is a term coined by Colombian-American communication scholar Clemencia Rodriguez in 2001 in her book Fissures in the Mediascape. Rodriguez draws from Chantal Mouffe's understandings of democracy and citizenship, which views citizenship as defined by daily political action and engagement:

‘Mouffe understands citizens as individuals in permanent interaction with their contexts, gaining and generating power from social relations…Citizens combine this fragmentary power to enact everyday political actions that shape their communities to reflect their personal and collective visions of utopia…a citizen is a person who uses his or her quotidian power to activate social and cultural processes, which in turn move the citizen’s community towards the vision he or she envisions’ (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 24).

In this light, Rodriguez defines citizens’ media as media that contributes to the transformation of individuals as citizens as understood by Mouffe. Citizens’ media, therefore,
‘are communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols empowering them to name the world in their own terms. Citizens’ media trigger processes that allow citizens to recodify their contexts and themselves. These processes ultimately give citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and driven by well-defined, achievable utopias. Citizens’ media are the media citizens use to activate communication processes that shape their local communities’ (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 24).

Citizens’ media projects have a role to play in peace-building. As opposed to the role of ‘loudspeakers for public service announcements’ (Siemering 2008, quoted by Rodriguez 2011, pg. 233) that media often play in the context of armed conflict, Rodriguez argues that media can go beyond being simply a tool of mass information and dissemination. Drawing from work that stresses that ‘peace efforts should come from the people, since imposed peace is fragile and elusive’ (Barsalira & Nyambura 1988, quoted in Rodriguez 2000, pg. 148), Rodriguez argues that ‘a conceptual bridge can be built between development communication and peace studies’ through the practices of citizens’ media (Rodriguez 2000, pg. 151). For instance, Rodriguez argues that citizens’ media can play some of the following roles:

- Alternative sources of information for citizens in relation to the conflict, which would provide access to diverse perspectives;
- Mechanisms to facilitate communication among parties in conflict, which could take the form of on-air discussions between parties in conflict or the publication of different views on the conflict;
- Produce content that can shed light on previously ignored peace initiatives in a way that recognizes and encourages this work;
- Citizens’ media are also sites where new media genres based on collaboration, rather than conflict, can emerge;
- Act as sites to reclaim the experience of violence and sow the seeds for reconciliation, forgiveness, and empathy (Rodriguez 2000, pg. 151-157). Citizens’ media can also contribute to preserving memory about the conflict, as demonstrated in the work of Riano-Alcala among youth in Medellin (Riano-Alcala 2006, quoted by Rodriguez 2011, pg. 237);
- Contribute to the re-appropriation of public space. Rodriguez points out that, in situations of armed conflict, public spheres such as local markets, plazas, and streets are some of the first victims as people lose access to these spaces. In this context, citizens’ media projects can be sites where social interactions disrupted by conflict can occur once again;
- Help defy fear and uncertainty, and reconstruct ‘life worlds’. As the work of Desjarlais and Kleinman (1994) argues, some of the biggest impacts of armed conflict are psychosocial, as people’s daily lives, moral and social norms, and sense of normalcy are
disrupted by violence. In light of this, citizens’ media often play the role of reconstructing local cultural imaginaries, thus helping to defy the sense of fear that comes from arbitrary violence (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 237-243);

Furthermore, Rodriguez stresses the performative function of media in peace-building, which is the role that media has in expressing everyday life in contexts of armed conflict. The goal of the performative function of media is not to communicate, express, or inform, but instead to perform local identities, values, ways of life, cultural practices, and forms of interaction that have not been permeated by militaristic, war-driven logic (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 82). In this sense, citizens’ media in contexts of armed conflict allow people to not just talk about peace, but actually experience social interactions where non-violence is normalized in multiple ways, creating what Rodriguez calls ‘the performance of peace building’ (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 255).

ii. Citizens’ Media Experiences in Colombia

Media in Colombia is marked by the contrast between high levels of media ownership concentration in private mass media, a fairly weak public broadcasting system, and a strong community media sector. In terms of radio, Caracol, RCN, and Todelar, all private companies, and the public Radiodifusora Nacional reach most of the national territory, making radio the main information technology in the country. There are currently 656 commercial stations, 167 public interest stations, and 651 community radio stations. (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 25-26). In terms of television, there are two major private channels, Caracol and RCN, and three minor public channels: Senal Colombia, Canal Uno, and Senal Institucional; 91% of households had at least one colour television set in 2005. There are also 553 community television channels (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 28, quoting Comision Nacional de Television 2006, pg. 8). Community media has had a particularly strong presence in Colombia over the years, with Radio Sutatenza, arguably Latin America’s first alternative radio station (Rodriguez 2012, pg. 27; Gumucio-Dagron 2001, pg. 6) emerging in the 1940s, and more than 26 indigenous radio stations currently in operation (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 28). In Bogotá alone, there were 47 community television radio stations, 7 audiovisual collectives, 110 community newspapers and magazines, at least 25 web-based communication platforms, 7 community radio stations operating on the radio spectrum, and 10 community radio stations operating online as of 2012 (Red de Comunicacion Comunitaria 2012).

The citizens’ media movement in Colombia has taken multiple forms, and faces a number of challenges. Ranging from more traditional community radio stations to youth-led ‘communication campfires’, where young people regularly meet by the fire to discuss politics and art, and more recently to audio-visual initiatives using the internet as platform, the citizens’ media movement in Colombia is vast and diverse.
Rincon (2007) argues that in the case of Colombia, citizens’ media has evolved as a form of communication that articulates new types of citizenship that underscore trust and dialogue, that draws from a strong tradition of narrative to tell relevant stories where people’s lives become the material for stories and characters, and where media producers are fighting for a place in the media sphere (Rincon 2007, pg. 9). A relevant example led by youth is Suacha Informa, a communication initiative that produces a radio show and a newspaper in Soacha, a city neighbouring Bogotá that faces a number of social issues, such as being a frequent destination for forcibly displaced families. Suacha Informa was initially a communication initiative run by young people at an arts centre, Promotora Cultural Creer, but it eventually developed into a larger project that delved into the discussion of issues such as drug trafficking, local and national politics, and free trade policies, among others. The project’s objective is to provide more knowledge and awareness to citizens in a city where often ‘citizenship is for those who sell their votes, not for people with social responsibility’ (Villegas et al. 2007, pg. 121-126). However, as it will be discussed in the policy section below, these types of initiatives usually suffer from sustainability issues, which lead to problems in replicating experiences in different contexts.

**iii. The Role of Communication Policy in Colombia**

There exists important legislation and policy frameworks for community media in Colombia, but there are a number of issues to effective implementation. For instance, Presidential Decree number 1981 of 2003 is the piece of legislation that currently regulates community radio in the country. The decree defines community radio as a ‘public service of telecommunications, for the public interest, not for profit, under the ownership of the State but under administration of properly organized communities’ (Ministerio de Comunicacion 2003). Some municipalities may have their own policy guidelines for community communication. For instance, Decree 150 of 2008, issued by the mayor of Bogotá, outlines the adoption of an official city policy on community communication (Bogotá 2008, pg 2) and promises strategies such as technical training in production of community communication, support in the development of local agendas of communication as defined by the communities, access to city-owned means of communication, training for community communication outlets to divulge information about social policy, and special support for communication initiatives originating from vulnerable groups such as indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, and LGBT population (Bogotá 2008, pg. 6-9). However, while these pieces of legislation definitely have an impact, community-based groups hoping to engage in communication work often face significant barriers. For instance, according to research from the Colombian Ministry of Communication, community radio stations often have to deal with issues of
financial sustainability disconnects between producers and audiences, and lack of production guidelines (Ministerio de Comunicacion 2007 pg. 28, 29).

In this light, a pilot project on youth-led citizens’ media projects working for peace in Colombia should actively support policy advocacy groups working to obtain financial support from the state. It should also support education and capacity development processes in partnership with state institutions that would allow for experiences and ‘best practices’ of citizens’ media experiences to be shared to new groups. This work should build on the legislation and implementation policies that already exist in Colombia.

iv. Issues and Constraints

Participatory communication projects such as citizens’ media projects often face a number of criticisms. For instance, these projects are often seen as overly optimistic and as advocates of romanticized views of communication. Huesca explains that projects can be sometimes premised on the ‘somewhat romantic belief that peasants, Indians, and other marginalized persons possess local wisdom and a virtual cultural ethos and that participatory processes are inherently humanizing, liberating, and catalyzing’ (Huesca 2003, pg. 217). Other scholars have also pointed to issues such as the conditions necessary for participation, the possible clash between participatory practices and local community or cultural norms, and the necessary mechanisms to measure and evaluate participation and empowerment, (Waisbord 2005, pg. 84). Cadiz (2005) points to a sense of burn out from excessive voluntarism and participation because local people have to tend to their daily routines (Cadiz 2005, pg 157) as another element that needs further attention. Cleaver (2006) tackles the lack of clarity when these approaches talk about ‘the community’ or ‘the poor’, arguing that such broad and fragile categories do not engage with issues of differences such as socio-economic inequality, agency and structure, or personal motivation for participation within these groups. (Cleaver 2006, pg. 787-793). In addition, in contexts of peace-building that are often politicized and where, as Rodriguez (2011) notes, community communicators experience violence at the hands of armed actors, issues of safety are critical.

Another criticism is the lack of attention given to the structural constrains that these projects face, such as policy and legislation. Waisbord (2003), for instance, points out that decentralized grassroots programs, such as community media projects, are often ‘offered as examples of decentralized citizenship’ that allows for the ‘sharing and production of information among community members’ (Waisbord 2003,
However, as Waisbord illustrates, citizenship and political participation are still linked to states and to laws that rule over political geography. States still have a monopoly on citizenship (Waisbord 2003, pg. 160), making it naïve to ignore the role of the state in development (Midgley 1986, quoted in Waisbord 2003, pg. 160). Manyozo (2012) echoes this concern about structural constraints in his argument to reconceptualize the field of communication for development under a paradigm he terms *Power, Participation, and Policy*, which focuses on issues of power in policy and institutions (Manyozo 2012, pg. 200-205). For example, as Coyer (2011) has argued, communication policy in developing countries should support communication that uses traditional technologies such as radio, as it transcends issues of illiteracy and is an affordable technology that is easy to use and requires minimal equipment (Coyer 2011, pg. 166-169).

In this context, a pilot project to support youth-led citizens’ media work in Colombia should take a number of steps. Firstly, it should build on the work currently being done by some citizens’ media groups, which may already have a strong organizational culture and solid personal relationships that allow these projects to have a sustained impact. Secondly, this pilot project should build on the work of institutions, such as schools and universities, doing work in this field as a way to guarantee participation and sustainability. The example of Save the Children’s work discussed above, which added a media component to its educational programming, is a good example of this. Lastly, as mentioned above, this project should support communication policy groups as a way to ensure that resources for the sustainability of these projects are in place once Canadian funding ends. The role of communication policy cannot be overemphasised, as much of the existing communication policy in Colombia has been the result of the strong lobbying and mobilization efforts of media activists during the 1980s and 1990s. Policy advocacy efforts led to a greater awareness about community media, which was ultimately reflected in Article 20 of the 1991 Colombian Constitution, which guaranteed the right of every Colombian to establish their own media, in Decree 1447 of 1995 on community radio licenses, and in Acuerdo 006 of 1999 on community television (Rodriguez 2011, pg. 28-31).

c. Canadian Development Programming in Colombia

The Canadian government’s development priority is to reduce global poverty (Canada 2013a), a priority pursued in the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development. All development projects must adhere to the Canadian government’s aid effectiveness agenda, which is ‘anchored in principles - ownership, alignment, coordination and harmonization, managing for results, and mutual
accountability – that provide a reference point for increasing the coherence, impact, and effectiveness of aid efforts' (Canada 2013). Within this agenda, the Canadian government focuses its development efforts in three priority areas: increasing food security, securing the future of children and youth, and stimulating sustainable economic growth (Canada 2011).

Within the priority area of Securing the future of children and youth, which is of specific interest to this policy brief, the Canadian government focuses its programming in three sub-areas: child survival, including maternal health; access to quality education; and safe and secure futures for children and youth (Canada 2012). Some of the objectives listed under these sub-areas that youth-led citizen’s media projects could support include: increasing access to learning opportunities for youth in and out of school; strengthening and implementing frameworks to better protect the human rights of children and youth, particularly girls, who are at increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse; and helping youth-at-risk find alternatives to violence and crime and engage as positive and productive members of their societies (Canada 2013).

Also as part of Canada’s aid effectiveness agenda, the Canadian government decided to focus its international assistance in 20 countries. Colombia, a country where ‘7.4 million individuals (16 percent of the population) live on less than US$1.25/day’ (Canada 2013), is one of Canada’s 20 countries of focus. Canada is particularly engaged in work that serves children and youth, which make up 42% of Colombia’s population and are ‘particularly vulnerable to inequality, poverty, and conflict’ (Canada 2013). According to Canadian government websites, the ‘overall goal of Canada's program in Colombia is to improve human rights and reduce the inequality and poverty of the most vulnerable, with a specific focus on children and youth…by focusing on children and youth, Canada will help break the cycles of violence that have plagued Colombia and will prepare future generations to better integrate into licit economic activity’ (Canada 2013). As of 2013, Canada’s work in Colombia in the priority area of Securing the future of children and youth has achieved important results such as the training of teachers in peace-building communication, the provision of after-school programs, the education of police and army personnel about international humanitarian law, direct education and health services to displaced children and youth, and increased awareness about issues of sex trafficking (Canada 2013). At the time of writing in August 2013, according to the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development (Canada 2013) there were nine projects working under the Securing the future of children and youth priority area in Colombia.

However, while the projects Canada currently supports clearly meet a number of important needs for Colombian children and youth, Canada’s development agenda in Colombia also could extend its
support to grassroots development efforts. From reading over the list of development work Canada currently funds, it is evident that most of the projects supported by Canada are operated by large NGOs such as UNICEF, UNDP, or Save the Children, while only one of them, the Local Fund for Governance and Children’s Rights and Protection, actively supports smaller projects operated by Colombian NGOs. And while large NGOs certainly have the capacity to deliver effective programming in areas such as education, healthcare, and capacity development, as well as to abide by Canada’s aid effectiveness agenda, there are a number of local groups that could engage in areas such as grassroots peace-building, participatory citizenship, and communication capacity. With sufficient work and clear parameters, grassroots groups could generate innovative strategies to meet development objectives such as ‘increasing access to learning opportunities for youth in and out of school; strengthening and implementing frameworks to better protect the human rights of children and youth; and helping youth-at-risk find alternatives to violence and crime and engage as positive and productive members of their societies’ (Canada 2013). In light of this, this policy brief proposes the creation of a pilot project to support youth-led citizens’ media projects working for peace in Colombia.

4. Policy Recommendations

This policy brief argues that Canada should consider a pilot project to support youth-led citizens’ media projects working for peace in Colombia. This pilot project should begin by taking the following steps:

- **Engage in a consultation process** with leaders of existing citizens’ media projects in Colombia, as well as with Colombian academics and civil society organizations supporting citizens’ media work. These connections would inform the designers of the pilot project as they:
  
  a) Gain a better understanding of the citizens’ media landscape in Colombia;
  
  b) Identify projects it could initially fund;
  
  c) Identify policy groups working on communication policy in Colombia concerning ways to relate to citizens’ media;
  
  d) Identify people to provide capacity development support in the form of workshops, training, etc.;
  
  e) Draft funding application guidelines for interested projects;
  
  f) Create education material to support projects approved for funding;
g) Identify opportunities for monitoring and evaluation of the projects;

Key people/groups working on Colombia include:

a. Clemencia Rodriguez, University of Oklahoma;
b. Amparo Cadavid, Universidad Minuto de Dios;
c. Omar Rincon, Universidad Javeriana;
d. Jesus Antonio Arroyave, Universidad del Norte;
e. Jeanine El'Gazi and Tatiana Duplat, Caracola Consultores;
f. **Barrio U** is a very active group of communication students and alumni the Universidad de Antioquia, led by Professor Astrid Carraquilla. This group is well connected with projects in Medellín;
g. Community Communication Division, **Secretaria de Gobierno de Bogotá**. This is the division of the City of Bogotá leading community communication initiatives. This office is well connected with projects in Bogotá and is led by Nacho Toroviedo;
h. **Echo Consultores** is a private communication consulting firm with experience in citizens’ media work;
i. **Corporacion Ciudad Comuna** is a small NGO that works to educate young people in Medellin in the field of community communication. It is led by Leonardo Jimenez;
j. **Red Audiovisual de Bogotá** is a group that links a number of communication projects in Bogotá;
k. **Ojo al Sancocho** is a film-based initiative in Soacha, a town outside of Bogotá, which consists of the production and screening of films on the subject of internal displacement;
l. **Suba al Aire** is a community radio station based in Bogotá run by youth and senior citizens;
m. **Coco Salado** is a grassroots communication initiative working out of El Salado, a small town in the Caribbean region of the country. This initiative is particularly interesting as El Salado is a town that experienced high levels of violence and is currently undergoing a process of land restitution;
n. **Colectivo de Comunicacion de Montes de Maria** is an established civil society in the Caribbean region of the country group that has been working in the field of grassroots communication for the past decade. It is led by Soraya Bayuelo;
o. **Escuela Audiovisual de Belen de los Andaquies** is an initiative to teach media production skills to children and youth in the department of Caqueta;
p. Teatro Esquina Latina is an established theatre company based in Cali with a strong theatre program for children and youth, many of who are victims of displacement;

- **Identify general parameters** for the establishments of youth-led citizens’ media projects. These parameters could become the basis for creating project guidelines for funded projects. Some initial parameters common in communication for social change literature that could guide the project include: the use of appropriate and affordable communication technologies that people can easily afford and replace, depending on the context; encouraging the production of local media content that is culturally relevant by each of these projects; projects should be designed in such a way that youth own the means and methods of communication; having a clear strategy for capacity building in terms of communication and project administration skills to guarantee long-term impact; providing physical spaces to produce and store media content and technologies, as well as for youth to meet (Gumucio-Dagron 2006). These parameters should be developed in consultation with key contacts in Colombia, such as the ones mentioned above, who may have already done work in this area. This would allow the pilot project to build on the work of local actors, strengthen connections in the sector, and develop relevant project guidelines.

- **Support civil society organizations working on community communication policy.** As mentioned in the sections above, work on citizens’ media should be accompanied by support for communication policy advocacy groups. This work should build on existing legislation and policy frameworks in Colombia, particularly in regards to finding a sustainable way of financing citizens’ media projects as a way to guarantee the long term impact of projects supported by this pilot project, even after Canadian support comes to an end.

The implementation of this pilot project could lead, in the medium term, to the creation of a fund to which youth-led citizens’ media groups and communication policy groups can apply for financial and capacity building support. Canadian financial support can be crucial in developing a sector that, despite important growth in recent years, often faces financial barriers. Capacity building support, which can take the form of workshops or meeting spaces with leaders in the field, would help create important opportunities for youth, one of the social groups most affected by the armed conflict, to develop the necessary communication and organizational capacity skills to not only start new communication projects, but to share their experiences with other groups. Canada already supports a project with a similar structure, the Local Fund for Governance and Children’s Rights and Protection, which is operated by the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá and supports medium-scale initiatives that work in thematic areas such as reproductive health, child labour, and education.
5. Suggested Reading


Bouvier’s text provides an interesting summary of a number of grassroots peace projects that have taken place in Colombia over the past 20 years. It provides insights about successful projects as well as on some of the issues facing peace-building work.


Gumucio-Dagron’s text provides a number of examples of alternative communication and citizens’ media projects in different contexts. Starting with some of the earliest experiments in participatory communication, this book shows some of the different forms that this type of communication can take.


This introductory chapter to an anthology on communication for development literature traces some of the origins of the field and provides some of the theoretical underpinnings of communication for social change.


This book provides a sweeping examination of the emergence of communication for development from a number of perspectives. It is relevant in understanding the ways in which communication has been conceptualized in the context of development.

This text explores some of the roles that youth in post-conflict situations take, as well as some of the possibilities created by including young people in the construction of peace in a more active way. While this text only has a small section on Colombia, it nevertheless provides important insights about youth in armed conflict contexts.


Rodriguez’s book provides a number of examples of the ways in which citizens’ media projects operate in contexts of armed conflict, as well as a thorough theorization of citizens’ media in contexts of war.


This text introduces readers to some of the current debates on communication in the context of Latin America, with a specific focus on citizens’ media and citizens’ communication projects in Colombia.
6. Works Cited


Lorenzo Vargas – *Citizens’ Media as a Tool for the Local Construction of Peace in Colombia: Opportunities for Youth*


Insight on Conflict. Consultoria para los derechos humanos y el desplazamiento (CODHES).

<http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/colombia/peacebuilding-organisations/codhes/>


Lorenzo Vargas – Citizens’ Media as a Tool for the Local Construction of Peace in Colombia:
Opportunities for Youth


