

Building the Peace

Rural Education and conflict in Colombia

The conflict that has affected Colombia for the last 50 years, has reinforced economic inequalities and widened the divide between urban and rural areas. It has also severely affected children's access to quality education. There is now a three-year difference in learning levels between children in the same grade in urban and rural areas. To bridge this gap and ensure sustainable reintegration of children formerly associated with armed groups, considerable investments should be made to strengthen access to quality education in rural areas

Background

The peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP represent a historic opportunity for the 8.2 million people affected by the armed conflict. Implementation of the agreement will create a unique possibility for rural children and youth to finally overcome the crisis of forced displacement and be able to return to school.

Two out of ten children living in rural areas don't attend school. This number increases to 7 out of 10 for youth at the age of 17. Half of the children and youth who gain access to education do not get beyond primary school. According to a recent study by NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the key factors that account for these numbers are forced displacement, violence, abruptions in the school year, poverty, distances between homes and schools and lack of teachers in some rural areas.

As stated by a representative from the Colombian Ministry of Education, the PISA knowledge tests, used to

measure learning levels, showed significant differences between rural and urban children. In terms of learning levels, the difference between the urban and rural areas is equivalent to three years. In other words, when placing two children in the same grade, the gap in terms of educational quality would be tantamount to three fewer years of school in the rural areas.

Education key to peace

Inequality in Colombia largely corresponds with the urban-rural divide. Both the Western Coast, the North East and some Central areas measures high on indicators of poverty and marginalization, and have limited access to public services. According to official information, 80 per cent of the displaced population lives in poverty.

These rural areas have also historically been the areas most affected by the armed conflict. More than 47,000 out-of-school children and youth have been identified by NRC in Nariño, Cauca and Norte de Santander in the municipalities most affected by the armed conflict.

Lacking education, children and youth are easy prey for non-state armed groups. According to a study, 57 per cent of the children and youth recruited by or involved in armed groups come from poor families suffering from lack of sufficient access to food and who have on average been displaced 4.5 times by armed violence.



Fernanda Pineda ©NRC Jambaló (Cauca); Nasa, Indigenous community.

Additionally, the education levels of separated and demobilized rural children, adolescents and youth are below the median. This element suggests a correlation between low levels of education and involvement in armed groups and indicates that particular efforts should be made to strengthen education levels for this group.

Education can also be an effective strategy to prevent children and youth from re-joining the armed groups once they have demobilized. A recent study indicates that, out of a representative sample of separated children, 80 per cent have received threats from the armed group they were previously associated with, 9.7 per cent stated that they might possibly return to an armed group and 3.7 per cent said they would consider returning to the armed group. The risk of a new cycle of violence is real and it is necessary to provide other opportunities for the children and youth without access to education.

The Colombian Government has in recent years demonstrated willingness to strengthen its education sector, but these efforts have yet to demonstrate effect in the rural areas. Nearly 60 per cent of the municipalities of Colombia are rural and these host 30 per cent of the population. In 2014, public expenditure on education was 4.6 per cent of GDP. Of this amount,

only 0.5 per cent was allocated to rural education. In order to achieve substantive changes, the amount dedicated to rural education will need to increase to 1.2 per cent of GDP per year over the next 15 years.

Colombia needs a grand pact for rural education with commitment by state institutions, the education sector, civil society, the private sector, international donors and international organizations.

Such a national pact must promote investment in the education sector in the rural areas most affected by the conflict, and build on existing initiatives. Relevant policies to consider include the General Agreement for Termination of the Conflict, the Special Plan for Rural Education, the National Plan for Education about Human Rights, and initiatives for successful reincorporation of separated and demobilized children and youth.

NOREF and NRC recommendations:

The Colombian State

- Establish a grand pact for education in Colombia, which should include governmental entities; territorial entities; the education sector, civil society organizations and the private sector. This grand pact should include increased investment in the rural sector to 1.2 per cent of annual GDP.

The donors and the international community should

- Explicitly recognize the role of education in the peace building process and allocate significant funding to promote rural education.
- Work together with the Colombian Government to address the factors preventing access to quality education in rural areas.
- Contribute towards the capacity building of the Government and civil society to provide access to quality education for demobilized children and youth, and children and youth otherwise affected by the conflict.