Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programming With Colombia’s Youth

CRISTINA PETCU
Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Cristina Petcu is a Research Associate with the Just Security 2020 project at the Stimson Center. She is a native of Romania and received a Master of Arts in International Affairs with concentrations in conflict & security and development from The New School. Cristina also studied at the University of Barcelona on an Erasmus scholarship and holds a B.A. in Philosophy and European Studies from the University of Bucharest. Prior to joining Stimson, she served in various roles at the United Nations, including the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Guatemala, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (Office for the Rule of Law and Security Institutions) at UN Headquarters, and UN Habitat (Youth and Livelihoods Unit). Her work and research interests focus on global governance reform, strengthening civil society's role in global governance, the management of armed groups (i.e. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration), and advancing the UN's youth, peace, and security agenda, among other global policy issues. Cristina is an alumna of AIESEC and One Young World, and currently co-chairs the UN2020 coalition’s Advocacy Working Group. She is fluent in English, Spanish, and Romanian, and has an intermediate knowledge of French. She can be reached at cpetcu@stimson.org.

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Abstract

This paper shifts the focus away from the narrative portraying youth as a security concern and beneficiaries of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs and instead recasts youth as partners and champions for advancing DDR. Building on the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) resolution 2250, it identifies a practice framework that harnesses young Colombians’ vital role in ensuring the reintegration of FARC ex-combatants and promotion of reconciliation and social cohesion. The practice framework is based on two of YPS’ five pillars:

1. Participation—which calls for youth participation at all levels of decision-making as well as measures to support local youth initiatives, and
2. Disengagement and Reintegration—which encourages support for youth-led peace building organizations.

Introduction

In November 2016, four years of peace talks ended Colombia’s 50-year-old conflict with the former left-wing guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC). The conflict claimed eight million victims, of which 6.7 million were displaced people.1 Identified as the most inclusive peace process in history, the final agreement’s 558 stipulations covered ambitious and comprehensive goals including rural reform, guaranteed political participation and collective socio-economic reintegration for FARC ex-combatants, and a comprehensive truth, justice, and reparation system.2 Although not sufficient in itself to bring peace to Colombia, the implementation of the peace agreement is imperative to creating the preconditions needed for a more stable and cohesive society.
However, one of three main areas of concern for the implementation of Colombia’s peace agreement is the slow progress of long-term political, social, and economic reintegration of ex-combatants. In a country still plagued by criminal activity, armed groups, and a continuous migration flow from its politically unstable and violent neighbor, Venezuela, the slow reintegration process could yield high recidivism rates among Colombia’s former combatants. Similarly, the bitterly polarized political setting, which was aggravated by Colombia’s President Iván Duque who took office in 2018, undermines the process of national reconciliation and social cohesion.

Despite political polarization and the initial negative results of the 2016 referendum on the peace accord, popular support for the implementation of the agreement persists, particularly among Colombian youth. Since 2016, they have been one of the largest sectors of Colombian society to embrace the peace agreement and the first to mobilize and defend both the peace negotiations and the adoption and implementation of the agreement. Youth have been at the forefront of social movements, such as Paz a la Calle (Peace on the Street) and Defendemos La Paz (Let’s Defend Peace), and conducted informational campaigns about the conflict and the peace agreement (e.g. Historias para lo que viene/Stories for what’s coming). They have shown remarkable persistence in defending peace even at the expense of becoming targets of hate and violence.

This paper argues for further recognizing, facilitating, and enhancing the young Colombians’ role in the reconciliation process as well as in guaranteeing the successful, collective, and community-based socio-economic reintegration of FARC ex-combatants. Including Colombian youth as key agents in the reconciliation and reintegration process is particularly relevant in the context of resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) adopted in December 2015 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which recognizes “the important role youth can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and as a key aspect of the sustainability, inclusiveness, and success of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.” The YPS resolution has been a landmark in changing the long-standing narrative that portrays youth as a security threat to be contained, victims of conflict, or simply passive beneficiaries of post-conflict peacebuilding. It recognizes their potential to be agents of positive change and highlights their own peacebuilding efforts.

In Colombia, youth recruitment by armed groups coupled with petty and violent crimes committed by socioeconomically disadvantaged youth cause young people at large to be seen as a security threat. Depicting youth as a ‘problem’ and a factor in community destabilization is, regrettably, common in the country. But, the young Colombian generation has been born amid conflict and has not yet experienced a different reality. This is partly why they are genuinely interested in contributing to peace in their communities and transforming the country into one where they wish to live as adults. In this context, this study does not approach the issue of youth disengagement from armed groups. On the contrary, it shifts focus away from the narrative portraying youth as a security concern and beneficiaries of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs and instead treats youth as partners and champions for advancing DDR. It builds on the normative frameworks established by resolution 2250, subsequent UNSC resolution 2419 (2018), the priority areas and recommendations indicated by the Independent Progress Study on YPS, and the UN Youth 2030 strategy, while bearing in mind their contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

In particular, it contributes to the operationalization of the YPS resolution by focusing on two of its five main pillars: the first one, participation, and the fifth one, disengagement and reintegration. Focusing on the disengagement and reintegration pillar is especially relevant because of the emphasis of common DDR practice in framing youth as a security concern. This pillar’s shortcomings include overemphasis on factors like unemployment that generally serve as “push” factors towards youth violence. The economic lens for disengagement and reintegration is at best narrow and foregoes partnering with youth in a more comprehensive manner. Pillar one, participation,
do better on that score as it calls on Member States to implement “measures [...] that involve youth in the implementation mechanisms of peace agreements.”

This offers a window of opportunity to reframe the youth-DDR nexus. Using Colombia as a case study, the paper first assesses progress with DDR and highlights challenges with the reintegration process (the process in which youth can be engaged the most). Second, it justifies the imperative for youth-led and facilitated reintegration of FARC ex-combatants. Third, it offers several preliminary recommendations for advancing a new DDR-with-youth practice framework.

**The Implementation of DDR**

Over the past decades, the changing nature of conflict led to several DDR policy and practice innovations, captured in the new Integrated DDR Standards (expected to be released in 2020, including a new module on youth). According to the UN Institute for Training and Research, “DDR is a process through which members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life. As a complex process, it comprehends political, security, social, economic and humanitarian dimensions aimed at creating an environment where a peace process, political and social reconciliation, and sustainable development can take place.”

Since 1982, Colombia has tried to negotiate seven peace processes and failed six times to implement any DDR programs. Colombia lives in a historic but very sensitive moment. The peace process faces political polarization and variable support for its implementation, as demonstrated by the October 2016 peace plebiscite where 50.2 percent of voters rejected the agreement and 49.8 percent voted in favor. Following the adoption of a peace agreement in November 2016, a DDR program commenced. By July 2017, FARC had officially completed the disarmament and demobilization process (DD). The DD process marked the transformation of FARC from an armed group to a political movement. During this process, more than 8,000 weapons were received, and 10,015 combatants demobilized in twenty-four Territorial Areas for Training and Reintegration (formerly known as Zonas Veredales de Transición y Normalización/Transitional and Normalization Zones).

**The Reintegration Challenge**

Notwithstanding progress with DD, the reintegration process remains slow and concerns Colombians who fear another failed DDR program. As for FARC ex-combatants, they can easily recidivate if reintegration fails. Reintegration is a long-term process of development, which allows ex-combatants to acquire civilian status, gain sustainable employment and income, and become socio-economically integrated with their communities at the local level. From December 2016 to December 2018, the reincorporation of children (who have a different reintegration track than adult combatants) has been the most successful (67 percent completed), followed by the political reintegration (62 percent completed) and socio-economic reintegration of adult ex-combatants (43 percent completed).

Socio-economic reintegration is a fundamental element that contributes to a stable peace process and “[l]ong term delays can generate frustration and distrust among ex-combatants. Ensuring sufficient resources for implementing effectively the transition to civil life helps ensure their rejection of violence as a valid instrument for political ends.” This is concerning as the achievement of peace is tied to the successful implementation of the reintegration phase to ensure the long-term social, psychosocial, political, and economic well-being of ex-combatants and their communities. During previous DDR programs, the lack of proper reintegration programs along with the continuous threat that criminal gangs and paramilitary groups posed to the country were the primary factors associated with conflict recurrence and ex-combatants’ involvement in crime. Regrettably, according to
a Colombian Ministry of Defense intelligence report, a total of 1,749 FARC dissidents have already returned to arms.16

Successful reintegration would not only reduce the risk of recidivism for former guerilla members, but it can also be an entry point for reconciliation and social cohesion. Community-based socio-economic programs are imperative for social participation and acceptance of ex-combatants by the communities where they will settle. According to Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, participation “can help ex-combatants feel socially fulfilled and acceptance by their communities can reduce their needs to maintain social connections to their former group networks and bosses,” consequently minimizing recidivism to illegal activities.17

However, social cohesion and reconciliation remains an intriguing topic among Colombians, fueled partly by society’s concerns that the agreement compensates the members of a former armed group but not the eight million victims of conflict. Reintegration entails financial compensation, educational and vocational training, psychological support, and a series of programs meant to smooth the transition from combatant to civilian life. But Colombians often see this process as a privilege that FARC, responsible for the death of 220,000 people, does not deserve. This messaging creates stigma and undermines the process of return for ex-combatants. As such, community acceptance is one of the biggest obstacles to national stability, peacebuilding, and the DDR process.18 Distrust and fear of former soldiers inhibits employment in the formal sector, which is fundamental to recovery and reconstruction efforts.19 If access to employment is denied and reconciliation between communities and former combatants becomes arduous, then the socio-economic reintegration of both communities and ex-combatants will fail.

Recognizing Youth as Peacebuilders

With few exceptions, the literature addressing issues regarding post-conflict reconstruction refers to youth (14 to 28 years old, as per Colombia’s youth policy) either as victims or perpetrators. In this respect, society has highly underestimated the youth’s role as active actors in preventing and resolving conflict, despite clear evidence showing that young people’s participation is an essential condition to the sustainability, inclusiveness, and success of peacebuilding efforts.20 Long before they were ever mentioned in an international forum, young people and youth organizations were at the forefront of social movements promoting justice, human rights, and economic development. They have denounced and held accountable corrupt and abusive governments while using different methods to communicate and promote civic engagement, reconciliation, and respect for diversity, among others. The YPS resolution is not “groundbreaking” in this sense, as many studies and policymakers like to characterize it, but is instead a long awaited, essential framework that acknowledges young people’s role in peacebuilding and advocates for their integration into important policy and decision-making processes at local, national, and international levels.

Youth have been on international agendas since 1985, when the first International Youth Year was celebrated, and in 1995, when the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) was adopted by the General Assembly. Point three under the “armed conflict” section of the WPAY encouraged Member States to promote the “active involvement of youth in maintaining peace and security [...] for reconciliation, peace consolidation and peacebuilding.”21 Despite this earlier call, the UN took twenty years to realize that a normative paradigm shift was necessary to address programmatic and operational gaps that determined how youth were portrayed by multilaterals and governments.

The YPS resolution is germane to the Colombian context and represents a blueprint for youth participation in the peace process. Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding the current government’s compliance with the peace agreement, Colombia has the potential to become a champion of the YPS resolution by meaningfully integrating youth in the peace process. Building
on the YPS resolution’s call for action, which encourages Member States to consider innovative methods to support and increase inclusive representation of youth in building peace, this paper identifies a practice framework to harness young people’s vital role in ensuring the successful socio-economic reintegration of FARC ex-combatants and promoting reconciliation and social cohesion. The practice framework is based on two of the five pillars of the YPS resolution:

1. Participation—which calls for youth participation at all levels of decision-making as well as measures to support local youth initiatives, and

2. Disengagement and Reintegration—which encourages support for youth-led peace-building organizations.

This approach is connected and should not be isolated from the two other aforementioned efforts, specifically promoting reconciliation and social cohesion, as they are interdependent and reinforce each other. While the disengagement and reintegration pillar of the YPS resolution is primarily focused on DDR programming for young people, this paper puts forward a different approach centered on youth-facilitated and youth-led reintegration for a caseload (FARC ex-combatants) whose majority (72 percent) is not young.

**Why Colombian Youth?**

With a current population of 13 million young people aged between 14-28 years old (26 percent of the total population as of 2018), Colombia will have the largest youth population in its history between 2015 and 2035. Further, Colombia is experiencing a period of “demographic bonus that could extend beyond 2020” because “the rate of people in working age grows in a sustained way with respect to the rate of people in potentially inactive ages (younger than 15 and older than 60).”

Colombia has an opportunity, and the duty, to recognize and encourage youth to become the primary actors in transforming their country and laying down the building blocks for sustainable peace. Ignoring youth might instead feed a continuous cycle of violence, polarization, frustration, and distrust in the peace process. While Colombia’s government can claim victory over a 50-year war with FARC, other spoilers of violence such as paramilitary and armed groups, gangs, and criminal and drug trafficking organizations continue to affect various regions of the country. Including young women and men in this peace process becomes critical for long-term stabilization, development, and reconciliation given that “[r]econciliation takes a generation and is a long-term journey. Youth have the capacity and life span to engage in the long run. Investing in a new generation that will be future leaders in their countries can help break the cycles of political deadlock, ethno-centric, adversarial, and competitive politics, and lead nations to true justice and reconciliation.” It is an opportunity for youth to be invested in the peace process because they will actively reimagine and rebuild the society in which they wish to live.

Clearly, the case for partnering with youth to advance the DDR process deserves further consideration. Firstly, the belief that Colombia’s youth are central to the peace process is not an overstatement or misled romanticism. Following the peace agreement’s rejection in the October 2016 referendum, university students from Bogotá took over the streets and advocated for the continuation of peace talks and the ratification of a new peace agreement. The movement (*Paz a la Calle*/Peace on the Street) grew and included a significant number of students from all over the country with different backgrounds and political affiliations, all united in demanding that FARC and the government move forward with the peace agreement.

The Peace on the Street movement echoed throughout Colombia, both among the opposition and those who supported the agreement. It became a central contributing factor to former President
Juan Manuel Santos’ decision not to abandon the process and to negotiate changes to the accord. Since then, youth, among other sectors of the Colombian population, have defended the peace accord and held the government accountable in regard to respecting its obligations under the deal. Youth have also been at the forefront of movements denouncing the government for allocating a low reintegration budget in its proposed National Development Plan for 2018–2022. Their ability and energy to mobilize as well as their genuine interest in rebuilding their country should be acknowledged and strengthened. DDR stakeholders should tap young people’s potential to achieve buy-in from Colombians for DDR and long-term reintegration. Across the country, frustrations with the current and previous DDR programs pose challenges to the reintegration of ex-combatants and advancement of reconciliation and social cohesion. Convincing youth of the importance of DDR and partnering with them to ensure a broader acceptance of the process could be a strategic entry point to achieve support from Colombians.

Secondly, youth generally “demonstrate openness to change, feedback and learning; tend to be more future-oriented; more idealistic and innovative; and more willing to take risks.” Their experiences during reconstruction will not only serve to stabilize the country during transition, but will also prepare them to become future leaders that further break the cycle of violence and instability. But in order to feel empowered and included in the reconstruction process, young women and men should not be treated as an inclusion quota. It is essential to involve them in the initial phases of DDR planning and to build shared ownership of the process. Having them included in the planning process will also facilitate an understanding of shared strengths, potential capacity and knowledge gaps, and avenues for collaboration between DDR practitioners and youth. Since the current DDR program has reached the reintegration phase, these principles could best be applied to the potential future DDR program for the National Liberation Army. At the same time, failure to include youth in the planning process should not rule out the possibility to partner with them.
at a different stage of the program as long as they can have a meaningful contribution and adults are not attributed “exclusive ownership of experience and knowledge in decision-making.”

Thirdly, youth have a greater ability to forgive and forget the past, which represents an opportunity to include them in the reconciliation process. Despite the fact that more than half of the eight million registered victims are younger than 28 years old, results from a 2018 Search For Common Ground mapping exercise of Colombian youth-led organizations show that “young people want to leave the past behind; they are open to dialogue in the midst of differences; and they want to live in peace in their communities” (see Box 1). An example of how young people support reconciliation is the Letter for Reconciliation Campaign; a project of two youth organizations, BogotArt Foundation and Young Youth Foundation, that encouraged young people to send letters to former combatants. These letters welcomed ex-combatants back to society as they began a new life. Hundreds of them have been delivered to demobilization camps, inspiring former guerillas who were impressed by the messages received. Youth resilience and coping strategies prove that DDR policymakers and practitioners should recognize and include youth in reconciliation and reintegration efforts.

Why Youth and DDR?

DDR should not be viewed as a panacea for peace and security. Instead, it can be seen as a complement to stabilization efforts which “can, at best, open windows of opportunity for sustainable development, for social justice, and for reconciliation.” These “windows of opportunity” are precisely the avenues to showcase the positive contribution that young women and men can have in DDR while also moving away from the incessant discourse generally portraying youth as passive beneficiaries of the program. While DDR is only one of the tools used for stabilization, it is also one of the pivotal elements to ensuring the success of a peace process. As such, DDR programs should benefit from young people’s capacity and idealism to rebuild their communities. Equally, it is an opportunity for young people to appreciate peace, exercise civic responsibility, and claim ownership.

But, as Irma Specht well highlighted a decade ago (and still holds true today), common DDR practice and the disengagement and reintegration pillar of resolution 2250, to a certain extent, “addresses youth as a security concern.” This approach is present in countries and regions

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**Box 1: Colombian Youth Behavior Towards Politics**

A survey completed by the University of Los Andes in 2016 found that youth embrace reconciliation and forgiveness the most:

- **39.1%** would accept their child befriending a demobilized soldier of FARC while only 28.4 percent of adults would accept the same.
- **50.9%** would accept their child studying at the same college as the children of former combatants, more than double that of adults.
- **47%** would agree that the company they work for should offer employment to a former combatant, while adults scored 40.7 percent.

beyond Colombia where DDR programs are extensively conducted for younger caseloads. While in some countries the securitization of youth is connected to the threat posed by “youth bulges”, radicalization, and extremism, in Colombia (and Latin America more broadly), it is associated with *jóvenes pandilleros* (youth gangs) and youngsters (mostly males and also referred to as “the disposables”) who present “problematic” behavior. Exceptions to this approach exist but have only been explored in recent research, primarily in relation to young people’s role in disengaging and reintegrating young soldiers. Research and policy solutions are critical to developing guidance on best practices for conducting DDR for youth and addressing the needs of former young soldiers. However, this focus should not undermine and overlook young people’s potential to facilitate reintegration of ex-combatants and hold their governments accountable to implement peace agreements. Youth in the Colombian context, and particularly in those environments where youth form a large proportion of an armed group, should be considered an “asset in the reconstruction period.”

DDR is extensively presented as a complex, rigorous, and highly technical process developed and implemented by experts and designated institutions. The reality is that, while setting up the conceptual framework for DDR is a heavy endeavor, DD are clear-cut processes conducted within a limited timeframe (usually one year) and reintegration represents a comprehensive and multidimensional effort extended over years. Reintegration requires society-wide participation to be effective. It cannot be reserved for ex-combatants alone because their social, economic, and political reintegration is not achieved in isolation from their communities of return. Community-based approaches to reintegration are among the most successful because they encourage all parties, victims, perpetrators, and observers of violence to actively engage in reintegration programs, therefore inhibiting forms of exclusion and resentment among community members. Youth, formally or informally, become active or passive participants in this process.

**Operationalizing Youth-Led and Facilitated DDR**

Since the adoption of resolutions 2250 and 2419, there have been numerous initiatives and studies intended to put them into practice. Operationalizing youth-led and facilitated DDR should be part of this endeavor and an important programming priority of the relevant UN offices and government partners based in Colombia. Given that the nature of conflicts and actors involved in each context is different, strategies for operationalizing youth-led and facilitated DDR in other countries should be developed and adapted according to each specific conflict environment. Based on the analysis and gaps identified in the previous sections, a set of preliminary recommendations to facilitate the inclusion of Colombian youth in peacebuilding, reintegration, reconciliation, and social cohesion programming will be presented.

**Adopt and implement a national action plan on Youth, Peace and Security**

Colombia implemented a national youth policy from 2005 to 2015 and adopted a national youth law in 2013, but its influence is limited when it comes to securing youth access in the decision-making process and constructively integrating them in peacebuilding efforts. The current law neither recognizes nor ensures young Colombians’ inclusion in post-conflict recovery or crisis response. Countries affected by conflict must be champions in adopting national action plans on youth, peace, and security to ensure they are represented during peace negotiations, implementation, and monitoring.
So far, Finland is one of the only countries to prepare such a national action plan, but Colombia is not far behind. Following strong advocacy efforts of youth organizations, Colombia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs committed to creating a national action plan based on YPS resolutions 2250 and 2419 at the International Symposium on Youth Participation in Peace Processes held in March 2019. Ideally, such a plan should set national priorities for promoting and strengthening young people’s contribution to peacebuilding as well as for preventing youth engagement with armed groups or gangs; it should highlight the role of DDR in tapping youth’s potential contributions to building and sustaining peace; and should elaborate these objectives in an action framework. Further, the national plan should reflect the needs of different regions and be considerate of marginalized segments of the population such as women, indigenous, LGBTQ, disabled, and at-risk youth. To ensure the highest level of inclusivity and policy expertise, the government should consult the Guide to kick-starting UNSCR 2250 Locally and Nationally and the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security co-chaired by the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, Search for Common Ground, and the United Nations (Peacebuilding Support Office and United Nations Population Fund).

**Strengthen the role of Colombia Joven**

*Colombia Joven* (Young Colombia) is a platform coordinated by the Administrative Department of the Presidency of the Republic, which develops its activities according to Decree 1649 (2014) and Law 1622 (2013) and looks to promote the youth national policy and facilitate young people’s access to resources and opportunities for their projects and activities. The platform should continue to assist with the coordination, execution, and monitoring of youth public policies. However, its capabilities should be strengthened and its purpose extended to include monitoring of the future national action plan on YPS. Furthermore, it should enhance its financial support and capacity building for young people that are developing projects focused on the socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants, reconciliation, and social cohesion. In addition, the platform should be used as an online learning tool integrating courses or toolkits explaining DDR and how youth can participate in DDR programming. Similarly, *Colombia Joven* should be positioned to strengthen the capacity of adult policy makers to engage young people as essential partners for nation building. The courses and toolkits could be developed in collaboration with DDR specialists—including the UN’s DDR Unit—and youth organizations to boost young people’s leadership and meaningful participation. This type of capacity building would not only empower youth organizations to facilitate the reintegration and reconciliation process, but it would also provide them with the necessary tools and skills to effectively document, monitor, and collect data for measuring their impact.

**Partner with youth to promote reconciliation, social cohesion, and socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants**

Youth should be supported in implementing awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns via different media channels, dialogues, or community-based activities. Awareness-raising activities in schools, communities, municipalities, and districts are a key component to educating Colombians about the relevance of the peace agreement and the DDR program, pulling the conversation away from the political discussion, and reducing hateful attitudes towards ex-combatants. These efforts are imperative for achieving social cohesion between the local population and former combatants, and can advance both reconciliation and reintegration. One example of how young people are creating dialogue is by organizing visits to the Territorial Areas for Training and Reintegration for talks between youth and ex-combatants, where young women and men have the opportunity to ask questions about the history, ideology, and structure of FARC as well as the reasons for joining the group. Questioning attitudes and negative stereotypes about the “enemy” is a useful exercise...
to dismantle prejudices and achieve a certain level of social cohesion, which would make ex-combatants more likely to be accepted in the community. The UN Verification Mission in Colombia, through its youth engagement strategy, fostered youth-led reconciliation dialogues between communities and former combatants located close to the former Territorial Areas for Training and Reintegration. Support from the UN is critical given that it has the authority to offer permission to enter these areas and facilitate the logistical preparations for the visits.

Establish a Colombian National Youth Service Program

A National Youth Service Program for Colombian youth, with an emphasis on marginalized and at-risk youth, should be put in place by the government and operated by local civil society organizations. This may enable young people to immerse themselves in local communities where post-conflict recovery efforts are being undertaken and high numbers of ex-combatants are being reintegrated. The benefits of this program can be twofold: it would facilitate the exchange of good practices and knowledge among youth organizations as well as create awareness about the different challenges that various areas of the country are facing. Youth organizations in urban settings have greater access to resources and knowledge, are more informed about opportunities, and have better capacity to conduct peacebuilding activities. Creating a platform that contributes to narrowing the gap between rural and urban centers, along with areas that experienced the conflict directly or indirectly, would help youth understand the different manifestations of conflict while strengthening their organizational and personal peacebuilding skills. The program could also provide constructive roles for marginalized or at-risk youth as alternatives to risky behavior that could lead to disruptions to the peace process. It could further have an impact on reducing polarization and prejudice while simultaneously promoting tolerance.
Conclusion

Fifty-two years of war left deep wounds and resentment in Colombian society, which finds itself at a crossroads between hate, condemnation, frustration, forgiveness, dialogue, peace, and tranquility. Reconciliation is hard to find given the continuing injustice and violence perpetrated by armed groups, gangs, and drug trafficking organizations. Even so, the peace agreement represents a major milestone, one that could inform how stabilization, peace, and justice can be achieved in Colombia.

This paper centered on the disproportionate attention that DDR practice typically places on youth. Historically, these programs view youths as security concerns and beneficiaries of DDR, disregarding their potential as key actors in making DDR work for their communities. DDR's heavy focus on job creation and a similarly narrow attention to preventing/countering violent extremism, has left a multitude of opportunities to engage youth in peacebuilding untapped. Despite not being explicitly referenced in the global youth, peace, and security agenda, efforts to operationalize the disengagement and reintegration pillar of resolution 2250 should emphasize opportunities for young people to meaningfully engage in reconciliation and reintegration.

Attaining peace entails a broad range of efforts, but focusing on DDR is important because of the central role it plays in managing former armed structures and creating the conditions for the reintegration of both ex-combatants and affected communities.

Colombian youth have created avenues to advocate for peace while holding their government accountable to its obligations under the peace agreement. Through social movements and informational campaigns, they ensured that a peace deal was achieved, demonstrating their commitment to sustained success. Through the years, Colombian youth showed resistance, leadership, and the capacity to forgive. They have been invested in the peace process and have promoted dialogue with former combatants while strengthening social cohesion through social projects. Partnering with youth to lead and facilitate reintegration and reconciliation should be an organic endeavor of stabilization, especially given their efforts and interest in participating in the public sphere as political actors.

Amplifying the voice and efforts of young peacebuilders across the country is crucial to enable communication, forgiveness, unity, reconciliation, and social cohesion. There is no single process for achieving this goal. However, one strategy that will help DDR programing sustain peace in Colombia is securing youth inclusion in the reconstruction phase and unleashing their potential. To this end, the proposed recommendations are timely and align with the Security Council’s request to the UN Secretary-General to include in his reporting young people’s participation in peacebuilding processes such as DDR. The proposed recommendations serve just as initial examples for operationalizing this framework in the Colombian context. The government, DDR practitioners, and youth peacebuilding organizations should consider more innovative ways to include youth in DDR. Implementation of the practice framework will require resources, mobilization, and coordination between various stakeholders, but the costs would be well worth it when compared to the long-term outcomes that could be achieved.

This paper does not intend to romanticize Colombian youth or rule out other peacebuilding efforts led by adults. Lack of resources, expertise, influence, credibility, and motivation among young people are real challenges, but they have been deepened by the minimal attention received from the government and by the stigmatization surrounding youth, in general, and those marginalized and at-risk, in particular. While the United Nations’ Youth, Peace and Security agenda is intended to address some of these challenges, a repositioning of youth within DDR is imperative.
Endnotes


4. Ivan Duque, backed by former President Alvaro Uribe, won the presidency of Colombia on a campaign that promised to dismantle the peace agreement. While the Constitutional Court ruled that he will have to obey the law and implement the agreement, Duque continues to undermine the peace process, allocating insufficient resources and delaying the implementation phase. In 2019, the peace process was in jeopardy when Duque announced objections to articles of the statutory law for the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. The lower house rejected his objections, but they managed to create distrust among the former rebels and inflict a growing rejection of Duque’s policies among Colombians. Source: Sánchez-Garzoli, Gimena. “The Slow Death of Colombia’s Peace Deal.” Foreign Affairs, October 30, 2019. Accessed January 26, 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/colombia/2019-10-30/slow-death-colombias-peace-deal.


6. There is no mutual agreement on the definition of reconciliation, but for the purpose of this paper, the term will be defined according to Louis Kriesberg’s interpretation. According to the author, there are four dimensions of reconciliation: “Truth[s]…— the recognition of the injuries suffered and the losses experienced by members of one side at the hands of former antagonists. Justice […]—[to] seek redress for the injustices they [victims] endured. Respect […]—[to] accord the opponents respect as humans may require overcoming feelings of anger, resentment, hate, and the desire for revenge. Security […]—[in] the process of reconciliation, adversaries look forward to living together without threatening each other, with mutual respect and security, perhaps even in harmony and unity.” Kriesberg, Louis. “Reconciliation: Aspects, Growth, and Sequences.” International Journal of Peace Studies, Vol. 12, no. 1, 3-6. (Spring/Summer 2007): 1-21.


22. The census conducted by the National University of Colombia on FARC ex-combatants shows that approximately 28 percent of the former guerilla group were between 15 and 27 years old. The percentage represents only an estimate and was determined through calculations based on the data available from the national census. Lack of similar and precise data for both young women and men affects the final result's veracity. According to the report, 25 percent of men (1,937) are under 27 years old and 25 percent of women (566) are under 23 years old. To make up the age difference between men and women (27 versus 23 years old), the author has calculated that of the 50 percent of women between 23 and 34 years old (1133), one third (estimated by the author) are aged between 23-27 years old (377). The final percentage was calculated from the sum of the three different youth data points (2,842) as a percentage of the total number of demobilized combatants (10,015), which is 28.3 percent. Source: Universidad Nacional de Colombia (National University of Colombia) and Gobierno de Colombia (Government of Colombia). “Informe de Rendición de Cuentas de la Implementación del Acuerdo de Paz: Noviembre 2016 – Abril 2018.” Bogotá: MTC, 2018, 14. Accessed January 21, 2020. http://unal.edu.co/fileadmin/user_upload/docs/transparencia/2018/FORMATO_INFORME_INDIVIDUAL2018.pdf.


34. Specht, “Children and DDR,” 12.


“Across this work, our efforts must reflect a fundamental understanding: Young people are not subjects to be protected, but should be seen as citizens with equal rights, as full members of our societies, and as powerful agents for change.”