

## Children and adolescents talk to the Truth Commission

*"We call society to reflect upon the impact of conflict on children. To consider very seriously why children have been facing this violence,"* Commissioner Patricia Tobón Yagarí, speaking at the third Encuentro por la Verdad #NuncaMásNiñosYNiñasEnLaGuerra

An estimated 17,000 children and teenagers have been recruited by armed groups in Colombia, with 293 children forced to join armed groups in 2018, according to the United Nations Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

Tensions have deepened in recent weeks after a bombing aimed at dissidents of the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) group killed at least eight children.

In this snapshot we explore how Colombia's Truth Commission (TC) is working with children and young people to sow the seeds for an inclusive peace.

### Youth focus

Violence has impacted the lives of children in Colombia in a multitude of nefarious ways, which have impeded their fundamental rights to education, to family and to health.

Uncovering these impacts is a key focus for the TC. As Commissioner Ángela Salazar recognises, peace in Colombia depends on the participation of young people who have experienced the conflict firsthand. Modern-day violence has transformed; it now utilises technology, affects new spaces, and may be better understood and confronted by today's youth.

To this end, the TC has been meeting with civil society organisations, including ReD Youth, to help design creative, innovative methodologies for working with children to amplify their voices in Colombia's truth-seeking efforts.



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## Third Encuentro por la Verdad: 'Boys, girls and adolescents talk to the Truth Commission'

On 22 and 23 of November, the third Truth Encounter (Encuentro por la Verdad) took place in Medellín, to explicitly recognise the impact of conflict on the lives of children and young people, taking into account their cultural and regional diversity, and being mindful of the social conditions that have determined their different experiences within the framework of Colombian armed conflict.

Just under 20 individuals who experienced the conflict during their childhood shared their stories of forced recruitment and stigmatisation, disappearance, torture and sexual violence, among other atrocities. The event also sought to recognise how young people have resisted violence and rebuilt their lives.

This was the first Truth Encounter in which perpetrators from all sides of the conflict participated. Rodrigo Londoño, president of the FARC political party and former guerrilla commander, Fredy Rendón, ex-commander of the United Self-Defence Forces, and Daladier Rivera, former commander of the armed forces, each apologised for the damage caused to children and young people on their orders. This historic event was hardly conceivable before the peace process and ought to be recognised as concrete evidence of how much progress has been made in Colombia.

*"At my order, and for more than 11 years, thousands of families in the Urabá were affected."* Fredy Rendón, former commander of AUC recognising his responsibility.

## 'Story-listening': innovative methodologies for truth-seeking with children

In November 2019, ReD UK screened *The Tree of Love* (El Árbol del Amor), a short film written, illustrated and animated by child survivors of conflict from the indigenous Nasa reservation of Jambaló in Cauca, Colombia, followed by an enlightening dialogue with the producer, Dr Mathew Charles.

The film explores the complex phenomenon of forced child recruitment and the life of child soldiers. It has also been accepted by Colombia's TC as official testimony.

*"I wish that through these narratives, children or adults from different places will understand what we live through, and that they won't judge us, and that with this story, those who make war will listen to us."* A quote from the final scene of *El Arbol del Amor*



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The innovative methodology used in the film seeks to allow young people to reconstruct their own stories. Through focus groups and workshops, literary exercises and human cartography, the young participants re-created the real, collective stories of former child combatants and young survivors of conflict, depicted through two fictional characters. Mat described this process as 'story-listening' not storytelling, recognising that young people are experts of their own lives.

## **Truth-seeking innovations: the importance of listening to children**

During the dialogue, Mat suggested that increased violence in the region in recent months means that it would not be possible to produce this film now, which is a stark reminder of the gravity Colombia faces as new cycles of violence are costing young lives.

However, the TC's innovations in alternative methodologies, which encourage the active participation of young people, may help to prevent children and adolescents from being recruited, violated or seduced by the conflict in the future.

It is time we listen to children in Colombia and their demands for peace, both for the clarification of the truth in Colombia and for the recommendations of non-repetition.



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