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Children as agents of social and political change for water protection advocacy in post-conflict Colombia

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At the end of 2016, Colombia – let’s hope so, definitely – turned its back on the conflict that opposed the government and the FARC for over 50 years. As often, restored peace unearths crucial problems. And in Colombia as elsewhere, water is one of those. To ward off the forecast that in 2025, almost 70 % of the population may not have access to water during drought, the SieNi association has set up an innovative project, placing children in the forefront of this vital combat.

While children bear the brunt of resource mismanagement in a world threatened by environmental crisis, their subservient social and political positions within family and State power structures compromise their ability to denounce, re-negotiate and/or resist environmental policy at the local, national and international levels.

Children on the front line, but excluded

Within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the concept of “child and youth participation” is emphasized as an essential right of children and youth in article 12¹. In fact, the Committee on the rights of the child, the Convention’s monitoring body, has interpreted participation not only as a right in itself, but as an instrumental right, i.e. a right which ensures the successful exercise of other rights and liberties contained in the UNCRC. Youth participation is therefore not a pursuit onto itself, but rather the pathway through which youth wield the power to bring about social change. The Committee has gone as far as to elevate participation to the rank of one of the four general principles of the UNCRC, further emphasizing the perceived heightened relevance of participation rights before the international child and youth rights advocacy community.

The translation of article 12 into tangible programs carried out in the field is anything but straightforward. Throughout the globe, children and youth are excluded from political institutions which operate upon the principle of age segregation. Being denied the right to vote, children and youth are effectively rendered unable to participate in the shaping of environmental public policy. Organizations aimed at mobilizing youth participation are therefore faced with a conundrum: Is it possible to ensure that the voices of the most disenfranchised population are heard, and furthermore brought to bear a tangible impact on public policy? As if the facilitation of youth participation were not a challenging enough project onto itself, the task of implementing spaces for meaningful youth participation is further complicated in contexts of emergency intervention: How to guarantee that youth are provided with the adequate tools to assist them in understanding complex environmental phenomena requiring urgent action?

¹ Lansdown Gerison, *The realisation of children’s participation rights, A handbook of children and young people’s participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*, 2010, p.11-23.

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The present contribution discusses youth participation in the context of an urgent environmental and humanitarian intervention. In addressing issues such as the Colombian water-crisis in a post-conflict context, the relevance of a youth participation-based strategy and the aiding factors that foster effective youth participation will be discussed. Finally, and perhaps most saliently, the present contribution will conclude by addressing the manner in which to ensure that youth participation bears an influence on public policy.

Post-conflict Colombia: a unique opportunity to address the water crisis

Following the negotiation of a peace agreement aimed at halting the five-decade long armed conflict opposing the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a historic ceasefire was agreed on June 23rd 2016. Following the referendum held on October 2 2016, the accord was narrowly rejected by the Colombian citizenry, leading to the reopening of negotiations aimed at laying the foundations for sustainable peace. An amended accord was ratified by Congress with a large majority on November 30 2016 and its implementation is currently underway.

The document², which lays the foundations of the country's development plan for the next decades, conceptualizes "Integral Rural Reform" as an overarching framework fostering the conditions to achieve social justice on a national scale. The document lays out the Colombian government's commitment to implement rural development that is democratic, sustainable and respectful of human rights. The issues identified as requiring urgent action in post-conflict Colombia especially pertain to land-distribution and agricultural investment. Access to water and the management of wastewater are also featured prominently as dimensions integral to the achievement of decent living conditions for Colombian rural populations.

"Integral Rural Reform" is a much-awaited window of opportunity to prioritize urgent action in addressing Colombia's water crisis. Debate pertaining to the regulation and implementation of sound water management practices are particularly relevant in the context of post-conflict Colombia, considering the country's alarmingly rapid deterioration of water resources. The phenomenon has been commented upon by international research bodies: in 2000, a report published by the United Nations Environmental Programme ranked Colombia among the 9 States sharing 60% of the planet's freshwater resources; by 2015, Colombia's ranking plummeted to the 24th place. Extensive agriculture and farming, mining, metalworking, and touristic development all contribute to the rapid and steady deterioration of Colombian water resources, prompting the Colombian institute of hydrology, meteorology and environmental sciences (IDEAM) to warn that 90% of freshwater resources are compromised in quality, and that in the absence of State measures by 2025 approximately 69% of the Colombian citizenry will not have access to quality drinking water during drought periods³.

SieNi's strategy: Mobilizing children to realize the goal of water protection

In this context, SieNi developed a strategy aimed at producing Colombian environmental policy change through grassroots youth empowerment and multilevel international cooperation. The pilot project is set to start in the Colombian region of Boyacá in February 2017.

² Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera. Signed by Juan Manuel Santos Calderón (President of the Republic of Colombia) and Timoleón Jiménez (Commander of the central office of the FARC-EP), on 24 Nov. 2016.

³ Ministerio del Medio Ambiente, IDEAM (2014). Estudio nacional de agua.

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Led by their school teacher, “water teams” comprised of children aged 12-16 will establish a diagnosis of the quality of water in their hydrographic micro-basin, gathering evidence on the causes and consequences of local water contamination. In addition to their school-teacher, who will be trained by SieNi to guide them through the process, each water team will be mentored by a scientific water specialist based anywhere in the world who will meet with them once a month through digital media in order to monitor their progress and guarantee the reliability of their data. The water teams then upload their data onto the Platform for Regional Water Observatories, a publicly accessible online crowdsourcing tool designed for data compilation. Children will thus have contributed to gathering information which is urgently needed in order to inform policy making on the measures to be taken to protect water at the local, regional and national level.

Following one year of data collection, the water teams are expected to have gained a solid knowledge on the causes of water contamination of the hydrographic micro-basins serving their communities, and to be ready to formulate an action-plan for water protection that is adapted to their community’s resources and needs. The information collected by the young water teams will not only be stored on the virtual platform, but will also serve as the basis for analyses by civil society organizations established “water observatories”, which will ensure the long-term monitoring of water quality in the hydrographic micro-basins and promote actions to protect the resource. The water observatories are expected to gradually become both technically and financially independent from SieNi thanks to strategic partnerships with non-governmental actors. From its base in Lausanne, SieNi will support the political claims of the observatories through advocacy actions at the national and international level.

Children as agents of social change

While the lofty project of youth empowerment through participation is attractive, its implementation can be subject to critique. Organizations facilitating youth participatory projects perceived as falling short of serving as vehicles of real change are charged with facilitating tokenism. The challenge thus taken up by SieNi is to facilitate youth participation which impact extends beyond tokenistic gestures. Youth participation is, in fact, a transversal structural element cutting across SieNi’s entire intervention strategy, i.e. the teacher training workshops, the scientific mentoring, the Platform for Regional Water Observatories, and the water observatories. All of these structures serve to empower children by allowing them to investigate the water-related problems affecting their communities and devise solutions.

The purpose of youth empowerment in the framework of urgent humanitarian intervention demands some further explanation. In terms of relevance, humanitarian intervention programs are set to tackle specific issues deemed priority in terms of gravity or scale. The pertinence of involving youth in the setting of the humanitarian agenda cannot be overemphasized: firstly, young stakeholders affected by humanitarian issues possess a unique, deep understanding of the cultural, socio-political and economic dynamics which produce injustice and harm. As such, their input is crucial toward the elaboration of relevant action strategies that are mindful of local customs and institutions. In addition to guaranteeing the relevance of humanitarian intervention, the inclusion of youth as representatives of broader communities also serves to lend tremendous legitimacy to entities providing humanitarian intervention.

Thirdly, the involvement of youth in devising the aspects of urgent humanitarian intervention can be said to be in line with a democratic approach to the development of sustainable solutions to redress environmental harm. As minors, youth are consistently excluded from government, thus constituting one of the most disenfranchised segments of society. In extending the opportunity

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to youth to contribute to the production of knowledge and to policy-making, the democratic ideal put forth in the Colombian post-conflict plan for “Integral Rural Reform” may be truly realized.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Colombia ratified the UNCRC on September 2 1990. Therefore the national government has the obligation to respect the youth’s right to participate in all matters affecting the youth’s life, including efforts at environmental assessment and intervention. Furthermore, in ratifying the Convention, the Colombian State has committed itself to give the youth’s views “due weight”⁴, i.e. take the youth’s views into earnest consideration. Therefore, youth participation is not a privilege, but a right, and the Colombian government has a legal duty to lend an ear to the environmental concerns of its young constituents.

Communicating to decision-makers

The translation of youth participation into tangible social, economic or political reform is a conundrum with which child and youth human rights organizations have been struggling with for decades. How can we ensure that the policy proposals put forward by the youth are communicated to decision-makers, and are furthermore taken into earnest consideration by the political class?

As previously stated, SieNi and its partner organizations will provide the necessary logistical support to the young members of the water teams. The findings produced by the youth will be centralized on an online virtual platform and transferred to local Colombian entities entrusted with the mission of monitoring water quality and practices in Colombia, i.e. the water observatories. These entities will be in close collaboration with the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Through the creation of such institutions, the nature of SieNi’s action is transformed, going from an urgent, transnational instance of humanitarian intervention, to the establishment of a long-term, Colombian-led, innovative solution for water protection. The water observatories will be charged with providing scientific data to Colombian governmental bodies, with the view of informing the Colombian leadership on the proper means to implement water policy that is environmentally sound, fair and transparent. By basing its work on data collected by youth, the future water observatories will be able to inform government and civil society stakeholders about water policy, and thus be instrumental in the creation of a national strategy for water protection.

From an institutional perspective therefore, three separate entities are involved in the bottom-up translation of youth-devised policy suggestions to the decision-making spheres of government: the youth research groups facilitated by SieNi, the independent water observatories, and local and national governments. It is noteworthy that the intermediate entities – the water observatories – will act as a bridge in relaying the youth’s claims to government decision-makers, thus ensuring that the youth-led participatory research groups’ efforts are truly given the opportunity to shape public policy modification or creation.

The intervention plan devised by SieNi is based on an innovative design that promotes and fosters youth participation in environmental research and advocacy. In leading efforts to mitigate the Colombian water-crisis, young persons from heavily affected areas in Colombia may henceforth access the opportunity to relay their environmental grievances and demands – based

⁴ UNCRC Art.12: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”.

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on sound scientific evidence – to public policy makers, thus directly participating in a democratic process of natural resource management. It is the hope of SieNi that the project will develop so as to extend beyond its pilot phase (2017) and to regions beyond Boyacá in the future. SieNi is equally hopeful that through the creation of water observatories, civil society and governmental actors will intensify collaborative endeavors so as to develop democratic, inclusive and sustainable approaches to water management in post-conflict Colombia.

Biographies

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* **SieNi** (www.sieni.co) is a non-profit organization based in Lausanne, Switzerland, created in May 2016 under the impetus of the Colombian Swiss-based scientific diaspora. Its name is inspired by the wisdom of Colombian indigenous peoples: "Sie" is the goddess of water in Muisca mythology; "Ni" means water in Kogui. Our mission is to empower Colombian children in becoming agents of social and political change by leading water protection activities within their communities.

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