

Promoting social entrepreneurship through participatory arts and music with young people

Creating opportunities with
Afrocolombian and indigenous
youth during the COVID-19
pandemic in Colombia

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1. Background

This briefing draws on two interlinked projects that brought together **young people, researchers from Colombia and the United Kingdom, artists, educators and civil society organisations** to respond to priorities identified by young people in Quibdó, Colombia: tensions within and between neighbourhoods (barrios), violence and armed gangs, and visualising alternative futures. The research was funded through an AHRC GCRF [Changing the Story](#) Large Project Grant and a University of Edinburgh SFC GCRF Global Impact Accelerator Grant.

As part of the 'imagining alternative futures' theme of the project and in an effort to promote sustainability in a community that has been marginalised (due to structural exclusion based on socioeconomic background, colonialism and race, ethnicity, gender and location) we collectively agreed to reallocate part of the funding: It was utilised to support our Afrocolombian and indigenous young co-researchers to develop their innovative idea of a gastro-cultural social enterprise into a concrete business.

This briefing reflects on our learning experience of supporting the young people to set up a multi-strand social enterprise called '**4 Esquinas**' (the 4 Corners). The gastro-cultural initiative draws on traditional Chocoan cuisine and heritage (SDG 11) and aims to improve socio-economic conditions and reducing inequalities (SDG1, 8, 9, 10), gender equality (SDG 5) and early childhood education (SDG 4).

It provides an example of how arts- and music-based participatory methodologies can harness young people's creativity and innovation and support them to realise their dreams, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected settings where new mechanisms are required to provide alternative and resilient socio-economic strategies.



2. COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There is no agreed definition of social entrepreneurship, and the umbrella can include any activities aimed to create social change with a benefit to society. Martin and Osberg (2007) define three components of social entrepreneurship:

- 1) It identifies social injustice factors (e.g., exclusion) that are obstacles to beneficial social change.
- 2) It identifies an opportunity that tackles this injustice by developing a social project that challenges social, political and cultural monopolies, and
- 3) it establishes an equilibrium that liberates “trapped potential” and improves the circumstances of the affected communities (Martin and Osberg, 2007).

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people’s education, employment, mental health and disposable income, particularly for those who had already been disadvantaged due to complex inequalities and marginalisation (OECD, 2020). In 2020, an additional 144 million people globally lost their employment, as the pandemic exacerbated existing employment shortages (OIT, 2021).

In low- and middle-income countries like Colombia, the impact of the pandemic has been felt even more strongly and has aggravated existing socio-economic inequalities. The informal sector provides 50% of employment in Colombia (DANE, 2021). Before the pandemic in 2019, youth unemployment (of those aged 14 – 28) stood at 19.5%. In the first trimester of 2021, this rose to 23.9%, with some cities reaching over 30% (La República, 2021). This significantly impacts lower-income young people’s education, since they tend to rely on a stable income to subsidize their studies.

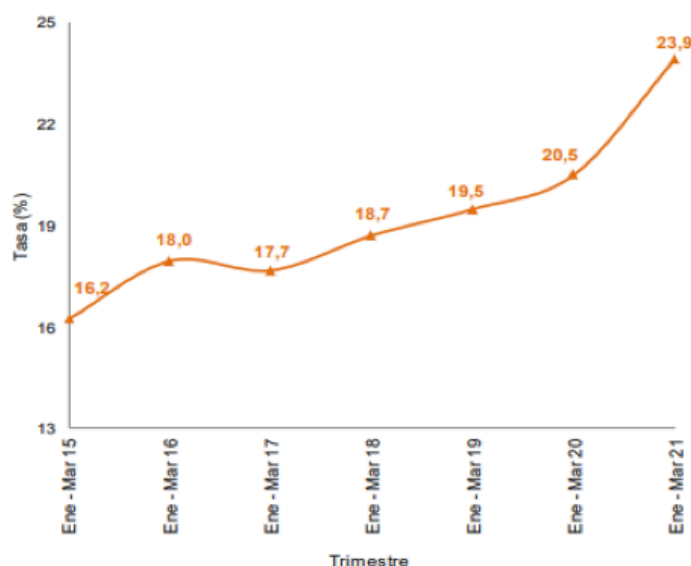


Figure 1: Youth unemployment in Colombia. Quarterly Technical Bulletin January-March 2021. National Integrated Household Survey (DANE, 2021a)

3. ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVES IN TIMES OF COVID-19

The pandemic has affected businesses globally, with specific impacts for youth entrepreneurship. While the overall economic impact of the pandemic has been detrimental, young people were at the forefront of much technological innovation driven by the digital shift (Selvan and Andrew, 2021). However, young people in marginalised areas have to overcome additional obstacles to make entrepreneurship work, such as lack of financial resources and buy-in from the local government (Musarurwa, 2021).

Colombia, despite posing multiple obstacles for entrepreneurship (e.g., difficult access to loans, high levels of bureaucracy) has been a dynamic country in terms of creating small- and medium-size enterprises. In 2020, Colombia had 2,540,953 Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs, in Spanish: MiPymes). They formed 90% of the country's enterprises, produced 30% of national GDP and contributed more than 65% of the national employment (El Espectador, 2018)

However, in uncertain and risky times such as the current pandemic, the vulnerability of these SMEs has increased, and negative impacts have not been shared equally. For instance, during the 2020 pandemic in Colombia, 509,370 small businesses disappeared, with more businesses led by women being affected than those led by men, since most of the former are in sectors such as tourism and gastronomy (La República, 2021a). Nevertheless, 51% of the SMEs created during 2020 (104,617), are led by women (Confecámaras, 2021).

Necessity is the driving force of economic entrepreneurship. During the pandemic, this was illustrated in the rise of innovative and technology-driven enterprises, providing digital solutions to overcome the crisis. This development has motivated the Colombian government to facilitate the success of entrepreneurs, including social entrepreneurs. On 30 November 2020, the National Government issued a new "National Entrepreneurship Policy" with the goal of generating conditions in the entrepreneurial ecosystem for the creation, sustainability and growth of small businesses that contribute to the generation of income, wealth and increases in productivity and business internationalization (DNP, 2020). However, in marginalised communities, certain obstacles persist – poor infrastructure, limited access to technology and weak presence and support (if any) from the state – placing additional pressure on finding solutions to economic scarcity.

4. CASE STUDY: AN ARTS- AND MUSIC-BASED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP PROJECT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN A CONFLICT-AFFECTED AND MARGINALISED CONTEXT

The context of Chocó region: historical marginalisation, mass protests and systemic violence

Chocó region, the location of this project, has the highest Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (37.6%) in Colombia (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2015, p. 528) The political and socioeconomic marginalisation of the central state, aggravated by geographic barriers and destructive administrative practices (i.e., corruption) that the city has historically experienced, is reflected in the lack of development in Quibdó (Calderón, 2021). In addition, the strong impact of the armed conflict in the region has aggravated the conditions of poverty and marginality. The presence of illegal armed groups, attracted mainly by profitable extractive activities and narco-trafficking and the absence of the state (Calderón, 2018; 2021), paved the road for the involvement of young people in the conflict. Humanitarian organisations have reported the ongoing voluntary and forced recruitment of young people to illegal armed groups, despite the peace agreement (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014; Verdadabierta, 2020; El Espectador, 2021). For many young people, this represents an immediate solution to overcome conditions of precarity and insecurity.

In Chocó, 24.34% of the population are young people aged 14 to 26 (DANE, 2021). In Quibdó, its capital, where our project took place, the unemployment of the young population reached 29.8% in the first trimester of 2021. The most affected sectors have been services related to arts, entertainment, and recreation (La República, 2021).

Despite these circumstances, the governmental response has been lacking and even oppressive. While many urban hospitals have collapsed and a great part of the population is facing economic struggles due to the pandemic, the National Government is reopening the economy in the face of high COVID-19 infection rates. It announced tax reform whilst having been accused of unjustifiably large expenses (in areas such as military investment (e.g., fighter planes) and political propaganda) which immediately triggered mass protests and demonstrations (El País, 2021). This has worsened public health and dramatically increased violence in urban areas of the country (BBC News, 2021). Young people have played a key role in these demonstrations against historical and structural civil rights violations and have been targeted by systematic brutality (i.e., assassinations, forced disappearances).

“Look, for me the project has been, let's say, a door to more knowledge and a door to liberation, what I mean by this, a door to give hope to other people, to children, to mothers who are heads of households, to people who have nothing, to people living on the street, to young people who are involved in a lot of violence, to young people who want to fulfill their dreams but see that their dreams are truncated. [...] We wanted to give everything of ourselves, thanks to this project, because thanks to it we learned many things and we are still learning.” (Young co-researcher)

Against this challenging background, as part of the ‘imagining alternative futures’ theme of our project and based on in-depth data collection with youth in Quibdó, we worked with a core group of five young co-researchers. They are Afrocolombian and indigenous young women and men from Quibdó who were interested to be involved in all stages of the project, shaping its direction and methodology and generating data with other young people in the area. The young co-researchers developed an innovative idea for a social enterprise business: ‘4 Esquinas’ (the 4 Corners).

“I think that one of the things that I learned that marked me a lot was that dreaming is good, it is very good, but realising those dreams is much better, right? How to make these project ideas transcend beyond, from dreaming and wanting to do it and put them into practice, realise them, is something that every day reverberates not only in the project idea that we are doing now but in everyday life for me” (Young co-researcher)



The 4 corners within the enterprise vision are named after deities in African diaspora religions:

1. Oshún:

a multifunctional micro-business restaurant which serves as the main economic engine of 4 Esquinas. Its purpose is to train and generate employment mainly for women entrepreneurs, housewives, victims of the conflict and to support the other corners financially.

2. Yemayá:

a community nursery where the women who work in Oshún and elsewhere can leave their children in a safe and professional place while they can generate income or pursue academic studies.

3. Baobab:

the 'cultural house' is a place where young people from Quibdó can come together to engage in cultural and artistic activities and events.

4. Amón:

is the final corner of 4 Esquinas, and it aims to bring homeless people / those living on the streets of Quibdó into the project by collaborating with other organisations.

Some of the project funds had been reserved to be spent as directed by the young people, and we collectively decided to use this budget for financing training on social enterprise business development with a local business consultancy group. Working with a team of business consultants, the young co-researchers developed their dream of a gastro-cultural social enterprise into a concrete business model and plan.

The business plan focused on the heart of 4 Esquinas, **Casa Gastro-Cultural Oshún**. Oshún is a deity within African diaspora religions, a goddess associated with water, purity, love and femininity. She is a symbol of feminine power. Oshún is a gastronomic business specialising in traditional Chocoan cuisine, which supports childcare and cultural facilities with its profits. The young co-researchers have reached out to local CSOs who are keen to be involved and support the social enterprise.

Following the young people's initial idea, Oshún was developed between January – June 2021. The research team met virtually 2-3 times per week with the young co-researchers, supporting them to realise Oshún through training, marketing, crowdfunding, business formalisation and practical activities (e.g., preparing food, menus etc.). In line with Martin and Osberg (2007), activities were geared towards both generating income for the young people themselves, as well as contributing positively to social and cultural aspects of their communities.

PROJECT PHASES

The social enterprise was developed in four phases: the Yincana, business training, establishment and marketing/dissemination.

1 A playful and participatory process was developed for the first digital engagement phase, namely the virtual adaptation of a traditional Yincana game, utilizing arts- and music-based participatory methodologies. The game was carried out through eight interconnected stations which invited the young co-researchers to engage with key questions with the ultimate goal of collectively defining our research problem and steps to address it. The Yincana enabled young people to identify their skills and abilities, dreams and training needs, and, ultimately, was used as a tool to develop their social enterprise idea.

2 The young co-researchers and wider team engaged in in-depth training with social enterprise consultants, resulting in a co-produced business model, market analysis and business plan. In addition, the co-researchers worked with the wider team on formalising the social enterprise into a registered business, and received training on motivation and networking skills.

3 The co-researchers took initiative in sourcing key equipment for the business (e.g. mobile kitchen, ingredients, audio-visual equipment for marketing). With the artists and musicians in our team, the co-researchers co-produced marketing and social media content. Outputs included training on design, recording, editing, and publishing; a graphic identity (e.g. logo, menu templates, fonts, info brochure); a social media presence (social media strategy, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp accounts); and a range of audio-visual content (e.g. cooking videos, jingles, music video, and short adverts produced by other cultural groups and artists in Quibdó). Arts and music were central to the branding and marketing of the social enterprise. In addition, young co-researchers explored partnerships with other local cultural NGOs and artists.

4 In June 2021, the young co-researchers launched the social media campaign with support of the wider team. At the time of writing, a crowdfunding page is ready to go live pending the legal formalization of the business and bank account. Casa Gastro-Cultural OSHUN is already operative as an informal business, as is typical for small gastronomic initiatives in Quibdó.

“We already used those tools that we learned in the process and they were essential. A seed was planted, “Oh I want to know more, I want to have more tools, I want to generate more things”. This morning I was talking to one of the [other co-researchers] and it was time for us to understand that this is something that is going to change our lives and change our opportunities and our possibilities and makes the project have a strong impact.” (Young co-researcher)

5. CONCLUSION: IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AT THE MARGINS THROUGH MUSIC AND ARTS

The pandemic has exacerbated complex inequalities shaped by conflict and structural exclusion and highlighted the fragility of such contexts. The lack of state support and available infrastructure, as well as technological barriers, enhance the need for creativity and innovation to overcome situations of precarity and poverty. Against such backgrounds, social entrepreneurs can provide a strong alternative to promote social change in marginalised contexts.

Promoting the creation of social enterprises based on young people's talents and skills has the potential to counteract the economic crisis resulting from historical marginalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic in cities such as Quibdó. The vision of 4 Esquinas, and in particular of the Casa Gastro-Cultural Oshún, has shown that stimulating a culture of entrepreneurship and providing relevant training, based on the genuine desire of young participants, can enable them to visualise and realise alternative futures in their lives. In the case of our project, music, arts and traditional cuisines served as key elements in this process.

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