

Capabilities and Conflict: An Examination of Colombia's *Educational Revolution* and its Role in Peacebuilding

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In loving memory of Sam Ling Gibson, who would never accept weak excuses for ignorance

Abstract

This article aims to examine whether the process of expansion of access to tertiary education in Colombia, labelled the *Educational Revolution* by the government, has addressed inequalities that contributed to the Colombian civil conflict and threaten its reconciliation today. Using the Capabilities Approach as a framework for analysis, and referring to a combination of empirical studies, official national and supranational data and theoretical literature for evidence, it will be argued the policy has caused a stratified system that constrains non-urban and lower socio-economic people's capabilities. Only through investment and expansion of public universities will inequalities be addressed.

Key words:

Higher Education H.E, Capabilities Approach, Colombia, Colombian Peace Process, Peacebuilding, Social Justice, Human Development.

In 2016 Colombia signed an historic peace accord ending a 52-year civil war. The conflict affected many members of the population, with 7.7 million people forcibly displaced, the largest number of internally displaced people in the world (Human Right Watch, 2017). Equal access to social services such as health and education were oft cited objectives of the rebel groups that formed at the inception of the conflict.

In order to address inequalities within access to education, the government enshrined the right to education in the Ley 30 of the new

constitution of 1992. In the year 2000, a policy of mass expansion of higher education through deregulation and creation of vocational colleges, labelled the *Educational Revolution*, sought to address some of these inequalities. This paper is an attempt to analyse the extent to which this policy has addressed inequality in access to higher education, based on a combination of a combination of empirical studies, official national and supranational data and theoretical literature, and using the capabilities approach as an analytical framework. It is argued that through deregulation and expansion of vocational study, a stratified higher education system has been created that perpetuates inequalities between socio-economic demographics and urban and non-urban populations, which could pose a threat to the ongoing reconciliation process.

The CA was coined by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and continues to be developed by theorists such as Nussbaum, Robeyns, Acemoglu and Robinson today. The CA perceives people as both the means and ends of development, arguing that development is ‘a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’ (Sen A. , 1999:3). The CA is concerned with people’s capabilities and functionings (Robeyns, 2017)

with the latter being what a person is able to achieve, and the former being a person’s agency to do so. Central to the CA is the idea of agency freedom; the autonomy to define one’s own functionings, and how lack of agency can become a constraint in this endeavour (Ibid). Hence, for CA theorists, access to quality higher education is key, due to its purpose of enabling people to achieve functionings, and providing agency to realise them.

Inequality in Access to Education and Civil Conflict

In studies which have examined whether and how a lack of educational opportunities leads to civil conflict, two major causes have consistently been identified. First, is the concept of education providing an opportunity cost to recruitment to the army or paramilitary forces. Where there are educational opportunities present, joining a militarized group and participating in conflict presents far higher risk than studying in the safety of an educational institution. Reward is also far greater in a university, where one can have their skills and knowledge enriched enabling them to earn higher wages in the knowledge economy in the future, compared to the shorter term and uncertain rewards of recruitment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). This concept has been supported by Paul Collier’s finding that 47 out of 73 civil conflicts between 1965 and 1999 were in countries with low enrolment in education, leading him to conclude lack of educational opportunities post 16 is a significant risk factor for civil conflict (2006). An empirical quantitative analysis of 120 countries similarly found that those with large populations of young males with scant educational opportunities are at a higher risk of civil conflict (Barakat & Urdal, 2009).

Adjacent to the opportunity cost evidence is the concept of grievance as a common cause of civil conflict. Gurr (1970), in his classic book *Why Men Rebel*, termed the phrase relative deprivation, which is the discrepancy between what people feel they should have access to, based on observations of other groups in society, and what they have access to in reality. He concluded that the greater this discrepancy, the greater the potential for collective violence. The grievance theory has been examined more recently by Thyne (2006), who found that countries that invested in education were more likely to be perceived as sensitive to the needs of the population, and showed lower incidence of civil conflict. The grievance theory also finds support within the capability approach. For capability theorists, education is a capability multiplier due to its potential for increasing one's agency to convert opportunities into functionings (Sen, 1999). Deprivation of this capability for one section of the population therefore leads to asymmetries which can feed a sense of political alienation that can lead to war (Sen, 2002; Dupuy, 2008)

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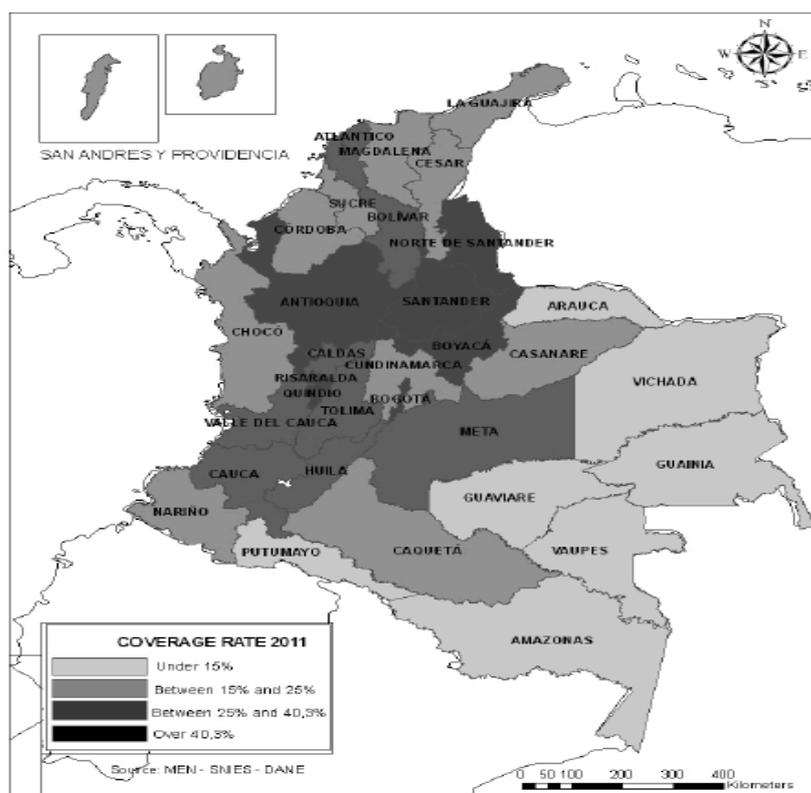
In Colombia's civil conflict, both feelings of grievance perpetuated between generations, and lack of educational access not providing a viable alternative to recruitment in rural areas were factors that contributed to the war. In the case of the latter, many non-urban areas had little or no tertiary education options until the *Educational Revolution* promoted the expansion of vocational study to these areas in 2002 (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014). Non-urban and agricultural regions were also the site of much of the recruitment into the FARC and paramilitary forces, where disparity in educational access relative to major cities was and remains a risk factor for internal conflict (OECD, 2018). Evidence that lack of education was the cause of one such grievance can be seen in the prominence of education in the declarations of newly formed left wing paramilitary groups. Indeed, when the FARC declared its first independent state the Southern Bloc, in 1964 it pledged to provide education and healthcare to the communities who had lacked it previously (Martin, 2011). Similarly, the ELN was formed by intellectuals from public universities who sought to revolutionize the social, economic and political power structures that perpetuated poverty, citing education as a key pillar of the status quo. Education was seen as a right that had been deprived of non-urban populations, and the ELN and liberation theologians sought to reclaim it in order to address inequality (Lopera, 2006). Inequality in access to social services such as education was therefore a cause of the formation of rebel groups at the inception of the conflict. Likewise, the persistence of inequalities of access between socio-economic groups and urban and rural areas remains a threat in the current reconciliation process started by the peace accord of 2016 (Idler, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Education in Colombia

There is still a large disparity between secondary school diploma achievement and university enrolment between the larger cities, and regional areas that were often sites of the conflict and are still recovering from the resultant after effects (OECD, 2018). Despite regional inequalities, overall enrolment in secondary school rose by 12.9%, between 2002-2010 (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014), which can be attributed to widespread government interventions to enrol children from the lowest socio-economic strata in secondary school, such as the use of school voucher programmes (McLeod & Urquiola, 2014) as part of the *Educational Revolution*. Naturally, an increase in secondary school enrolment has led to increased demand for post-secondary education, and caused a 6.9% increase in enrolment over the same period (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014).

Colombian post-secondary education is increasingly diverse with a wide range of courses available across the public and private sector. However, access to all tertiary education is highly divided between regions (fig.1). This article will focus on the areas of public universities, private universities and public vocational institutions, which make up 13.8%, 47.6% and 32.7% of the population enrolled in tertiary education respectively (Ministerio de Educacion de Colombia, 2014).

Figure 3.2 Gross tertiary enrolment rate by department, 2011



Source: MEN, SNIES.

(OECD, 2012)

1.3 Colombian Public Universities

Admittance to public universities in Colombia requires an institutional entrance exam, separate to the secondary school completion exam ICFES. Fees are means tested, although even those from the highest socio-economic strata pay a fraction of what they would in the private sector. Competition is fierce, as shown by the fact that only 10% of applicants received a place in 2016 (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2016). Such competition is understandable, given that public universities consistently rank equally or higher than their elite private counterparts in world rankings, and degrees from many public universities are highly valued in the job market. Furthermore they number far less than private institutions and are concentrated in large urban areas such as Bogota, Medellin and Barranquilla.

With increased demand for university places, public university provision has come under recent scrutiny. Students and lecturers protested in 2018 over funding deficits and attempts to repeal the *Ley 30*, which was an article in the new constitution of 1992 that pledged to provide higher education to all those who showed the required abilities (Ministerio de Educacion, 1992).

1.4 Private Universities in Colombia

The expansion of private universities since the year 2000 has been attributed to supply side factors within increasingly neoliberal government policy, such as deregulation of requisites to found a university (Páez and Teelken, 2016), and demand side factors, such as creation of a private student loan system that has enabled many middle class students to attend university (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014). Private universities mostly do not have entrance exams and the fees vary hugely between a few elite institutions and many mid-price range ones.

1.5 Vocational Institutions in Colombia

Organisations such as the *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (SENA)¹ are post-secondary institutions that offer vocational courses focused on the service sector (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014). SENA has been the focus of much public investment since the year 2000 as part of the *Educational Revolution*, particularly in regional areas, where educational opportunities were seen as most necessary (Velez & Guzman, 2014). Between 2002 and 2010, SENA enrolment saw a sharp increase of 241%, with many students being the first of

¹ National Service of Learning

their family to attend university and enrolment being highest among the lower and middle socio-economic strata (Jacinto & Garcia de Fanelli, 2014).

The Educational Revolution

As seen in the previous sections, the self-proclaimed *Educational Revolution*, was an attempt by the Colombian government to increase the number of people enrolled in tertiary education, with expansion policies starting around the turn of the century and continuing today. The policy's stated aims were to increase equality in order to address threats to peace, and to improve the competitiveness of the country through having more skilled workers (Ministerio de Educacion, 2013). The strategy for expansion was largely two pronged: Deregulation of the private sector in order to increase choice and competition and make university education for those who had previously been unable to afford it, and expansion of the state funded vocational institution of SENA, particularly in rural areas.

Official statistics report a staggering achievement in providing access to tertiary education, with an overall rise of 95.4% in students enrolled in some kind of higher education between 2002-2012 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013). The largest public increase was in technical and vocational study, attributed to the expansion of state organisations such as SENA (*National Service of Learning*), (Velez & Guzman, 2014). Nevertheless, 47.6% of all tertiary level students still enrol in universities in the private sector (Paez & Teelken, 2016). The following sections will examine the extent to which the *Educational Revolution* has addressed inequality of access to education using the capabilities approach as an analytical framework. The policy of deregulation of the private sector and expansion of SENA vocational colleges due to being the focus of the Colombian government's expansion strategy.

Capabilities Framework

The CA was coined by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and continues to be developed by theorists such as Nussbaum, Robeyns, Acemoglu & Robinson today. The CA perceives people as both the means and ends of development, arguing that development is 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy' (Sen, 1999:3). The CA is concerned with people's capabilities and functionings (Robeyns, 2017), with the latter being what a person is able to achieve, and the former being a person's agency to do so. Central to the CA is the idea of agency freedom; the autonomy to define one's own functionings, and how lack of agency can become a constraint in this endeavour (Ibid).

Education is often called a *capability multiplier* within the CA, owing to its power as an opportunity that expands human freedoms (Walker, 2006). For Sen, education's role in this function is threefold: First, it is an intrinsic good as it allows people to participate in the joy of learning and to understand the world around them. Second, it has instrumental value as it enables people to do things they value, such as expanding one's options in life or being able to engage politically. Finally, it has a distributive role within society through promoting equality (Sen, 1999). Sen's description of the function of education will be used as criteria for the analysis of the *Educational Revolution*, because it reflects two of the government's own stated purposes in the formulation of the policy: to increase equality in order to address threats to peace (distributive); to improve the competitiveness of the country through having more skilled workers (instrumental) (Ministerio de Educacion, 2013).

The Capability approach has been chosen as an analytical framework because it is concerned with the extent to which opportunities are distributed with equity across a society. Indeed, in its manifestation as a numerical index 'the Human Development Index' (HDI), the distributive equality of opportunities across demographics and regions is factored into the calculation. Given the aforementioned causal relationship of unequal distribution of opportunities in Colombia and conflict, it makes an apt framework for this analysis. CA theorists such as Nussbaum see a strong link between equality of educational access and peace-building, arguing it provides critical reasoning to examine one's own culture and society, increases solidarity and concern for those around them, and provides narrative imagination to empathise with others: all of which undoubtedly contribute to creating a more peaceful, egalitarian and tolerant society (2011). Finally, the CA sees tertiary education institutions as having the ability to provide capabilities or constraints to citizens, depending on the equality of access they can offer across a whole population. Which role higher education fulfills thus depends on how inclusive they are, and the extent to which this access is successful in enhancing capabilities. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) note that inclusive institutions, such as universities, reinforce the *social contract* between state and citizen, which fosters the trust that is the basis of law and order and political participation, all of which contribute to an effective state. In contrast, states with exclusive institutions, ones which restrict access to a select few, have been shown to be more prone to political upheaval, greater inequality and more prone to civil conflict, both today and throughout the post-industrial period.

Capabilities and the Private Sector

The *Educational Revolution* within the private sector involved supply side changes in the form of deregulation of the H.E sector, allowing new universities to be formed and smaller technical colleges granted university status. The government's role was to be regulator of standards only, with universities acting

as autonomous entities. Simultaneously, demand side changes were enacted, including the expansion of the loan system ICETEX, which saw an increase from 65,218 loans given in 2002, to 259,269 in 2010. These strategies resulted in a 20% increase in enrolment in private universities across the 8 year period 2002-2010, mostly among the lower and middle classes (Ministerio de Educacion 2013).

Given that most people in Colombia cannot afford private H.E, and the fact that public university spaces are scarce, mid-price range universities enabled by deregulation have become increasingly popular with the lower and middle classes. (World Bank, 2014). Paez and Teelken (2016) aimed to examine the effectiveness of newly formed mid-price range Colombian universities by interviewing 700 current students and graduates. They found that the majority of undergraduate students perceived the quality of their education as poor and alumni described the degree as lacking in skills necessary for the job market. They conclude that due to deregulation of the Colombian higher education sector, much of mid-price private university education is lacking in quality and does not provide sufficient skills for the job market (Ibid). This view is echoed by the OECD, who report that the skills held by Colombian workers do not match those necessary for its modernizing economy, and suggests reform and greater monitoring of standards in H.E (2017).

The expansion of the private sector as part of the *Educational Revolution* has led to 20% more students attending university. Under Sen's definition of the role of education in the CA, the policy has provided an intrinsic benefit of greater numbers who are able to experience the joy of learning. However, the extent to which the policy has provided instrumental and/or distributive benefits is less clear in the light of evidence. When graduates from mid-price range private universities were interviewed 88% were employed, which suggests that their degree had helped them to find employment. However, an alarming 33% reported being employed in a position that required no university degree, calling into question the extent to which mid-price range private universities had multiplied their instrumental capabilities (Paez and Teelken, 2016). It also calls into question the distributive benefit of these institutions, given that only 4% of respondents claimed they had a 'well paid job' and 63% said their salary was lower than expected (Ibid). The perceived lack of social mobility granted by respondents' degrees suggests they may not have increased distributive capability nor addressed the wider issue of social inequality. Coupled with the large debts now incurred by the graduates due to use of the ICETEX scheme, it could be argued there has been a perverse effect on social inequality at the household income level.

Capabilities and the Vocational Sector

Jacinto and Garcia (2014) conducted a study on the effect the expansion of vocational education through SENA has had on democratizing access to education and of increasing access to quality employment. By synthesising statistical data with qualitative interviews they found that there was often a discrepancy between students' subjective satisfaction and the reality evident in the quantitative data. For instance, subjective satisfaction of SENA graduates was extremely high, however theirs and another quantitative study by Medina and Nunez (2006) suggest that graduation from SENA does little to impact lifetime earnings. These data therefore call into question whether SENA provides greater distribution of capabilities, as they seem to show minimal impact on social mobility through increasing earning potential. Jacinto and Garcia attribute the incongruity between low earning potential and high student satisfaction to the fact that SENAs opened where there had previously been no tertiary education, and many SENA graduates are the first in their family to attend higher education (2014). This could also be seen as an example of adaptation of agency goals based on what has come before, which are common when assessing one's own capabilities within education (Burchardt, 2009). In other words, if nobody in one's family or social network has attended higher education, one is more likely to assess any form of higher education as multiplying capabilities. Regarding SENA's ability to provide instrumental benefit, Jacinto and Garcia argue that vocational study has enabled a new generation of people to acquire skills in a way they previously could not (2014). However, they point out that these new instrumental capabilities are relative to what went before, and that university graduates appear to be favoured in the job market, suggesting degrees from SENA may not improve graduates' opportunities to get high quality work.

CA Measurements

The capabilities that make up human wellbeing and the potential to even measure them has long been debated within the CA. Initially Sen refused to define what factors constitute human wellbeing, arguing that they are subjective and thus defined by the individual. Despite his earlier resistance to measuring capabilities, Sen worked with the UN to formulate the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990, which sought to measure opportunities and choice for people, by examining a range of economic and social factors including access to higher education (United Nation Development Programme, 2019). While this index has been criticised for relying on objective educational data such as enrolment and graduation which ignores intangible inequalities within education (Unterhalter, 2017), it is nevertheless an insightful attempt at evaluating the capabilities a nation gives its citizens. Between 1990 and 2017, including the *Educational Revolution* in higher education access from 2000 onwards, Colombia's HDI increased by 26.2%. However, when inequality in the distribution of human development across the population is factored in, the score is diminished to 2.6% over the same period (UNDP, 2018). This seems

to concur with the empirical evidence mentioned in the previous sections (Paez and Teelken, 2016; Medina and Nunez, 2006; Jacinto and Garcia, 2014) which found that both deregulation of the private sector and increase in coverage of vocational courses have contributed little to the expansion of human capabilities in Colombia.

Implications for Social Inequality and Peacebuilding

As has been shown, the *Educational Revolution's* expansion strategies have meant those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and non-urban areas are constrained to vocational institutes or low quality private universities, neither of which significantly expand the capabilities of their students in an instrumental or distributive sense. This inequality can be seen as a stratified system in which degrees from good quality private universities, and the jobs that result from them, are ringfenced for those from higher socio-economic strata in urban areas. Such a policy betrays a sufficientarian approach within the *Educational Revolution*, in which there is a minimum level of education the state is duty-bound to provide, but beyond which inequality in distributive or instrumental capability is acceptable (Brighouse & Swift, 2006). If the state seems to give less regard to the education of some sections of society, then what effect will this have on the ongoing fragile reconciliation period? Peacebuilding is the support of the transformation from conflict to post-conflict over many generations, making education a huge part of whether that process impacts positively or negatively (Novelli, 2011). The equality with which education is provided can then either foster constructive interactions and relationship building or promote distrust and entrench intolerance. (Shah & Lopes, 2015). In Colombia, the student protests against the withdrawal of publicly funded university education in 2011 and 2018 have shown there is a dissatisfaction with the government's policy and its inherent unequal distribution of opportunity. Education is therefore viewed as a site of division and perpetuation of inequality rather than a multiplier of capabilities with redistributive impact in Colombia.

The *Educational Revolution* can be praised for bringing the intrinsic joy of education to many who in previous generations would not have had access to it, due to inability to afford the costs or lack of institutions in their geographical location. However, as has been shown deregulation with low levels of monitoring has led to the proliferation of low quality mid price range institutions lack in their provision of instrumental capabilities to graduates when compared to other universities in the country. The expansion of SENA has also provided new forms of education to many, but provides less social mobility than degrees from a university. Hence, the policy has had only a minor impact on redistribution of opportunities, resulting in social inequality in this sector persisting. In order to address this inequality and reduce the risk that it again becomes a contributor to the reignition of war, the government should not pursue a deregulatory approach that assumes the market will address

inequalities. Rather, it needs to invest in public provision in order to address social inequality directly from the supply side and make the growth of the economy in this post-conflict period more inclusive (OECD, 2017).

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