

ALTERNATIVE REPORT

TO THE UNITED NATIONS COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD
A call to improve the situation of children and adolescents' rights
2015 – 2021



PARTICIPATION of girls, boys and adolescents in Colombia

Bogotá, Colombia | December 2023


Alianza
por la niñez colombiana

 **COALICO**

**ALTERNATIVE REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF
THE CHILD
(2015 – 2021)**

THEMATIC REPORT
Participation on child and adolescent in Colombia

This document is an integral part of the primary report titled “A call to improve the situation children and adolescents' rights”, presented to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the framework of the Civil Society Organisations' Alternative Report

Colombian Children's Alliance
Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Young People in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (COALICO)

Colombia - December, 2023

©Participation on child and adolescent in Colombia.
Thematic report produced as a result of joint work between the Colombian Children's Alliance and COALICO.

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Coalition Against the Involvement of Children and Young People in the Armed Conflict in Colombia (COALICO):

Centro de Desarrollo Psicosocial - Taller de Vida, Asociación Cristiana Menonita para Justicia, Paz y Acción Noviolenta (Justapaz), Benposta Nación de Muchach@s Colombia, Corporación Vínculos, Defensa de Niñas y Niños Internacional (DNI Colombia), Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados Colombia (JRS/COL).

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This publication has been co-financed by: the European Union; the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives operated by the Canadian Embassy; DKA Austria; the IBCR Voluntary Cooperation Program - "2020-2027 Program for Strengthening the Rights of Children and Adolescents"; and, the Swiss Embassy in Colombia - Humanitarian Aid and Development (SDC). Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Alliance and COALICO and do not reflect the views of its donors.

The translation of this document was funded by the International Bureau for Children's Rights (IBCR) in collaboration with the Government of Canada.

Editorial desing:

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Participation of
girls, boys and
adolescents in
COLOMBIA



I. CONTEXT OF THE SITUATION

In its 54 articles, the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children and adolescents as subjects of rights. It emphasizes the importance of their right to freely express their opinions, especially in matters that affect them (Articles 12 and 13)¹. In addition, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure² has been established, which facilitates communications (and subsequent procedures) for children and adolescents who have been victims of a violation of their rights by the State. The Colombian State has received recommendations to adopt this protocol on a number of occasions.

Even though spaces have been designed to ensure the participation of children and adolescents in Colombia, their implementation has been incipient. There is low participation in the spaces that do exist, as well as difficulties with monitoring and measuring this population's participation in different scenarios³. As a result, children and adolescents feel that their voices are not taken into account: *“Because I’m young I don’t like to say what I think, I don’t like it. I like to play and imagine”*.⁴

Following the passing of Decree 936 of 2013⁵ in Colombia, Roundtables for Child and Adolescent Participation were promoted, which were led by Childhood, Adolescence and Family Roundtables in each department and municipality in the country. Currently there are no active departmental

roundtables, while 706 municipal roundtables have been established⁶. There is no clarity regarding their composition, real influence on decision-making bodies, continuity, participation, or representativeness across the age range of children and adolescents.

Despite the different legislative frameworks that promote and facilitate participation and reporting of violations of children and adolescents' rights, there are significant limitations on this participation caused by geographical conditions, differences between populations and security issues that are the result of the presence of illegal armed groups. Political and social dynamics in some territories, especially those that are affected by the armed conflict, evidence how children are victims of multiple forms of violence. Social leaders, families and community members face significant difficulties when trying to report these acts of violence to the relevant authorities.

In the process of preparing this Alternate Report titled **“A Call to Improve the Situation of the Rights of Children and Adolescents”**, the civil society organizations that authored this document engaged in dialogue with children and adolescents to obtain their perceptions regarding the current level of fulfillment of their rights. This information was used to prepare a comprehensive document that identifies the main problems they currently face.

¹ Accessed at: [Convention on the Rights of the Child UNICEF.pdf](#).

² Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure, accessed at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/source/signature/2012/CTC_4-11d.pdf.

³ National Childhood and Adolescence Policy, 2018-2030, accessed at: https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/politica_nacional_de_infancia_y_adolescencia_2018_-_2030.pdf.

⁴ One girl's response to the question: “What do you enjoy most about being a child or adolescent and what do you dislike?”. Online survey conducted with more than 250 children and adolescents during 2021.

⁵ Accessed at: <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=53059>.

⁶ Information from the National Family Welfare System, November 2023.

The target population was consulted using focus group and interview methodologies that were specifically designed for early childhood, children and adolescents. A total of 952 children and adolescents participated in these exercises. Workshops were held with 215 children aged between 3 and 6 years who attend child development centers, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten groups in the departments of Norte de Santander and Antioquia. A total of 38 focus groups were held in 11 departments of the country⁷ as part of this process, which involved the participation of 487 children and adolescents aged between 7 and 17 years of age. This methodology involved establishing two simultaneous discussion spaces for participants. One was for children aged between 7 and 11 (223 children) and another for adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 (264 adolescents). In terms of gender, 54% of participants were girls and female adolescents while 46% were boys and male adolescents. A survey was designed to collect respondents' perceptions about the level of enjoyment of their rights, which was available to fill out online for a period of one year (between 2021 and 2022). This tool collected the voices of more than 250 children and adolescents between 8 and 17 years of age (70% female) living in 17 departments of Colombia⁸. Through sharing their perspectives and experiences, these children and adolescents told us about the level of access they enjoy to their rights and even went as far as proposing new rights⁹.

It is important to note that existing participation spaces for this population in Colombia are exclusively focused on children and adolescents, ignoring the perceptions and experiences of early childhood regarding the rights violations they face and the perceptions they have of the spaces they inhabit, especially their homes and schools. For this reason, it was very important to design a participatory methodology for early childhood that allowed them to express themselves using narrative and visual-based methodologies and contribute to this report.

Perceptions of children and adolescents

The exercise carried out with the early childhood respondents identified that, in most cases, these children live with both their nuclear families and extended families. This is due to their lack of economic stability, often because their parents are very young (in some cases they are still in school). The homes they live in are usually owned by their grandparents.

“My house is big, it has 3 floors, it’s in nature and it has cars.”

Girl, Norte de Santander

The participating children identified the homes they live in and their level of access to basic services (electricity, water, gas). They also recognized the different forms of travel they use to reach their child development centers/preschools. In some cases, it was possible to identify that some families do not live near these centers/preschools and the children must travel on the back of motorcycles or go on long walks in the company of their grandparents in order to arrive each morning. The children identified situations in which they have access to health services. The complementary survey identified a lack of specialized professionals in these zones to provide medical care for children. It was also possible to identify the community spaces that these children frequent in their daily lives, as well as the very few recreational and play spaces they can access. It was recognized that most of the children and adolescents who responded to these surveys are aware of the importance of the environment and have learnt about conservation with a specific focus on recycling.

“I get happy when people make jokes, when someone buys me snacks and when I play with my mom.”

Niña, Norte de Santander

⁷ Antioquia, Atlántico, Cundinamarca, Bolívar, Chocó, Córdoba, La Guajira, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Santander y Valle del Cauca.

⁸ Amazonas, Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Cauca, Córdoba, Cundinamarca, Huila, Magdalena, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Quindío, Santander, Tolima y Valle del Cauca.

⁹ Through open-ended questions, the children shared their reflections on possible rights that they would invent for themselves. For example, the right to love, the right to emotional attention and the right to freedom of learning. *“The right to freedom of learning, because in many cases if my father doesn’t like what I learn, I can’t study it. If my mother doesn’t like the thing I want to study, then she doesn’t let me do it.”* *“The right to decide which subjects I study, because we aren’t all good at the same subjects”.*

Respondents from the 7- to 11-year-old age group highlighted situations where they were affected by the armed conflict and criminal groups, difficult economic situations, single-parent households headed by women who don't have support networks, micro-trafficking, negligence in their care that results in mistreatment and sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies, a significant lack of the presence of the Colombian State and a limited supply of social services. These children recognized the existence of the following rights in their daily lives: access to housing, food, education, play, having a family and health services. As for the guarantors of these rights, the children mentioned their families, the State, security forces (police, army), communities, teachers and public institutions (health and social services such as ICBF¹⁰).

Adolescent respondents discussed their connection with the social and political world, how they have been impacted by the armed conflict, situations involving poverty and limited access to basic services where they live with their families. This group (12 to 17 years old) identified the following dynamics that affect them: the armed conflict, especially the use and recruitment of adolescents; common crime; the lack of an institutional presence; high population mobility; displacement caused by economic vulnerability and public order situations; micro-trafficking; begging; and others. When mentioning the enjoyment of their rights, adolescents referred to sports and recreational activities, youth participation spaces and activities and programs implemented by civil society organizations. They generally named schools as the institutions that contribute most to the enjoyment of their rights.



¹⁰ ICBF: Colombian Family Welfare Institute.



II. SITUATIONS OF SPECIAL CONCERN

The State has promoted spaces for the participation of children and adolescents that are generally framed in Decree 936 of 2013 and the national Child and Adolescent Policy 2018 – 2030. This document highlights the need “... to raise awareness and create conditions for children and adolescents so that they can act as agents of change in social, political, economic, environmental and cultural areas. This includes communication strategies and actions that promote their meaningful participation in all social, cultural, political and family scenarios, among others”.

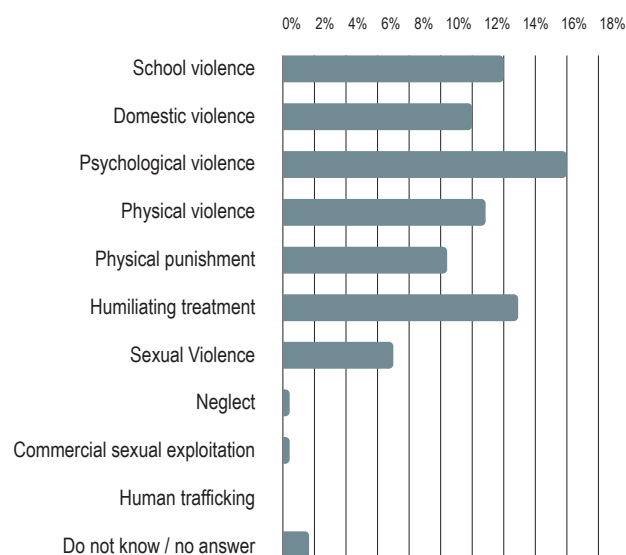
However, implementing these spaces still does not facilitate the permanent, active and influential involvement of children in decision-making. As part of the desire to achieve this participation, children are constantly invited to spaces where, with support from adult staff in the best of cases, they are consulted about situations that concern them. However, there is no subsequent action that involves follow-up and feedback. In general, the participation of children and adolescents is still located in the first rungs of Roger Hart’s participation ladder. These scenarios are limited to spaces involving manipulation, decoration and what Hart calls symbolic participation¹¹. Children in these cases are invited to participate in spaces that are not designed for this population, meaning that they become spectators without a voice or a vote in these processes.

When children and adolescents were asked whether adults in Colombia listen to children’s opinions, 68% responded that they were listened to either occasionally or never, which evidences a lack of recognition and validation of their voices.

As a result of the situation described above, adolescents have sought access to informal participation spaces through youth networks supported by grassroots and civil society organizations that work with this population. These spaces allow children to express their perceptions of the world and contribute to the design and implementation of initiatives that, based on their perspectives, respond to problems that affect access to their rights.

As part of the consultations carried out to prepare this document, children and adolescents identified the different problems that affect the enjoyment of their rights. It is notable that most respondents stated that they have been victims of multiple forms of violence, including psychological violence, mistreatment, humiliating treatment, physical violence and domestic violence.

Have you been a victim of some type of violence?



Data source: Electronic survey collection instrument, made by: Colombian Children’s Alliance and COALICO, 2022.

¹¹ Roger, A. Hart, Children’s participation: from symbolic participation to authentic participation. Accessed at: <https://issuu.com/lizettvega/docs/la-participacion-de-los-ninos.docx>.

96% of child and adolescent respondents stated that they had felt discriminated against, rejected or attacked because of their age.

Children and adolescents' perceptions of insecurity in the territories where they live were notable. They mentioned the consumption and sale of psychoactive substances, fights, shootings, adults' indifference regarding their mistreatment and shouting. When asked about the rights that are least respected, they cited the rights to life, free expression, equality, freedom from discrimination and protection against any abuse and mistreatment.

The children and adolescents who participated in the survey identified violations of their rights, particularly their rights to education, health, play, food and protection. They said they were affected by the lack of available spaces for recreation and leisure. Due to the economic situation faced by their families, some children do not enjoy a sufficient nutritional intake while others engage in child labor to generate extra income for their families. Many respondents stated that they don't live near any health facilities, meaning that access to medical care is problematic. Some children face difficulties with attending school because they live far away from where they study, or they can't pay for transport to get there. Others mentioned difficulties with accessing the internet in their territories.

When asked about the situation for adolescents in Colombia, this population referred to situations involving stress, anguish, depression, fear, mistreatment, abuse, violence, lack of access to education, lack of freedom of movement, insufficient food intake and not having their voices heard. Adolescents stated that they experience violations of their rights and are victims of mistreatment, sexual abuse, child labor, homelessness, abandonment and discrimination and do not have access to public services, education and cultural and recreational spaces, among others.

The narratives and drawings shared by children from the early childhood population identified a lack of community spaces for their enjoyment and recreation. This affects their physical development and limits access to their right to play. Parks and other community spaces are generally used by adults and there are no specific spaces where early childhood can play. Due to this situation, children are exposed to screens such as phones, tablets and TV from an early age, increasing the risks associated with this technology. This in turn has an impact on their socialization processes, which are essential for the development of life skills and competencies.

“Sometimes my mom lends me her cell phone and tablet.”

Boy, Norte de Santander

The lack of qualified health professionals to provide medical care for this population is concerning, as this situation increases risks for children and adolescents' lives and health that include deaths due to preventable causes, health complications, etc. As a direct consequence of public order situations and families' economic conditions, many children stop attending child development centers and often permanently remain outside the formal educational system. The complementary interviews conducted to prepare this report identified that some children are victims of domestic violence and received psychosocial support from their local Child Development Center.



III. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section includes additional recommendations to those presented in the report titled “*A call to improve the situation of children and adolescents’ rights*” that was presented to the Committee on the Rights of the Child as part of the Alternate Report prepared by Civil Society Organizations.

a. Through **meaningful participation**¹², involve children and adolescents in the decision-making processes that concern them. This should include spaces for free expression within family, educational and community settings, while also ensuring their participation in public policy design and social oversight mechanisms.

b. Strengthen the principle of progressive autonomy and participation (Articles 3, 5, 12, 14, 27 of the CRC), which is embodied in children’s right to be heard and have their opinions duly taken into account (Article 12, CRC). This principle is a practical guideline for making progress with guaranteeing children and adolescents’ right to participation. Administrative measures should take into account children and adolescents’ ages and define relevant times, spaces, locations and methodologies to facilitate participation for this population.

c. Immediately comply with the third area of action contained in the National Policy for Children and Adolescents, which is related to participation, mobility and citizenship. The State is asked to

allocate 1) financial, 2) technical and 3) human resources to ensure the implementation of this policy in the territory¹³.

d. Adopt the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure** in order to guarantee free expression for children and adolescents and establish mechanisms for submitting individual reports of specific violations of their rights

e. In the framework of the National Family Welfare System (SNBF), strengthen the role of the National Roundtable for Children’s Participation with all entities and generate a quantitative and qualitative follow-up mechanism for municipal and departmental child and adolescent participation roundtables.

f. Strengthen spaces that promote the creation of participatory experiences for children and adolescents. During the consultations with this population as part of preparing the current report, children and adolescents stated that participation spaces designed for them should be attractive. They also requested changes to the conventional structures of meetings and the way decisions are made to facilitate their interest and meaningful participation.

¹² Meaningful participation: A concept that refers to the recognition of children and adolescents as active rights holders, citizens and actors in territorial development, while also acknowledging their right to participation in decision-making in policy areas that affect them. These include early childhood care institutions, schools, families, communities, and public management. Their participation in public management requires the involvement of this population across the entire public policy cycle: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. ICBF, accessed at: https://www.icbf.gov.co/system/files/guia_5_participacion_de_ninos_nina_y_adolescentes_en_la_gestion_publica.pdf.

¹³ Laws 1804 of 2016, 2328 of 2023 and 1195 of 2008.



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