



## Lessons learned from amplifying youth voices for inclusive democracies by the Power of Dialogue

This case study on Youth Participation in Colombia provides an in-depth view and complementary approach to the work mentioned in 'The Voice of Youth at the Table.' Colombia, as one of the partner countries of The Power of Dialogue Consortium, understands that its work for promoting inclusive democracies must consider the efforts made by the youth population to become recognized and legitimate actors in the political system.

By defining the problem via its normative scope, it offers a first sound approach to the unique reality of the actor, in relation to the institutional dispositions that recover the imaginary of being young in Colombia. Then, some barriers to political participation are identified, thus making the eruption of disruptive repertoires of collective political participation more comprehensible. Furthermore, NIMD's Colombia approach to the promotion and fostering of inclusive democracy entails a depiction of both of its dimensions and a brief detour through the scopes that apply to each intervention. The former aims to establish bridges of understanding with the barriers identified in section one and how these also affect implementation.

Finally, this paper offers some policy options, analyzes pros, and cons that may interfere with the overcoming of barriers in a two-fold manner: on the one hand, related to the realm of programme implementation, and on the other, to those of political participation. The paper serves a more comprehensible understanding of the Colombian case than that given in the large consortium case.

Potential organizations of civil society, policymakers, and other civic and political actors interested in learning from the lessons derived from a political and economic analysis scope are welcome to read and contact the reality of Youth Political Participation (YPP) in Colombia, and to foster dialogue around some of the problems mentioned.



### Problem Definition

Youth participation processes in Colombia are intrinsically complex. They are covered by normative development that determines their rights and duties, but there are structural barriers that deter them from formal ways of participation. Even when participating through disruptive collective repertoires, they are delegitimized and alienated from the political sphere.

#### Normative development

First, regarding normative development, there is a standing institutional framework from which one could draw two key provisions as central for Colombian youth participation processes: the Statute of Youth Citizenship and CONPES 4040.

**The Statute of Youth Citizenship.** It is the most comprehensive regulation of youth participation processes in Colombia to date. It was established by Law 1622 of 2013, known as The Statute of Youth Citizenship, and later modified by Law 1885 of 2018.

It created the National Youth System (SNJ, for its acronym in Spanish), which comprises a set of actors, processes, instances, legal tools, plans, programs, and projects that operationalize all law and policies related to youth (Article 22 of Law 1622 of 2013). The SNJ has three main branches: an institutional subsystem, concertation and decision commissions, and a participation subsystem.

- The institutional subsystem has two main instances: the youth units of local and regional authorities and the National Council of Public Policies for Youth (CNPPJ, for its acronym in Spanish).
- The concertation and decision commissions are national, departmental, and municipal instances responsible for planning, agenda concertation, and generation of mechanisms for executing the agendas at a territorial level (Article 67 of Law 1622 of 2013).
- The participation subsystem encompasses all processes and organizational practices involving Colombian youth, such as their participation spaces: Youth Councils, Youth Platforms, and Youth Assemblies.”

Additionally, there is a Knowledge Management System that acts as an integrated process for information, training, research, and planning related to youth in territorial and administrative issues.

**CONPES 4040, Colombia's Youth Pact.** A strategy to strengthen the integral development of youth, was issued in 2021 as a national commitment in the short to medium term for the political opening of young people and the improvement of their living conditions, with 3 thematic lines and 14 action lines.

The diagnosis provided by the document identified several multidimensional challenges that Colombian youth face, including incomplete education trajectories in urban and rural areas, limited opportunities for productive insertion, and low participation in cultural, artistic, and recreational activities. This document estimates that by 2030, many of these identified problems will be addressed by the Colombian State in a comprehensive approach.

#### Barriers to participation

Despite these normative dispositions, there are day-to-day and structural situations that discourage YPP. Initially, formal instances of participation such as those encompassed by the SNJ require availability to meet and resources that the bulk of Colombian youth hardly ever have. In addition, it requires coordination of schedules to avoid conflicts with personal life, academic work, and caregiving obligations. Additionally, physical, or virtual spaces are needed for execution, materials for their activities, as well as resources for transportation and sustenance. Recognition for their participation, even by political parties and important political actors, is discredited by collective bodies such as the Congress, the Assemblies, or the Municipal Councils due to corrupt practices by officials, as well as structural barriers harming YPP.

This section will describe four of these structural barriers, namely: prevalence of the adult-centered worldview, disregard of young people through homogenization, structural violence, and economic barriers to the proper development of dignified living conditions.

- Prevalence of the adult-centered worldview: In Colombia, as in many other regions worldwide, young people are seen as individuals preparing for the adult world. This preparation phase is considered a natural progression for their insertion into society. The approach shapes collective imaginaries, discourses, and actions that reward adults over youth with value, visibility, and control capacity over society (Duarte, 2011).

·Disregard of young people through homogenization is common, where they are often homogenized based on the barriers they face or their identities, without actual recognition of differences in their agendas. Governments often respond to diversity with standardized solutions without recognizing characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age subgroups, work activities, educational trajectories, family situations, territorial dynamics, among others (Osorio, 2005). ·Structural violence, according to the theory of types of violence, is structural to the extent that it is exercised by powerful entities (State, family, school) as a mechanism of repression (Galtung, 2003). Violence in Colombia historically stems from various fronts; notably, the armed conflict has involved youth by recruiting, exploiting, and further limiting their participation in many regions of the country (Muñoz, 2015).

·Economic barriers hinder the proper development of dignified living conditions. As established in the CONPES 4040 document, there are variables that hinder the economic development of Colombia's youth population. For the national total, up to February 2024, the population of young people between 15 and 28 years of age who were neither studying nor employed was around 26.8% of the people of working age for that age range (DANE, 2024). This shows that they have limitations for the achievements of complete educational trajectories, and they have scarce opportunities for productive insertion.

### Disruptive Collective Repertoires

Due to these barriers to participation, Colombian youth historically resort to disruptive collective repertoires to assert themselves as political actors. One recent example is the national strike in 2019, which took place uninterruptedly between 21 November and 29 November, and then sporadically from 1 December to 25 March 2020, when the emergency for COVID-19 was declared and it led to a lockdown.

This strike channelled and encompassed various demands across different sectors (El Espectador, 2020). But it became especially sensitive to Colombian youth due to abuses of authority by public forces, resulting in fatalities of young people, such as Dilan Cruz (Borda, 2020). Demands included compliance with FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) peace agreements, resignation of high-ranking army and government officials, and dismantling of the Mobile Anti-riot Squadron (ESMAD, for its acronym in Spanish) (Aguilar, 2023).

## Why is this policy paper needed?

The mentioned case is a recent illustration of how Colombian youth have historically participated informally in the public sphere. However, these disruptive actions are delegitimized due to violence from authorities and discourses dominated by adults in media coverage, coupled with structural factors mentioned earlier. It is crucial to involve Colombian youth in formal, yet unconventional spaces or expressions of participation to promote YPP for a more democratic society.

## NIMD Colombia's approach to political participation and Democracy

The participation of youth in Colombia finds spaces for realization through expressions that could be understood as unconventional, but that act within the regulations set forth by the Colombian Political Constitution and therefore reaffirm their role as legitimate political subjects. Thus, NIMD (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy) Colombia has found the possibility of deploying technical support through its own design of participatory methodologies, pursuing the construction of political agendas with high significance for young people. The deployment of actions aims to reduce the political barriers for youth participation in different contexts and for different agendas that normally enhance the delegitimization of youth participation repertoires, e.g., the role of state institutionalism and economic barriers, to name a few. In contrast to these instances, NIMD's methodological objective has been to facilitate spaces for dialogue in both formal and informal public spaces, between youth and institutions, to bring youthful perspectives closer to decision-making scenarios by competent authorities.

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**On the first dimension,** NIMD Colombia implements actions guided by the approaches mentioned above, thus considering the diversity of actors, their vision, and objectives, and responding to the specific needs of the political context and situation of the country. Consequently, the successful generation of participation spaces and platforms includes a politically oriented agenda with a focus on young people, to be later discussed with public institutions. This aims to create, reform, or validate norms, public policies, laws, action plans, among other initiatives. It's worth mentioning that these actions have been primarily implemented by determining the priority of territories where networking and collaboration have been successfully built with both civic and public actors.

In paradigmatic instances of the participation dimension, such as multi-stakeholder dialogue scenarios, specific methodologies promote the decentralization of decision-making processes. Through scopes such as public innovation and deliberative democracy, the youth population can address their most urgent needs on a fast-track basis, allowing them to have a more significant impact on politicians' agendas and other relevant actors in the political system.



On a practical basis, these scenarios serve a twofold objective: a) to foster public interest discussion and deliberation of problems, and b) to implement a more participatory design of solutions to these issues. What is the outcome of these processes? It normally ends with the prototype of a Plan of Action, Public Policy inputs, or compromises embedded in a route of action for both participants and decision-makers. These products must receive technical support from NIMD to ensure their viability and application to solve urgent needs.



The spaces designated for dialogue and deliberation for citizen co-creation are established upon the premise of developing participation scenarios geared towards fostering collaboration and analysis through various methodologies. This approach aims to construct solutions aimed at addressing local or national development challenges. Such an approach ensures the engagement of diverse population groups and stakeholders from both the public and private sectors.

Moreover, it contributes to bridging the gap for historically underrepresented groups in effective citizen participation by establishing channels for the influence of their agendas and inputs gathered in these spaces. Subsequently, these inputs are brought into decision-making arenas for materialization. Most of the methodologies employed in these participation scenarios are oriented towards and grounded in principles of deliberative democracy. Among the actors present in these dialogue spaces, besides the youth, are: (i) Political parties, (ii) Civil Society Organizations, (iii) Non-affiliated participants with a high level of commitment, and (iv) Non-affiliated participants with a low level of commitment.

**On the second dimension**, concerning the training aspect, the pedagogical model of NIMD Colombia has focused on contributing to the improvement of public management in prioritized territories through empowerment, training, cooperation, and advocacy of civic, social, and political actors to create public value. Its main objective is to increase knowledge, democratic capacities, appropriation, and application of innovative tools and methodologies in civic, social, and political leadership. This is done to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and to increase the effectiveness of citizen participation through cooperation scenarios between civic and political actors for the development of public policies that respond to the challenges of youth participation and the effective inclusion of their agendas.

Within the implemented actions, it has been possible to appreciate training processes such as Democracy Schools, ranging from modules with thematic experts, mentorship, networking spaces, and the development of platforms with pedagogical content, which have managed to bring together various youth leaderships.

The educational process in Democracy Schools is structured around three fundamental pillars: education for Being, Learning, and Doing. Education for Being refers to the strengthening of soft skills from the inside out; this process is guided by the coordinator or facilitator of the school. Training for Learning focuses on theoretical-conceptual knowledge and is guided by a teacher or instructor. Finally, education for Doing focuses on practical, empirical, and methodological exercises that are concretized with the development of canvases and work tools. Thus, participants manage to increase their conceptual knowledge and their levels of confidence with other actors, allowing them to consolidate methodological knowledge that they replicate in their economic, political, and social experiences, as well as in their participation repertoires.

The actions of NIMD are grouped into two dimensions, as previously outlined: those that promote citizen participation and the development of public innovation methodologies for generating solutions to development challenges, and those that contribute to increasing knowledge and capacity building through training spaces on various topics of interest.

Noteworthy success factors of these actions include:

- Methodological capacity to foster safe, conceptually robust dialogue spaces conducive to reaching agreements among diverse individuals, reflecting the specific needs of each population group being addressed.
- Strong relationships with partners and allies. Strategies deployed by NIMD, focusing on effective teamwork and the representation of needs through a multi-party approach, are perceived as successful factors.
- Promotion of diverse forms and scenarios of dialogue and training. Through initiatives such as Schools for Democracy, Territorial Dialogue Initiatives, and Territorial Agendas, NIMD has demonstrated adaptability in methodologies to meet the needs of each scenario and stakeholder.
- Consistency in systematically reaching prioritized territories with local relevance, aligning with principles of long-term commitment and local ownership by NIMD.
- High-quality team composed of young, committed, and highly skilled individuals.

#### **Additional barriers to the implementation of NIMD Dimensions**

However, participation and training scenarios also face barriers, such as limited access to territories due to structural violence dynamics, lack of interest from public bodies in youth agendas, and challenges in maintaining effective youth participation throughout the processes due to contextual dynamics in the territories.

To mitigate these barriers, efforts are made to ensure the participation of diverse population groups in dialogue and deliberation. While significant representation has been achieved, it is imperative to develop a strategy for outreach and dissemination to ensure greater participation from underrepresented groups, thereby enhancing representation and the quality of outcomes in these scenarios.

Another mitigation strategy involves the ongoing execution of all programs and projects within NIMD's actions in Colombia. Changes or adaptations in their operation have primarily been due to factors associated with the pandemic and insecurity resulting from actions by illegal armed actors in some regions of the country. In both cases, NIMD has developed adjustment strategies, such as virtual sessions, modification of methodologies and their scope, and ensuring the training of trainers to replicate content without the direct involvement of NIMD staff. Additionally, the Institute collaborates with specialized organizations in protection and security to standardize protocols that enable early detection of alerts and appropriate actions as needed.

Thus, while NIMD's work has aligned with political participation frameworks and adapted to Colombia's contextual dynamics, the impact capacity of each action executed by NIMD could prompt the state to embrace other innovative forms of participation. This could potentially dismantle structural barriers that hinder youth from positioning themselves differently within the country's dynamics. However, it is necessary to create institutional and formal avenues that provide greater reach and impact for these unconventional and innovative actions.





## Policy Recommendations

Once the barriers for participation and implementation are identified, namely thus of adult-centered view and homogenization of youth, one can proceed on the elaboration of recommendations to overcome these, for both civic and political actors. This section explores pros and cons of what is proposed in terms policy options.

Two main salient outcomes are here to be examined. On the one hand, in terms of implementation to overcome the barriers just mentioned, to articulate with public entities that show interest in implementing innovative methodologies of dialogue for the opening and grant of youth participation, as a regulatory governance cycle. Also, to promote the implementation of the results of innovative dialogue on the specific agendas of the public entities, in key of its viability. On the other, regarding participation, the promotion of long-term institutional mechanisms such as a political reform with a youth scope is needed, if decision making is understood from a distinct perspective. Likewise, to overcome the false imaginary on youth, NIMD's Colombia understands that a Rights approach is needed.

### Recommendations on implementation

Promotion of articulation with public allies. One of the main factors of success for the implementation of innovative dialogue methodologies and knowledge-enhancing spaces, such as Democracy Schools, is to identify potential public actors that are interested in promoting civic participation without restraint on scope. To incorporate civic participation from diverse groups bets for a governance model in which decision making is more open and understands the dynamics of societal and political groups around their demands and needs.

The execution of these spaces contributes to minimizing the barrier of invisibility and homogenization described in section 1 by strengthening their formal participation instances, facilitating dialogue with decision-makers at the local and national levels, and supporting the generation of collective agendas.

The structural obstacle that prevents both formal and non-formal participation is the adult-centered perspective and the structural violence that fails to recognize perspectives other than their own from those who hold power. Social movements have insisted on the need for decentralization of political power, but culturally, it is an inherited pattern that will apparently take several generations to deconstruct and will only be achieved to the extent that international organizations mediate, as cooperation has done for so many years, the relationship between certain actors (congressmen, high-level executives, media) and movements such as feminist or youth movements. This mediation, based on technical support, accompaniment, training, and support for advocacy in spaces and with agendas built collaboratively, is the main strategy of NIMD's actions.

### Compliance with compromises.

If the alliance with public actors allows implementing the dimensions of NIMD Colombia, a further step must be taken. Although NIMD's work has aligned with the frameworks of political participation and adjusted to the contextual dynamics of Colombia, the impact capacity of each action executed by NIMD could prompt the State to embrace other innovative forms of participation and thus assume the task of breaking down structural barriers that prevent youth from positioning themselves differently in the country's dynamics.

The work carried out to bring public corporations closer to the citizenry, prioritizing open dialogue with youth, is a non-formal way of contributing to democracy, promoting spaces for accountability of elected representatives, and energizing new forms of articulation and collaborative action around public interests.



## Recommendations on participation

Promoting long-term institutional mechanisms. To overcome the so-called adult-centered scope necessarily requires a commitment to institutional change that initially introduces far-reaching mechanisms through high-quality documents and binding decision-making for all actors.

The scope of such a strategy could involve promoting a substantial reform of the political system. However, for such a process to yield sufficient results, there needs to be a focus on direct interaction between generations, which is also a challenge not only for the political system but also serves as a general validation scenario by Colombian society. For this, citizen participation mechanisms such as the 'Popular Consultation' or the 'Referendum' can be initiatives that institutions can process before national authorities.

As a complement to these initiatives, youth can use the Popular Initiative or the Open Council as legitimate participation mechanisms to demand their needs, without the intermediation of the adult population. NIMD's position on this matter hovers around the identification of these processes, guarding its principles of a multiparty approach to democratic participation and continuous work on the dimensions of innovative participation and training scenarios.

Overcoming the false imaginaries of the youth. In addition to the issue, there is a causal homogenization of the young population in the country, based on the premise that being young entails not having the necessary credentials to participate in politics. This homogenization conceals assumptions about youth identity in different spheres, exhibiting biases from epistemological, ethical-political, and ontological-practical standpoints.

**One could argue: Being young means not having sufficient maturity to take on the responsibilities derived from a political commitment, as one lacks the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions.** From this, it follows that being young is represented with a political bias through a false ideology. However, this leads to a dilemma regarding the parties or ideologies in power at any given time, denying one of the democratic principles: dialogue.

Ultimately, being young results in a mistaken perception of priorities, viewpoints, or realities, which are initially denied the possibility of being reaffirmed in the political spectrum.

How can these challenges be overcome? The commitment to a rights-based approach that cuts across the needs of young people is vital. Guarantees of access to education, health care, recreation, and leisure appear to be a valid first step. The priority of advancing these policies must be supported by the institutionality and the State in general.

## Conclusion

The dynamics of YPP in Colombia provide a valuable case study for understanding YPP in Latin America. Youth lack sufficient guarantees to take part in the public sphere, and when they do, they often resort to disruptive spaces that are delegitimized by the adult-centered view dominating public discourse, resulting in violence and discrimination against them.

In this context, NIMD Colombia's actions aim to ease and create spaces for participation and training (the two dimensions earlier discussed), which, although unconventional, are framed within Colombian regulations or formal participation methods. However, this is not as simple as one might expect. Structural barriers also permeate these participation spaces, hindering their implementation. It is necessary for public actors in power to coordinate with international cooperation and civil society and to commit to fulfilling the agreements made in these spaces.

Additional actions must be undertaken to address the structural barriers mentioned above, ensuring guarantees in education, recreation, and labor market integration for youth. Moreover, promoting institutional mechanisms that involve youth in the long term, through political reform, is essential to giving them a voice and decision-making power in matters that concern them both now and in the future.



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