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### **Participatory digital methodologies with marginalised young people in “fragile” contexts. A case study from Colombia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research Briefing.**

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## ¿Cuál es la verdad? De-constructing collective memories and imagining alternative futures with young people in Chocó

Research Briefing, November 2020

### Participatory digital methodologies with marginalised young people in “fragile” contexts

A case study from Colombia during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### 1. Background

This briefing is linked to our research project [¿Cuál es la verdad?](#). The project brings 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. It is funded by an AHRC GCRF [Changing the Story](#) Large Project Grant.

The original project plan was to utilise a co-produced music-and arts-based methodology. However, in March 2020 we had to shift our original in-person methodology to an online process due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We designed a methodology to engage with our participants virtually. We had already recruited a group of **19 young co-researchers who are young community leaders and activists** but had not met with them in person yet. Due to social distancing measures and travel restrictions for young people and the research team, all interactions had to take place online.

This briefing reflects on our ongoing learning in relation to engaging online with young people who have been 'marginalised' (due to structural exclusion based on socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, gender or location). It raises questions for educators and researchers who want to plan, reflect on and deepen their **online engagement with marginalised young people in fragile or conflict-affected settings**.

## 2. The Colombian context: COVID-19 and increased violence

The 2016 peace agreement between the national Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) established a political agenda of "post-conflict" for a 15-year period. However, the peace agreement has not been supported as expected under the current national government. Colombia has experienced increasing levels of violence such as the assassination of social leaders and a series of massacres against young people and vulnerable groups (such as farmers, indigenous and Afrocolombian people), perpetuated by right-wing armed groups. Recent months have seen a wave of protests against neoliberal policies, in which young people played a significant role.

Colombia has also been severely affected by COVID-19. In Quibdó, the location of our research, the impact of the pandemic is exacerbated by poor healthcare infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic is placing further strains on the fragile peace agreement. Armed groups have gained strength and armed harassment in marginalised territories has increased, perpetuating rural violence and forced displacement. Colombia is the nation with most internally displaced people in the world (over 8 million) (Unidad Para Las Victimas, 2020). For young people globally, especially from marginalised and vulnerable groups, the pandemic has brought detrimental impacts in the fields of education, employment, mental health and disposable income (OECD, 2020).

## 3. New challenges for arts-based, participatory methodologies in times of COVID-19

Digital methods are increasingly used in social science research, but their use with children and young people is not well established (Bond and Agnew, 2015). In international development, participatory arts-based methodologies have become very popular (Cooke and Soria-Donlan, 2019), and many of these draw on digital tools.

Some common creative digital methodologies with young people are **participatory video**, **photo voice** or **photo elicitation** (Cin and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2020; Ergler, 2020), **digital diaries** (Volpe, 2019), or **digital storytelling** (de Jager et al., 2017). These methodologies harness the expressive potential of creative, visual, dialogic and participatory forms of engaging with young people.

There can be different degrees of participation and co-production in such methodologies. For example, some researchers ask participants to take photos of their daily lives which are then used as narrative prompts in more traditional interview set-ups. Other researchers may support young people to generate a full audio-visual narrative, such as an edited video. The

creative element of the methodology can thus help to generate further data and outputs, or be data and output in itself.

A range of 'traditional' social research methods can also be employed in the digital sphere, such as **individual or group interviews** conducted via video-conferencing platforms. These have advantages over in-person interviews in terms of saving travel, financial affordability and international connectivity, but can raise ethical issues and have implications for building rapport with participants (Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

While there is a rich literature on digital research methods, such **approaches typically rely on (at least some) in-person events and relationships**. In our case, and of many projects during the ongoing pandemic, all research interactions took place solely online.

Additionally, most writing in these fields is premised on work that has been conceived as digital from the outset, and therefore does not encounter the same circumstances and challenges that arise from adapting to online methodologies at short notice in contexts of scarcity. Much of this literature is geared towards general populations with **access to appropriate devices and connectivity**. Much less has been written about online research and engagement with young people who belong to communities that are under-resourced and oppressed, and live in fragile contexts. All this creates particular challenges for devising meaningful digital methodologies, establishing relationships, trust and continuity with participants.

#### 4. Digital access of marginalised populations in Colombia

**Digital media are key to young people's civic and political participation** (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). Research has shown that many young people in the "Global South" have access to smartphones and Internet, and that **access to digital technologies can be revolutionary for young people's mobility, socio-economic wellbeing and connectivity** (Gwaka, 2018). The digital sphere has permitted a more democratic access to knowledge and has enabled some marginalised groups, especially young people, to access latest news, other cultures and languages and so on (Barbero, 2002).

In Colombia, a study by the Ministry of Communications (2017), involving 8,300 people (1,204 in rural areas) in 96 municipalities, revealed that

- smartphones are the most used technological device (72%) and have been key to the digital transformation in Colombia.
- Facebook (88%) and WhatsApp (87%) are the most used social media platforms, followed by Instagram, Google+ and Twitter.
- 97% of Colombians use the internet as a means of communication, and the majority of the population state that internet access is essential to their daily lives, particularly amongst young people (Caracol Radio, 2017).

Global inequalities in digital access have been highlighted during the pandemic. While we could not identify systematic data on digital access in Colombia during the pandemic at the time of writing, it has been reported that **students in rural areas and with limited resources were badly affected in terms of digital access** (DW Noticias, 2020).

This is particularly significant because **rural development is a key aspect of the Colombian peace agreement**. However, young people in rural areas face ongoing difficulties in accessing education. Some of our young co-researchers were located in rural areas, and the characteristics of our main research location Quibdó can be compared to those faced in rural locations. Scholar desertion is a large problem in rural areas, exacerbated by economic inequalities and a lack of educational programmes that adapt to the needs of rural populations. Combined with precarious working conditions this paves the way for involvement in illegal activities such as narcotraffic and joining criminal structures (Balvino and Murillo, 2017). Technological advances and relevant education for rural populations' needs have the potential to advance key goals of the peace agreement, such as the permanence of young populations in rural areas, yet digital access remains a significant problem.

## 5. Case study: reflections on a multi-modal participatory digital methodology

Similar to Bond and Agnew (2015), we decided to pursue a multi-modal approach to draw on different technologies and forms of expression. In practice, this involved an **ongoing WhatsApp group** in which participants and facilitators could submit **text messages, voice messages or short videos**, a **closed Facebook group**, and **video conferencing meetings (drawing on additional visual applications such as mapping and whiteboards)**. This methodology was chosen in response to what is known about Colombian young people's online preferences (as described above) and in collaboration with our young participants (aged 16 – 25).

### a. Building and sustaining relationships

It is important to note that even when using digital methods, often researchers and participants still meet in-person at certain stages of the research. In our case this was not possible. This raised important implications for the process of building relationships and trust with participants. In order to set a **light-hearted, fun tone** for the project, the research team remotely recorded a hip hop video to introduce ourselves and to break down some of the **power dynamics** between the research team and participants. We then invited all young people to introduce themselves through a **creative video** about themselves (e.g. songs, poems or other creative ideas). Following this introduction, we embarked on a process of **weekly asynchronous 'activities'**, set by artists and researchers, in which the young people participated, and a **weekly synchronous meeting** between researchers and participants on Zoom or Meet.

A key finding from our approach includes that **digital methodologies require a much higher level of time and energy** to be invested in building and sustaining research relationships. The immediacy of digital technologies such as WhatsApp can break down certain time and geographical boundaries. At the same time, the fluidity of these boundaries requires some careful management, for example in terms of negotiating the balance of project and private life for both facilitators and participants.

## b. Digital access and practicalities

Not all young people who had originally signed up for our project were able to take part. Some indigenous young people living outside the urban area of Quibdó were not able to connect online, due to a **lack of devices and internet connectivity**. If planned in advance (and not at short notice due to the pandemic), we could potentially have arranged devices and data for these young people (which may not have solved the lack of data signal). On the other hand, this would have raised some sensitive cultural issues in terms of how certain 'gifts' are perceived by local communities.

While these participants could not take part because the project had to move online, on the other hand the digital sphere facilitated much **closer and more sustained contact** over a longer time with other young people, and reduced geographical boundaries among the research team and between researchers, facilitators and young people. Perez (2013: 59) describes how the internet has permitted the formation of "new communities", remote collaboration and "individual and collective expression of talents, feelings, desires and projects", and this was certainly felt in our project.

For young people taking part in the online activities (including some of the artist facilitators), the project funds covered their **data fees** and on two occasions the repair of a mobile phone screen. There were still issues of access to address, such as young people finding a space in their homes to take part in sessions, coordinating multiple busy schedules to find suitable dates or the unstable Internet and electricity networks in the region. This meant that some young people were not able to attend all sessions, and researchers had to ensure to keep everyone updated and involved by maintaining contact between meetings.

## c. Sustaining engagement online

Sustaining prolonged project engagement of young participants can be a challenge in any context, but even more so when working digitally and in contexts of marginalisation and fragility. Most projects involving young people in remote areas in Colombia happen at a microscale, are stand-alone rather than connected to other programmes and operate with very concrete actions and a brief time span (González et al., 2006). Some have reported challenges of working with young people in rural Colombian areas: a lack of proactive attitudes and reliance on others ("parents, the state, institutions, or even divinities") to solve problems (González et al., 2006, p.163). Moreover, the uncertain present and future of young people can lead to demoralised attitudes, frustration and pessimism (González et al., 2006; Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente, 2013), particularly in marginalised contexts, and often results in a non-committal approach to participatory processes (González et al., 2006).

Some of these challenges were also experienced in our project. The research team kept track of young people's participation by maintaining a register of activities and reached out to those who did not take part. A study by PROCASUR (2014) with rural young populations concluded that **working with consolidated groups of young people allows more commitment and sense of belonging with their own territory**. Similarly, a very committed core group of participants emerged as our project progressed, while some others left the group. Participant numbers can be less predictable in online activities, and while in terms of

practicalities it would be easy to invite new participants into the project at any stage, this would need to be addressed in terms of ensuring that relationships and trust can be built with any new participants.

#### **d. Collectivity, creativity and embodiment in the digital sphere**

Creative and arts-based methodologies, such as music and dance, bring a unique emotional intensity and immediate experience with huge potential for building embodied and collective identities (Frith, 1996). **Not much is known about if and how this sense of embodiment and collectivity can be replicated in an online environment.** An emerging field of research looks at how social movements, such as anti-racist or environmental protest movements, create a sense of collectivity online (e.g. Sobande et al. 2019). However, there is a lack of research on how to utilise the potential of arts-based methodologies to generate this embodied collectivity on a smaller-scale digital project level.

We found that there is a **tension in digital projects**: while researchers and participants can feel connected and part of a joint experience (Leavy, 2015), they also feel simultaneously alone in front of their devices. There is less opportunity for spontaneous one-to-one conversations and for informal chatting before and after coming together. It can help to create a sense of collectivity if all participants are visible (e.g. on Zoom), but videos can also create bandwidth issues. In addition, the emotional impact of constant visibility has been documented during the pandemic (Fosslien and Duffy 2020). Other tools, such as collaborative whiteboards (e.g. Google Jamboard) can help to build a sense of collectivity. However, we suggest that there is still a need to learn more about how we can creatively build collectivity online, and how to address any remaining limitations.

#### **e. Ethical considerations**

Our project activities were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Universidad Claretiana (Colombia) and the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education and Sport (United Kingdom). Particularly when it comes to involving children and young people, there can be a **tension between protectionist tendencies of ethics review boards**, and recognising **participants' agency and enabling their inclusion** (Powell and Smith, 2009).

We found that in a digital project, these tensions can become even further pronounced. It was important to **strike a balance** of considering ethical issues whilst at the same time not letting these become barriers for young people's involvement. An example was the choice of online platforms (e.g. Zoom, Facebook, Meet) that we used for our project interactions. The ever-changing landscape of digital tools creates a challenge for researchers to fully grasp **implications for data ownership and management**. On the other hand, different young people have different preferences for platforms, and an ongoing conversation is required to ensure that any barriers are addressed as much as possible. We were able to justify to the ethics committees to use certain social media tools, which would not normally be supported at the University (e.g. Google Meet).

While participants in conflict-affected settings may not understand the full details of data ownership and storage when using such platforms, they are very aware of safety boundaries

in terms of sharing personal information. We found that it was important to **give participants credit for evaluating ethical boundaries themselves**. The fact that many digital tools automatically create a written record (e.g. by posting in a WhatsApp group) may contribute to participants' self-evaluation of what they decide to share.

## 8. Conclusion: raising critical questions

The COVID-19 pandemic will shape research and participatory activities for a long time to come, and it has brought to light important questions for engaging digitally with young people from marginalised backgrounds and in fragile settings. Our project is ongoing and we will share further learning as it develops. Some critical questions that have emerged for us, to guide us in this and any future projects are:

- Who is included in the digital sphere, and who is excluded?
- What practical steps can projects take to enable inclusivity and participation - e.g. co-producing methodologies, buying data plans, selecting digital platforms and investing into building strong relationships?
- What timeframe is appropriate for a digital project and how do we manage expectations about the frequency and boundaries of interactions for both participants and research teams?
- How can we build the necessary flexibility into digital project design, to ensure we can respond to evolving situations and participants' needs? (For example, seek ethical permission for a variety of tools and methodologies at the beginning of the project, to avoid delays.)
- How do we manage expectations (cultural expectations, and expectations based on previous participation in other projects) of participants in terms of seeing immediate project results versus planning for longer-term sustainable developments?
- What kind of investment of time, emotions and energy is required for research teams and participants to form and maintain relationships in digital contexts, and how do we ensure to fully recognize it?
- How can we harness the opportunities of the digital sphere to increase visibility of marginalised young people in fragile settings and advance their rights?

Access to the digital sphere is an **issue of rights and equality**, and **longer term solutions will be required** to ensure that marginalised groups have access to essential services (including education) online (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh 2020). Digital access is closely linked to various **Sustainable Development Goals** (from enabling education for all to reducing rural poverty), and any research in this field has the potential to contribute to broader work on reaching the SGDs in these areas. It is therefore essential that we **continue to explore the opportunities, obstacles and solutions within this sphere of communication**, and that we do so **in partnership with the young people** we want to engage with.



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