



Healthier Democracies Case Study: Cali, Colombia

NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENTS AND CIVIC CULTURE

by *Melisa Ross*

Pichindé's Civic Culture Roundtable mobilized people to clean up a park for development as a gathering place.

Santiago de Cali is Colombia's third largest city, famous for its diverse demographics and its cultural scene. The city is also known for its endemic struggle with gang violence and insecurity and has ranked as one of Latin America's most violent and dangerous cities for the past three decades. The areas most affected by these issues are in low-income, underserved communities with high levels of conflict between neighbors and very low levels of trust in the government and public institutions. The daily lives of residents are affected by "invisible borders" set by drug trafficking that prevent residents from reaching their schools and jobs.

Faced with these challenges, the local government created Civic Culture Roundtables in the most affected communities across the city. Public officials invited and supported local community members in establishing working groups to discuss problems, ideas and improving their communities. Each roundtable consisted of 10 to 25 volunteer residents who met regularly to discuss the problems affecting their areas. They brainstormed ideas for neighborhood improvement through voluntary actions, such as park cleanings, painting murals or cultural activities for local at-risk youth to regain shared ownership of public spaces and bring together conflicting parties in communities. They helped improve trust among neighbors and in public officials.



CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

The capital of the Valle del Cauca Department, Santiago de Cali is the second largest city in Colombia and the third most populous. According to the 2018 census, it has 2,227,642 residents in its entire metropolitan area. It is made up of 15 districts, 22 communes and 249 neighborhoods. Urban communes represent 98 percent of the population, while the remaining 2 percent is comprised of rural villages

Cali is considered an economic, cultural and sports epicenter in Colombia. Yet, the city has long struggled with insecurity and violence, poor relationships between neighbors and high levels of mistrust in public institutions. Cali, like much of Colombia, struggled with the consequences of the armed conflict that began in the 1960s between paramilitary and revolutionary forces. Five million Colombians fled their homes during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and roughly 200,000 refugees and rural-to-urban migrants settled in Cali. In the 1990s, the city was home to one of the country's most dangerous drug cartels, which controlled up to 90 percent of the global cocaine trade. The city's homicide rate ranked at 394 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991. Crime and violence especially affects low-income neighborhoods, youth, vulnerable populations and ethnic minorities.

Cali is an ethnically diverse city, with 44 percent mixed-race residents, 30 percent white, 20 percent Afro-descended and 4 percent indigenous. Relationships between communities have long been conflict-laden. According to a Corpovisionarios survey from 2016, Cali had an interpersonal trustworthiness rating of 6/10 and 90 percent of local residents reported that they did not trust public institutions—the lowest score of all Colombian cities. The study also highlighted the conflictive relationships between neighbors, characterized by intolerance and hostility. Studies further reveal that citizens in Cali are highly indifferent towards public spaces, with 45

Fast Facts

COLOMBIA

CALI

POPULATION (METRO)

2,227,642

GDP

\$11.2 billion

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

239 mi²

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percent reporting they did not care about them and only 6 percent reporting satisfaction with public spaces.¹

Colombia is multicultural, but it doesn't have a strong sense of identity... We are constructing a national identity, and in Cali we are just now getting to know ourselves.

JUAN CARLOS TENORIO, City Initiatives and Mobilization Team Lead, City of Santiago de Cali²

¹ Cali Cómo Vamos, *Encuestas de Calidad de Vida*, 2014, <http://www.calicomovamos.org.co/#!blank-1/c1onh>.

² Juan Carlos Tenorio, *Cities of Service, Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana. Engaged Cities Award Case Study*, John Hopkins University, 2019, <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/mesas-de-cultura-ciudadana-cali/>.

Yet, Colombian citizens and governments have also pioneered attempts at reducing the impact of violence on the everyday lives of communities. The first documented citizen security program started in the Colombian cities of Cali, Bogotá and Medellín in 1993 and 1994. Rodrigo Guerrero, a public health scholar and former mayor of Cali, created the Peace, Security, and Development Program (*Programa Desarrollo, Seguridad y Paz*, or DESEPAZ) during his first term in office, 1992–1994,

adopting an innovative epidemiological approach to violence prevention.³ In his second term, 2012–2015, Guerrero created a municipal strategy called Territories of Inclusion and Opportunity (*Territorios de Inclusión y Oportunidades*) focused on 18 low-income neighborhoods throughout the city, where it established approximately 80 microfinance institutions funded by community capital, 150 soup kitchens and 11 street repaving projects with locally hired workers.

SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

Mayor Maurice Armitage, elected in 2016, sought to improve the local government's response to citizen security issues by incorporating programs to support the development of the most socioeconomically challenged neighborhoods.

In 2015, Cali was chosen as a member of the Rockefeller Foundation 100 Resilient Cities program. As part of the program, in 2016, the city government conducted focus groups and interviews with around 300 citizens and workshops with another 100 to identify perceptions, actions, risks and assets of the city and to develop a resilience strategy. This information improved the new government's understanding of the chronic problems affecting Caleños and Caleñas.

Based on the findings from the Resilient Cities engagement in 2016, Mayor Armitage restructured city government operations and created the [Secretariat of Peace and Civic Culture](#) with a mission to “design and implement policies, programs and projects to prevent violence, peacefully resolve conflicts, promote and protect human rights and foment a culture and pedagogy of peace and reconciliation.”

Mi Cali Soñada (My Dream Cali) survey: Developing a civic culture model

The Secretariat of Peace and Civic Culture conducted several projects to promote civic culture. Before drafting the Roundtables program, it conducted a [comprehensive research process](#) to take stock of the civic landscape and find out what kinds of changes people supported. This survey was conducted in alliance with Corpovisionarios, a civil society organization that had collaborated in the development of the [First Model of Civic Culture](#) for Cali. The model identified the city's civic culture and laid out the commitment of the local government to improving and fostering it.

Mi Cali Soñada (My Dream Cali) surveyed 30,000 residents on three questions:

- What is best about Caleños?
- How do you dream of achieving peace in Cali?
- What could you do to achieve peace in Cali?

The results of the survey showed that one of the greatest sources of pride among Caleños and Caleñas was the human quality of its residents and that they identified kindness as their most characteristic attribute. Another important asset for civic culture was social disposition, or

³ Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguirre Tobón, *Citizen security in Latin America: Facts and Figures*, Strategic Paper no. 33 (Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé Institute, April 2018), <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Citizen-Security-in-Latin-America-Facts-and-Figures.pdf>.

willingness to work with the community for the common good. Citizens also reported that their most significant problems were a lack of safety, conflict with neighbors, unemployment and the quality of education.

This input was incorporated in the development plan *Cali Progreses Contigo* (Cali Progresses with You), which set out four lines of action to orient the work at the secretariat: Mobilization and Community Initiatives, Training and Citizen Education, Civic Training, and Community Justice. The general goal of Civic Culture for Peace interventions was to prevent violence, promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts and support a pedagogy of peace and reconciliation.

People in these communities are born vulnerable and they don't have the channels to get to the government. We [the government] don't know what they want, so there is just a group of people making decisions for them in City Hall. And my job was to tell these communities that they have a voice and they don't really need the government. That was the main idea [of the Roundtables], to allow them to work for their communities themselves.

JUAN CARLOS TENORIO⁴

Roundtables: Neighborhood improvement through community organizing



COMMITMENTS

The Roundtables of Civic Culture for Peace are open collaborative spaces, much like [Community Committees](#), tasked with promoting norms and agreements on civic culture based on issues identified in citizen meetings by local residents. They are neighborhood-based spaces for community participation to identify and develop projects and initiatives that could help transform the civic culture and practices in Cali's territories. They promote voluntary changes in behavior through collective actions that involve transformation in social practices and articulate collaborative action at the local level.

The Roundtables were organized in predetermined neighborhoods selected on the basis of the Territories of Inclusion and Opportunity Program. Initially instituted in 11 communes and in four townships, they have expanded to other areas of the city since and numbered 24 Roundtables at the program's height of activity.

The secretariat staff organized local visits to each neighborhood to identify residents interested in forming a Roundtable. Once a few residents had come together, they would formally establish the local Roundtable and set a regular time and place to meet. In general, the meetings were set at about twice per month, ideally in the local administrative center or in other public buildings or spaces. Participation was open to any members of the local community on a voluntary basis. There were usually five to eight community members, though some included up to 20 participants. Participants were mostly adult women, although there was one majority-male Roundtable.

For each table, a team of dedicated staff was created with around 13 professionals with backgrounds in psychology, education, history, sociology and social work. They supported the process of organizing the Roundtables and mediated the conversations between community members to help bring ideas to fruition. A journalist and photographer also took part to document the

⁴ Juan Carlos Tenorio, interviewed by the author, January 12, 2022.

process and the interventions.⁵ In addition, a budget was assigned to each Roundtable to organize their activities, ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 per year. The total project budget for the Roundtables was \$38,000 in 2018.

There were four steps to establish a Roundtable:

1. **Identifying a shared vision:** A one-page document that the Secretariat crafted with input from community leaders described the community's aspiration to enhance the social fabric and participate in civic life through collaborative activities.
2. **Self-diagnosing the community:** Roundtable members and staffers evaluated results and reports from the civic culture survey's indicators, and reflected on guiding questions, including "How do you want this council to develop?" and "What is missing in this community?"
3. **Determining how the council will function:** The Roundtables operated horizontally with no hierarchy and no leadership. Members democratically elected a spokesperson (*vocero*), but the role was limited to public communication of the Roundtable's activity.⁶ All Roundtables agreed on basic rules such as punctuality for meetings, exclusive use of the group chat for Roundtable-related issues, non-partisan participation and equal rights to express participants' opinions. At later stages, they could revise agreements to address more complex matters, such as how to resolve internal disputes, distribute workloads equitably or handle the natural fatigue cycle of volunteer efforts.
4. **Executing an initiative:** The public-facing output of the Roundtables were their initiatives. The activities undertaken by the Roundtables varied widely and often reflected a neighborhood's cultural identity.

Once they were set up, Roundtables discussed their respective community's needs and challenges and began to design and plan a civic activity that could operate as a model of civic behavior to address them. These activities included items such as a park cleanup, a youth soccer tournament, information campaigns, a community art class or installing urban equipment. Each year, the Roundtables' work culminated with a "Civic Culture Week," a festival that attracted thousands of people from across the city and showcased an initiative by each local Roundtable.

Roundtable staff visited with the council members at least once every two weeks. The visits served to prompt Roundtables to focus on the problems facing their communities. Staffers would also mediate conversations about ideas and experiences on how to improve those problems and support Roundtables in determining which ideas were practicable. Staffers found that the official bimonthly visits, however, were not sufficient to establish and support a successful Roundtable. They usually engaged outside working hours to connect with the local community and build trust, through things like attending birthday parties and other social events.

What we have done with these councils is to bring people together and tell them, "Through these councils and in communication with the mayor, we are supporting you, we are encouraging you to be a leader." We tell them, "If you are interested in working for your community, City Hall will help you. Let's work hand in hand."

MAURICE ARMITAGE, mayor of Cali, 2016–2019⁷

⁵ Tenorio, interview.

⁶ Cities of Service, *Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana. Engaged Cities Award Case Study* (John Hopkins University, 2019), <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/mesas-de-cultura-ciudadana-cali/>.

⁷ Mayor Maurice Armitage, in *Cities of Service, Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana. Engaged Cities Award Case Study* (John Hopkins University, 2019), <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/mesas-de-cultura-ciudadana-cali/>.

OUTCOMES

Neighborhood improvement

[Twenty-four Roundtables](#) were created across the city between 2016 and 2020, each of them with 10 to 20 members. Sixteen of them continue their activities even though the Civic Culture Program has officially concluded. In 2018, over 300 initiatives and activities had been organized by the Roundtables, benefiting some 15,000 residents who live in the targeted areas.

In one district, the Roundtable organized a traveling photography exhibit of the district's past, present and future. Participants solicited archival and family photos from residents and hired a local photographer to shoot images of the most significant places in the district's 13 neighborhoods.

In a rural district called Pichindé, a Roundtable spruced up a neglected park by repairing a broken playground, repainting a faded mural and cleaning up the park's landscaping. According to members of the councils, these park cleanups and other projects have reduced drug trafficking and gang activity in targeted areas and increased positive use of public spaces.⁸

In another rural district close to the mountains, neighbors complained that the bus stops to reach the city were in the open and when it rained, passengers did not have a safe place to wait for the bus. The local Roundtable decided to build a pergola together to create weather protection at the bus stop. Other neighbors joined in the effort, bringing plants and painting and decorating the stop. The stop was improved in such a way that it became an attraction for the community, who now spend time there—some have even used the location for wedding photographs.⁹

Community organizing

There were no set expectations regarding the activities that a Roundtable could organize, but most activities were aimed at building a sense of neighborhood solidarity and a common identity. A study conducted in 2016 and 2017 to assess the first programs implemented by the secretariat concluded, "Citizens are asking for the creation of strategies for social, economic and cultural inclusion, and not only as part of identity policies implemented within Cali's institutional inclusion programs, but also about fundamentally rethinking the meaning of politics, postulating the emergence of new types of subjects for this society. The above is very important especially if we take into account that in recent years there is an increasing feeling of harm and victimization in the population."¹⁰

Projects and ideas that emerged from each local Roundtable were conducted by the neighbors themselves, creating bonds of trust and confidence among them and with civic institutions. They allowed participants to discuss how to create healthy environments in their communities, how to resolve conflict, how to improve democratic participation, how to use and care for the local public spaces and how to improve conviviality with the environment and the neighbors.

Overall, Roundtable participants have reported a positive impact in community-building and bonding among neighbors.

An observer researching the Roundtables found that "culture becomes the outlet. Communities experience conflicts and process them according to their resources, possibilities and capacities... In this way, cultural activities assume a preponderant role in articulating interests,

⁸ Cities of Service, 2019.

⁹ Tenorio, interview.

¹⁰ Montenegro Bustos, Joaquin Ernesto, and Arturo López Tunubalá, "Sistematización del programa social desarrollado por la Secretaría de Paz y Cultura Ciudadana del Municipio de Cali en la Comuna 1 2016–2017" (thesis, Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, 2018), 5.

imaginaries, tradition, history, practices and languages that allow each table to build and develop particular understandings of their communities. . . . The repertoires are in accordance with the nature of each community, of each context. They emerge from the community that adopts practices, copies methods, integrates experiences from other roundtables, but they all highlight interpersonal communication as the basis for the development of the different initiatives. The state can establish guidelines, operate as a mediator in the processes, but the Roundtables build bonds autonomously and through their own interaction.”¹¹

In 2018, the project was awarded \$70,000 in funding to continue the program’s activities as part of the Cities of Service program by Bloomberg Cities.

Violence reduction

The murder rate in Cali has dropped to its lowest level in 25 years, reaching 51.5 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017. Public officials and citizens also report that trust in public institutions has grown in participating neighborhoods. While there is not yet definitive causal evidence linking this to the work of the Roundtables, there is qualitative and anecdotal evidence about their positive impact in the affected areas, including residents’ reports of gaining confidence in taking back public spaces from gangs and reclaiming their neighborhoods for their communities.¹²

Staff also report that these efforts, coupled with other city programs aimed at youth rehabilitation, have helped the city develop effective intervention programs.¹³ The secretariat has identified around 1,100 young residents who have directly profited from initiatives, by calculating their risk of gang association and then recruiting them early into health and rehabilitation programs, and through mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms implemented to solve conflicts between neighbors.

SUCCESS IN COMUNA 15

Comuna 15’s Roundtable organized a cleanup along a main road clogged with illegally dumped construction debris and old furniture that blocked traffic. The neighborhood has regular household trash pickup, but home renovation projects are commonly performed by residents themselves, creating debris and extra trash that must be trucked out of the neighborhood at personal expense. It’s a cost which many residents can’t bear, leading to the dumping of waste in the street.

After removing four tons of garbage, the Roundtable launched public education campaigns to discourage further dumping and promote proper disposal from house renovation and construction. They also planted trees and painted murals to improve the look and feel of the main road. The secretariat facilitated the initiative by coordinating the trash pickup with the city’s solid waste collection utility and coordinating the tree planting efforts with the city’s Environment Department.

In addition to the \$500 provided by the secretariat, the council raised \$250 from local businesses for the beautification project.

¹¹ Jhon Alexander Riascos, “Prácticas comunicativas desarrolladas en las ‘Mesas de cultura ciudadana en Santiago de Cali’” (master’s thesis, Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia – UNAD, Santiago de Cali, 2019), 76.

¹² Cities of Service, *Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana*.

¹³ Ibid.

LESSONS

Organizational challenges

The process of organizing the Roundtables and creating community bonds and initiative was not easy. Low trust in city government officials made empathy, good communication and transparency about the process essential in creating a basis for trust. In Cali, the government had approached communities before, but academic and administrative language alienated residents new to engagement processes. It proved important to prepare communication tools to address these kinds of problems.¹⁴

The process of identifying community leaders and encouraging them to voluntarily start a Roundtable, commit to regular meetings and organize and implement activities can be slow and arduous—on average, it required eight months to set up a Roundtable in each community.

The staff assigned to support the Roundtables and conduct the program were mostly on short-term contracts, which created an additional challenge to program continuity, as staffers might cycle out based on fluctuations in city budgeting. Sufficient funding and stable contracts are essential to ensuring that support staff remains engaged for the long-term with Roundtables and communities.

Organizational benefits

The Roundtables have allowed the city government to better understand the needs of residents in underserved communities and how to integrate them in the fight against violence. At the same time, staffers and public officials supported the neighbors in understanding what could be done by the government and in which ways. The Roundtables Program also improved spending efficiency and helped build trust with citizens.

We as a municipality have many obligations, but the important thing is that the little money we have, we use it wisely through the Roundtables. In other words, those councils tell us where we should invest the money.

MAURICE ARMITAGE¹⁵

A central factor in the program's success was the mayor's commitment to working with residents, seeing them as valuable assets to their communities, not just as "free labor" but as partners with skills, knowledge and firsthand experience about the needs of their communities. It proves the importance of opening the doors of city halls to create the opportunity for collaboration.¹⁶

The staff's professional background also played a key role. The fact that they were educated in the social sciences, pedagogy and psychology helped them conduct an analytical reading of communities while also attending to the human issues and stories they encountered. It helped "humanize" the government in the eyes of the residents as well.¹⁷

¹⁴ Mauricio Garcia, interviewed by the author, October 15, 2021.

¹⁵ Armitage, in *Cities of Service, Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana*.

¹⁶ Garcia, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Strengthening community through citizens' self-organization



Secretariat officials emphasized several factors that made the Roundtables successful. Most important is the ability of staff to identify local residents who can commit to moving the project forward collaboratively.

In one community, two strong leaders collided in the Roundtable—one of them with past ties to drug trafficking and gangs—which led to an interpersonal conflict that made the work of that Roundtable unsustainable. Another Roundtable also encountered difficulties because of high political polarization among neighbors. The group was associated with a particular political candidate, which was considered detrimental by the Secretariat and the staff, who strive to keep the program nonpartisan.¹⁸

Solutions to a city's problems will not come exclusively from the state. Many times the solutions are in communities themselves and you have to understand what communities are doing—whether it works or not.

MAURICE ARMITAGE¹⁹

Each Roundtable developed a set of norms to govern how participants would work together. The city supported these high-impact volunteering efforts with teams of professionals to help people plan, research and implement Roundtable ideas. But the changes were visible and sustainable because they came from the communities themselves. The advantage of the civic culture approach is that neighbors first learn to agree on rules and coexist within the Roundtables, and it shows the rest of the community that it is possible to organize and make small changes if residents come together—even with limited resources.²⁰

The program aimed first and foremost to build trust among neighbors in the most underserved communities and empower them to take back public spaces and

organize to combat the everyday conflicts that lead to violence. Small actions in public spaces helped recover parks and streets from gangs who would then refrain from using those spaces, because the community was active there.

Besides the meetings of the Roundtables and the initiatives and projects, the main goal was to get the communities together and for us to get together with them. To generate trust again. That was, for me, that was the main goal
JUAN CARLOS TENORIO²¹

A final reflection by the program's former manager, Juan Carlos Tenorio, is that each community presented unique challenges and opportunities in creating the Roundtables: "It is not like in books about how to engage people. Everybody's different. You need to find who is going to help bring in everybody else in the community."

In the same sense, "It's very difficult to replicate engagement done in mega-cities because smaller locations don't have the same population and resources," said Mauricio Garcia in an interview about the experience. "Practitioners go to large cities to study engagement, however, it's not realistic to apply in those cases in smaller cities."

It is important to understand the concrete needs of each community. In Cali, a large-scale survey and focus groups helped develop a strategy that was tailored to what communities needed and could offer, and could be implemented with a small department, staff and budget, thanks to the engagement of those communities.

¹⁸ Tenorio, interview.

¹⁹ Armitage, in *Cities of Service, Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana*.

²⁰ Tenorio, interview.

²¹ Ibid.

Change of government

Jorge Iván Ospina, Cali's new mayor elected in 2020, eliminated the previous administration's engagement strategy and replaced it with his own engagement concept, which did not continue the Roundtables program. While this particular participatory structure is no longer in place, communities in Cali may still be using the structures created by the Roundtables to organize and engage with each other without the aid of the government.

There has not been a systematic evaluation of the program to follow up on what happened to the Roundtables after the change of government, nor to measure their impact in the long term after their implementation.²²

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²² Tenorio, interview.