The 'Medellín Miracle': The politics of crisis, elites and coalitions

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This DLP Research Paper examines the political processes behind the 'Medellín Miracle'. Epidemic violence in Colombia's most industrialised city has dropped dramatically from its peak in 1991 of more than 380 murders per 100,000 people. Using a political analysis framework to investigate this remarkable change, the paper asks what factors contribute to long-term violence; what factors make it possible for critical junctures to become progressive spaces, and how do actors use them; and what motivates elites to redefine power dynamics that have so far favoured them. It concludes that formal legislative landmarks, such as Colombia's new constitution, are important, but changes in the 'informal rules of the game' – the social and cultural dynamics that frame the way that coalitions and leaders are formed – are also crucial.

Introduction

This DLP research paper is about the politics involved in the coalitions, leaders and changes that can emerge in the wake of crises. It is well known that critical junctures are crucial political moments that can rupture the political fabric, and transform social relations. However, the way these junctures are used by political actors, and how the spaces that open up in the wake of crises function to facilitate change is underexplored. In analysing the case of violence reduction, urban peace-building and development in Medellín, Colombia, this study

will use a political analysis to better understand how critical junctures can be used beneficially to advance democratic, peaceful and equitable socio-economic development in a conflict situation.

Key findings

- **Understanding the structural context is crucial**: Long-term, high levels of violence are the result of a structural context in which violent actors are able to gain power and violence becomes part of the everyday political processes. These structural factors include inequality, exclusion, lack of state monopoly over legitimate use of force, and the blurring of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political actors.

- **Specific factors turn critical junctures into opportunities**: Critical junctures can be used as progressive spaces and important factors that determine whether change will be progressive include the presence of external actors and funding, the range of political actors who all perceive that they would benefit from a reduction of the threat, and institutional changes at local, national and global level.

- **Understanding the agency of political actors is crucial**: Political actors can use the spaces created by critical junctures to influence the agenda, gain a seat at the table and collaborate with the 'powers-that-be' while also chal-

lenging the power dynamics that maintain them. New political actors can also emerge in these processes.

- **The position and motivation of elites is important politically**: Traditional elites can be involved in processes of change if they perceive that they would benefit from a reduction in the threat, if their agenda coincides to a certain extent with the agenda of those who want reform, and if change can be understood in certain senses as a reaffirmation of their power.

- **Change is a long-term process**: Tensions between those who want reform and traditional elites are generated in processes of change, and change has to be seen as a long-term process.

Policy implications

- **External Actors**: External political actors, whether at national or international level, are crucial factors in processes of change.

- **Enacting the agenda**: Fora to discuss and develop agendas are vital, but not sufficient to implement change. Coalitions and compromise are crucial factors for policy implementation.

- **Elites are crucial in processes of change**: Forming coalitions with the powers-that-be is a necessary element of enacting change, but can also introduce tensions into the process.

- **Politics is as important as policy**: Political changes in who has the power to define an agenda, sit at the table and enact change are as important as the direct impact of certain projects and the policies themselves.

Medellín, Colombia, was once the most murderous city on earth. In the 1980s and 90s, the city became known as the epicentre of the global trade in cocaine, and Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel is largely seen as responsible for the astonishing increase in violence at this time. At its peak in 1991, there were 381 murders per 100,000 people in the city. This figure was almost 40 times the UN's definition of epidemic violence at 10 per 100,000, and even compares unfavourably with the Colombian average for that year of 90 per 100,000. In addition

to the extreme levels of violence perpetrated and orchestrated by the Cartel, violence involving paramilitaries, urban militia and, indeed, the state became endemic in Medellín, and created a situation in which violence became 'banal'.

It would appear, however, that Medellín's darkest days have passed, and the city is now becoming known for the astonishing decline in violence that has occurred over the last 20 years. The statistics – although showing that Medellín still has some way to go – are now comparable with major cities in the US, and the murder rate in Medellín for 2011 was 31.4 per 100,000. This sharp decline, known as the 'Medellín Miracle' has become associated with the approach to urban development pioneered in the city known as 'social urbanism'. Social urbanism is an umbrella term for the policies enacted in Medellín in the late 1990s and early 2000s to address the 'historical social debt' owed by the city's elites to marginalised and poorer areas.

Investments in infrastructure, public transport and conspicuous architectural projects in the poorest areas of the city were designed to address the inequitable development of the past that had led to the outskirts of the city becoming neglected and excluded. This approach won Medellín the Urban Land Institute's award of 'Innovative City of the Year, 2013', sponsored by Citibank and the Wall Street Journal.

However, despite these successes, many fear that the focus has been on changing the city's image rather than the deep-rooted, political causes of the unrest, and that many of the policies associated with social urbanism re-affirm as much as challenge elite power and dominance.

Political processes

This DLP Research Paper examines the political processes behind the 'Medellín Miracle', in particular the coalitions, political spaces, and compromises that were behind the diagnosis of the city's problems as being rooted in inequality and marginalisation, and the subsequent formulation of appropriate policies.

When the violence in Medellín was recognised as a crisis in 1991, political spaces opened up in which community organisations and social movements had a seat at the table with the city's notoriously exclusive and protectionist elites. As a result of these political changes, a new political party, Compromiso Ciudadano, was formed and its leader, Sergio Fajardo, eventually took office as Mayor of the city in 2004.

The changes in the political fabric in Medellín and the transformations in its urban development policies were far more complex than the term 'miracle' suggests. They involved constitutional changes at national level, pressure from global economic forces, participation from a range of grassroots organisations and social movements, and, crucially in terms of being able to enact a new agenda, the collaboration of the city's business and political elites.

The discursive, institutional and political spaces which opened up in the wake of Medellín's crisis, and the broader, national and global transformations that were underway at this time, changed the way that power was gained and exercised in Medellín and arguably reduced the prominence of violence in power struggles there.

Methodology

By focusing on the political processes behind the 'miracle', this paper is framed by the DLP's method of political analysis which focuses on processes of structure and agency that brings out the power dynamics inherent in crisis and change. Based on interviews with leaders from the city's political and business elites, social movements and community organisations, this paper examines the power dynamics behind the violence, the politics of the transition in the early 90s, and how this crisis was marshalled by political actors from various perspectives to develop innovative approaches to urban violence.

The research questions framing this paper are:

- What structural and institutional factors contribute to long-term and high levels of violence?

- What structural and institutional factors enable critical junctures (CJs) to become progressive spaces?

- How do actors use these spaces?

- How do elites see their own involvement? What motivates them to take part in a process that almost by definition entails a redefinition of power dynamics that to date have favoured them?

- What tensions are generated by these processes of change?

The empirical research was conducted over several visits to Medellín in 2011 and 2012, with an extended visit in July/August 2012. Fieldwork comprised interviews and focus groups with leaders who were involved in the political changes instigated by the recognition that the violence was at crisis point in 1991. These leaders were drawn from the city's political and business elites, social movements and community organisations. Documents from the period, including reports generated by investigations into the violence at local, national and international level, as well as press coverage, were also analysed. The specific focus on Medellín and the political changes of the last twenty years is placed in political and historical context with reference to scholarly work on Colombia's history of violence, trajectory towards democracy, and political and constitutional changes of the late 20th Century.

Structure of the paper

The introduction to this paper introduces the DLP's framework for analysis and how this relates to the research questions listed above and the specifics of the Medellín case. The main body of this paper has two parts.

Part 1, 'Medellín: Conflict and Crisis', provides a political analysis of how endemic violence developed. The focus here is on the structures that frame the way power is attained and retained in Medellín in the broader context of Colombia's ongoing multi-dimensional conflicts between state, guerrilla, paramilitary and narcoterrorism elements. Using the DLP's framework, we argue that vast

inequality, the exclusivity of the city's elites, and the failure of formal powers to ensure citizens' security led to a situation in which violent actors were able to gain power and violence entered into the 'common sense' of how politics was conducted. A number of factors related to national level conflicts are involved in Medellín's troubles, including the exclusivity and lack of legitimacy of the political class, vast inequality and the inability of citizens to ensure their own security in such an endemically violent context.

The Cartel, urban militia, and paramilitary groups were able to gain power by promising work, upward mobility and security in a context where the state had failed in this duty. Populist politics blurred the line between formal and informal political actors, and violence became part of the political everyday.

These dynamics illustrate the importance of an analysis of violence as a political process. However, the structural factors in no way pre-determine the violence. They are co-constructed, negotiated and marshalled by political agents whose aims and motives have to be analysed for the crisis of violence and the miracle to be understood.

In **Part 2, 'The Miracle'**, we introduce the policies and projects that are most associated with the Medellín Miracle, before looking at the political coalitions and leaders that made these policies feasible.

The question framing the analysis of these polices here is in what ways do they represent a rupture or a continuity of the political dynamics – particularly the exclusivity of the city's elites, inequality, exclusion, lack of legitimacy and populism – that underpinned much of Medellín's violence. The argument here is that when Medellín's violence was recognised as a crisis, certain coalitions and political spaces were enabled that ultimately challenged some of the political underpinnings of the violence.

This is the focus of **Part 2, Section 1, 'Critical junctures and political work'**. There were several key initiatives in the early 1990s that were produced by and enabled political changes in the city. These included the creation of a special Presidential Programme for Medellín in 1992, the subsequent development of International Seminars for Future Alternatives for Medellín, and numerous official Working Groups dedicated to developing specific policy initiatives. These new political spaces, energised by the recognition that the city was in crisis, enabled new coalitions to be formed and agendas to be developed.

In **Section 2 of Part 2, 'The rules of the game: formal and informal'**, we take a further step back and look at the long-term, national and global institutional changes and developments that also framed the miraculous decline in violence. The changes in Medellín include new coalitions, innovative approaches and policies, and the emergence of new political agents and agency. They have coincided with, resulted from and in some cases given rise to institutional processes that have changed the political landscape.

These processes have included formal legislative landmarks such as the new constitution; the popular election of mayors, and extradition agreements with the USA; and, crucially, changes in the 'informal rules of the game' – the social and cultural dynamics and changing politics that often elude analysis, but frame the way that coalitions and leaders are formed. However, we can also see the way in which values and politics associated with the status quo are recreated through these processes of change.

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