Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana

An **Engaged Cities Award** case study created by Cities of Service in partnership with 2018 award winner Santiago de Cali, Colombia.

Executive Summary

Santiago de Cali, Colombia's third-most-populous city, suffered from a high rate of violence, poor relationships between neighbors, and a deep mistrust of public officials. Mayor Maurice Armitage and the city's Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat sought to address this social breakdown by helping the city's most socioeconomically challenged neighborhoods develop *mesas de cultura ciudadana* (civic culture councils). The city has successfully developed 15 councils, in which neighbors work together on initiatives such as park revitalization or youth arts programs in order to build trust between neighbors and inspire confidence in civic institutions.

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The Challenge

Nestled in a valley in the southwestern corner of Colombia, Santiago de Cali is the country's third-largest city, with 2.3 million inhabitants. Long a small regional capital compared to the country's bigger cities — capital Bogotá and economic powerhouse Medellín — Cali was a small city surrounded by agricultural land for much of its history, starting with its founding by a Spanish conquistador in 1537.

Located near Pacific gold mines, Cali remained a relatively small outpost until an urbanization boom in the second half of the 20th century, when the city regularly posted 30 to 40 percent population increases between national census counts, which were conducted every eight to 12 years. From 1951 to 1964, the city population more than doubled.

In 1971, Cali became the first Colombian city to host the Pan American Games, an event that necessitated urban revitalization and investment in sports infrastructure that earned the city a reputation as Colombia's sports capital.

That civic high point was replaced with a civic low point in the 1980s and 1990s, when the city became home to the Cali cartel, a narcotics trafficking organization that battled the rival Medellín cartel. Following the assassination of Medellín drug trafficker Pablo Escobar in 1993, the Cali cartel controlled up to 90 percent of the global cocaine trade, as well as many of the major political and business institutions in Cali.

Narco-trafficking created a devastating culture of violence in the city, which had a homicide rate of 394 per 100,000 in 1991, just shy of the 400 murders per 100,000 statistic that gave Medellín a reputation as the most violent city in the world that same year.

The deleterious impact of narco-trafficking was compounded by the effects of Colombia's armed conflict, which began in the 1960s and only reached a tentative peace in 2016, halting fighting between the left-leaning FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rebels and right-wing paramilitary groups. Decades of conflict in the Colombian countryside had forced 5 million people from their homes. Roughly 200,000 refugees of the conflict settled in Cali, where, possibly for the first time, they encountered people from other ethnic and regional backgrounds. Demobilized militants also resettled in larger cities like Cali. Sometimes, they ended up in neighborhoods in proximity to their former enemies.

This rural-to-urban migration, together with decades of armed conflict and drug trafficking, led to a culture of conflict over daily aspects of city life.

For example, in a 2016 survey of Cali residents, 49.6 percent of respondents reported that a neighbor played music too loudly in the last year. More anecdotally, city government officials also recorded incidents of sometimes violent neighborhood conflict over noisy quarrels between neighbors, failure to clean up after pets in public space, and improper disposal and burning of solid waste.

According to a survey prepared by Corpovisionarios, the consulting firm started by former Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus[1], Cali had an interpersonal trustworthiness rating of 5.99 out

[1]Antanas Mockus pioneered both social science research and public policy intervention to promote better civic relationships in Colombia. The survey asked 54 questions of 1,843 people with a margin of error of 3 percent.

of 10 in 2016. Ninety percent of Caleños had low confidence in public institutions, the lowest score among Colombia's three largest cities, and the perception of honesty in public workers had declined steadily since 2010. These figures follow a history of pervasive corruption in Cali's government. For example, Emcali, the public water, energy, and telecom utility, was notorious for kickbacks and inflated contracts in the 1980s and 1990s.

"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, PROJECT MANAGER FOR MESAS DE CULTURA CIUDADANA

"In Colombia we have had a political habit of mishandling policies regarding finances," said Mayor Maurice Armitage, who entered office in 2016. "Politicking has been bad and has influenced the image people have of the officials."

In 2018, Mayor Armitage issued an anti-corruption plan, including detailed charts and tables illustrating public processes and highlighting decision points prone to corruption in order to encourage more transparency.

The city is ethnically diverse, with 44 percent mixed-race residents — the largest single category — followed by 30 percent white, 20 percent Afro-descended, and 4 percent indigenous.

"Colombia is multicultural, but it doesn't have a strong sense of identity," says Juan Carlos Tenorio, leader of Mobilization and Community Initiatives, who is the project manager for the mesas de cultura ciudadana program. "We are constructing a national identity, and in Cali we are just now getting to know ourselves."

The Solution: Mesas de Cultura Ciudadana

The mesas de cultura ciudadana evolved out of Mayor Armitage's platform to improve education, increase incomes, and promote civic culture. Through these councils, residents work together on initiatives to build trust between neighbors and inspire confidence in civic institutions.

In 2016, Armitage implemented a broad restructuring of city government operations that included the establishment of the Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat with a mission, according to a government decree, to "design and implement policies, programs, and projects that prevent violence, peacefully resolve conflicts, promote and protect human rights, and foment a culture and pedagogy of peace and reconciliation."

The Secretariat is now led by a secretary, the equivalent of a deputy mayor position, with two distinct city departments that were recently combined: the Sub-Secretariat of Prevention and Civic Culture, responsible for violence prevention and civic culture and which oversees

the councils, and the Sub-Secretariat of Human Rights and Peacebuilding. The department employs 200 people with an annual budget of around US$5 million.

One of the Secretariat's main initiatives is the development of civic culture councils, which are part of a 25-year effort to de-escalate violent conflict in Cali.

"The presence of conflict in a community is characteristic for many Colombian communities," said Secretary of Peace and Civic Culture Rocío Gutiérrez Cely. "We are marked by conflict — we have turned into a very creative people that searches for solutions in the absence of a strong, stable state."

The city government of Santiago de Cali defines civic culture as citizen participation in civic life that fosters mutual respect, restores citizen trust in government, and establishes neighborhood pride. Cooperation, dialogue, self-reflection, and tolerance contribute to a peaceful co-existence.

Mayor Armitage's initiatives build upon the violence-prevention efforts of former mayor Rodrigo Guerrero, a public health scholar. Mayor Guerrero created Programa Desarrollo, Seguridad y Paz (Peace, Security, and Development Program — DESEPAZ) during his first term in office (1992–1994). For example, research done during his administration supported a curfew for liquor sales on weekends, and temporary bans on carrying handguns, such as after the typical payday, given the propensity of the use of guns to escalate a dispute over an unpaid debt.

Guerrero served a second term from 2012–2015. Anticipating the neighborhood-specific approach of the civic culture councils, he created a municipal strategy called TIO (Territorios de Inclusión y Oportunidades, or Territories of Inclusion and Opportunity) focused on 18 low-income neighborhoods throughout the city, which was continued by Mayor Armitage. The TIO program facilitated the establishment of approximately 80 microfinance institutions funded by community capital, 150 soup kitchens, and 11 street repaving projects with locally hired workers.

Guerrero's administration also published a 32-page civic culture manual, "Cali Cívica e Incluyente," in 2015. It covered six topic areas: healthy surroundings, conflict resolution, democratic participation, respect for the environment, use and care of public space, and

respect for neighbors. Over 100 citizens from the neighborhoods where TIO was active contributed ideas to the manual.

"The manual was successful in planting a seed to put the word 'civility' in people's mouths," Tenorio said.

TIO laid the groundwork for the civic culture councils by creating a municipal program targeted in specific neighborhoods showing high rates of socio-economic vulnerability. The manual also showed the willingness of citizens to participate in a program for civic cultural education. In the process, the manual-writing experience helped the city identify community leaders who became the key players for the civic culture councils.

"Soliciting ideas for the manual became a prototype for the councils," Tenorio said.

Civic Culture Councils

In 2016, Mayor Armitage directed the Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat to develop projects that reduce violence and improve civic culture. The Secretariat created the councils as a way to create civic interventions and bring the ideals of the manual to life. The councils engaged residents in predetermined neighborhoods selected based on the TIO program. They meet regularly to plan a civic activity as a model of civic behavior — a park cleanup, a youth soccer tournament, a community art class. They received a small stipend from the city to implement the activity.

Transforming Santa Rosa School

Gang and drug activity made getting to school difficult for students of Santa Rosa School, located in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Cali. A border between rival gangs ran close to the school, and gang members regularly recruited students near the schoolyard. The council organized community members to clean up green areas around the school and recruited former gang members to paint murals on the walls around the sports court. The area is now clean and well lit, making it difficult for drug and gang activity to continue. Attendance at the school has doubled.

The Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat staffs the councils with 10 professionals who have backgrounds in fields like psychology, education, history, sociology, and social work to help bring ideas to fruition.

Importantly, the Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat is noted for its apolitical stance in a sometimes partisan city government. "There is no politics on this team. Here, you enter for your professional talent," Tenorio said.

Ideally, each council produces four to six activities throughout the year, including one activity per year during the city's annual Civic Culture Week. Councils are steadily increasing the number of activities over time.

"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," said Mayor Armitage. "We tell them: if you are interested in working for your community, city hall will help you. Let's work hand in hand."

Nuts and Bolts: How It Works

Civic culture councils are typically comprised of five to eight community members, though some are as large as 20. Adult women are the most common members, but there is at least one majority-male council. The councils operate horizontally, with no hierarchy. Members democratically elect a spokesperson (*vocero*), but it is clear that the role is to communicate with the neighborhood, not to lead the council. The actions taken by the councils benefit about 15,000 city residents who live in the areas where the councils implement their activities.

Councils have been established in 15 *comunas* (districts that include several neighborhoods) of the city, and 10 are currently active. The councils meet about twice per month, ideally in the *comuna*'s small administrative center. Schools and parks are other meeting places. Private homes are used only if necessary in order to avoid any impression that certain members have more power over the council.

The staff assigned to the councils are mostly on short-term contracts, however, which creates a continuity challenge as more experienced members may cycle out based on the fluctuations in city budgeting. The Secretariat is chronically underfunded, with only US$500 per year available in stipend funds for each council. The total project budget in 2018 was US$38,018.

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

While participation in the previous municipal administration's TIO program provides some continuity for the Peace and Civic Culture Secretariat, the process of identifying community leaders and encouraging them to voluntarily start a civic culture council can be slow and arduous, taking eight months on average.

"This is the hardest part of all," Tenorio said. "When someone from the city government comes by, there is very low trust and high skepticism. The team's empathy matters greatly."

Secretariat staff visit with the council members at least once every two weeks, from initial contact with potential members through the establishment of a working council. Staff members stress that official bimonthly visits generally do not suffice and that staffers must be prepared to blur professional and personal lines in order to connect with a community, for example by attending birthday parties and other social events in order to gain trust.

"It is inevitable that you visit more often than two times per month," said Diana Castillo, who staffs the council in Comuna 15, a largely Afro-Colombian district. "When they call us, we are ready."

Along the way, Secretariat staff help guide the council's efforts without co-opting the initiative. They might encourage the council to discuss the problems facing the community, such as parks that have been taken over by local gangs or public spaces overflowing with trash, and then offer ideas based on their experiences. The staff can serve as a sounding board and help determine which ideas are practical and which are not feasible.

"The mesas always have ideas, we help them understand what is possible," Castillo says.

Making Peace with a Soccer Tournament

The council in Comuna 20 organized a soccer tournament for youth in the area, including members of local gangs. The council helped form the teams, provided equipment, and paid referees. More than 100 youth participated in the tournament, peacefully bringing together rival gangs members for the first time. Through programs like this, in concert with other efforts, the city is reducing violence between gangs and has helped register more than 1,000 at-risk youth for gang rehabilitation programs.

For example, Comuna 15's council organized a cleanup effort along Corredor 35, a main road clogged with illegal dumping of construction debris, furniture, and mattresses that blocked vehicles from traveling down the road. While the neighborhood has regular household trash pick-up, home renovation projects are commonly performed by residents themselves in a neighborhood largely established and built by squatters. This creates debris that must be

trucked out of the neighborhood at personal expense, a cost which many residents choose not to bear by dumping material in the street.

After removing 4 tons of garbage, the council launched public education campaigns to discourage further dumping and promote proper disposal from house renovation and construction. The council also planted trees and painted walls to make the thoroughfare feel like the shared public space that it is.

The Secretariat facilitated the initiative by coordinating the trash pick-up with the city's solid waste collection utility and delivering a letter from the council to the city's environmental department to request the street trees. In addition to the $500 provided by the Secretariat, the council raised $250 from local businesses for the beautification project.

Because the civic culture councils program is relatively new, data about long-term impact is not available. However, participants in Comuna 15 and other districts report that projects like this have reduced illegal dumping and drug dealing in public spaces and increased connections between neighbors.

Four-Step Process

Such initiatives are the end result of a four-step process:

1. Establishing a shared vision
2. Self-diagnosing the community based on the civic culture survey's indicators
3. Establishing a basic agreement for how the council will function
4. Executing an initiative

The Secretariat plays a key role in each step of the process. The shared vision is a one-page document that the Secretariat crafted with input from community leaders. It describes the community's aspiration to enhance the social fabric of neighborhoods and participate in civic life through collaborative activities. The goal is to "empower new generations to build a peaceful territory and be examples of peace." In 2018, all 15 councils had adopted the same shared vision.

Next comes the self-diagnosis, which is tailored to each council based on responses to a series of guiding questions, including "How do you want this council to develop?" and "What is missing from this community?" Secretariat staff facilitate a self-diagnosis session in person, where the councils break into groups of three and answer the questions, creating responses by consensus. Secretariat staff serve as notetakers and write down a self-diagnosis based on the responses. This is reviewed and agreed upon by the entire council by the end of the meeting. The self-diagnosis is also useful to reveal group dynamics where certain council members might have interpersonal issues that require attention.

The third step is an agreement on how the council functions. All councils have basic rules like arrive on time, do not abuse the council's group text chat with personal messages or late-night messages, do not use the council for personal political gain, and allow everyone a chance to speak. Currently, the Secretariat is pushing the councils to revise these agreements to address more complicated issues, including how to resolve internal disputes, distribute activities equitably throughout large districts with multiple neighborhoods, and handle the natural fatigue of volunteer efforts.

Finally, the public-facing output of the councils are their initiatives. The activities undertaken by the councils vary widely and often reflect a neighborhood's ethnic identity. For example, majority Afro-descendant communities tend to employ music, dance, and other forms of Afro-Colombian culture in their civic culture activities. Rural districts with a larger indigenous presence tend to pursue environmentally themed initiatives.

Some of the more standard activities have included youth soccer tournaments and a school cleanup that helped increase student enrollment. There is no template or set menu of activities, however. One council curated a traveling photography exhibit of the district's past, present, and future to build a sense of neighborhood solidarity and shared history. The council 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 council 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.

In recent years, the murder rate in Cali has dropped to its lowest level in 25 years, with 51.5 murders per 100,000 in 2017. City officials and citizens also report that trust is growing in participating neighborhoods. While there is not yet definitive quantitative evidence that the councils have improved the city's civic culture or helped reduce its homicide rate, there is ample anecdotal evidence that residents feel they have begun to reclaim their neighborhoods. Staff also report that these efforts, coupled with other city programs, have helped the city recruit more than 1,000 at-risk youth for its gang rehabilitation and intervention program.

Keys to Success

Secretariat officials emphasize several factors that make a council successful. Above all, the staff must identify leaders who will move a project forward locally. That process can sometimes falter. For example, in one comuna, two strong leaders emerged — one with past ties to narco-trafficking — that led to an interpersonal conflict and the necessity of starting the council over from scratch. Another council also proved difficult because the neighborhood is highly polarized politically and the activity became attached to a particular political candidate, a practice that is forbidden by the Secretariat, which strives to keep the councils nonpartisan.

The staff's own professional background has also played a key role. "It is absolutely fundamental that you have people in social science who are capable of an analytical reading of communities," said Gutiérrez. "They must attend to the human issue, as we encounter human beings with their own histories." In addition to those who have been educated in fields such as social work and psychology, one council member is a former transit cop.

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SANTIAGO DE CALI MAYOR MAURICE ARMITAGE

Gutiérrez underscores the Secretariat's role as facilitators, not program leaders. "Solutions to a city's problems will not come exclusively from the state," she says. "Many times the solutions are in communities themselves and you have to understand what communities are doing — whether it works or not."

The Secretariat hopes to instill the importance of civic culture throughout city government by drafting a public policy that would provide guidelines for how municipal teams can instill civic culture norms in their operations, improve how the councils interact with city government from an ad hoc to a more permanent basis, and ensure citizen participation in public policy.

"The premise is that the community has ownership over this policy," says Mayor Armitage. "It's hard for the next mayor not to involve them. People expect it."

This effort amplifies the city's belief that changes in civic culture are medium- and long-term projects driven by a civic sense of ownership and responsibility for daily life in Cali. As Gutiérrez notes, "We are delivering power back to citizens so that they take over their public space without abdicating the important role of the state. The problems of one territory are everyone's problems."

Citizen Story: Magnolia Aguirre

Magnolia Aguirre, a native Caleña, is one of the spokespeople for the civic culture council in Comuna 15, a district of about 125,000 residents where she has lived for 18 years and has long been involved in community causes. She has watched the district change over time with the influx of people from other parts of Colombia fleeing violent conflict and rural impoverishment. Today, Comuna 15 has 22 formal neighborhoods and 18 squatter settlements that have increasingly become integrated parts of the city.

Aguirre takes these changes in stride and recognizes why these new residents moved to her district. "People came to search for other opportunities — to save their lives and have a little peace from the violence they had lived through," she says.

The community response to the newcomers, she says, has been largely welcoming. "We received these people with lots of warmth, love, and respect," she says. However, she acknowledges a certain culture clash. "They had habits very different from ours," she says.

"Government participation enriches us because they listen to community leaders. We come up with a thousand ideas and they work to help us improve our ideas."

MAGNOLIA AGUIRRE, CIVIC CULTURE COUNCIL MEMBER

Specifically, she cited habits around trash disposal and playing music at a loud volume as perennial complaints. But, she says, the civic culture council has been helpful in turning around some of the community's bad habits, as well as improving the public spaces that had previously lacked public investment.

"Eighteen years ago it was very disorganized — the parks weren't taken care of, the public spaces, canals, main thoroughfares," she says. "All of the community spaces were in precarious condition and lacked electricity. A group of leaders said we want to see a different neighborhood with gardens and public spaces revitalized for everybody. The leaders sought a strategy by working with the city government. We worked little by little on a volunteer basis."

Aguirre considers her city fortunate to have a government that prioritizes civic culture and welcomes the municipal presence. "Government participation enriches us because they listen to community leaders," she says. "We come up with a thousand ideas and they work to help us improve our ideas."

Aguirre credits the Secretariat with helping her and fellow leaders on the council learn skills such as how to articulate themselves more professionally, take photographs, and conduct interviews. "The staff are very dedicated to our comuna," she says.

Although challenges remain — chiefly from the limited funding available to execute initiatives — Aguirre believes the nearly four years of the council and its prototype under the TIO program have helped the city and council members make inroads in Comuna 15 and started to change perceptions of the district.

"We had a stigma," she says. "Few know about the changes that have taken place here."

Cities of Service is an independent nonprofit organization that helps mayors and city leaders tap the knowledge, creativity, and service of citizens to solve public problems and create vibrant cities. We work with cities to build city-led, citizen-powered initiatives that target specific needs, achieve long-term and measurable outcomes, improve the quality of life for residents, and build stronger cities. Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of more than 250 cities, representing more than 73 million people across the Americas and Europe.

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The Cities of Service Engaged Cities Award shines a light on cities that are collaborating with citizens to meet pressing local challenges in diverse and creative ways. Santiago de Cali, Colobmia was one of three winners of the inaugural Engaged Cities Award in 2018 for its civic culture councils program.

Each year, Cities of Service recognizes cities that are effectively involving their citizens to do things like reduce community violence, produce better budgets, create safer streets, and build stronger communities. The strategies of the Engaged Cities Award winners and finalists are models for other cities around the world to learn from, adapt, and improve upon. Cities of Service works with winners and finalists to develop resources to share with other cities so they can implement similar programs in their own communities.