



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

May 13, 2014

## World Urban Forum 7: Policy Lessons from Colombia

**F**or one week in early April, Sara Swartz (Universitas Programme of the KIP International School), Shauna MacKinnon (Manitoba Research Alliance [MRA] and University of Winnipeg [UW]) and Lynne Fernandez (MRA and CCPA MB) visited Medellin, Colombia to take part in the seventh World Urban Forum (WUF7). Last Spring, KIP, UW, UM, the Manitoba government, MRA, CCPA MB and other Winnipeg community-based organizations signed a Memorandum of Collaboration and have since begun working on an online journal highlighting “innovative practices of inclusive urban development and poverty reduction” <http://www.universitasforum.org>”.

While in Medellin we connected with several groups involved in grassroots community organizing in poor urban areas. We hosted a session during the conference called: *Towards a global network of inclusive urban development* and were joined with researchers and practitioners who shared development stories from Colombia, Mexico and Peru. Shauna introduced the approximately 150 people attending our session to Winnipeg, with a focus on the inter-generational learning approach developing in the North End of Winnipeg on and near Selkirk Avenue.

Our aim was to share our stories and to solicit interest in further collaboration. Few people had heard of Winnipeg and even fewer understood that a Canadian city could have problems such as poverty and racism.

It is impossible to draw direct comparisons between Medellin and Winnipeg. Medellin

is a bustling city of three million people, in one of the most unequal countries in the world. Fully 32 percent of Colombians live in poverty. Many of Colombia’s problems are the result of the violence and corruption that has come from widespread involvement in drug cultivation, processing and trafficking, as well as from the revolutionary guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries who filled the power vacuum after drug-lord Pablo Escobar’s death over 20 years ago.

Canada’s problems pale in comparison. A relatively small number—8.8 percent of Canadians, 8.9 percent of Manitobans, and 10 percent of the Winnipeg population lived below the low-income cutoff (LICO -after tax) in 2011. And while violent crime is a concern, it is nowhere near that experienced in the Medellin, which has only recently shaken its reputation as the most violent city in the world.

Despite the differences, there are unfortunate similarities between Colombia and Canada —Medellin and Winnipeg. Poverty and inequality disproportionately affects women, children, Afro-Colombians, Indigenous groups and displaced persons in Colombia. In Canada, poverty is most prevalent in First Nation communities; in Winnipeg it’s concentrated in inner-city neighbourhoods where the Aboriginal population is large and growing. Not surprisingly, violent crime and street gang activity is concentrated in poor neighbourhoods in both

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CCPA-MB  
765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

[ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca)

website

[www.policyalternatives.ca/  
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)  
blog

[www.policyfix.ca](http://www.policyfix.ca)  
twitter

@ccpamb



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cities. But unlike Winnipeg, the poor in Medellin often live in neighbourhoods far from the centre of the city. Miles of substandard, informal housing blankets the mountainside surrounding the city. Like inner-city neighbourhoods in Winnipeg, these “barrios” are particularly dangerous as many young people with few opportunities turn to the drug trade. Herein lies a devastating commonality that links these two different cities: the damaging effects of poverty and the devastation it leaves in its wake for poor families, poor communities, and the implications this can have for entire cities.

We found reprieve and hope in in Moravia, one of Medellin’s poor barrios. This community used to house a city garbage dump. The women who hosted the tour told stories of gasses escaping and setting the informal housing on fire; of children losing their hair and nails because of the contamination. They told of the lost generation of husbands and sons recruited by Pablo Escobar – whose name they still whispered behind cupped hands, as if to ward off his memory. And they told of the violence wrecked on them by the paramilitaries who seized control after Escobar’s death.

Still they found the courage to insist on change and thanks to their efforts and support from the municipal government, more than 2,000 people were moved from the dump into decent housing. The dump itself has been transformed into a park, with plants to aid drainage and greenhouses for vegetables. We also visited the community centre where children are encouraged to get involved with recreation rather than joining gangs.

Our guides reminded us of the women leaders we know in our own inner-city neighbourhoods. The parallels of resilience and the significant role women play in protecting and nurturing their communities, in spite of seemingly insurmountable challenges left us with a sense of solidarity with the wonderful women who welcomed us and shared their stories of despair and hope.

But as we explored the city further we were struck by one more important difference: the extent to which the City of Medellin is committed to turning their city and its reputation around, as opposed to Winnipeg which seems incapable of responding to its challenges.

The best example is the way Medellin has extended its modern and efficient metro system to reach the outlying poor communities. At the end of the Line B Metro artery, you get off the metro and get into a cable car (called Metro Cable) that takes off up the mountain slope, stopping at two stations in the informal housing that climbs almost to the third and last station, located high above the city. Once at the top, you’re greeted by modern public-housing apartment high rises, with paved streets and bike paths winding between landscaped green spaces. People from the informal housing are being moved into the public housing in such a way as to minimize disruption. Whether families are in the new area at the top, or still in the lower-lying informal housing, they have access to reliable, affordable and efficient public transportation that allows them to get to the city centre so they can work or attend school. This ingenious solution to a transportation quandary has dramatically changed people’s lives, as explained in this video: <http://gondolaproject.com/2011/02/15/video-gondola-transit-in-medellin/>.

The way in which the state has combined the public transportation system with investment in public housing means that two of the most important aspects of poor people’s lives are addressed together: housing and transportation.

We returned to Winnipeg with a sense of hope; hope engendered by seeing what communities, when supported by government, can accomplish and how much difference the state can make. But we also are left asking a lot of questions about why that sort of transformation is so slow in coming to Winnipeg.

*Lynne Fernandez, Shauna MacKinnon and Sara Swartz*

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CCPA-MB  
765 Main St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R2W 3N5

phone  
(204) 927-3200

email  
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

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[www.policyalternatives.ca/  
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