

# Overcoming the Invisible Boundaries of an Informal Neighborhood: A Youth Initiative in Itagüi, Colombia

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## Introduction: Violence in Itagüi in the 1990s

This case study reports from an extraordinary initiative, started and maintained by group of young local men and women, responding to drastically increased level of violence after Colombia's maximum Security prison was had been located in their neighbourhood.

The Municipality of Itagüi forms in the Southern section of the greater Medellín Metropolitan Region in Colombia's state of Antioquia, and counts a population of 258,520 inhabitants. The municipality is divided into a six comunas apart from the rural territory, and each comuna hosts between 4 and 17 districts. We are located in the community San Francisco which belongs to the Comuna 3 with the highest population number (8,850 people), of which approximately two thousand are adolescents between 14 and 26 years of age.

In 1990, the Maximum Security Prison was built in Itagüi right next to community San Francisco and was referred to as "a new prison for the repentant drug dealers of Medellín" (El País, December 9, 1990). It' special status is grounded on a "treaty of transitional justice" (conflict management in a period of transition), which had been signed between the Colombian drug traffickers<sup>1</sup> and the Colombian Justice Department. This treaty allowed the drug traffickers, known as "Los Extraditables"<sup>2</sup> to be imprisoned in Colombia instead of being extradited to the USA in exchange for disclosing certain types of information.

When drug lords arrived, life changed for the neighbourhood close by – and not only because of stigmatization that the presence of the prison created. The inmates still disposed of financial fortunes had close connections to the paramilitaries. From inside the prison they could organize targeted killings, persecution, disappearances, intra-urban

01.  
Except for Pablo Escobar who had declared war on the Government

02.  
"Los Extraditables" was an organization created by Colombian drug lords in the early 1980s. Their motto was: "We prefer a grave in Colombia to a prison the United States."  
(Wikipedia)

*Previous Page:*  
*Community Organization GRUPO AEQUUS: Education without Borders: Non-profit community organization for educational projects.*



displacement, and the death of social, labor, and political leaders (which actually still happens today). They started the recruitment of young people outside the prison who would exercise the killings, extortion, and trafficking of narcotic substances in their service. Meanwhile, women have been hired to visit the inmates, prostituted and abandoned later, not only by the inmates of the prison, but also by institutional members such as the police, military, and prison guards).

*Left:*  
Main road of San Francisco, Itagüi  
*Right:*  
Comunas of Itagüi

## 2000 and the arrival of paramilitary leaders

A key figure for violence the municipality of Itagüi was Diego Fernando Murillo, the boss of the criminal gang Bloque Cacique Nutibara, who appeared around 2001 (Noren, 2007: 62). This group fought a war against different other gangs to achieve the absolute rule and military hegemony of Medellín and its surroundings and turned Itagüi into one of the most violent places in the country, where street murder lured at virtually any street corner. Especially in San Francisco, even those who did submit to the Bloque Cacique Nutibara lived through violence, as members of different informal structures came to dispute the territory. Taxing for the “vaccine” (whether or not it is called by its real name, extortion) has become commonplace, with those who provide security seen almost heroically. Such security provision is exercised with impunity, which fosters an “invisible border”, arbitrarily created to mark territory or simply delete the other.

Territories are small independent republics, whose hierarchy is properly planned. The chief is called “el duro” (the tough one), “el boss”, “el patron”, and commands everyday life in the neighborhood. The man that is installed on the corner to monitor all movements of people sustains the power of “the boss” through money obtained from the sale of narcotics and “taxes” collected from retail traders or transporters. The “boss” is also shielded by a group of armed youths who have had other opportunities, but nonetheless ended up as actors in the conflict: it is a very tempting offer for a young man without study, without preparation, and with all the vital needs of a home to get involved in such groups.

Thus, not only men, but also women were recruited, the latter as a trophies of war, which worked to control the population. Ironically, those who sought to control the population often wished to do so through local



*Motos and women are status symbols for men in the youth gangs.*

*Photos: Kosta Mathéy*

action and accordingly sponsored social events with the hope that the population would legitimize their actions as community benefactors.

The “boss” has different strategies of social control at his disposal. On special dates, he donates gifts; congratulates moms on Mother’s Day; buys uniforms for the football team of the neighborhood; and provides community lunches. At Christmas, all children mysteriously receive a gift from Father Christmas and in the process, the “boss” becomes a respectable gentleman to be defended from the onslaught of the state, at least in the minds of people.

In 2003, under the government of Alvaro Uribe,<sup>3</sup> a demobilization process of the terrorist and ultra right group, the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), was began within the frame of the “Justice and Peace Act”. This law allowed the demobilization of 31,000 combatants, who could confess their crimes and receive a reduced imprisonment of 5 to 8 years maximum (Act 975 of 2005 Justice and Peace). Diego Fernando Murillo, alias “Don Berna” surrendered in December 2003 and eventually become the most significant paramilitary inmate at Itagüi prison.

Today, although insecurity has diminished, there is still violence between criminal gangs over various territories and the rearrangement of leadership, which continues to affect directly the population. Not only are the people living in Itagüi affected by the protracted violence but subsequent generations, who grew up without knowing their parents, also carried the burden of social stigma for the simple fact of inhabiting a territory socially marked as violent and insecure.

## **Results of the violence in the neighborhood of San Francisco de Itagüi**

### ***Invisible borders***

An invisible border is a means used by the gangs to control a territory and its population, often defining a neighborhood against another and preventing people from moving freely. Territory is sought for various reasons (including economic reasons or territorial strategy for the mobilization of weapons or drugs) with those desiring the territory gradually and arbitrarily marking it as if it were merely a border between two countries. The big difference, however, is that the boundaries between

03. Alvaro Uribe Vélez, born in Medellín where he was mayor in 1982 and Governor of Antioquia between 1995 and 1997, served as president of Colombia from 2002 to 2010. He was following a strong arm politics against the guerilla and some members of his government were accused for having close links with Paramilitary groups.



criminal organizations are invisible and, via the exercise of violence and threats, are imposed on the population through fear. In Itaquí, for a certain period, crossing the river to the neighbouring territory implied risk of life and therefore stopped completely.

### ***Collection of tax by criminal gangs: Extortion***

The idea of a “war tax” came from the nascent guerrilla movements of the 1950s as a way to sponsor confrontations with rival criminal gangs. Rapidly, groups made taxes a central purpose of their operations, for financing weapons, acquiring real estate, to bribe the police and to create a network of support for maintaining their established order of control. As the capital accumulation led to greater power by these groups, confrontations began to diminish,

Extortion also became an effective means to control the population because those who did not pay the tax received a form of retaliation that could increase from beatings and other physical attacks, or persecution to death. Anyone who owned a car or neighborhood store was required to pay a tax in order to carry out their day-to-day activities. Thus, extortion strongly influenced the economy of the district.

### ***Persecution of organizations and community leaders***

For criminal gangs, social organizations that were outside their control or supervision represented a virtual enemy. Usually, organization that arose from within the community – which often implicitly dealt with the defense of human rights– were turned into military targets by the gangs, particularly the leaders of such organizations. Many of these individuals were thus forced to leave their communities, while others were even exiled abroad. These instances occurred quite regularly, as the state was unable to effectively combat the criminal groups, or in many cases, directly supported them. A climate of anxiety was thus experienced across communities and their organizations, and the result was a lack of faith in the institutions that the state established to defend citizens. The abandonment of communities from state protection and the fear produced as a consequence allowed illegal groups to form a monopoly of influence, which left vacuum of justice that enabled everyday conflicts to escalate into violent reactions.

*Left:  
The  
geographically  
determined  
neighbourhood  
is the home of a  
youth gang  
Photo: Silvia  
Matuk*

*Right:  
The river valley  
looks like place  
to relax. But  
in reality it  
represents one  
of the invisible  
boundaries around  
San Francisco. In  
certain periods  
crossing that  
river was a deadly  
venture.  
Photo:  
Silvia Matuk*

### *How the Grupo Aequus proposal arose*

The attacks generated physical and symbolic violence, and the constant fear of violence in the population conditioned the formation of unarmed defense movements and groups. These organizations sought alternatives to violence, and particularly focused on preventing the recruitment of young people for the armed conflict. Throughout Colombian history, this kind of resistance that originated in the “popular sphere” tried to provide an alternative to the conflict. Therefore, the connotation ‘popular’ was stigmatized and used as a synonym for members of the insurgency or the political left. This very soon called the attention of the paramilitaries who started to pursue the groups and their social leaders whose projects conflicting with the right wing ideology of paramilitaries.

Being affected directly by the various mechanisms of illegal control exposed above, and having seen killed some of their closest friends by the gangs, a pacifist group, called Grupo Aequus: Education without Borders was born in San Francisco de Itagüi in 2011 with the aim to promote socially productive (instead of destructive) career opportunities to the youth in the neighborhood of San Francisco. Grupo Aequus is a non-profit community organization (not a foundation or a corporation) that “seeks to prepare and sensitize the general population, especially youth, to the need of entering public higher education, and accordingly, as part of their overall activities, provides educational tools that allow students to achieve academic study.”

The word aequus comes from Latin and means “equity”, and is intended to express an integral characteristic of the neighborhood San Francisco which they follow an aim. Through the choice of this term, the group seeks to recognize the value of solidarity in order to promote an organization that can transform the pessimistic mindset, inhibit urban violence, and promote inclusion. One of the specific goals of the organization is to implement a much more inclusive and liberating education system. In more concrete terms the group encourages young people to take charge of their own lives through educational processes and promote the free movement across the territory, both in terms of unhindered physical mobility across the territory as well as the movement of ideas for the prevention of violence in its various expressions.

*Yeyson Andrés Castañeda and  
Jhoan Stevens  
Arango, members  
of the AEQUUS  
group in their  
library office.  
Photo:  
Kosta Mathéy*



The founders of the initiative have had the opportunity to enter public higher education, and wanted to help other adolescents to equally achieve access to college through assisting them with their preparation for admission tests. Thousands of adolescents are unable to access higher education, as the costs for formal preparation for the tests are very restrictive. Moreover, public universities have limited places for applicants from lower economic situations; private universities are wholly inaccessible to these young people, on account of their higher tuition fees.

The organized program of AEQUUS began with two members giving classes to 11 young people living in the neighbourhood. Over a period of two years, this initiative has gathered 8 lecturers reaching 90 students from different neighborhoods. New educational programs were started to diversify the opportunities also students who for their educational background would have usually been excluded from such programs. Apart from the formal classes, the youth would gather voluntarily to share the knowledge that they had learned in the structured programs. English language classes for children and young people called "My Neighborhood Bilingual" have exposed adolescents to the world of language and travel. A group education approach has also fostered different environmental partnerships with corporations in order to generate leaders on environmental issues, which then can be contextualized to the needs of the community. A group for music has also introduced children and youth to guitar, while another group called "Young Writers" has allowed many young people to utilize their talent for reading and writing as a method of exposing their ideas. Finally, a dance and leisure group was created through which adolescents can learn regional music and Latin rhythms such as salsa, merengue, cumbia with other age groups, such as the elderly. The groups was granted use of a premise, which they transformed into a library and where neighbours could also find a space to gather, discuss or learn outside the often cramped and overpopulated homes.

These results have not only occurred at the high school level, but have also assisted younger students in achieving academic success. Of particular importance to the program has been the Pre Universitario offered by members that had recently started studying at the university and wanted to share their experiences with the next generation, who were also interested in studying.

Aequus actions do not only have an impact on the community, but also on the facilitators, i.e. on young people from the community who are committed to this project. A physics student at the University of Antioquia and co-founder of the group commented:

*"Since the beginning of Grupo Aequus we have initiated activities focused on solidarity and social responsibility in our community. This encouraged me to share my limited knowledge and experiences with those who wanted to grow academically and personally, and has enabled my community to address many social problems such as inequality, intolerance, violence, poverty, among others. But when it comes to poverty, we are not just talking about material poverty, but also about mental poverty. The group has generated a sense of belonging for me in my community,*

*countless experiences, meetings with a lot of great people, and significant academic growth, mainly in the area of knowledge development. (Yeyson Andres Castaneda Guzman)*

One of the participants of the educational project affirmed:

*“For me Aequus represents friendship, and that is what motivates me to do things for the group, no matter how small they are, I want to help them, they are my friends now, they work hard to alleviate the problems of society, they provide me with support and joy” (Deivy Alexander Marimón Gómez).*

To summarize, Grupo Aequus is based on the concept of communitarian education which is contextualized and can be adapted to the needs of the neighbourhood and is flexible enough so that individuals with different knowledge and human capital can participate enriching spaces of personal and academic growth. The results achieved so far include the following:

- In the popular neighborhoods of Colombia, especially in Medellín and its metropolitan area, street corners in popular neighborhoods are commonly the meeting sites for criminal gangs, where they plan illicit activities but also engage in threats, murder, or extortion. With the support of various social leaders, the AEQUUS community library was founded on one such corner. The role of the library is to provide free educational services to the community, such as the free use of internet for learning purposes, poetry classes, and different courses from Grupo Aequus (including English, literature, and math courses). The creation of this educational space is progressively changing the perception of spaces that have historically been identified as violent and dangerous spaces.

*Left:  
The premises of today's AEQUUS public library once used to be well known hang out for the members of the youth gangs.*

*Photo:  
Silvia Matuk*



*Right:  
The Medellín 'Metro Cable' is the public transport facility reaching out to (only a small number of) informal settlements on the hills. Photo:  
Silvia Matuk*

- With the entrance of many young people into the different educational groups, the community has stopped assuming that young people are the sole perpetrators of violence. Instead, community members started to perceive the youth as agents of change and social transformation.
- Gangs have acknowledged the group's non-offensive discourse, and accordingly allowed the movement of students without instigating

fear when they cross the so-called invisible borders.

- One of the most important results is that many children and adolescents see educational programs as part of their life project, and something through which they can grow as active citizens. In this way, their qualities and potentials are recognized and they get to use them to involve other kids and young people in their visions about the community and the country.
- Perhaps the most visible and evident achievement is the inclusion of over fifty young people in the public higher education system; these youth are studying for careers such as economics, sociology, food engineering, environmental engineering, communication, etc. This has been beneficial in the sense that a cooperation network is built between the students and people in their communities. Moreover, the groundwork for future local development has been laid.
- Grupo Aequus has taught English to over 40 children, who did not have the means to pay for an English course in a formal institution. The leader of this English learning group studied “languages and literature” at the university, and serves the newer generation by sharing knowledge with them and their families by including the parents in the learning process. In this way, not only the children benefit from learning a second language, but their parents become active in the process as well.
- After seeing the motivation of many young people and children who are taking part in the educational programs, even various members of the criminal gangs have decided to participate in some of the courses, studying music, English, or preparatory courses for the university. In cases where a gang member has not been able to attend the courses themselves, they have supported some of their relatives (brothers, cousins, children) so that they can take part in the educational programs – aiming at preserving the next generation in their families from following their own path and joining a criminal gang (once being absorbed by a gang it is almost impossible to opt out again).
- Music, literature, and culture are being promoted through music and writing courses. Approximately 15 kids and young people have learned to play the guitar through the teachings of a music student from the public university. On the other side, at least 5 people have developed their writing skills, appreciating literature and writing as empowerment activities.
- The public recognition of the group is another important result to list. In 2013, the group was awarded the prize “Ciudadano del Cambio” (Citizen of Change), for its commitment to transforming the municipality of Itagüí. The reduction in the homicide rate of the neighborhood San Francisco has been partially attributed to the group’s work.
- Finally, the group has participated in various academic events, as

well as with governmental and non-governmental organizations to spread the word about their communitarian education project. The group's members have also participated in trainings with violence prevention leaders, in public budget learning programs, and in law and justice training to learn about the right to a more inclusive and equitable city.



*Members of Aequus group giving free pre-university classes to the local youth*

### **Conclusion: a city according to our vision**

The members of the Grupo AEQUUS dream of a city where everyone has the right to enjoy all the dimensions of the city, not only on paper, but to live in all its potential. Making use of this right, the citizenry could take advantage of its musical, economic, cultural, social, environmental, and political realities. This is a city where human beings and sustainability are the main axes of the future, including everybody's perspectives, and not only those of the technocrats or "politiqueros" (demagogues, corrupt politicians). In this city public resources do not disappear or end up in somebody's private pocket, denying opportunities to people, especially the most excluded.

A city where the night can be enjoyed, without fear of being an object of violence perpetrated by those who hide in the night is also a desire of Grupo Aequus. In this city everyone can enjoy the stars without hesitation, recovering the cosmic dimension of life, which has been lost, as surviving is the priority in the unequal society of Colombia.

Grupo Aequus aims for a city where the corners of neighborhoods are not territories and niches for planning the next crime but rather vital spaces for meetings, playing, and developing community solidarity. This is a place where building the community and its social fabric is not seen as a threat, nor as a subversive act. Respect for the life of others is a supreme value. For example, the library in one of the corners of Itagüi has become a space for daily life, a collective property without restrictions. This experience has resonated with political leadership, as the mayor of

the municipality of Itagüí has even assumed the building of a community center.

Grupo Aequus wants a city where the urban development sustains a permanent dialogue with environmental sustainability, in which all are committed actors, and where everyone can breathe easily without fear of contracting pneumonia. The group strives for a city where the green spaces are not only for environmentalists, biologists or poets. They want the possibility of riding a bike around the city, without having to go through a war with motorcycles and cars. In this city all will be able to go for a swim in a nearby creek, without having to swim in a toxic soup, produced by the factories that release their wastes in the rivers at night. It should also be possible to go for a walk a night, without this walk having to be an act of courage or a leap of faith when trespassing invisible border lines.

This city should be one where parks, squares, outdoor theaters, and all public places are meeting places and not points of wasteful consumption or street vendors, who do not have another safe and profitable option. The city should not turn its inhabitants into almost compulsive consumers. Going to the park with the family on the weekend should not mean spending two months worth of salary, or where taking the metro cable<sup>4</sup> is nothing but a dream for a kid from the peripheries of the city.

The city should give all the opportunity to enjoy art, the street, sports, the night, simple things, without restriction or discrimination. A city that is open to the heartbeat of the best of the world and that encourages its inhabitants to open their souls to encounters with new developments and with the concept of difference itself. In this city the rights to a decent home and to public services are recognized. Quality education and a good health system are not restricted to a rich fraction of the population. Young people can work and develop their potentials. Particularly the young people's potentials that entail a creative transformation

04.  
The Metro Cable is a recent achievement by the City of Medellín where by mass public transport has been brought to the otherwise rather inaccessible informal settlements located on the mountain slopes around the city. Cable cars, otherwise used as ski lifts in alpine holiday resorts, have been adapted for the extension of the existing Metro train service in the city.

*AEQUUS  
presenting at  
the World Urban  
Forum in Medellín  
2014*



of society are not anchored in the past, paralyzing them, or preventing them from building and enjoying the future.

In such a city the governmental bodies and the state should encourage equality, not inequality – inclusion instead of exclusion. Inequality and lack of opportunities constitute two of the main ingredients of the violence that plagues the reality of Colombia today, especially Itagüi and Medellín. Grupo Aequus wants a society that encourages, stimulates, and supports organizations and community groups. If equity and opportunities are provided to the citizenry then the people will transform their cities with joy and peace. These cities will be much better and certainly the inhabitants will be too.

In short, AEQUUS stands for a city that everybody can enjoy, not just a minority. We firmly believe that our work and total commitment to our community is already part of the construction of our imagined city, however we are not waiting for someone to come and build it for us. We understand that our vision is the basic input of what it could be or what we hope it could be.

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# Jordan 14