Chapter 2

Historical, Sociopolitical and Geographical Background

Although the Colombian history of conflicts is quite complex, we start this chapter with a short overview of what seems relevant considering our focus of children involved in the conflict. For more specific outlines on the conflict we recommend more detailed literature (e.g. Vranckx, 2010; Richani, 2010; Marks, 2008; Galeano, 1971; Bustamante, 1999). We also give a short overview of armed groups involved in the recruitment of children. Moreover, we discuss the sociogeographical situation of Colombia whereby the diversity is an important aspect and finally, we address the four study areas more in detail.

1. A Glance at the Conflict Dynamics.

"Not many Colombians can remember a time when there wasn’t war somewhere in the country.”

(Juan Elias in Cameron, 2010 p.7).

A coordinator of an NGO in Bogotá who has been working in the area for over 20 years explained:

We’ve always been in violence. In the 19th century we had 16 civil wars. We started the 20th century with a 3-year war, the war of 1000 days, we had the violence in the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s, ’50s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, ’90s and we started this century in war.

Colombia has known conflict for hundreds of years. In the 16th century, the Spanish colonisation meant looting indigenous heritage whereby their harsh regime and diseases resulted in a decline in the indigenous population and African slaves were brought over to fill the gap. After the Spaniards were conquered, a succession of conflicts over power, resources, and governing arose (Richani, 2010). In 1810, Colombia declared independence and in 1819, Simón Bolívar, also known as the liberator, became the first president of Gran Colombia (current Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama). In 1830, Bolívar was put off his throne and Gran Colombia fell apart, resulting in the independence of Ecuador and Venezuela. The situation remained unsettled, with two main political parties: the liberals and the conservatives and a lot of turbulence on the
social level. The desolate economic situation, several coups, and ongoing violent conflicts led to the Thousand Day's War in 1899 between both political parties (Vranckx, 2010). The violence involved in the secession of Panama, the massacre of the “Banana Strike” and the assassination of the liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán followed by “La Violencia” war (1948-1958) which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed many towns and villages (Vranckx, 2010; Malaver & Oostra, 2001). The war ended with an agreement between the conservatives and the liberals to alternate the country’s administration, but it did not lead to a reduction of violence as many people felt excluded. The political power of landowners and commercial bourgeoisie, whereby the state authorities had less say in land distribution, only led to further conflict.

The political conflicts in Colombia thus exploded into armed conflicts. The weakness of the Colombian government allowed intra-elite conflict and a reaction came through armed opposition led by rebel groups (Richani, 2010). Soon, dozens of guerrilla groups emerged, each with their own philosophy, politics and military strategies. With the fall of communism, the guerrilla movements FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia- Ejército del Pueblo, Revolutionary armed forces of Colombia- army of the people) and ELN (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, National liberation army) lost the support from Moscow and Havana (Vrackx, 2010). Consequently, they sought financial support in the drug industry, exploits, robberies, kidnappings, investments in mining (gold and coal), investment in public works, taxing economic activities and controlling territories (Mulaj, 2010; Researcher NGO Bogotá). The groups used their criminal activities to support their political agendas, but the border between both increasingly blurred (Shifter, 1999).

As a response to guerrilla movements, private militia or self-defence groups were developed by landowners as private armies to defend their country with all parties intimidating people and committing murders. Initially, they were established by and connected to the government in order for the latter to distance themselves from more extreme manifestations of violence against guerrillas and other parties (Kaldor, 2006), making the manifestation of violence legitimate so to speak. The situation soon derailed as the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, United Self-defense of Colombia, a paramilitary group) committed many killings and terrorized the rural population (War Child, 2007; Vranckx, 2010). They were officially detached from the government and were defined as illegal. However, up to date, both are still being linked. An example is the implementation of the term “parapolitics”, used to express the link between paramilitary groups and political parties (Univ/Res Bogotá). With the emergence of cocaine production, the mafia also armed themselves on a large scale. An ideal separation between the different actors are not always clear. For example, the mafia was protected by the guerrillas and they funded the war against the
Julia Villanueva O’Driscoll, Gerrit Loots, Ilse Derluyn

Chapter 2

government and other armed groups with drug money (Univ/Res Bogotá). As Keen (1988:11-12 in Newman) stated:

Conflict can create war economies, often in regions controlled by rebels or warlords and linked to international trading networks; members of armed gangs can benefit from looting; and regimes can use violence to deflect opposition, reward supporters or maintain their access to resources. Under these circumstances, ending civil wars becomes difficult. Winning may not be desirable: the point of war may be precisely the legitimacy which it confers on actions that in peacetime would be punishable as crimes.

American military writers argued that we are entering the “fourth generation” of warfare in which insurgencies and terrorism threaten undermining Western ways of war (Roxborough, 2006, p. 51). These new or postmodern wars involve conflict between non-state and state forces and are typically asymmetrical, where the non-state forces might not have equal means as the state forces (Wolfendale, 2011). In Colombia however, throughout the war it has not been clear who has more power. A breakdown of public authority thereby blurs the border between public and private combatants, between combatants and civilians (Newman, 2004: Kaldor, 2006; Kalyvas, 2006). There were many civilian victims in the battles between armed groups. Therewithal, many were children because attacks often occurred against schools or in the vicinity of schools, which was possibly part of a conflict strategy. A high civilian-combatant death ratio supposedly characterizes new wars. On this aspect Wolfendale (2011, p. 15) stated:

New wars, it is argued, are usually fought by irregular forces (guerrillas, insurgency groups, terrorists) that target civilian populations directly and indirectly through tactics as ethnic cleansing, terrorist attacks, hostage taking, systematic rape, hiding among civilian populations, and the use of human shields.

However, research has shown that former war dynamics held equal ratios concerning civilian-combatant deaths (Wolfendale, 2011). Furthermore, although postmodern wars have been explained to vary from old wars on the dimension of causes and motivation (private loot versus collective grievances), support (lack of popular support versus broad popular support) and violence (gratuitous or senseless versus controlled), Kalyvas (2001) argued that this is simplifying the situation and is based on incomplete and/or biased information.

As already mentioned, there are different levels on which wars can be approached: the actors, the motives, the spatial context, the technological means,
the social, material and human impact as well as the political structure (Newman, 2004). All these aspects can be taken into consideration when speaking about (changes in) war dynamics on a historical level. Whereas before 1920 wars were more “interstatal”, they thereafter became more internal or “intrastatal” concerned with political power and have progressed into intrastatal conflicts over natural resources (diamonds in Sierra Leone and Angola, lapis lazuli and emeralds in Afghanistan, oil in Iran, Angola and Chechnya and drugs in Tajikistan to name but a few) (Newman, 2004; Kaldor, 2006). This can also be mirrored in the situation of Colombia. The common discourse is that the conflict in Colombia has changed in recent years whereby a clear political objective, which would consequently mark the end of the war when obtained, is no longer apparent. Though Kalyvas (2001) noted this to be a characteristic of new wars, Kaldor (2006) suggested the political aspects may still be present through political mobilization on the basis of identity and claims of political representation or control, which thereupon are connected to economic goals. Furthermore, Kalyvas (2001) stated that although historical studies showed a higher degree of ideological engagement, combatants were usually motivated by group pressure and processes involving regard for their comrades, respect for their leaders, concern for their reputation with both, and an urge to contribute to the group’s success. The author further argued that there has been an overstatement of ideological contribution to old civil wars via unwarranted inferences from the elites on the masses (Kalyvas, 2001). These were aspects mentioned throughout the different conversations I had.

The so-called new wars are moreover described to be characterized by state failure as mentioned previously (or fragmented sovereignty as Richani (2010) calls it), and social transformation driven by globalization and liberal economic forces. This is thus where the aspects of natural resources, illegal commercial entrepreneurship, private armies and criminal warlords come into the picture. Interestingly, international aid and interventions exacerbates the ongoing dynamic. Global networks of vested interest frame war (Nordstorm, 1997). In that way, intrastatal new wars may be seen as “globalized wars”, involving fragmentation and decentralization of the state (Newman, 2004; Kaldor, 2006; Kalyvas, 2006).

The United States have been involved in shaping the Colombian conflict (for economic, strategic, and ideological reasons), which demonstrated that “Colombia’s war is not so internal after all” (Mason, 2004). International support was offered through Plan Colombia, aimed at combating guerrilla groups and drug trafficking (Free-Will Productions, 2003) inter alia, whereby the United States funding came and the military manpower grew. Instead of this entailing an institutional redefinition of civil-military relations, the president’s (Andrés Pastrana Arango) response to the imbalance in power was an aggressive approach (Marks, 2008).
Furthermore, countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, and the United States suffer spillover effects from the conflict in different ways like problems with mafia, guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and drug trafficking (Millet, 2002; Richani, 2010). The international involvement makes the conflict more globalized and furthermore only intensifies the complexity of it. Paradoxically, the United States offered support through the above mentioned Plan Colombia for example, but the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and Unites States also resulted in poorer peasants being unable to compete with the influx of cheaper products from elsewhere. Consequently, alternatives for these peasants were displacement to cities where jobs were already scarce, or shifting to alternative cash crops, like coca (Richani, 2010).

Interestingly, historical information on the influence of illicit drugs is ambiguous. Marijuana became an important crop only in the 1960s, cocaine a decade later; with significant coca plantations appearing only in the 1990s, yet the high degree of violence and civil conflict have been part of the political life since several decades before that (Angrist & Kugler, 2008). Nevertheless, in the 1990s the drug cartels and offspring brought along a lot of violence, intensifying the conflict, whereby armed groups were financed by drug-related practices (Gray, 2008; Thoumi, 2003). Indeed, around 70% of the guerrilla funding came from the drug industry (Univ/Res Bogotá). Angrist and Kugler (2008) noted that violence increased in regions where coca cultivation increased. Hereby comes the additional fact that increases in income (due to coca cultivation) fuelled the violence instead of ceasing it. One could expect an increase in resources to reduce poverty and consequently lead to a cease fire (Angrist & Kugler, 2008), but natural resources also offer armed groups something to fight over (Gray, 2008) and the income from resources provides financing for continuing the conflict. Though in Colombia the conflict is above all linked to illicit drugs, violence in Colombia has also been fuelled by licit development in the oil, mining, and agribusiness sectors (Gray, 2008). The government’s attempts to suppress drug trafficking both by force and by peace agreements failed. The drug mafia thus continued reigning the drug world. In the 90s the guerrillas and paramilitaries took over, which meant the main cartels (Medellin and Cali) were shut down and the drug industry fell apart. This fragmentation was even more difficult to control (Shifter, 1999). The political antagonism between paramilitary and guerrilla groups became a question of economic concurrence and spurred both on (Vranckx, 2009). In 2002, guerrilla and paramilitary groups were put on the list of terrorist organisations by the United States and Europe. This allowed the United States to utilize more military forces against them, which the “War on Drugs” did not allow them to do (Ungerman & Brohy, 2003).

There are a lot of paradoxes in the situation. An example was pointed out to me by the coordinator of an NGO explaining that the War on Drugs is being fought in territories where the drugs are being produced, but the “war on weapons” is
being fought in territories where weapons are being used. So why does relatively little attention go to territories where drugs are being used or where weapons are being produced (NGO Medellín)? (Up to 80% of the weapons handed over during demobilizing processes of AUC came from international contraband (Llorente & Vranckx, 2012).) Another example was pointed out by a researcher saying that the AUC was indirectly funded by the United States, but it was also on the list of terrorist organisations (Univ/Res Bogotá) and it is also questionable whether the support is peace driven or oil driven (Ungerman & Brohy, 2003). Holding into account these kinds of dynamics, it is unclear where motives for peace lie. The fight against paramilitary violence, guerrilla groups, cocaine mafia, corruption, and power abuse is a continuing influence on the political situation. Among others, the (political) abductions by guerrilla groups made the country unattractive to foreign investors and this was reflected in the economic situation (Vranckx, 2009).

Throughout the years, the dynamics have also changed significantly, whereby armed groups answer the ongoing dynamics by adapting their functioning. Up until the first few years of this century, there were many massacres, with emblematic situations and a lot of victims, afterwards murders became more selective. A reason for the changing dynamics was explained by a psychologist:

For example in the years 2002, 2003 there were a lot of massacres by paramilitaries. This got a lot of international attention. It got them into a lot of trouble. Now there are more selective murders, there’s a changed dynamic of the conflict (NGO Bogotá).

Whilst the former counteracts popular support, the latter are more difficult to prove, more difficult to penalize and consequently perpetrators remain in impunity (NGO Bogotá). This has major (emotional) consequences for victims.

The above paragraphs illustrate the entanglement concerning legal, illegal, legitimate and illegitimate aspects, whereby the discussion of conflict versus terrorism is raised. In Colombia, by altering the discourse from conflict to terrorism, it changes how the involved groups are approached, as we will elaborate on further throughout the chapters.

2. Demobilizing Processes and Peace Agreements

Throughout the decades, there have been various attempts at peace negotiations (Vranckx, 2010). The peace agreements in 1984 are an example, after which the demobilized FARC members developed a political party (Unión Patriótica), a party whose members would later be murdered one by one, circumstances which immediately doomed future negotiations. Nonetheless, some agreements
were more successful. An example is the peace agreement with the guerrilla group M-19 in 1989 (García-Durán, 2004). Although official numbers of 2006 indicate 31,000 AUC-members had demobilized (Vranckx, 2010), as we will see further on, the actual success of these paramilitary demobilizations is another story. Attempts to bring peace to the country are being undertaken through reconciliation processes and transitional justice to punish perpetrators\(^6\). Victims are (supposedly) being recognized and are getting compensation through the law of victims\(^7\), introducing measures of attention, support and reparation for victims of the conflict. However, considering this is taking place while the conflict is still ongoing, it is an arduous process (Vranckx, 2008). Throughout different conversations and meetings, I often wondered when speaking about a situation of omnipresent war, can borders of infraction of rights due to the war even be defined without excluding and further violating people?

Several interviewees pointed out the solution for the conflict has majorly been sought on a military level; little has been done to solve further structural problems and other social concerns (Univ/Res Bogotá; NGO Medellín). When going through literature and diary notes, it seems the different armed groups continue to point their fingers at each other, while each side continues with their own transgressions.

The AUC has been through several demobilizing processes (Immigration and refugee board of Canada, 2008). Nevertheless, few measures have been made to disconnect the complex structure whereby a large amount continues to be active in another group or under a different name. When demobilizing collectively, it is often a decision of the commander, whereby the individual members, do not necessarily have the will to do so (HRW, 2005). Once they become acquainted to a life of violence, it is very difficult to introduce other schemes (Vargas-Barón, 2010). As an interviewee explained to me:

> If McDonald’s has many stores in Colombia, and for one or the other reason they decide to leave, there are no longer any McDonald’s in Colombia. The endorsement is gone, but all the people that worked there, all the franchise of the McDonald’s is not. They’ll surely go on and do what they’ve learnt to do. So they will go on making hamburgers. They will go on selling hamburgers (GO Ind Bogotá).

\(^{6}\) For more information on the demobilizing processes, we recommend Labrador Araújo, K., & Gómez Jiménez M. (2010). DDR: Desarme, Desmovilización, Reincorporación en Colombia. Fundación Antonio Restrepo Barco: Bogotá.

On this topic, a staff member of an NGO stated:

There have been many strategies to point out that we were really going through demobilizing processes but in reality the armed groups continue operating where they were, with different names. And these armed groups obviously continue to threaten social organisations... because they accuse organisations of being conspirators of the guerrilla (NGO Bogotá).

As mentioned on various occasions above, the dynamics of the conflict and the armed groups have changed on many levels:

The political ideology of left parties against right parties has given over its throne to a conflict financed by narcotrafficking, based on criminality, search for territorial domination, domination of people, and seemingly lost its political reasoning. All armed groups are involved in narcotrafficking. It allows them to uniform themselves, to have weapons and so on (GO Ind Bogotá).

On a geographical level, the conflict has become more urban (GO Bogotá), which has consequences for the dynamics in the sense that armed groups can function more invisibly in urban areas, and the conflict has become more underground (as we will mention in a further section of this chapter, this is comparable to what is happening in other South American countries like El Salvador).

Moreover, the demobilization processes and the establishment of the justice and peace law, implying juridical processes for demobilizing paramilitaries, brought along certain dynamics. Situations occurred whereby demobilizing minors had in actuality never been engaged in the armed groups. They were being paid by armed groups to claim so, and were consequently being brought into the programmes for disengaging minors. Another dim aspect was explained by an interviewee saying that there were only 5 to 10% of weapons brought in during disarmament processes compared to the amount of demobilized people. Justification to this was that the people factually never carried weapons, but carried beams, though this is questionable considering the amount and cruelty of massacres carried out (NGO Bogotá).
3. Armed Groups\textsuperscript{8} Involved in the Conflict\textsuperscript{9}

3.1. Regular Forces

Irregular armed groups are not the only ones guilty of violating laws regarding recruitment age. Although children are not officially enlisted, boys and girls are also used by regular forces for activities such as getting information, messaging, guiding, contacting other friends and ingratiating themselves with the people, which also puts their lives and those of their family at risk (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [Coalition], 2004). Firstly, children disengaged from armed groups are not always surrendered to authorities within the 36 hours decreed by law, but are sometimes detained and interrogated for days, which is also a form of using children in the conflict (United Nations Security Council, 2009). A researcher (Univ/Res Bogotá) explained the governmental forces need information from disengaged children for their actions against armed groups and (in the past) one of the (unofficial) conditions to participate in the reinsertion programmes was to participate in dismantling the armed groups they disengaged from. As an interviewee pointed out: “Using children for logistic information is as great of an international crime as recruitment” (NGO Bogotá).

Moreover, the army organises civil-military activities under the guise of providing health care and offering activities like sports or circus games. In an indirect way, this is involving the civil society. It is said to consolidate the relationship with the army, but in a context of war, a staff member of a governmental organisation explained this is taking civilians out of the neutral zone and positioning them in vulnerable situations (GO Bogotá).

Different interviewees mentioned the absence of state services brings a lot of vulnerability to certain communities, but so does the mere military presence. A staff member from an NGO explained that in areas where the military presence is high, there are also a high number of rapes for example (NGO Medellín). Moreover, different hostile groups imposing themselves in certain regions results in the forced displacement of the population. In rural areas, an interviewee

\textsuperscript{8} Throughout the book we speak about “armed groups” in general, trying not to discriminate between different groups recruiting children, as it is not our objective to enter into the discussion on the definition of an armed group, but we more so want to give an overview concerning children engaged with armed groups. In that way, how the group is defined is irrelevant. Moreover, it should be noted here that there are other actors involved in the conflict who also involve children in their actions like hit men gangs, narcotrafficking gangs, and weapon venders.

\textsuperscript{9} For more information on the history of armed groups, we recommend Gutiérrez Sanín (2010).
explained that governmental armed groups are often only present temporarily, while other armed groups remain there. The people are thus put in a dangerous position after they have (forcibly) had contact with the governmental army, as they can easily be considered as an accomplice (IO Bogotá).

A staff member of a governmental organisation illustrated an example of experiences lived by people in rural areas:

The guerrilla came along with their weapons, with their power, imposing their laws and orders, the next day the regular army came along punishing those who had been forced to help the guerrilla because they had had a weapon to their head and the next day the paramilitaries came along and judging them with their own norms, punishing and executing people they considered shouldn’t be there (GO Bogotá).

3.2. Irregular Groups

3.2.1. Guerrilla Groups

The most famous guerrilla groups are FARC-EP (or FARC), ELN, movimiento 19 de abril (M-19), Ejército revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP- revolutionary army of the people), Ejército popular del pueblo (EPP- Popular army of the people) and Ejército popular de liberación (EPL- Popular liberation army) among others (Pizarro & Valencia, 2009; Defensoria del Pueblo, 2006).

There are different opinions about the strength of existence of these groups, once again depending on the source. Though there are talks of guerrilla groups being weaker than ever, the FARC for example claim they are still strong and standing (“Las FARC ‘no están debilitadas’”, 2012; Belga, 8/4/2012).

The guerrilla groups were initially left wing movements coming up for the rights of the rural population. They controlled much of the countryside (40%), remote areas where the state had little presence (Richani, 2010). As stated above, throughout the years the political motivations seemed to evaporate and economic power prevailed. Their structure and methods also changed. Johnson et al. (2005) suggested that this change in the dynamics of the guerrilla may be due to the increased infrastructure and communication. Although Llorente and Vranckx (2012) and Louage (2012) explained them

10 With the term “irregular groups” we refer to all non-state groups involved in the conflict, which are also called violent non-state actors (Mula, 2010), non-state armed groups (Non-state armed groups, 2006) or illegal groups (e.g. GO Bogotá) among others.
having to reuse couriers in recent years, as the state eavesdropping on them is too high of a risk.

Some participants mentioned an alteration in motives, such as the transformation of discourse from guerrilla groups to criminal gangs. As a director of an NGO explained: "The difference with guerrilla and criminal gangs is that FARC for example had Leninist and Marxist ideas, ELN has Guevarrian ideas and the latter [i.e. criminal groups] do not have any political motive" (NGO Bogotá).

Recently, the FARC and Colombian government have been undertaking attempts to peace agreements through dialogue, which are still ongoing (ODDR, 2013).

### 3.2.2. Paramilitary Groups

The most common known is the group of the AUC. Other groups are the Autodefensas campesinas del Casanare (ACC Self-defense farmers of Casanare), Bloque central Bolivar (BCB Central Bloc Bolivar) and Bloque Cacique Pipinta among others (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006).

As explained in an earlier paragraph, after demobilization processes, paramilitary groups officially no longer exist. However, throughout the research process we encountered different opinions. Interviewees explained there is no longer a national order or command, but that they still function in the same way, with illegal money, with military ranks, and uniforms and weapons, controlling the people (e.g. implementing curfew) (Other Bogotá; Univ/Res Bogotá). A staff member of a governmental organisation explained they no longer consist of groups of hundreds or thousands, but in certain towns or areas there are groups of 60 to 70 men controlling the area (GO Bogotá). A research by Nuevo Arco Iris in 2008 estimated up to 10,000 active members (Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2008).

A lawyer from an NGO expressed his view on it: "Although there's discussion whether paramilitaries still exist or not: what is for sure is that violence still is connected to drug trafficking, human trafficking and so on" (NGO Bogotá).

### 3.2.3. New Groups

With the years, the dynamics of the conflict changed, and with this, so did the functioning of armed groups, and the discourses concerning them.

A director of an NGO explained:

Paramilitarism as a phenomenon no longer exists. What does exist now are structures that continue to be important from the perspective of participation of negotiation of drugs, of narcotrafficking. Approximately ten percent of ex-paramilitaries engage with these criminal groups after the demobilization process. It goes to say that nearly ten percent of the
paramilitaries took up weapons again and were part of armed structures again, like these [criminal] gangs. However, these gangs are very alike the paramilitary groups in their narcotrafficking. But we don’t think they have the same pugnacity towards the state in terms of wanting to substitute public authorities or wanting to handle out obstinate or rebellious crimes or having, let’s say subversive activities or engaged with subversive disputes in the conflict or groups that are ideologically committed to the left (NGO Bogotá).

Several interviewees explained there are new groups originating from people demobilized from other armed groups. Interviewees mentioned many names for these new groups: sometimes they are simply called criminal gangs as they have no political motive, others call them “neoparamilitary” groups as they are demobilized paramilitaries, they work identically, and they “just changed their coat” as a staff worker explained (NGO Bogotá; GO Bogotá, NGO Medellín). The Atlantic departmental plans literally stated criminal gangs as “returned” paramilitaries (ODDR, 2011, p. 40). On this aspect, a social worker pointed out generalizability is not possible: “Not all demobilized are good or bad. From integrants of criminal gangs arrested by police forces seven percent are former demobilized. This is low in comparison with other countries” (NGO Bogotá).

Furthermore, they are simply called emergent groups, as they are newly emerging. On the subject, an NGO staff member explained:

Social cleansing, threats, selective murders and so on are becoming the ways of operating of these groups. So for the government there no longer are paramilitaries, but there are emergent groups in service of narcotrafficking. [Although the group supposedly has changed its meaning,] it’s still a paramilitary group (NGO Bogotá).

A coordinator of an NGO mentioned similar dynamics in other countries like Mexico and Brazil. In the Americas, the culture of violence and street gangs has been present for decades. Literature has shown a considerable diversity in gangs or organised armed groups in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras among others (Rodgers & Muggah, 2009). Drawing these parallels raises the question concerning at which point a violent situation of society is called “war” or “armed conflict” and who decides on this. Although the Colombian government may decide not to call the situation an armed conflict, for whichever reason, the actual situation and everyday life of the population may mirror a different reality. On this aspect Rodgers and Muggah (2009, p. 3) argue to take into account groups that not solely use violence against the state, but also groups that are “not consciously seeking direct control over all (or even any) of its institutions”.
Concerning children disengaged from armed groups entering the reinsertion programmes, a psychologist explained that children entering the programme are not the same as before, considering the conflict’s change in dynamic:

There was the AUC, there were massacres, there was more drugs. Many young people in urban areas are now in gangs, while they used to be in armed groups, so the youth have changed. There is also more violence in schools. Although there is the problem that youngsters are seen differently by being part of a gang or an armed group, they namely have no access to the benefits of someone who was formerly engaged with an armed group. They are legally sanctioned. They are brought to rehabilitation centres. But being part of a street gang does entail a risk of being recruited by an armed group. Another danger is that gangs are part of the criminal environment. The youth earn money. In armed groups they get no money, they are exploited. Between 2001 and 2005, the AUC used to pay the youngsters. Although the youngsters who are part of gangs also experience(d) violations of their rights, they therefore also deserve a restoration of their rights (GO Bogotá).

The discussion whether children (or people in general) engaged with criminal gangs are seen and treated as delinquents whilst “children engaged with armed groups” are seen as “children disengaged from armed groups” when arriving in the hands of authorities often arose in conversations I had with staff of organisations and as an interviewee questioned: “Both are children, they engage with the armed group for the same reason, so why differentiate between them?” (NGO Medellín).

4. The Sociogeographical Situation and its Diversity

The republic of Colombia has over 45,000,000 inhabitants and a magnitude of 1,138,910 km² with a population density of 39.7 inhabitants per km² (Statistiques mondiales, 2012). Bogotá is the capital of the country and Spanish is the official language. Geographically, it has a border with Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It can be divided into five major parts: the Caribbean coast, the Pacific coast, the Andes, the Orinoco area, and the Amazon area. On a governmental level it is divided into 32 departments and the capital district (DANE, 2005).

Different aspects explain the diversity of society in the country:

About 68% of the population lives in urban areas (PNUD, 2011). Concerning ethnic groups, about 3.4% of the population are indigenous, 10.6% are of
Afrocolombian descent and a mere 0.1% are of Rom origin according to a cultural auto-recognition census (DANE, 2005) and with further mixes between them, the diversity results in both richness (on the cultural level) and poverty (regarding the socioeconomic risk level).

11 Map retrieved from: http://www.tourist2townie.com/status-updates/status-update-29-days-til-colombia/
An aspect which strongly marks the diversity is poverty. Interviewees explained both wealth and income are highly concentrated, while poverty is very dispersed (IO Bogotá). Moreover, rural areas differ much from urban areas, not only on the poverty line, but also concerning the presence of the different armed groups (IO Medellín; GO Pasto). Although geographically the conflict is present in all five zones (and 29 of the 54 subregions), the conflict in concentrated on border areas, with the epicentre in the region where the guerrilla traditionally have control (Springer, 2008). As a researcher explained:

In the north, you’ll find new groups and paramilitaries and from the middle [of the country] towards the south there are more guerrilla groups, although at the pacific coast you’ll find FARC, ELN, emergent gangs, all sorts of armed groups (Univ/Res Bogotá).

Up to 9.7% of the children in Springer’s research (2008) reported the presence of AUC in their area, 24% reported the presence of FARC, 2.2% ELN, and 3% reported the presence of other marginal groups. Up to 50.1% of the children participating in her research indicated that more than one group was active in their living environment.

These figures also bring along different dynamics concerning children disengaged from armed groups. The study of Defensoría del Pueblo (2006) found that children were recruited in all departments, spread over the country. Therewith, risk areas for recruitment include zones that form a gateway for weapon trafficking, where illegal cultivation takes place, with the presence of minefields and mine accidents, a lot of forced displacement (with a high proportion of minors in the displaced population), a high percentage of family violence, and a strong presence of armed groups (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006; Springer, 2008). The geographic areas at high risk level are noted to be Putumayo, Arauca, Meta, Norte de Santander, Caquetá, Chocó, Antioquia, Guaviare, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca, whereby the Andean region is the region with the most communities at risk (Springer, 2008) and there is a lower concentration of recruitment in the Amazon area - the southern part of the country (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006).

As noted, considering this diversity, we decided to focus on different areas in this research. We hereby give an overview of the four areas, which have shortly been mentioned in chapter one.

4.1. Bogotá (Capital District)

Bogotá is Colombia’s capital with more than 7,500,000 estimated inhabitants (DANE, 2005). This area seemed primordial to take up in our research considering a lot of headquarters of organisations (national and international)
function here. Moreover, as many interviewees had mentioned, it offered us a good starting point to gain an overview of the situation of children engaged with and disengaged from armed groups in the country, as well as of the conflict in general. Bogotá is thereby closely connected to what is happening in the rest of the country. Moreover, Pérez Ortiz (n.d.) explained it is an important strategic corridor for communication with rural zones of the district and for the transport of weapons and provisions as it functions as an important source of resources and supplies.

The city (and broader capital district) consists of a broad diversity. From the south and the outlying areas to the north, it goes from miserable poverty to great wealth. The city is divided into different strataums going from one (very poor) to six (rich). The vast majority (82.2%) live in the three lowest strataums ("Mapa de información", n.d.).

There are over 270,000 displaced people in Bogotá (Albuja & Caballos, 2010). An interviewee explained many rural internally displaced people (IDPs) move to Bogotá, partly because it allows them to live more anonymously, but they moreover hope the city can offer them tranquility and opportunities. Instead, they encounter poverty, loneliness, exclusion and fear (NGO Bogotá). An editorial by Defensoría del Pueblo (n.d.) stated that the locality of Ciudad Bolívar is one of the most common places to flee to. It is located in the southeast, the district with the highest degree of poverty (26%). An interviewee (Other Bogotá) explained that in these areas, the conflict between guerrillas, paramilitary groups, street gangs and the military and police forces is felt daily. Armed groups perform territorial control, implement curfew, control the population by charging and extorting merchandisers and perform social cleansing, for example by murdering children located on a public list of supposed drug dealers or gang leaders. The authors of the editorial (Defensoría del Pueblo, n.d.) furthermore explained that forced displacement, selective and collective murders, recruitment, coercion of politic candidates and extortion brings fear to the lives of the population.

4.2. Medellín (Antioquia)

Medellín is the capital of the department of Antioquia and is the country’s second largest city with over 2,000,000 inhabitants of which around 14.5% are between ten and 19 years old (DANE, 2011). In the last 50 years the industrialization transformed Medellín from a rural to an urban area, and in recent years it has also developed on a commercial and technological level (Ramírez, 2005).

The contrasts between the different neighbourhoods of the city are tremendous. A coordinator of a non-governmental organization (NGO) attended
to the dynamics in the high class neighbourhoods explaining prestige and looks rule life, with beauty contests and plastic surgery being what matters (NGO Medellín). In lower class areas, life is about surviving. Here, Ramírez (2005) mentioned people live in overcrowded and dense areas, which are characterized by social conflict and violence. These circumstances have high implications for the quality of life on the physical level, but also concerning family and community relations and conviviality. There is no space for privacy and the private is thus made public (Ramírez, 2005). A staff member from an NGO explained how Itagui (a neighbourhood in Medellín) functions as the southern gateway of the city and is not only characterized by poverty and a dynamic of conflict, but also by stigmatization which inhibits any form of progress (NGO Medellín). In a lot of the popular neighbourhoods there are so-called invisible borders, whereby gangs act out autonomy and territorial control, and going from one block to another is at the risk of losing one’s life. A coordinator of an international organisation explained how if you live in commune a, you are seen as an enemy in commune b and crossing the border becomes dangerous (IO Medellín). Another coordinator of an NGO explained this is one of the reasons for descholarization, as children drop out because it is too dangerous for them to go to school, or sometimes they have to walk a long detour to avoid entering a red zone (NGO Medellín). In 2002, the number of unschooled children was estimated around 30,000 (Ramírez, 2005). Furthermore, the popular neighbourhoods often have a high percentage of displaced people from rural areas, whereby even schools show discrimination towards these groups. An example was explained by a social worker from a local NGO (NGO Medellín) whereby an Afrocolombian boy was not accepted into a school. When asked why, the school explained they want quality and quality implies having a uniform, having shoes, and being clean. People living in strata one and two (poorest) do not have the economic means for this. This way, the vicious circle of marginalization is kept operating.

Moreover, many of the neighbourhoods function under their own reign and have their own rules (forcibly implemented by the armed group active in that precise neighbourhood). An example of this may be the dynamic

---

12 An interviewee explained popular can have three dimensions. Firstly, on an economic level it means poor; secondly, on a social level it enhances fame; and thirdly, it holds account for another form or alternative for the common, meaning resistance and contrary to the economic and social models of the elite (NGO Cartagena). We refer to popular neighbourhoods meaning urban areas where people with low financial resources live in marginalized circumstances.

13 Red zones are zones where the conflict is active and they are considered to be dangerous.
of social cleansing, whereby rules are imposed on the population and pamphlets are spread around that if they do not obey, they will be punished (NGO Medellín).

A staff member of an international organisation explained Antioquia is a strategic pathway concerning conflict dynamics (IO Medellín). Furthermore, a researcher noted that it has been strongly marked by narcotrafficking for decades. In the ‘90s the famous cartels were broken down, whereby narcotrafficking became dispersed and more difficult to track down (Univ/Res Bogotá). It was thus not surprising that in the year 2000, there were more than 200 armed groups active in Medellín (Asesoría de Paz y Convivencia, 2000 see Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia [Coalico, n.d.). Ramírez’ research (2005) showed that these groups consist of around 10,000 members; with an estimate of 60% to 70% of these members of armed groups in Medellín being children. Taking into account the total number of members in armed groups, this means that nearly half of the children engaged with armed groups on a national level come from Medellín. The existence of such groups is due to both historic facts and specific aspects of the city, which is characterized by circumstances of violence and conflict (Ramírez, 2005).

According to Ramírez (2005) insurgency groups (militia groups and urban guerrilla) have diminished due to demobilization efforts and a higher presence of paramilitaries and public forces. Paramilitaries, although active in the city as long as the city exists, had quite poor territorial control up to the year 2000. But soon after, these groups implemented a new urban strategy on a national level financed by drug trafficking, meaning they started cooperating with criminal gangs. After 2000, most of the criminal gangs worked in service of paramilitary groups. Those that refuse to be subordinate to the paramilitary groups are obliged to do so by force. Furthermore, there are gangs of reduced sizes, which are not subject to other actors, but are immersed in actions such as narcotrafficking, assault, and theft (Ramírez, 2005).

Springer (2008) noted that Antioquia is the area with the highest degree of vulnerability concerning recruitment of children in absolute terms, partly due to it being a gateway for weapon and drug trafficking, an area of high intra- and interurban displacement (NGO Medellín), the presence of armed groups, and the presence of domestic violence. But relatively speaking (relative size of population compared to the size of contributions) the departments of Caquetá, Tolima, Putumayo, and Meta pay the largest contribution. Furthermore, she stated that for 46.1% of children engaged with armed groups, the area of recruitment is not equal to their birth area. Moreover, there is a change in degree of recruitment per department, demonstrating the mobility of children and difficulties locating them territorially (Springer, 2008).
4.3. San Juan de Pasto (Nariño)

Pasto, the capital of the more rural department of Nariño, is located in the southwest of the country, bordering Ecuador. An interviewee explained that Nariño is in a complex situation and has a high presence of armed groups due to its coastal line, mountain range, and border with Ecuador (GO Pasto). It thereby is not only a transit for trafficking, but it is also an exit for refugees. A majority of 95% of the refugees (estimates of 135,000) in Ecuador are Colombian ("ONU reubicaría a refugiados Colombianos", 2010). They cross the border in an informal way looking for better and secure conditions (IO Bogotá).

With 383,846 inhabitants (DANE, 2005), San Juan de Pasto is more of a town than a city. Since there is no governmental programme for children disengaged from armed groups in the city, a coordinator of a governmental organisation explained that when children are handed over to or taken in by authorities, they are sent to cities like Cali, Medellín or Bogotá to follow the reinsertion programme (GO Pasto). Nevertheless, we decided to give it a short visit, because Nariño is an area with a majority of indigenous inhabitants.

The conflict has brought harshness to people's life in rural areas, but besides this they have basic difficulties of marginalization due to the long distances to educational and other services. A member of an international organisation explained that the change in dynamics, whereby “before, they were called autodefensas [paramilitary self-defence groups], now they are hit men, they kill for money. That’s how it is in Pasto” (IO Pasto). In rural areas the presence of the army is often absent. A researcher explained that the relation between the guerrilla groups and the community is stronger and closer there (NGO Bogotá). Nonetheless, the discourses concerning these topics vary between guerrilla groups supporting the indigenous and rural populations, and abusing them.

The land distribution is also an important topic in these areas, as a coordinator of a GO explained: “There are a lot of people that have had land for generations but they have no formal title” (GO Cartagena). People do not have documents stating the exact land they own, so although they have always lived there, officially they do not own it (IO Pasto). An interviewee explained that because the land has a spiritual importance for them, they remain with less than nothing after they have been forcibly displaced from their home. According to a programme coordinator, throughout the years, dynamics in indigenous cultures have changed, cultures are being lost, whereby ‘macho’ behaviour and gender hierarchy has grown and problems like alcohol abuse have appeared. She explained these aspects have changed societies: “The love for one’s children that used to be very strong is now lost”, and “Violence between mothers and fathers is a consequence of the macho culture. This culture is something relatively new in indigenous communities whose values were not set in this way” (IO Pasto). The coordinator continued by explaining that they are indirect consequences of the conflict (e.g.
through the militarized culture and parting of family and community). She also mentioned that they are of great importance for the psychosocial wellbeing and development of society (IO Pasto).

An example of the consequences of armed conflict is the indigenous Awá community, where in the past decades there were inter alia five massive flights, individual flights, four massacres with about 200 murders, 50 people affected by mines, abductions, threats, coercion, forced recruitment, and blocking passage of food and medication (Dh Colombia, 2009).

4.4. Cartagena de Indias (Bolívar)

Cartagena, the fifth largest city of Colombia, is situated in the north of the country. It is a tourist attraction, both nationally and internationally. Its inhabitants are quite diverse, but like most coastal cities the Afrocolombian presence is strong. Though the colonial city centre and the beaches raise images of paradise, the areas some blocks away from the centre illustrate another reality where sewerage and streets are one, houses are built from wood and earth, running water and electricity are not evident, and poverty is omnipresent.

A staff member of an NGO explained the tourism brings along positive consequences like a rise in job opportunities, but it has also increased the problem of sexual exploitation. Although another interviewee noted there are also cases of sexual abuse and exploitation in home environments, whereby family members allow their children (boys and girls) to be sexually exploited for money (IO Cartagena).

The majority of inhabitants of Cartagena are not pure Cartageneros, inasmuch the city is a recipient for displaced people. A coordinator of an international organisation explained:

> We have 20 years of receiving displaced youth... about 20 years. Because Cartagena has always been a quite tranquil city and as I was saying, tourism offers a non-qualified workmanship which is informal work, which is generated by tourism (IO Cartagena).

Some neighbourhoods have surged from displaced people arriving there from different parts of the country. An example is the Nelson Mandela borough which now has around 60,000 inhabitants (IO Cartagena). A community leader explained how a neighbourhood consisting of displaced people causes suspicion whereby nobody really knows who is who and where they came from. He continued by saying people presume that others have been displaced due to the conflict; however this may have been as a perpetrator or a victim. Arriving in these areas as a white person brings about looks of interest and suspicion, though once
you are introduced to people, they are very open an inviting. Outside these neighbourhoods, people deem you insane to even consider going there.

A non-governmental staff member explained that Cartagena has both historic poverty and poverty due to displacement (NGO Cartagena), whereby it is not always a consequence of the conflict, but also a development pattern (IO Cartagena). An interviewee noted:

People displace to search for better social and economic conditions. In Colombia rural and coastal areas are very impoverished. So people come to the city because they find infrastructure, precarious ones, but they find it; universities, culture, public services. It’s the 21st century and some communities don’t have running water (IO Cartagena).

A first distinction with the other research areas that we noticed in Cartagena, was that people did not seem to mention the presence of the conflict or armed groups as such, but they spoke about the problematic of gangs. A 2006 research identified up to 80 gangs in the city (Márquez Barbosa, 2009), sometimes referred to as youth at risk (IO Cartagena). A researcher also explained that these gangs have specific dynamics compared to other armed groups in areas such as Medellin, with these gangs not solely being a consequence of demobilization considering they were also present before these processes. Furthermore, Márquez Barbosa’s research explained that the strong presence of informal jobs is another aspect that brings along a lot of criminality related to the gangs, which was also explained by a participant talking about motor taxi’s (Univ/ Res Cartagena). According to Rodgers and Muggah (2009) there may also be a link with migration; gangs are a means for migrated youth to feel included. Furthermore, gangs are explained to be an urban manifestation and although there is no clear link between gangs and poverty, they are more likely to emerge in poorer and marginal areas of the city. When looking at arguments for joining gangs, research has shown different influencing aspects such as hanging out, avoiding family problems, friends being members, and unemployment (Rodgers, 1999). These are aspects which reflect what was explained by interviewees.

As various interviewees explained, these gangs are moreover characterized by its members exclusively consisting of children and young adults up to around 25 years old in contrast with the traditional armed groups where many are also of an older age. An interviewee mentioned:

Children of nine or ten years old, children form informal groups, they grow up in the streets due to absence of the parents. They spend their adolesence in the gang and when they are 20, 25 years old, if he/she isn’t dead, if he/she isn’t worn out because of drugs, he/she enters in the theme of maturity (IO Cartagena).
A psychologist explained reasons for this are that they also often start having their own children and consequently develop feelings of responsibility. According to a coordinator the family plays an important role in the lives of people, so when they start their own family they dedicate themselves to this entirely (IO Cartagena).

Furthermore, a staff member of an NGO explained Cartagena is an important in- and export gateway to and from Central America and thereby it is also a gateway for 'mules' (drug transporters). These dynamics partly result in the fact that youth are being generalized and discriminated to be drug users and traffickers and are seen as criminal (NGO Cartagena).

5. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the prolonged course and therewith complexity of the Colombian conflict. It shows that the conflict is deeply rooted in society on a broad range of levels, whereby boundaries become complicated. Although there are many aspects important and necessary to dwell upon, at the same time these aspects are intertwined and bringing them together is rather complex. The whole country is affected by the conflict and the diversity of the population demonstrates itself in the diversity of affectedness. This offers a context wherein the situation of children engaged with and disengaged from armed groups should be understood. In the following chapter we continue on the situation of children in this context.