

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

The Story of Medellín: From a Drug Behemoth to a Model City

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The Colombian city of Medellín, once home to legendary cocaine king Pablo Escobar, is winning urban development award after award today. For years now citizens, companies and politicians have worked together to ban the explosion of violence from their city – with libraries, cable cars and escalators.

The shining example

"I prefer to take a different route here", our taxi driver murmurs, "there are too many robberies on this street at the moment." He ferries us through night-time Cali, the third largest city in Columbia, wending his way along streets jammed with rush-hour traffic. We slowly overtake lumbering tour busses and foolhardy pedestrians. It seems to take forever. All the while he tells us about his city: the corrupt politicians who toss money out the window – for a new stadium instead of useful infrastructure. When the river breaches its banks, whole sections of the city are under water. As for the violence, he sighs, it just keeps getting worse.

"In Medellín though, they've done it there!" he finally exclaims. For a long time the country's second largest city was under the control of a powerful drug cartel, just as Cali was, until both empires were smashed by the military. Our driver reports that while the violence only continued to worsen in Cali, the politicians and citizens of Medellín triumphed over it. And while that is not entirely true, it is fairly close.

Slums, drugs and violence

Medellín was not always a shining example. The city was once considered the most violent place in the world. In 1991 there were around 380 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants – an incredible 40-times higher than the UN's marker for an "epidemic" rate. This was primarily due to the high migration into the city and, of course, to the massive power of the drug economy.

The ongoing battle between the military, drug traffickers, the FARC guerrillas and diverse paramilitary groups has led to severe violence and the displacement of uncountable families in Columbia over recent decades and into the present. Especially in the seventies and eighties, hundreds of thousands of people fled hostile actions in the rural areas around Medellín into the city. The population of Medellín tripled in the 20 years between 1951 and 1973 alone.

Most of the internally displaced people were poor and settled in the undeveloped areas around the city centre nestled in an Andean valley. To this day humble huts cling jumbled together on the mountain slopes, threatening to slide with every hard rain. There was typically no public transport, electricity or water pipes. Anyone who grew up here was easy prey for the drugs mafia, which offered many youths the only lucrative "career path". Drug and gang violence worsened. Legendary drug lord Pablo Escobar in particular held the city in thrall throughout the eighties.

Citizen involvement against bandit violence

But this all changed when government troops killed Pablo Escobar in a spectacular skirmish in 1993 and then drove alleged guerrilla groups from the city with Operation Orion in 2002. Only the paramilitary and their highest leader in the city, Don Berna, remained. He controlled most armed groups in town and promised a cease fire. The murder rate began dropping and by 2007 was an amazing ten-times lower than in 1991, as UN data reveal.

But the transformation went well beyond military intervention and cease fire accords. Today almost 90 percent of all Medellinenses have access to water, electricity and gas; even the slums are connected to public transport and most streets are paved. Progressive companies, dedicated citizens and visionary politicians all worked together to make this happen, taking advantage of the relative peace to finally muck in.

Particular attention is generally paid to two independent mayors who were elected during this time. Sergio Fajardo, in office from 2004 to 2007, represented Compromiso Ciudadano, a network of company leaders and civil society. His successor Alonso Salazar, who held office from 2008 to 2011, was also a former member of Compromiso Ciudadano.

Our social revolution

Their vision was that the poor also deserved a chance to feel like they belonged to the city. One of the simplest steps in this direction was to provide access to transport into the city at the very least. The second step was to offer educational and recreational alternatives. They wanted to create peace through education and community building rather than through security forces. "When the poorest child of Medellín reaches the best classrooms in the city", Fajardo is reported to have said according to Arepa magazine, "it can dream beyond just being a drug trafficker or gang leader. Social transformation and inclusion define our revolution."

Fajardo succeeded in motivating large segments of civil society and private firms to get involved in shaping their own city. Private schools began supporting public schools in poor parts of the city, university students helped with restructuring measures, and engineering firms designed construction projects for free. The mayor laid out parks, created libraries, paved streets, renovated houses and built bridges. The "library parks" in some poor quarters, for example, now offer public libraries, internet workstations and child care.

Fajardo and Salazar also introduced a conditional cash grant programme called "Medellín Solidaria" and similar to Brazil's Bolsa Familia, which aims at reducing urban poverty. For the Medellín Solidaria programme together with the "Buen Comienzo" and "Encuesta de la Calidad de Vida" programmes (that provide health care for children and give citizens a say in urban services), the town received the UN Scroll of Honour award for excellence in human settlement development in 2010. The city also finances business centres which offer free consulting and technical assistance in the poorer areas and foster the supply of micro credits.

Medellin's innovative infrastructure, however, is and remains the city's most impressive feat.

Cable cabs for the poor

Medellín is one of the cities with the greatest variety of regional public transport. In January of this year, it was awarded the Sustainable Transport Award from the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), an international NGO dedicated to lower CO2 emissions in cities and increasing quality of life. The jury was particularly impressed by one of Fajardos' projects.

Since the train tracks of Medellín's metro – already very progressive for Latin America – did not travel up into the slums perched precariously on the slopes of the Andes, Fajardo decided to expand it by a cable car. Gondolas could make the steep climb with no problem at all. They now link the slums of Santo Domingo and La Aurora with the train network in the city centre and transport around 3,000 people per day in each direction. Small family-run businesses and restaurants are booming around the nine metro cable stations and driving the local economy.

In addition to fighting poverty, the cable car is also an environmental project. The electric gondolas have replaced innumerable stinking busses and shared taxis which used to clog the narrow streets of the barrios. This saves around 20,000 tonnes of CO2 a year, which is why the city can fund part of the operating costs through emissions trading. The jury praised this environmentally friendly mode of transport because it is also affordable for everyone and creates job opportunities in the poorer neighbourhoods. Meanwhile Rio de Janeiro, Panama City and Caracas are also considering building similar cable cars and financing them through certificate trading.

The first local transit escalator in the world

But Medellín's transport innovations did not stop with the cable car. Since 2009 busses powered by natural gas have also driven through Medellín in special lanes created just for them. This bus rapid transit system is known as Metroplús and can also be traced back to Fajardo and Salazar.

And in December 2011, images of a newly opened, 1260-foot mega-escalator went round the world. It climbs up into the poorest neighbourhoods and transports both the inhabitants and their belongings into the city quickly and cheaply – with the same positive effects like the cable car. It is the only escalator in the world used for local public transport. Furthermore, Medellín recently introduced the first bicycle-sharing scheme in Columbia.

Holger Dalkmann, jury member of the Sustainable Transport Award, summarized the success of these projects when he said: "the city transformed violence and despair into hope and opportunity, using sustainable transport as one of the key levers to drive this change."

"From fear to hope"

But despite all the good ideas and successes, criminality in Medellín is not even close to defeat. Though the murder rate had dropped drastically over the years, it has again begun to rise since 2008. The cease fire ended with paramilitary leader Berna's extradition to the USA and gang wars have broken out anew. The number of migrants and inequalities between citizens also remain high. Urban planning may be able to accomplish a lot – but it cannot do everything. And the drug mafia is the toughest of opponents.

In fact, many even reproach Fajardo and Salazar for entering into pacts with the paramilitaries to keep violence low. Nevertheless, Medellín's many-fold social and infrastructure innovations surely provide

examples other cities would do well to look at. The British Overseas Development Institute states that the city has created confidence and solidarity among its citizens – all in line with Fajardo's famous slogan "The transformation of Medellín: from fear to hope".