

# LESSONS FROM MEDELLIN: FROM A VIOLENT CITY TO ONE OF INNOVATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

A city that has cut its murder rate ten-fold over the last 20 years and was lauded as the most innovative in the world in 2013 is worth taking seriously, writes *Ivan Turok*. The *World Urban Forum* held in Medellin, Colombia, in April left an indelible impression on the 20 000 delegates who attended.

There are parallels and lessons for South African cities in the Medellin experience. Two decades ago, Medellin was notorious for being the most violent city in the world. Powerful drug cartels, such as the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel and paramilitary groups, flourished on the back of deindustrialisation, rising poverty and inequality, and outdated socioeconomic policies.

Armed conflict in surrounding rural areas displaced communities and spurred urbanisation. The tide of migration caused precarious *barrio* (slum) settlements to spread up the steep hillsides around the city because of the shortage of land on the valley floor.

**A collective effort focused on tackling the causes and consequences of violence and inequality.**



## **Breaking the cycle from the bottom up**

Out of the predicament of growing anxiety and insecurity, a popular consensus began to emerge that conditions had to change. This constituted the basis of a collective effort focused on tackling the causes as well as the consequences of violence and inequality.

For a decade and a half, city institutions have been pursuing a bold vision of social transformation aimed at breaking the cycle of economic stagnation, social conflict and deteriorating public services, and restoring civic pride.

One element is a long-term strategy for Medellin's revitalisation, social renewal and physical integration. Sustained urban planning is an overarching theme aimed at intensifying development in the heart of the city and linking the outlying neighbourhoods through an innovative mass transit system.

Second, economic development has been pursued through a series of catalytic projects involving the redevelopment of former industrial sites and run-down buildings for a range of new purposes – incubators for business start-ups, a

convention centre to attract events and tourism, and new headquarter buildings for major regional corporations.

Municipal entities responsible for supplying key utilities have been encouraged to diversify and expand their operations to other jurisdictions in order to become more competitive and to boost employment. Unemployment in the city has fallen to single figures for the first time in 20 years.

**Local residents are intimately involved in all stages of design and delivery.**



Third, a novel commitment has been made by the public authorities to strengthen the fabric of marginalised communities by investing in impressive multipurpose learning centres, health facilities and attractive public spaces with art and cultural artefacts. Local residents are intimately involved in all stages of design and delivery.

Neighbourhood upgrading has also meant legalising the unauthorised *barrios* and working to improve the condition of people's homes. The city's supply of formal housing has been bolstered by encouraging the growth of private building companies, housing cooperatives and social renters.

Fourth, there has been exceptional investment in a quality public transport network to connect peripheral communities to the economic core. A unique combination of cable cars, light rail, dedicated bus-ways and escalators has been carefully crafted to fit the city's challenging topography. Major new housing schemes built around selected stations have helped to increase ridership and viability.

There has also been a sustained effort to drive up the quality of schools, and health and social services throughout the city. Education is increasingly seen as a strategic requirement to enhance prosperity and wellbeing by developing more creative approaches to learning and investing in people throughout the life course.

So what lies behind this far-sighted social innovation and commitment to transformation?



Above: Slum areas in Medellín, Colombia. Right: The old city.



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### A collective approach

The economic and social crisis during the 1980s and 1990s created a special kind of resilience among the population. Its collective resistance to the armed conflict inspired a supreme collaborative effort to reconstruct and integrate the city.

Mature leadership has been one of the keys to success. Galvanised by the city's downward spiral and loss of life, a cohort of political leaders has emerged who have set aside party-political differences in the wider public interest. Medellín's long-term development strategy has been sustained from one political regime to the next by informal agreements between the main parties and across the spheres of government to ensure continuity.

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Extensive dialogue and engagement with the different sectors of civil society and local communities has also helped to build trust and mutual understanding. A social compact across key civic institutions has provided a platform of stability and confidence, resulting in higher levels of investment and practical cooperation.

The sense of common purpose and ambition has been fostered by national recognition of the importance of cities for Colombia's economic competitiveness and social cohesion. The country's 1991 Constitution promoted extensive decentralisation of powers and resources, enabling a kind of developmental local state that South Africa has sometimes dreamt about.

Devolved responsibilities for economic and social advancement have been backed by investment in institutional capacity building, both within the public sector and across civil society. Alliances with various stakeholders have helped the city government harness the effort and energy of many different social partners.

### Getting back to basics

One of the lessons for South Africa is the benefit that can be derived from empowering cities to take on strategic responsibilities beyond basic service delivery. Policy actions and interventions by the metropolitan municipalities are likely to be more effective if they recognise and respond to the causal dynamics of economic and social development.

Civic institutions also have much to learn from the long-term perspectives and commitment to collaboration of their Medellín counterparts. Out of the adverse circumstances of high unemployment, inequality and violent crime can emerge a sense of shared destiny and solidarity, on which to build transformative policies and programmes. ■

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