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Urban Governance: From global concepts to regional realities

by **Lina Martínez María, Isabel Zafra Maria, Fernanda Alomia**

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Abstract

This working paper focuses on urban governance concepts, including decentralisation, participation, and smart urban governance globally and in Latin America. It explores the transformative impact of decentralisation on urban governance and civic participation, mainly through formal platforms in the policy-making process. Additionally, the document covers critical aspects of smart urban governance and technological policies to modernise cities and improve city-level programme delivery.

Research in the region shows that decentralisation has been one of the most significant transformations in urban governance, implemented to provide autonomy and power to local governments, strengthen local programme delivery and promote civic participation. However, the process has led to complex interactions between state and non-state actors, shows uneven implementation, has deepened institutional weaknesses, and has exacerbated governance challenges and inequalities. Decentralisation also gave unprecedented power to cities in the region. Due to their high urbanisation, Latin American cities stand at the forefront of global urban governance discussions. Beyond megacities that play an instrumental role in economic growth, intermediate cities are gaining significance, hosting 32% of the population, contributing 17% to the regional GDP, and facing significant challenges related to disorderly urban growth, segregation, inadequate infrastructure and institutional weaknesses. The region's incorporation of technology to solve urban governance challenges is limited, reflecting the lack of technical capacities and internet penetration. Only large regional cities have incorporated robust mechanisms to improve programme delivery. Colombia mirrors the trajectory of the broad issues of urban governance identified in the region but adds the complexity of the armed conflict and peace-building process that have created significant gaps in territories affected by the conflict, limiting their administrative and financial capacities and hindering civic participation.

Research on the intersection of urban governance, intermediary cities and the incorporation of technology to promote participation is embryonic. There is scarce research regarding the institutional capacities, relations with state and non-state actors, and fiscal constraints of intermediary cities. The evidence is even scarcer regarding the intersection of technology, civic participation and government. We lack clear evidence on whether digital participatory practices strengthen local government institutions, how governments use technology to interact with stakeholders, if this promotes civic engagement, and how it varies by population groups. Colombia offers a novel opportunity to study youth participation with the recent developments in legal frameworks in the region, proving a valuable opportunity to understand the confluence of youth activism, technology and urban governance in intermediary cities in the Global South.

1 Introduction

Urban governance is central to global agendas. Since 2016, the United Nations has been promoting a New Urban Agenda recognising cities as engines of growth. The New Urban Agenda promotes a policy framework for inclusive, implementable and participatory urban policies to strengthen urban governance, sustainable development and their integration into national and local development strategies regarding transparent municipal finances, planning, design and improvement of urban areas (United Nations, 2017).

Cities are the engines of growth and development poles, facing complex challenges ranging from service delivery to promoting civic participation. Urban governance encompasses the complex and evolving interactions of governing cities and city regions through systems of multilevel governance. As cities grow and become central for development, understanding how cities are managed is instrumental in promoting sustainable and equitable growth. The discussion of urban governance involves multiple concepts. In this working paper, we focus on decentralisation, participation and smart urban governance to advance the knowledge of the capacities of intermediary cities and the role of civic participation for better policy-making and governance. We focus on the global discussion and research of these concepts to undertake a regional review in Latin America, focusing on Colombia.

Decentralisation processes in Latin America are of particular relevance for situating urban governance on the continent. Starting in the 1980s and consolidated through democracy, decentralisation has given unprecedented power to local governments, promoted civic participation and introduced technology as a mechanism for programme delivery (Nickson, 2023; Irazábal & Jirón, 2021). Despite the positive advances of the process, decentralisation has created new complexities in the region. Given the difference in institutional capacities and revenue generation, cities are growing unequally, with significant disparities between large and intermediate cities. New political dynamics are arising, influenced by populism, clientelism and short-term policy approaches that hinder long-term welfare and reduce trust (Keefer & Scartascini, 2022; Scartascini et al., 2011). While the fiscal autonomy of intermediate cities is still an ongoing process with unequal outcomes, other transformations are adding new angles to the rapid transformation of urban governance. Introducing innovative urban governance adds new layers to understanding how governments

operate, connect with the electorate and accentuate territorial gaps.

The document is organised into four sections. After this introduction, the second section presents relevant debates on urban governance and research directions in the global literature. It discusses decentralisation, civic participation and smart urban governance. In the third section, we narrow the discussion of urban governance in Latin America and Colombia, exploring how decentralisation, participation and smart urban governance have been studied in the region and the research gaps in the literature. The fourth section considers future research directions in urban governance in Latin America and Colombia.

2 Relevant concepts and debates around urban governance

Local and national leaders, practitioners and global political actors acknowledge the importance of urban governance in the pursuit of more sustainable models of development. The international community has positioned urban governance centrally in global agendas (e.g., New Urban Agenda). Yet, urban governance research is still embryonic.

Urban governance is a concept with several meanings. Governance can be interpreted as a concept and analytical approach that encompasses actors' interactions, accountability, democracy, decision-making, politics, and all complex interactions that governing involves. Governance is also a descriptive term covering institutions, financing, roles and responsibilities (Raco, 2020; Davoudi et al., 2008). Under urban governance fall broad categories ranging from agenda setting to financing, policy-making processes and people's political participation. Governance is different from government, which refers to the formal institutions in a state. It is also different from governing, which is the act of managing and decision-making for the functioning of a government. Governance is the broader framework of rules and relationships that guide the exercise of power and authority (Capano et al., 2015; Chhotray & Stoker, 2009). In this context, urban governance is the process of governing urban areas involving the interaction of state and non-state actors to make decisions and implement policies connected to the urban condition (McCann, 2016).

This broad range of governance definitions has led to approach the literature of urban governance as comparative analytical

frameworks rather than theories (Pierre, 2014). The struggle to identify wide-ranging explanations and extract learnings from particular local contexts that help understand and intervene in other cities and countries has often led to a focus on measuring outcomes (i.e. growth or poverty reduction) to signal governance arrangements (Kitchin, Cardullo, & Di Feliciano, 2019). Another approach is to focus on what works (best practices, role models) rather than on why it works (Visnjic et al., 2016; Jouve, 2009; Przeybilowicz, Cunha, & Tomor, 2017; Tewdwr-Jones & McNeill, 2000; Pierre, 1999). These approaches have led to theoretical confusion and practical disappointment by failing to consider and adapt to local contexts.

To date, there are three main approaches in the research of governance: i) theoretical ii) context-specific analysis and iii) systematic comparison. Theoretical analysis has evolved, starting in 1950 with the discussion of the government as the main body aiming at improving efficiency and productivity (Jachtenfuchs, 1995; Björk & Johansson, 2001); in the 1980s, the research agenda moved to the interaction of government, market and social interactions (Katsamunskaja, 2016; Davoudi et al., 2008). Since this wave, the incorporation of practical methods for urban governance research has been a constant in the area. Since the 1990s, most theoretical discussions have centred on a network model and multi-subject area encompassing the complex relations governing urban democracies with technology and sustainable development (Song et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2010).

The other research angles are focused on the empirical analysis of urban governance. The context-specific approach focuses on the complex and dynamic nature of urban governance, its multiple lines of authority and forms of power, and the socio-material assemblages through which urban governance works (Stripple & Bulkeley, 2019; McGuirk & Dowling, 2021). Researchers have deployed Foucault's concept of 'dispositif', or apparatus, and/or assemblage theory to identify and analyse the socio-materialities, processes and devices that compose the dispositif/assemblage, and how these cohere to generate governance capacity to deal with a particular challenge (Braun, 2014; Bissell, 2018). Usually drawn from highly 'contextualised, situated practice, always achieved through the gathering of heterogeneous elements in particular arrangements and through particular interventions, around particular and situated problems' (McGuirk & Dowling, 2021), this approach has the advantage of embracing emergence, contingency and complexity. Its

explanatory value and ability to generate transferable knowledge, however, is limited and sometimes exacerbates rather than helps the problem of knowledge reification (Richardson, Durose, & Perry, 2019).

The second approach to urban governance uses an analytical lens and/or methodologies that can be replicated in different contexts (Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022; McGuirk et al., 2022). Researchers identify and analyse 'configurations which represent multiple attributes leading or not leading to outcomes' (Byrne, 2011). Some of this literature seeks to generalise about links between urban governance arrangements, collective action and outcomes, and make it relevant to cities in different contexts (Neal et al., 2021). The clarity, replicability and explanatory power of this approach are key advantages. At the same time, it can be overly mechanistic, conceptually underdeveloped, and naive for failing to recognise the complexity of local contexts (Richardson, Durose, & Perry, 2019). Despite the research approach, there is a discrepancy between scholarly research and the practical concerns of city administrators on how to improve governance and deliver better services. This gap highlights the need for a more robust understanding of urban governance through empirical research, linking institutional arrangements to policy outcomes and taking into account technological transformations, globalisation and inequalities (da Cruz, Rode, & McQuarrie, 2019).

Currently, there are no frameworks or approaches in the field of urban governance research that combine the 'context-specific' and 'comparative' perspectives effectively. There is, however, a growing body of work that can be helpful in this pursuit, especially coming from the Global South: the literature on 'ordinary cities' (Robinson, 2005), 'hybridity' (Jaglin, 2014), 'southern urbanism' (Bhan, 2019) and 'post-networked cities' (Cirolia et al., 2021). Dichotomies commonly used in (Western) literature (e.g., formal/informal, developed/developing, global/secondary cities) have prevented theoretical insights to approach the study of cities (Pierre, 2014). Thus, with a focus on ordinary cities, Robinson (2005) attempts to challenge the notion that wealthy global cities innovate, while poor secondary cities imitate. According to this perspective, useful comparative analysis should depart from measuring up particular cases against an ideal type, and instead develop a detailed understanding of how events in one context might inform those of others. A key, yet largely unrealised, agenda set out by this literature is to seek 'a path between universalism and

incommensurability' (Robinson, 2005), which can inform the development of a more sophisticated urban theory and more effective urban policy.

Another growing body of research providing evidence from the Global South is urban governance in decentralised contexts that seek to promote inclusion and participation. Decentralisation is defined as deconcentrating institutional capacities and powers from central to local governments (Bardhan, 2002). The literature identifies three types of decentralisation: i) devolution, which is based on power-sharing between sub-national units over agreed areas of activity or location (Hambleton, 2016; Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2015; Goodwin & Simpson, 2002); ii) delegation is the transfer of authority from central to local agencies or governments, but central governments retain ultimate control (Florestal & Cooper, 1997; Yuliani, 2004); and iii) decentralisation, which is the transfer of decision-making from central to local entities (Dillinger, Gutman & Winkler, 1999; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Turner & Hulme, 1997). Decentralisation is the area with the greatest focus in the literature (Rumbach, 2016; Miller & Bunnell, 2013; Faguet & Pöschl, 2015).

Faguet and Pal (2023) identify that most of the literature on decentralisation comes from developed countries. At the end of the 1990 decade, between 80% and 100% of the world's countries were implementing some form of decentralization. However, many of the earliest decentralisation efforts occurred in high-income countries, where governments tend to have stronger tax revenues, and data are comparatively high-quality, facilitating the empirical study. However, the lessons of decentralization from developed countries are difficult to translate to developing countries, where infrastructure and state capacity may be comparatively weaker (Faguet & Sarmistha, 2023).

Research on decentralisation has predominately focused on the fiscal implications of resource decentralisation, ranging from economic growth to poverty reduction or service delivery (Aray, 2019; Kyriacou et al., 2017). However, despite the bulk of evidence on fiscal capacities, there is a lack of evidence regarding the impact of decentralisation on cities' economic structures (Díaz-Lanchas & Mulder, 2021). Other strands in the decentralisation study are related to diverse participation and the civic capacities to hold local authorities accountable (Faguet, 2014). The importance of participatory processes in cities has steadily grown since the 1970s. Participation in planning and policy-making is now one of the most prominent fields of inquiry in academic

disciplines, such as urban planning, human geography and political science (Forester 1999; Fung & Wright 2003; Cornwall 2002, 2008; Heller 2012; Soh & Yuen 2006; da Cruz, Rode, & McQuarrie 2019). Citizen participation is a dominant theme in scholarly research and development agendas, and most of the questions addressed in this literature are related to citizen participation in the policy-making process and the lack of local government's engagement with the electorate (da Cruz, Rode, & McQuarrie 2019). Participatory urban governance seeks collaboration and inclusiveness in the governing process of the urban realm, but it presupposes the willingness of the electorate to participate (Dean, 2018; Singh, 2013). In recent years, local authorities have implemented several formal strategies to promote civic participation, like participatory budgeting or collaborative planning (Baiocchi, 2005; Sintomer et al., 2008). However, city residents should be motivated and willing to engage. Promoting participation is becoming a prominent research area, focused on understanding individual motivations to participate, containing incentives, and the complex realities of urban contexts (Zientara, Zamojska, & Cirella, 2020).

2.1 Smart Urban Governance

Cities are the engines of growth and opportunities. Technology and smart collaboration are recognised as prominent tools to strengthen the capacities of urban systems to solve problems and create public value (Landry, 2006). A major bulk of the research on urban governance gravitates around smart cities, which is linked to the use of technology and innovation to solve problems in urban contexts. Within this ecosystem, smart urban governance refers to the management and administration of cities in a way that leverages information and communication technologies to create better outcomes and more open governance processes (Jiang, Geertman, & Witte, 2020). Smart urban governance aims to address substantive urban challenges by integrating technological intelligence within the specific context of each city, involving new forms of collaboration to promote social inclusion (Meijer & Rodríguez-Bolívar, 2016).

A major theme in the area of smart governance is digital participatory urban practices. This issue has begun to receive academic attention (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Schweitzer, 2014; Hollands, 2008; Gaffney & Robertson, 2016); however, to date there are few studies that focus on the use and interface of digital practices by activists, planners and governments, and even less so in cities with low levels of literacy and

sharp digital divides. The use of innovative solutions for leveraging technical tools and civic resources to generate renewed citizen investment in larger cities like Porto Alegre in Brazil (Röcke, 2014), has received considerable scholarly attention. Nevertheless, even in these cases the emphasis is often on technical innovations (as opposed to institutional innovations) because they usually do not challenge existing relations of authority (although they transform relations of power (Kitchin, Lauriault, & McArdle, 2015). Indeed, a recent review by UN Habitat (2022) suggests that city governments struggle to prioritise and nurture people-centred, rather than technology-led approaches to smart city initiatives.

There is a lack of clear evidence on whether digital participatory practices strengthen local government institutions responsible for community engagement or not. Currently, no established framework allows to ascertain whether digital innovations are luxury goods, covert top-down strategies, or indeed a feasible way out of democratic deficits, and a sustainable solution to resource and institutional constraints. Despite the broad consensus to promote smart cities and the use of technology in new forms of public administration and open government (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2015), there is little knowledge of its impact (Greenfield, 2017), use, civic engagement, and implementation gaps related to city size and capabilities. It is unclear how governments use technology to interact with stakeholders in the provision of services and information; if this promotes civic engagement and improves living conditions (Pereira et al., 2017); to what degree people use new data to gain agency and whether this supports civic engagement (Tadili & Fasly, 2019); or what role disparate territories and city sizes play in the effectiveness of digital urban governance, since smart city initiatives tend to focus on megacities, affluent capitals and regional clusters (UNESCO, 2019).

Furthermore, current academic debates evolve around the way citizens are being enrolled in urban governance (McQuarrie, da Cruz, & Rode, 2018): do they provide (1) necessary inputs for effective technocratic management, or (2) a corrective to technocratic management? An empirically based distinction in this regard is important because in the first approach, citizens and the data they generate are mostly treated as behavioural rather than political phenomena. Solutions are therefore designed to facilitate the technocratic management of actors, rather than to politically engage with them. In the second approach, in contrast, local actors are treated as

political agents with knowledge, interests, legitimacy and power, rather than another data point to be used in more effective management.

2.2 Governing intermediary cities

Clancey (Clancey, 2004) estimates that 50% of urban residents in developing countries live in cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, and 75% in urban agglomerations of fewer than 1 million. Although underrepresented in governance research (Kumar & Stenberg, 2013), local government has been considered a cornerstone of the liberal constitutional model of democracy (Loughlin 1996, 2004). De Tocqueville (1966) and Mill (1861) also emphasised the educational qualities of local government: Citizens see local governments as more accessible, relevant and closer to their needs and problems, and are thus more willing to participate than their national government.

Intermediary cities are a cornerstone of effective decentralisation, promoters of participatory mechanisms to improve local governance, and an essential pool for training and recruitment of new leadership (Sintomer, Herzberg, & Allegretti, 2013). The skills and experience needed to take part in national government and parliamentary politics are often developed in offices in intermediate cities. Besides, local governments offer fertile grounds for political experimentation and governance innovation. A variety of instruments aimed at boosting political participation, such as participatory budgeting, local referenda, consultation procedures, independent candidacies and the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) platforms, have primarily been developed at the local level before they were adopted in national politics and administration. In effect, local government not only plays a central role in community development but also helps in consolidating democracy from below (Almeida 2008a, Alfonso 1991). Moreover, smaller-size cities often share a role as test beds for innovative approaches to policy problems (da Cruz, Rode, & McQuarrie, 2019). Intermediate city governments are usually leaner and less able to tap into traditional sources of public revenue. They are typically also more enthusiastic about experimenting with new ways of governing, planning and managing public assets and services. Intermediate cities are therefore often at the vanguard in terms of innovative forms of delivering public goods, engaging with citizens and promoting collaborative governance. They also lead in mayoral pursuits of global problems, by way of introducing these into local solutions and capacities (Pipa, 2019).

3 Concepts and debates around urban governance in Latin America

Democracy, civic participation and local power are since the 1980s additions to the region's governance. After decades of political turmoil, juntas, autocratic leadership, military control and civil conflict, democratic governments have been established throughout Latin America (Smith, 2005). Democracy in the region is mainly dominated by elite politics that control the decision-making process in economic growth, urban planning and governance, contributing to maintaining traditional power structures (Schindler, 2017). Governance decisions are characterised by the conflicting rationalities between state and non-state actors that increase complexity and undermine governance systems' planning and operation. The complexity of governance is also exacerbated by precarious living, the high informality that permeates actors/institutions/relations and the permanent contestation of the urban space (Parida & Agrawal, 2023).

A major characteristic of city governance in Latin America is the politics of decentralisation that has increased local authorities' authority. The decentralisation movement in the continent was promoted by actors with different agendas during the 1980s. Neoliberals, radical reformers and technocrats promoted a political agenda calling for decentralised power (Nickson, 1995, 2023). The politics of decentralisation was also fostered by multilateral organisations (i.e. the World Bank) that called for the decentralisation of services like education to provide universal access to elementary schools across the continent (Schiefelbein, 2004). By the end of the decade of 2000, decentralisation was the norm in the continent, with all countries, except Cuba, having local government elections (Nickson, 2023). Each country in the region has a different trajectory adopting the decentralisation process. Annex 1 presents process in Colombia.

Decentralisation in Latin America transferred a significant share of power from the national to the local level in three dimensions: political, administrative and financial (Bland, 2011). However, the uniform treatment of all municipalities hides the substantial variance in population size and economic development between cities, creating disparities in local revenue and financing. Generally, fiscal transfers from the central government to municipalities are based on revenue sharing, sector-earmarked transfers and poverty reduction programmes.

Revenue sharing is based on population size, poverty and access to services. Earmarked transfers account for decentralised responsibilities, in which education and health are the main focus. Public-funded programmes for poverty reduction are one of the emerging trends in the region, channelling high volumes of social investment, mainly through cash-transfers programmes (Nickson, 2018). With this power transfer, sub-national governments in the region spend over 25% of national revenue, providing local authorities with unprecedented influence (Castro et al., 2010).

Nickson, 2016 identifies two local government systems to understand the purpose and functioning of local administrations in Latin America. One system is managerial, whose primary purpose is efficiently delivering public services. This type of government implies political subordination from the national government, leading to a conflict between central and local powers, mainly when opposition parties control local power. Under this system, fiscal transfers are heavily earmarked for specific purposes. There are strict regulations on local taxation or the ability to borrow, leaving local authorities without significant leverage on budget decision-making or revenue generation. A second system is governmental. Under this system, local authorities are pivotal in making policies to promote community interests, sharing responsibilities with the central government for service delivery. Central and sub-national administrations work as equal partners and local governments exert power on the decision and implementation of local taxation (Nickson, 2016). Each type of government has implications for citizen participation. Under the managerial system, civic participation is pivotal to holding accountable local governments in efficiently delivering local services. However, civic participation in policy formulation or budget allocation is restricted since the central government defines priorities and resource allocation. In contrast, civic participation, under the governmental type, is central to the functioning of local governments. The electorate holds local authorities accountable in the policy-making process to promote the community's interests (Nickson, 2016).

The financing system gives small municipalities little leverage to create revenue. Property taxation is the primary source of additional local revenue. In large urbanised municipalities, local taxation can account for over 60% of local revenue. In contrast, in small-size municipalities, central transfers account for over 90% of the total budget, given the limited property tax collection in

intermediate and small-size cities (Nickson, 2018). Decentralisation provided unprecedented power to local governments but created significant disparities. Intermediate and small-size municipalities lack the capabilities to propel economic development. This is due to their limited capacity to create revenue, the lack of mechanisms to promote participation and accountability, insufficient institutional capacity, and lagging coordination to create city regions (Campbell, 2010). The institutional capacities and revenue generation of intermediate and small cities is one of the major research gaps in the literature.

Research undertaking the study of decentralisation in the region shows that Latin America is considered a leader in decentralisation, particularly in service delivery with education and health (Bazza et al., 2022). The process has been driven by urbanisation, political and economic openness and territorial autonomy. Pinilla et al. (2015); Feinberg et al. (2005), and Montecinos (2005) argue that political and territorial decentralisation has been a significant political advancement in Latin America in terms of equity and distributive justice, especially in the realm of social public expenditure (Wiesner, 2003). Decentralisation has also been considered a means to strengthen sub-national autonomy and cross-border governance (Moreno, 2010; Contipelli, 2017; Developpement, 2001; Finot, 2002; Gropello, 1999; Angell, 2005), a tool for macroeconomic stability and regional economic integration (Wiesner, 2003), and as a catalyst for democratic participation, social control, community development and service provision (Boisier, 1987; Peterson, 1997; Schiefelbein, 2004; Veltmeyer, 1997; Ugalde & Homedes, 2002). Despite the positive sides of decentralisation, this process has also led to greater inequality and reduced administrative efficiency (Veltmeyer, 1997; Ugalde & Homedes, 2002 & González, 2007). Decentralisation has influenced the nationalisation of party systems, altering territorial patterns of political competition (Leiras, 2009), and is consistently threatened by the lack of intergovernmental coordination (Jordana, 2001, 2002), demanding extraordinary fiscal efforts for central and local governments (Finot, 2002). This gradual and diverse process has entailed complex and multifaceted tasks with varying degrees of success between countries and cities (Mena, 2002).

Urban governance analysis in Latin America has taken several angles. Some scholars analyse the role of institutions like regulatory bodies, or civil service or legal frameworks. This stream of

research also includes issues of corruption and bureaucratic efficiency (Villoria, 2021; Estrada, 2011; Díaz de León, 2013). Another approach delves into inequalities and socially inclusive governance. Research in this area examines how governance structures and policies can address disparities and include marginalised groups in decision-making processes (Acosta-Maldonado, 2022). Violence and political instability are also linked to urban governance to understand the dynamics of conflict, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Ferreira & Richmond, 2021); Feldmann & Luna, 2022). This stream of research is particularly prominent in Colombia (Piamba, 2018; Mendoza & Campo, 2017; Valderrama, 2018).

Another large stream of research undertakes the processes of decentralisation, focusing on studying local governance structures and their capacity to deliver services, promote development and foster citizen participation (Vásquez & Montoya, 2016); Faguet, 2014; Martínez-Vásquez et al., 2017). Across this literature, issues of policy implementation, development, accountability and globalisation are common themes overlapping with broad angles of research.

In Colombia, governance is characterised by the interaction of actors from the public, private and civil society sectors around the implementation of public policies. Issues associated with the rights of children and adolescents appear on the agenda, which reflect the need for multilevel governance (local and national government) that involves citizen participation. Environmental governance has experienced significant progress recently, driven by the 2010–2014 national government agenda, which strengthened environmental institutions (Orduz & Pineda, 2019). The collective action of social movements is highlighted through tools of consultation and negotiation with the government for the efficient and quality management of natural resources (Molina, 2014). This progress is due to administrative decentralisation that has favoured the autonomy of territorial entities and the impact of communities on the policies and protection of territories (Pérez, 2021).

3.1 Decentralisation and participation

The decentralisation processes in the region are part of broader democratisation efforts, aiming to recover and open spaces for citizen participation, aligning local decision-making with the demands of the population. As a general conclusion, researchers agree that decentralisation has fostered pluralism, reduced the concentration of

power, and expanded the spaces for decision-making and citizen participation. The process has favoured democracy and the participation of minority groups (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2002). The balance of this process in Latin America shows significant advances in local democratic governance with the execution of local policies, greater participation of citizens in electoral life, and the formation of a new political class in regions (Cravacuore, 2014).

Decentralization participatory budgeting. This mechanism, widely implemented in municipalities in Brazil and expanded to other countries, has had the most significant recognition for local citizen participation (Nickson, 2023; Heller P., 2022). Participatory budgeting allows the formulation, monitoring and control of citizens over a part of the municipal budget, a milestone for citizens' participation in local policy-making. Porto Alegre, Brazil, is an example of the participation and articulation of citizens with local government, constructing decisions for the prioritisation of public spending that solved problems of drinking water, health care and primary education across training citizens on local governance and including these actors in working groups with administration professionals (Nickson, 2023). Participatory budgeting has garnered the possibility of investing in local needs identified by the population and solving local problems. Other forms of participation at local levels beyond voting are reported in Colombia with *cabildo abierto*, which are requests or petitions to public authorities that must be answered briefly. *Cabildo Abierto* is considered a mechanism of participatory democracy that activates the control of political power and allows for direct dialogue between the administration and the citizenry (Díaz et al., 2020). In Bolivia, vigilance committees enable citizens to perform monitoring and control roles (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). Mexico implements citizens' councils, a participatory platform for civil society to issue proposals, policies and actions for government agencies (Avritzer & Cambraia, 2008). There is a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of these mechanisms of political participation in the region. Existing literature highlights that the mechanisms to promote citizen participation are more consultative than deliberative, and actions are still at the discretion of legislators. In some cases, those scenarios are used to renew clientele relations, and the efficacy of citizen participation relies on the organisation of civil society (Montecinos E., 2005; Díaz et al., 2020; (Heller P., 2022). However, the scarce evidence shows positive outcomes when citizens are involved in the decision-making to deliver goods and services

to communities (Díaz Cayeros et al., 2013). Among the programmes, laws and policies to promote participation in the region, Colombia stands out with its national policies to promote youth participation. These policies include the creation of youth councils, a formal platform for youth to participate directly in local policymaking. Youth councils were elected in 2021 and are an innovative strategy in the continent to promote participation in a population group with low formal political involvement (Ledezma, 2022). Appendix 2 presents the legal framework for youth participation in Colombia.

3.2 Decentralisation, institutional weakness and mistrust

Decentralisation in Latin America is one of the most significant political developments in the region, aimed at reducing inefficiencies, promoting accountability and transparency, increasing civic participation and promoting social development (Willis, Garman, & Haggard, 1999). However, the political changes in the region have propelled complex interactions and bargaining among institutions, political parties, elites, civic organisations and actors involved in governance and policy-making at national and local level (Murillo et al., 2011) The complexity of these interactions has created a vicious circle between weak governance and inequalities (OECD, 2020a).

There is institutional weakness in Latin America. The economic growth experienced in the region during the past two decades – prior to the pandemic – was not capitalised on as an opportunity to reducing inequalities, strengthening political institutions or levelling the field for intermediate cities in creating capacities to garner local development (OECD, UNITED NATIONS, CAF, EU, 2019). Overall, two broad explanations exist for the stagnated institutional and policy-making progress in the region. One explanation falls under the political dynamic in the continent. Politics are heavily permeated by populism, clientelism and policy-making behaviours favouring particular interests over the public interest (Engel et al., 2018; OECD, 2018). Under an ideal democracy, citizens put in power representatives to implement and deliver policies that improve the general welfare. Politicians, in turn, deliver policies that benefit the majority. In Latin America, however, the political process is heavily biased against broad-based policies with long-term benefits. Given the political dynamics, the electorate opts for politicians who promise short-term programmes with narrow benefits for particular communities over those who take a long-term approach to policy-making. This is

evident in the growing tendency in the region for policies focused on cash transfers and subsidies over long-term investments in the welfare system (Keefer & Scartascini, 2022; Scartascini et al., 2011). With these dynamics, democracy serves individuals who favour politicians who can provide clientelist benefits.

Another explanation for the institutional weakness in the continent is related to the inefficiency in policy delivery. The implementation process is poor even when the right policies reach the public agenda. Inefficiencies in public spending could be as large as 4.4 of the region's GDP (Pessino, Izquierdo, & Vuletin, 2018). Informality permeates institutions, there is poor administrative and technical capacity, and policy implementation is rendered to poorly skilled workers who cannot promote change (OECD, 2020a). The widespread institutional weakness in the continent propels the increasing perception of corruption. According to the Global Corruption Barometer, 62% of people surveyed in the region perceived that corruption is increasing, 53% considered that the government fails to address corruption, and 29% had to pay a bribe to access key public services (Transparency International, 2017). In general, governments fall short of people's expectations. Public programme delivery is usually perceived as poor (CAF, 2018), and those who can afford private providers (for instance, in health or education) opt for private alternatives for access to public services. The consequences of continued dissatisfaction with government performance disincentivise tax payments, political participation and fuel polarisation (OECD, UNITED NATIONS, CAF, EU, 2019).

Those negative perceptions also contribute to the growing mistrust in the region. 'Trust is the most pressing and yet least discussed issue confronting Latin America and the Caribbean' (Keefer & Scartascini, 2022). Over 2010–2020, fewer than 3 in 10 Latin American citizens trusted their government, and mistrust in public institutions is widespread. Interpersonal trust (the belief that most people can be trusted) dropped from 22% in 1981–1985 to 11% in 2016–2020, meaning that only 1 in 10 citizens trust others (Keefer & Scartascini, 2022). The continued demise of institutional and interpersonal trust is a worldwide phenomenon, but significantly accentuated in Latin America, affecting policy effectiveness. To be effective, policies need to change people's behaviours, like visiting and trusting the health system, trusting in the quality and relevance of the educational system or trusting the police to reduce crime. When people do not trust and perceive government actions as

mechanisms for the opportunistic behaviour of those in power, policies are ineffective.

Despite the positive side of decentralisation in promoting civic participation and distributing power, the process has created new complexities in the political and policy-making system. New fiscal inefficiencies have emerged, uneven development across municipalities is more evident, institutional weakness harms small and mid-size cities, programme delivery is perceived as poor, and trust in institutions is low (Martínez Cárdenas & Ramírez Mora, 2011; Pessino, Izquierdo, & Vuletin, 2018). Most of the recent literature on decentralisation is focused on cities' fiscal and administrative capacities (Pinilla et al., 2015; Miranda et al., 2022), regional disparities (Porto et al., 2018), and governance in large cities (Grin & Abrucio, 2018). Less is known about the decentralisation process in intermediary cities and the benefits or complexities in fiscal and administrative capacities, civic participation and programme delivery.

In Colombia, decentralisation has been a complex process, with successes and challenges (Barberena, 2010). Most of the literature evaluating this process in the country focuses on municipal finances, government performance and governance, with limited research addressing the political dimension of decentralisation (Ceballos & Hoyos, 2002). The political side of this process is central to understanding the fragmentation of political parties, the impacts of armed conflict, clientelism (Trejos, 2017), limited local autonomy and territorial participation (Barberena, 2010); factors associated with regional disparities. As a result of these political and social complexities, Colombia reflects the same trend in the region, marked by a deep distrust of citizens towards state institutions, perceiving them as part of a system of corruption, exclusion and violence (UNDP, 2024). Polls, such as the Invamer-Gallup poll, reveal a general lack of trust in all branches of government, with none reaching more than 35% favourability (Santander, 2022).

3.3 Governance in intermediary cities in Latin America and Colombia

Latin American cities are at the forefront of global urban governance discussions. The region is the most urbanised in the world, with 80% of its population living in urban areas. This high level of urbanisation has led to the proliferation of megacities that are the engines of economic growth. In the region, 10 megacities (Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Bogotá, Santiago de Chile, Caracas, Belo Horizonte

and Guadalajara) produce one-third of the region's GDP (BID, 2019).

Beyond the megacities, for the economic and social development in the region, intermediate cities are becoming more relevant. In the region, there are 961 intermediary cities (UCLG, 2017), which host 32% of the population and produce 17% of the region's GDP (CAF, 2019). Intermediary cities in Latin America are usually defined by the size of their population. These are specifically cities with a population between 50 thousand and 1 million inhabitants (CEPAL, 1998; UCGL, 2017). These cities are important regional centres of services, commerce, education, health and public administration (León, 2010). They usually act as clusters for economic, social and cultural connection between urban and rural areas. They are considered functional nodes that facilitate decentralising national and regional planning and promote collaborative governance (Otero & Llop, 2020). Intermediate cities have the potential to be scenarios for articulating decisive public policies that help increase cities' economic growth and favour processes of institutional and administrative change (CEPAL, 1998; Samad, Lozano-Gracia, & Panman, 2012; Otero, 2016).

The first wave of research on intermediary cities in Latin America appeared in 1980, defining them as the heart of the economy of rural areas in "third world" cities (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1986 in Otero & Llop, 2020). The use of terms such as medium or secondary city emphasises spatial and demographic criteria, reducing its potential in terms of urban planning, development and the interactions between the local, regional and national levels (Cepal, 1998; Mertins, 2000; Bolay & Rabinovich, 2004). This concept evolved into the use of the term intermediary city, giving a broader perspective and highlighting the relationship with city networks and their role in cultural, social, economic and political dynamics (Hernández & Sánchez, 2022).

Urban governance in these cities present challenges associated with sustainability and governance. Local governments present organisational and functional problems due to decision-makers' lack of knowledge of the complexity of intermediary cities in planning pertinent urban policies (Salazar, Irrazabal, & Fonck, 2017). The phenomena of disorderly urban growth, socio-economic segregation (Da Cunha & Rodríguez, 2009), the absence of infrastructure and climate risks and institutional weakness, planning capacities and corruption (Peralta & Higuera, 2017) are prominent issues in the study of the governance of intermediate cities in the region.

Recent lines of research question the administrative capacity of governance in the region, pointing to highly centralised and poorly adaptive patterns in the management of risks and disasters, the lack of resources and capacities, and significant dependence on central powers (Becerril, Rodríguez Cortés, & Yáñez Soria, 2022). In the region, the inefficiency of governments and the absence of management laid the foundations that gave way to urban entrepreneurship, understood as an approach in which the priority is on growth and competitive restructuring in order to maximise returns on capital, leaving aside equitable redistribution of resources and the search for social development. Although these approaches are comparable to the trends of large cities in Europe and North America, they lack planning, a situation accentuated in Latin America and exacerbating social inequalities (Prada Trigo, 2015).

Between the 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century, research on urban governance in Colombia was marked by the complexity of government and persistent regional economic inequalities attributed to institutions (Cepeda & Roca, 2014). These inequalities exacerbated the need for policies in the context of democracy, post-conflict regional development, and the relationship between the state, society and the market (Chaparro, 2018; Vitarelli, 2008; Alonso, 1996; Velásquez, 1991). The demands of strategies for peace-building, demobilisation of armed groups, the revitalisation of communities and reconciliation within local environments are prevalent in the research (Otero, 2016; Camelo, Gutiérrez, & Muñoz, 2022; López, Castaño, & Grisales, 2019; Rodríguez, 2019). At the time of discussions of peace-building, urban governance discussions also focused on the crisis in the country's external sector through governance measured by constructing monetary, fiscal, trade and wage policies recommended by multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to mediate dependence on commodities (Ocampo, 1985).

In the 21st century, Colombia strengthens urban governance through the reform of the security and defence sector, as well as in the construction of peace in the country's intermediate cities (Cujabante & Betancur, 2021; Rodríguez, 2019; Chaparro, 2018; Velásquez, 2006). Intermediate cities are formalised through the political-administrative divisions of the country as a determining element of governance (Cortés & Castañeda, 2020), increasing the importance of connecting governance with human capital and environmental law and creating a close relationship between culture, social capital and

governance for regional development (Tapia, 2020; Castro-Buitrago, 2011). All these factors combined give way to the contemporary governance challenges in Colombia. The urban governance in the country takes into consideration citizen participation (Rojas, Cuadrado-Roura, & Fernandez, 2005; Barreiro, 2008; Cervantes, Zayas, & Arámbula, 2018), accountability and financial transfers in cities as critical elements in the governance of intermediate cities (Chaparro, Smart, & Zapata, 2004). The research also highlights the power structures, the complexity of decentralised management (Camacho, 2018; García, 2007), the importance of the re-institutionalisation of the country (Mason, 2004; Giraldo, 2007) and state responsibility (Aya, 2006) in contexts such as the crisis and implementation of the Peace Agreements (Puello-Socarrás, 2018) and the framework of public health crisis such as COVID-19 (Ulloa, 2020).

3.4 Smart urban governance

In Latin America, the idea of smart cities operates as a series of prescriptive ideas to model urban development. Only a few large cities in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Colombia have systematically introduced technological and innovative alternatives to urban planning, safety, environmental or open data programmes (Duque, 2021), using technology to solve policy problems and promote social and economic growth works when operating in tandem. However, the penetration of technologies in the policy realm is uneven in the region, deepening further disparities between cities (OECD, 2020b). In Colombia, few cities have introduced technological strategies for e-government, data, infrastructure or services, and its advancements are still modest. Bogotá and Medellín lead this wave in the country with the use of technology in areas like public transport and public service delivery (Alonso-Gonzalez et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2020). Other cities in Colombia have made slow but steady progress in city-wide programmes like OpenWifi (Maestre et al., 2018).

A significant strand for the implementation of smart initiatives is the impact on civic participation. Digital technologies have the potential to improve governance in cities and restore trust among the electorate. When open government policies are adopted in procurement and accountability and implement a culture of transparency, citizens have the tools and incentives to participate in policy process and engage in interactions with the government (OECD, 2020b). However, citizens' participation through technology is more often utilitarian, using

citizens as sensing nodes rather than active political actors (Sanchez & Tironi, 2015). Smart cities have a political dimension with unequitable access to power. Only a few civic organisations or citizens have the potential to access, understand and use open-source data or non-proprietary software made available by the government, creating significant disparities in participation (Kitchin, Cardullo, & Di Felicianantonio, 2019; Trencher, 2019). Smart cities are situated, context-dependent, and despite the fact that discourse is global it develops locally (Burns, Fast, & Miller, 2021).

The potential of technology to improve governance or democratic participation is hampered by which are limited local capacities in the region. Over 32% of the region's population lacks internet connection, and around 70% of urban residents only have poor and costly connectivity. In addition, governments are not implementing digital strategies to promote the transformation of governance. Currently, only 7% of government procedures can be completed online, 1% of countries in the region have digital medical records, and smartphone and computer penetration are around 65% (Ziegler et al., 2020). The implementation of smart cities in the region is a recent silo for the megalopolis with focused policy areas like transport or energy. It is unclear how the development of this paradigm improves urban governance, promotes civic engagement or contributes to democracy.

Although Colombia has made progress in innovation and technology to improve various areas of its people's lives, it currently lags behind other countries; with 60.5%, Colombia is the country with the lowest internet coverage of all OECD member countries. Issues such as competitiveness, strategic uses and total coverage in the national territory are part of the challenges (Universidad Nacional, 2023). Since 2009, an electoral reform and the implementation of mechanisms such as electronic voting have been proposed; however, this continues to be a challenge that depends on the political will of the parliamentary majorities, the economic support of the executive branch and the training of citizens and their trust in the process and in the electoral authorities (Padrón, 2019).

Since 2009, the use of technology to promote participation, such as electronic voting, has been unsuccessfully proposed, continuing to be a challenge that depends on the political will of the parliamentary majorities, the economic support of the executive branch and the trust in the electoral process (Padrón, 2019).

4 Future directions of research

Most of the governance transformations in the region, like decentralisation or the use of technology, are recent additions to the policy process with uneven implementations. Some large cities with financial and technical capacities have improved governance and the quality of living of their residents, but the process is uneven. The newness of the political transformation in Latin America comes with additional complexities such as ingrained socio-economic inequalities (Busso & Messina, 2020). Despite the critical lessons for other parts of the world, these transformations have not received sufficient attention from the international research community (Hardoy, Satterthwaite, & Stewart, 2019). It is necessary to study the different urban transformations that are currently taking place in Latin America, with particular attention to the region's complexities and differences, including new and diverse types of political participation and its contribution to making urban governance more accountable and inclusive.

Research analysing the intersection between urban governance, technology and participation in Latin America is an emerging field. For the most part, research is concentrated in areas. Urban governance and decentralisation have been studied with a focus on large cities, and less is known about the institutional capacities, relations, institutional trust and fiscal constraints of intermediary cities. The introduction of technology as a mechanism to improve governance or service delivery is heavily concentrated in capital cities with large populations. The evidence is even scarcer regarding the intersection of technology, civic participation and government. We lack clear evidence on whether digital participatory practices strengthen local government institutions, how governments use technology to interact with stakeholders or if this promotes civic engagement and how it varies by population groups.

Evidence in Colombia mirrors the research deficits in the region. However, it adds additional complexities like the post-conflict challenges and the lack of institutional capacities and civic participation in territories affected by the armed conflict. Colombia also offers a particular angle in youth participation with the recent developments in legal frameworks like the youth councils. Colombia's new political format to promote youth participation is a prime example and an opportunity to study the confluence of youth activism, technology and urban governance in intermediary cities in the Global South. Focusing

on this and other concrete cases of articulating these three vital dimensions of future-oriented political participation, our research project will contribute timely insights on local-level urban governance practices and offer scalable conclusions on next-generation governance's workings, challenges and possibilities.

Annex 1.

Decentralisation in Colombia

Political and administrative decentralisation in Colombia arises as a response to the loss of legitimacy that public institutions have been experiencing since the 1980s. This loss of legitimacy and governability of the Colombian state brought a crisis of representative democracy, a lack of institutional channels for active and direct citizen participation, a deficiency in public and social services provision, and reduced capacity of local governments (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2002).

Decentralisation in Colombia was materialised with the new constitution in 1991, within the framework of a political and fiscal crisis and pressing demands for democratic openness and strengthening of sub-national governments. Decentralisation in the country was framed from an open market angle and a flexible approach to implement strategies to increase the economy's efficiency and reduce the state's size (Alesina, Carrasquilla, & Echavarría, 2000).

Since the 1991 constitution, Colombia has been consolidated as a decentralised unitary republic with the autonomy of its territorial entities, where the national government specialises in the general coordination and macroeconomic management of the country, while territorial entities concentrate on the design of plans and programmes to improve the provision of infrastructure and local public services. The objectives of decentralisation were to increase coverage, quality and efficiency of the provision of local public services, increase fiscal capacity, and improve management and administrative efficiency (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2002). This territorial decentralisation allowed, in turn, the spatial and functional specialisation of public activity, in which the set of territorial entities was substantially expanded, such as regions, provinces, metropolitan areas, indigenous territorial organisations and districts, which helped to recognise the plurality of ethnicities and cultures, including them in democracy and policy-making process (Vargas & Sarmiento, 1997).

Multiple measures were designed and implemented to transition to general decentralisation in Colombia. Processes associated with administrative and political decentralisation led the country to define functions, assign resources and distribute political responsibility, as well as consider the management of the process to assume the inherent risks of adapting and understanding a new constitution and its fiscal reforms regarding the fiscal deficit, the absence of evaluation and technical assistance and the lack of coordination between territorial entities and the national government (Alesina, Carrasquilla, & Echavarría, 2000; Bonet, 2006). The municipalities concentrated the most significant distribution of functions, making them autonomous not only to manage and partially generate their resources but also to take charge of the construction, provision and maintenance of the infrastructure for the education and health sector, as well as the administration of the service. Additionally, the municipalities reaffirmed their duty to provide drinking water, basic sanitation, roads and urban transportation by generating resources and strategies to increase tax collection (Camargo, 2005).

The constitution (articles 356 and 357) granted territorial entities the right to participate in the budgeting process of the nation through intergovernmental transfers that currently come from the General Budget of the Nation (PGN, its acronym in Spanish) and the General Royalties System (SGR, its acronym in Spanish) (Cárdenas M., 2013), which are defined as:

General Participation System (SGP, its acronym in Spanish): Created in 2001 and modified by Law 1176 of 2007. It is the primary mechanism for allocating resources from the central government to territorial entities. The SGP redistributes resources based on criteria of population, poverty and unmet basic needs, to finance sectors such as education, health, drinking water and basic sanitation. Resources transferred to local governments through the SGP system are not discretionary resources to use by local authorities. Those resources have specific destinations mainly focused on health, education and sanitation (Bonet & Ayala, 2015). Local governments can only use local taxes or revenues to invest in other areas such as infrastructure, technology or innovation.

General Royalties System (SGR, its acronym in Spanish): Created in 2011 with Legislative Act 05 and regulated by Decree 1073 of 2012, it is a system of unconditional transfers whose income is generated by exploiting non-renewable

resources, such as oil and mining. These are distributed between producing and non-producing territorial entities through a system seeking to compensate the environmental and economic impacts of extractive activity, considering poverty and the size of the population of the municipalities, to strengthen social equity, regional competitiveness and good governance (Bonet & Ayala, 2015).

Political power was represented by the democratic election of governors in the departments and mayors in the municipalities to strengthen territorial autonomy, improve public management, and obtain institutional stability and resources to develop and execute government programmes. In addition, the 1991 constitution also created a set of mechanisms for political participation in society to make management transparent, meet the population's needs, and strengthen participatory democracy. Some of these mechanisms were popular consultations, participation of users in boards of directors of public service companies, contracting of works with community organisations, creation of Local and Communal Administrative Boards (JAL and JAC, respectively), referendum, revocation of mandate, public services control committees, planning and land use councils, health committees and education boards, among others (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2002).

Additionally, the constitution placed particular emphasis on the role of the departments by considering them as mediators between the nation and the municipalities in terms of public management planning, the administration of resources transferred by the nation, technical, administrative and financial support for municipalities, and the coordination and provision of public services at the local level. Likewise, importance was given to evaluating the management and administration of local governments to demonstrate the correct use of the resources transferred by the nation and the execution and operationalisation of development plans at all levels of government (Vargas & Sarmiento, 1997).

Annex 2.

Policies and legal frameworks for youth in Colombia

Law 1622 of 2013 defines youth as people between 14 and 28 years old. Youth represent 24.8% of the total population in the country and are concentrated in urban areas (76.2%). The youth population in the country faces

multifaceted challenges, including lower educational attainment, scarce employment opportunities and persistent gender disparities. One of the significant problems facing youth in the country is the high unemployment rate. In 2019, national youth unemployment was 17.7%, and this increased to 24.2% in 2020 due to the pandemic. For women, unemployment is higher, at 31.7% in 2020, with a 12.9% gap compared to males (DANEa, 2021). The proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) accounts for 24%, overrepresented among women (16%) and lower for males (8%) (DANE, 2023).

Youth has been central in the policy agenda in Colombia since the new constitution of 1991 (Sanabria-González & Reyes-Sarmiento, 2020). Laws and policies enacted in the country focused on youth have two aims: i) improving the quality of life of youth through access to education, health employment opportunities, safety and all services of the welfare state; and ii) the promotion of active participation of young people in democracy and policy-making process.

In Colombia, 51% of young people of working age do not have access to formal education or employment (Fundación Corona, 2022), conditions that exacerbate poverty in young people belonging to marginalised social sectors and impede development and social mobility (García & Arias, 2021). The rate of labour informality among young people was 51.6% in 2017, concentrated in strata 1 and 2. In terms of access to higher education, 4 out of 10 students who finish high school manage to immediately access higher education (Universidad del Rosario, 2023). A similar evolution is observed between men (40.2%) and women (39.3%); the gaps are accentuated in the access of students from the urban (44.7%) and rural (24%) sectors (Ministerio de Educación, 2023). Magdalena (19.4%), San Andrés de Tumaco (23.9%), Fundación (22.4%), Jamundí and Granada are some of the 34 cities that rank below the national average (40%). Pamplona (72.8%), Ibagué (58.2%) and Quibdó (57.4%) obtain the highest averages. These conditions of inequality between cities translate into challenges in terms of urban governance that reduce the gaps of precariousness and social exclusion through differentiated actions that recognise the potential of the youth population for the social and economic development of the country (CUSO, 2018).

Policy employment programmes

In education, the national government has designed programmes to promote the qualification and entry of young people into higher education through forgivable loans such as Ser Pilo Paga, with total coverage of 40,000 students to private universities in the country between 2014 and 2018 (Ministerio de Educación, 2018). This programme was continued through the Generation E programme (2018) with the entry of 200,000 young people into public and private institutes and universities in the country, favouring remote regions and those in conditions of social vulnerability with a more significant number of scholarships (Ministerio de Educación, 2021); and Youth in Peace (2023), a programme that prioritises access to higher education and job training for young people in municipalities most impacted by violence and armed conflict, such as Bogotá, Guachené, Puerto Tejada, Buenaventura, Quibdó and Medellín (Ministerio de Igualdad, 2023). Student retention continues to be a challenge in education, which is why programmes have been developed such as Zero Tuition, free tuition for young people from public universities, and the Youth in Action programme with economic subsidies for students in vulnerable conditions. In employability, the Estado Joven programme offers vacancies for university students in the internship stage; between 2018 and 2022, it has linked 6,180 young people with 242 state entities granting economic incentives (Ministerio de Trabajo, 2022).

Colombian youth law

There have been important achievements in the participation and mobilisation of young people in Colombian history. Possibly the primary example in the recent past was la séptima papeleta (the seventh ballot). During the legislative elections in 1990, student groups, social movements and grassroots organisations promoted the idea of a seventh ballot to express widespread discontent with the established political system and demand change. The seventh ballot was introduced in the elections, with an overwhelmingly favourable result leading to a National Constituent Assembly that enshrined the social and legal process of the new constitution in 1991. La séptima papeleta is recognised as a massive example of the organised participation of young people who demanded guarantees to protect fundamental rights (Sanabria-González & Reyes-Sarmiento, 2020). This process gave rise to some significant achievements: the tutela action as a mechanism for the promotion and protection of fundamental rights and the creation of bodies, such as the constitutional court, in support of the principles

and articles of the constitution are some examples (Torres, 2010)

The new constitution laid the legal foundation of laws and policies to protect rights and promote the political participation of youth in Colombia. In the new constitution, articles 25 and 103 safeguard young people's integrity, access to education and political participation, which served as the first draft for constructing public policy for young people. The presidential programme and the first normative framework for youth emerged through Law 375 of 1997, later repealed by Statutory Law 1622 of 2013, which expanded the concept of citizenship and youth participation (Sanabria-González & Reyes-Sarmiento, 2020).

The Youth Statutory Law 1622 of 2013 formally recognises young people as subjects of rights and key actors in the country's development. It establishes a regulatory framework for the prevention, promotion, protection and guarantee of their rights, with guidelines for public policy and social investment in young people and guaranteeing their political participation. It was amended by Law 1885 of 2018, strengthening electoral processes not contemplated in the previous law. A fundamental aspect of the citizenship statute is strengthening youth participation, ensuring spaces for dialogue with the administration at its different levels through diverse formal participation mechanisms, such as youth councils and assemblies (Ledezma, 2022).

Policy instruments for youth political participation

In Colombia there are formal and informal mechanisms for the political participation of young people. The Statute of Youth Citizenship and CONPES 4040 of 2021 establish the institutional framework to guarantee the participation of young people in the social, economic, cultural and democratic life of the country, as well as guaranteeing the enjoyment of social and civil rights of Colombian youth.

The Statute seeks to materialise this conception by formulating a youth policy for each level of the government (departments and municipalities). Four principles govern the policy:

- Inclusion: recognition of diversity
- Participation: the establishment of processes, scenarios and instruments for participation and decision-making
- Complementarity: articulation with other populations and policies to achieve inter-institutional integration

- Territoriality: the application of differential criteria according to conditions of territories

Based on Law 1885 of 2018 and Law 1622 of 2023, the National Youth System (SNJ, its acronym in Spanish) is created to allow the state, civil society, youth organisations, public, private and mixed entities to interact in processes and create plans, programmes and projects related to youth. The programmes created in the youth system are aimed at strengthening youth capacities, providing opportunities and increasing political participation. The SNJ is responsible for young people's organisational processes and practices, generates spaces for participation, and builds platforms for forming Youth Councils and Assemblies. (Consejería Presidencial para la Juventud, 2023; Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2023).

The national government has promoted youth platforms comprising several organisational processes and practices that encourage the participation of young people as required by Law 1885 of 2018 (Consejería Presidencial para la Juventud, 2022; Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2023). These platforms promote participation in the design of youth policy agendas, allow oversight and social control of youth policies, and serve as a valid mechanism for dialogue with the administration and public entities.

Youth Councils

The Youth Councils, proposed in the Statutory Law on Youth of 2018, are a mechanism for civic participation of young people at the municipal, district and national levels. Its functions are promoting dialogue and agreement on youth issues, coordinating the inclusion of youth issues in municipal and national agendas, and exercising social surveillance and control (Consejería presidencial para la juventud, n.d). Councils are made up of young people (aged 14–28) who belong to independent lists, are formally constituted or belong to political parties elected by vote, reflecting each territory's racial, cultural and socio-economic diversity. Councils have between 7 and 17 councillors, depending on the population density of each city. The law establishes a formal dialogue between the youth councils and territorial authorities at least twice yearly and accountability meetings every six months with public audiences.

After the law was amended in 2018, the first youth council elections were held in 2021, with 10% of the national population eligible to vote (Presidential Council for Youth, n.d). In 2021, over

12,000 youth councillors were elected for four years to exercise political oversight, control and advocacy for policies benefiting youth. The youth council is a significant political commitment, favouring the democratisation of politics, providing representation of new leaderships and agendas from youth, and promoting a political culture with a participatory approach and pedagogical processes in the new decision-making spaces (Ledezma, 2022). In order for this platform to be effective and favour the construction of a social fabric and the reconstruction of a democratic youth culture (Ayala Soriano, 2008), the role of the state is important; it must ensure, through channels and resources, effective strategies of continuous community participation for young people and thus achieve the reduction of social inequalities (Ausberger et al., 2017; Gilbert, 2009).

Youth consultations. Some government entities and civil society organisations organise consultations and surveys specifically aimed at young people to collect their opinions and proposals on different topics of public interest.

Other forms of youth formal political participation

Besides the youth councils, there are several mechanisms that promote the formal political participation of youth:

Youth assemblies. Serve as a platform for socialisation, consultation and accountability of the actions carried out by the youth councils meeting twice a year. Different youth councils and assemblies do not have a defined normative framework; their composition is open and less formal, which allows a greater number of young people and youth-related actors to participate. In essence, assemblies allow for the discussion of issues of importance to young people at the local level, propose specific actions to address problems and contribute to developing public policies at the territorial level (Consejería Presidencial para la Juventud, 2023).

Student organisations. Young people can participate in student organisations within their educational institutions, such as student centres, student associations and student councils. These organisations allow them to express their opinions, defend their rights and promote changes within their educational communities.

Participation in political parties. Young people can join and participate in political parties to contribute to formulating policies and programmes, run for public office, and represent the interests of their generation within the political system.

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