

The Governmental Partnership in Colombia to guarantee sexual and reproductive rights of youth.

Lucy Wartenberg
Assistant Representative
UNFPA Colombia

Despite the important decline on fertility in Colombia, with reductions in Global Fertility Rate from 6.7 children per woman in 1960, to 2.4 in 2005, teenage pregnancy rates and birthrates have increased substantially. The specific fertility rate among women aged 15-19 years has grown from 70 per thousand in 1990, to 90 per thousand in 2005. According to the National Demographic and Health Survey of 2005 (Profamilia), one in five women under 20, has been pregnant.

The government and civil society have recorded this growing trend with concern since its strong link with urban poverty and its effect on intergenerational transmission of poverty. Although early fertility was a rural phenomenon, it has moved to the big cities due to internal displacement produced by the armed conflict that for decades has affected the country, which adds to the lack of opportunities that urban youth face which has restrained them from progress and development.

These circumstances have led the national government to revise their strategies and to design policies and programs that can break this trend. This paper brushes the evolution of these policy changes, especially those that United of Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have had the privilege of supporting both technically and financially.

In 2003, the Ministry of Health formulated a National Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) with rights based and gender approaches. This policy includes action lines that promote safe motherhood and family planning, and intent to reduce unwanted pregnancy, especially among adolescents, STDs/AIDs, and gender based violence. Although this policy was prepared within the health sector, it was received and adopted by other institutions belonging to the education, justice and protection sectors.

Under the umbrella of the SRH Policy, each sector has been adapting its programs seeking effectiveness. But not only have they revised their principles and strategies, but they have also put especial emphasis on the implementation of the National Policy at local levels. Most of the work has been done on the development of capacities of different actors in departments (states) and municipalities. It also led them to revise their institutional competences and complementarities, seeking to design programs and inter-cutting in the pursuit of a more comprehensive approach.

The health sector (Ministry of Social Protection since 2004) after testing the development and dissemination of standards for teenage care and the development of mass media campaigns aimed at promoting their right to access health services, found that care units and service providers were not prepared to deliver adequate services to young people. In 2007, the Ministry asked UNFPA to design a model of youth-friendly health services (YFS), seeking to overcome existing access barriers, promote early mobilization of demand and improve the quality of services. During the last two years, dissemination and monitoring strategies have been implemented by the Ministry in order to increase the coverage and quality of these services. Today, 559 YFS are in place in 445 municipalities (out of a total of 1,100 municipalities).

Since 1994, Colombian schools are obliged by law to provide sexual education. In 2004, after evidencing the low impact of this program, the Ministry of Education decided to rethink and build a new model which seeks to modify the previous approach which was limited to biological aspects and the risks associated with sexuality. UNFPA supported the design, the piloting and currently the expansion of the Programme of Education for Sexuality and Citizenship Competencies. This programme aims to create pedagogical practices that promote development of skills in students, so that they can incorporate human and reproductive rights, and thus make decisions that allow them to develop as individuals and live a healthy sexuality, fully and responsibly, to enrich their life projects. Now a days, the Ministry works with 74 education secretaries and 2115 educational institutions (with pre-schools, primary and secondary levels) strengthening their capacities to implement educational projects that promote the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights (SRR). Also, the programme has developed a strategy for training of trainers, through universities, colleges and other higher educational agents.

The Presidential Office of Special Programs developed a Program for the Promotion of Rights and Peace-building networks. It has promoted in 240 municipalities, institutional coordination, community organization and local communication strategies, all combined to prevent early pregnancies and to ensure the full exercise of sexual and reproductive rights amongst highly vulnerable groups.

In 2008, the above mentioned entities formed the Intersectorial Committee on Adolescence and Youth, with UNFPA as the technical secretary. This committee has been established to generate social mobilization and communication strategies to ensure public awareness, political will and cross-sector partnerships to guarantee that adolescents and youth have access to information and services to fully exercise their SRR. This initiative has had to a lesser extent the support of the Ministry of Communications, ICBF (Institute for Family Welfare), Colombia Joven (National Programme for Youth) and the SENA Institute (The institute in charge of informal education and technical training). At the end of august 2010, the president and its ministers looking for its sustainability, due to the change of government, institutionalized this instance as “Intersectorial National Committee for the Promotion and Guarantee of SRR”, assigned it precise functions and responsibilities.

Recently the public opinion was informed of a new ruling by the Colombian Constitutional Court (No. T-388/2009), by which the Minister of Social Protection and the Minister of Education have the obligation to design and develop a sustainable, continuous and intense campaign to promote SRR of women and youth, in order to inform the circumstances in which abortion may be carried out legally (abortion was recently found to be legal under three specific conditions).

In order to fulfill the legal rulings, and comply with target results of the different agencies, and implement the Plan of the Commissions, governmental institutions are embarking on an important set of activities that will close my speech. In addition, I intend to offer some reflections and lessons learned from these important efforts.