

Tourism in Comuna 13: A Story of Resilience and Rebirth

Madeleine Luntley, Isabella Sidoruk, Ali Eren Kaya

University of Toronto, Tufts University

Laidlaw Foundation and make_sense Americas

Background

When I arrived in Colombia, I had next to no idea what I would be doing for the coming six weeks. I just knew I had a flight there, a flight back, and somewhere to lay my head at night. It was a leap of faith, and one that I felt was ultimately worth it, despite the challenges. My main goal for this leadership-in-action experience was selfish: I wanted to gain confidence in my project management skills and leadership abilities.

The project I was to be a part of for six weeks, from July 8th until August 19, was organised and spearheaded by Makesense Americas, a wide-reaching social justice organisation dedicated to investigating and developing the mechanisms by which social change can be wrought. The Makesense project in Colombia was dedicated to exploring and empowering peace and social resilience in Medellín, with scholars split into four groups. Myself, Ali Eren Kaya, and Tufts University scholar Isabella Sidoruk were assigned to work with Zippy Tour in Medellín's *Comuna 13*.

Comuna 13 is a historically violent neighbourhood situated on the slopes of several mountains surrounding the heart of Medellín. It has a complicated past steeped in conflict, its residents continually caught in violence between Colombia's guerillas in the countryside, the government, and Colombia's organised crime networks. When violence broke out in the mountains outside Medellín in the 1980s, people fled to urban areas and settled on the outskirts of the city, up the steep mountain slopes. Many of Medellín's official sectors, called *comunas*, came to be in this manner, and *Comuna 13* was no different. Because it was initially a shanty-town, it was not an official part of Medellín, and as such it did not have access to the resources of the city; it was separate from Medellín's public transportation, from the city power network, and from water and sewage systems. Because of Medellín's unique topography, it was geographically very isolated from the economic prospects in the main city: so, all of the people who left their agriculture-based ways of life found themselves nearly destitute and stranded on the outskirts of a city they couldn't access.

The three major players in Colombia's political and economic systems that affected the residents of *Comuna 13* are the guerillas, the Colombian government, and the criminal organisations controlling the drug trade. The guerilla violence in the countryside forced people to the city. Because the government would not integrate these new settlements into the city, paramilitaries stepped in to provide some semblance of order, along with access to electricity and other services, but at a cost, and they governed with often deadly force. It also did not help that the shortest path to the ocean from Medellín travelled directly through *Comuna 13*, so the paramilitaries found it profitable to control that trade route. When in the

1990s and early 2000s the Colombian government wanted to gain control of the drug trade in Medellín, their eyes turned to *Comuna 13*, and what was in essence urban warfare broke out on the streets as they tried to root out the criminal organisations, and residents of the community were once again caught in the violence.

Ultimately, the leaders of the drug empire (ever heard of Pablo Escobar?) were apprehended, and *Comuna 13* was included in Medellín city limits, affording it access municipal resources and infrastructure; however, the gangs still maintained control over much of the economic opportunity in the *Comuna*, so the neighbourhood stayed one of the most dangerous areas in Colombia through to the late 2000s and into the 2010s, when things started to change.

Increased public transportation, namely the *Comuna 13* escalators and the metros, connected the residents of the *comuna* to the economic opportunities in the city, decreasing reliance on organised crime to make a living. Through all of the violence, the residents had been creating graffiti documenting their hardships. A few companies were established to provide tours of the graffiti, with the goal of sharing *Comuna 13's* history, and by bringing tourists and constant inflow of money to the community, violence decreased.

Zippy Tour is one of the tour companies that helped bring about this change. It is a non-profit tour company founded by residents of *Comuna 13* established in 2015, dedicated to sharing the artwork and history of *Comuna 13* with visitors. Prior to Zippy Tour's foundation, there were no bilingual tours of the community. Through first-hand accounts of the area's history and a passion for art, they helped usher in a new era for the community: one of lively transformation and international acclaim.

With this influx of tourism came several issues. Many of the residents experienced vast shifts in their quality of life, with overcrowding on the weekends, substantial noise pollution, loss of privacy, and increasingly poor waste management. The rise in tourism in the area happened in a sufficiently short period of time that legislation was not able to keep up with the new demands on infrastructure and governance of new enterprises in the area.

Zippy Tour came to Makesense looking for a project to help address noise pollution and poor waste management; however, when my peers and I examined the issue, we found a dearth of information on resident's attitudes towards increased tourism, and no documentation of the issues Zippy Tour was reporting. In lieu of trying to solve issues when we did not understand the root cause sufficiently, we decided to conduct a pilot study surveying community members on their thoughts on increased tourism.

The Process: Timeline

During our first week in Medellín, we visited *Comuna 13* twice, and spoke extensively with our Zippy Tour contacts. I'd like to take this time to thank Lizeth and John-Stiven for their help explaining their community to us, and for their support through the process. We learned about the community's history, and hiked to the top of the mountain up winding, hand-paved streets, trying to gain an understanding of *Comuna 13*'s unique position in the Colombian political and social fabric.

In our second week, we began to design our project. We initially wanted to work with at least 30 volunteers, but due to time constraints, we decided to work with a total of 20 volunteers over the course of the project. In week two and week three, we hosted several recruitment events, and visited classes at the *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana* to share about our project, while ironing out the fine details of our methodology.

Isabella took the majority of the workload organising the volunteers, and I and Ali developed the methodology. During the third week, we finalised our survey and our study design. Ali helped with the survey design from a mathematical standpoint, making sure we would be able to disseminate it online and in person and analyse the results after collecting the data, and I took the lead on the wording of the questions and deciding the survey's content. We enlisted the help of a communications professor at UPB to assist us in our project design to ensure we were not going to be inadvertently doing harm through our investigation. We also talked to our colleagues at Zippy Tour through the design process to make sure we were addressing the main challenges faced by the community in our survey, working with them and the professor over our fourth week of work.

Once we had our survey and we'd recruited our volunteers, we needed to train them and get them up to speed with our project. We designed a full education and training day for them, where we and Zippy Tour spoke about the history of *Comuna 13*, and taught them how to administer the surveys. We also created space for them to ask about the community, and to get them invested in our project, and did team building activities to help create a sense of collective identity and group work ethic. We did the majority of this work during our fifth week in Colombia.

A few days later, on week 6, we returned to the community to administer the surveys, to which we got 150 responses over a 6 hour period. This was beyond what we had hoped, and is due to our volunteers and their impressive motivation to help us with the project.

While designing and executing our project, we had been organising a wrap-up that happened at the presentation and event at the *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana* to share

We ended up with this map of where we surveyed, with red lines being highly touristic areas, blue being the somewhat affected areas, and the green areas being nearly unaffected.

Once we decided where we were going to survey, we could better design the list of questions. We decided to use a likert style survey, which is a rating scale used to measure attitudes and opinions on different topics. It consists of a statement or a question, followed by a series of five or seven answer statements. Respondents choose the option that best corresponds with how they feel about the statement or question. I will attach our list of questions in English and Spanish to the end of the report.

We wanted to measure the perception of increasing tourism in *Comuna 13* at the present and over time, to try and gauge what residents wanted from new tourism legislation. To do this, we included questions asking about attitudes towards public services and infrastructure over time, knowing that tourism has increased in the area significantly over the past five years. We asked questions pertaining to noise pollution, and if residents believe it's related to tourism, as well as surveying whether or not residents believe that tourism has made the neighbourhood more or less safe to live in. We also wanted to assess whether increased tourism has increased a sense of community pride and identity, or whether it has impacted those things negatively.

We designed this list of questions with input from *Comuna 13* residents, and worked with communications experts to ensure the questions were as free as possible from bias. We kept the list of questions to 32, despite similar studies having above 40 questions. We were aware that we needed to maintain engagement from our respondents, and having a survey that takes longer than five to ten minutes would result in an insufficient response rate.

We wrote the initial questionnaire in English, and worked with our native Spanish speaking volunteers to accurately translate it. Before deploying the survey on our survey day, we tested it and got feedback from a few residents, and made minor wording changes.

After collecting responses, we inputted all of them into a google form to digitise all of the information, which we could then export to a spreadsheet and analyse in various ways. I used ChatGPT to clean up the data set by removing surveys that were incomplete, and then got the system to find correlations between responses. We also looked at responses to individual questions, dividing based on where in the community the questionnaire was conducted.

Along with the data analysis, we partnered with journalism students to collect first hand accounts from residents. This was to allow for individual human experience, and to

make sure that the stories and people behind the survey responses were not being forgotten. We shared some of these stories in the final presentation, to tie humanity to the data.

Results and Discussion

We ended up with 152 responses to the survey, with 140 usable responses included in the final data set.

Fifty percent of people who responded depend on tourism to make money, which is less than we anticipated. We were under the impression that the vast majority of people in *Comuna 13* now rely heavily on tourism; it is still the predominant industry, but there is more diversity of industry than we anticipated. When we look at which respondents rely on tourism most heavily, there was a clear division between respondents living in highly touristic areas versus unaffected areas, with the respondents living in touristic areas vastly more likely to be dependent on tourism for their income. This is what we expected.

Inversely, when we look at the responses to whether or not an individual to move out of the community, the respondents living in highly touristic areas are far more likely to express a desire to move elsewhere; however, they do not want to leave *Comuna 13*, rather just move from the busy areas to elsewhere in the community. We expected this as well, due to the extreme noise pollution from the number of restaurants, bars, and music venues that have popped up over the past five years. People generally do not want to leave the community, just move elsewhere within it.

Most people feel that their lives have changed since the beginning of tourism, and they also say that tourism has improved the quality of their lives. We anticipated more recency bias, with people growing resentful of the tourists invading their community; however, though we had some responses along those lines, the more predominant sentiments were more excitement at getting to know new people and to share the history of the community. People had things that they would like to see changed, but overall, tourism is seen as a force of good.

Also, people feel that the culture of the community has been preserved, and they have a sense of belonging to the community. Prior to conducting the surveys, we were worried that tourism was having adverse effects on the social fabric of the community, but at the moment, that is not the case. Through some discussions with residents of the community, we had worried that because of increasing business competition in the community, there would be less of a sense of collective identity; however, the only responses to this effect were from the highly touristic areas. It seems to be something to keep an eye on, but overall it is not a huge issue.

Conclusions

Our initial goal for this pilot study was to inform a future, larger investigation that would eventually provide a report to inform policy changes for the legislature governing the development of tourism in previously vulnerable communities. This goal was partially completed: more time on site would have been beneficial, along with a deeper analysis of the data collected. We should have built in more time to analyse the results of our survey, to avoid so many surface level generalisations. However, we managed to collect and gain some valuable insights that will inform future studies in this area.

For future investigations, we recommend inquiries regarding the sources of income for people in *Comuna 13*. We found that many people rely on tourism for income, which may have led to biased responses that may not ultimately benefit the community. If we are able to discern exact sources of income, it may lead to more clear conclusions for the researchers.

With regards to current recommendations from our panel of experts and conclusions from our research, we recommend that the tourism economy in *Comuna 13* be diversified to provide links to cultural heritage and foster a sense of community rather than competition. It is important that in the future people find a niche in the industry instead of competing with neighbours for the same clientele. We see this happening to some extent, but more studies are needed to assess tourism growth in the sector and help plan accordingly. We recommend any future studies focus on growth of different industries in *Comuna 13*.

Our study was a pilot investigation, so there are obviously things we would change for the future. In all projects there are different steps, and we are still at the beginning of understanding tourism in *Comuna 13*.