

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: FROM SEED TO FOREST: THE FORMALIZATION PARADOX IN SCALING
NONFORMAL EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

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This dissertation examines how nonformal education (NFE) programs scale by following one organization's nearly two-decade trajectory of growth, contraction, and institutional change. Tiempo de Juego (TdJ), a Colombian foundation founded in 2006 in the informal settlement of Cazucá, Soacha, has grown from a Saturday soccer session into a three-region operation serving several thousand children annually through sport, arts, leadership training, and community programming. Using a qualitative case study design grounded in five weeks of fieldwork across multiple Colombian sites, twenty-four semi-structured interviews, extensive document analysis, and participant observation, the study asks how TdJ grew, how scaling decisions were made and by whom, what forces shaped the process, and what its experience implies for other nonformal education programs.

The dissertation reconstructs TdJ's trajectory chronologically across four eras, from the first games in Cazucá through methodological formalization, regional expansion into Santa Marta, Ciénaga, and Timbiquí, and the prolonged aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It then reorganizes the same evidence thematically around the four research questions, drawing connections across eras, sites, and roles to surface patterns the chronological narrative alone could not isolate. Attention is paid throughout to the communities that shaped the methodology, the monitors and coordinators who carried it, and the funding architecture that enabled and constrained the organization's choices. Drawing on Gramsci, Freire, Foley, and Mickelsson's scaling-as-learning framework, the dissertation engages the scaling literature's dominant taxonomies and argues for closer attention to the human and relational dimensions of growth that current frameworks tend to overlook. It contributes an in-depth, longitudinal case of NFE scaling in the Colombian context, extends existing theory through a set of proposed refinements, and offers the forest as an alternative to the engineering metaphors dominant in the field — reframing NFE scaling as cultivation rather than replication.

FROM SEED TO FOREST: THE FORMALIZATION PARADOX IN SCALING NONFORMAL EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

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University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2026

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all of the people who made this work possible.

To Dr. Steven Klees, you gave me the language to describe the forces at play in education, and then you presented me with alternatives. And then, when you became my advisor, you helped me keep things simple. Thank you for helping me see this project through to the final page.

To Dr. Jing Lin, I came to you with a 2.7 GPA, and you saw the passion I carried and welcomed me into the program anyway. You taught me something so obvious that it bears repeating: love is the solution when all else fails and must be our guiding force.

To my committee, Dr. Mark Ginsburg, Dr. Melinda Martín-Beltrán, and Dr. Taylor Woodman — your feedback throughout, and particularly at the defense, reminded me of the power of this work and of my ability to contribute to it.

To Tiempo de Juego, you all opened your hearts, your minds, and gave me your time. I am unbelievably grateful. There are not enough words to say thank you, so please think of this dissertation as much yours as it is mine.

To my mom, who told me “life isn't fair.” Well, I took that as a challenge to make life fair. You set an example to me that nothing is too difficult, and you challenged me every day to believe that. To my dad, who taught me crying is powerful and who showed me that change is profoundly possible. To my siblings, who I admire more than they know, and whose example makes me believe I am capable.

To Santiago, Martha, and Pame, and now Kev, who welcomed me into their family and opened their home to me. You made Colombia a second home long before I knew it would become one.

To my wife, Paula, without you, Colombia would never have become that second home, and without your love and support I could never have made it through the impossible stretches of this dissertation. Words can't describe how lucky I am.

To Ollie and Atreu, both born during the writing of this work: you are my lights. Each of you has pushed me to be a better version of myself, every single day. And one day maybe you'll get to read this.

To my academic friends, you stretched my brain and challenged me to think wider, deeper, more creatively, more critically, more empathetically.

To my other friends, too many to name, you know who you are; you have always been there to quell the doubt and remind me of who I am and what matters most.

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Table of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Name	Language
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project	English
ACDI-VOCA	Agricultural Cooperative Development International / Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance	English
AJ	Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing)	Spanish
CdJ	Cambio de Juego (Game Changer)	Spanish
COMET	Colombia's national soccer registration platform	Spanish
COP	Colombian Peso	Spanish
EiE	Education in Emergencies	English
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)	Spanish
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)	Spanish
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute for Family Welfare)	Spanish
IDP	Internally Displaced Person	English
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies	English
IOM	International Organization for Migration	English
JAC	Junta de Acción Comunal (Community Action Board)	Spanish
NFE	Nonformal Education	English

NGO	Non-governmental Organization	English
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	English
SABER	Systems Approach for Better Education Results (World Bank)	English
SENA	Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Service)	Spanish
SRPA	Sistema de Responsabilidad Penal para Adolescentes (Adolescent Criminal Responsibility System)	Spanish
TdJ	Tiempo de Juego (Game Time)	Spanish
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme	English
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	English
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	English
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund	English
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	English
USAID	United States Agency for International Development	English

Table of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Role at Time of Interview	Region	Entry Point
Andrés Wiesner*	Founder, Interim Director	Soacha/Bogotá	External (founder)
Willy Jiménez*	Co-founding Leader, Aprender Jugando National Coordinator	Soacha/National	Community (Soacha)
David*	Football Club Director (Cazucá FC)	Soacha	Participant at age 12
Mariana	Director of Operations	Bogotá	External (psychologist, joined 2012)
Rigoberto	Pedagogical Area Coordinator	Bogotá	External (sociologist, joined 2013)
Nairo	Director of Projects	Bogotá/Santa Marta	Community (schoolteacher, Soacha)
Santiago	Director of Alliances	Bogotá	External
Tatiana	Administrative and Financial Director	Bogotá	External (joined 2022)
Sandra	Regional Sports Coordinator	Soacha	External (athletics teacher, joined 2012)
Carolina	Psychosocial Coordinator / Community Manager	Soacha	Community (university practicum, joined 2013)
Luisa	Regional Coordinator	Soacha	Staff
René	National Trainer, Cambio de Juego	National	Participant (Soacha)
Fabiola	Psychosocial Coordinator	Magdalena	External
Ximena	El Habitante Coordinator, Ciénaga	Magdalena	Volunteer (circus artist/dancer)
Cecilia	Regional Coordinator	Magdalena	Staff
Camila	Dance Teacher / El Habitante Staff	Magdalena (Ciénaga)	Participant
Egan	Gestor / Teacher	Santa Marta	Participant (day one)
Carlos	Gestor / Teacher	Santa Marta	Participant (Sara's son)
Sara	Community Leader, Community Action Board	Santa Marta	Community (mother)
Freddy	Former Community Leader / Monitor	Timbiquí	Community (Timbiquí)
Caterine	Regional Coordinator	Timbiquí	Staff
Leicy	Sports Teacher	Timbiquí	Community (Timbiquí)
Yuri	Psychosocial Coordinator	Timbiquí	Staff

*Real names used with consent. All other names are pseudonyms.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Power of Sport - For Worse and Better

During the 1994 World Cup, Colombian football hopes were at an all-time high as football fans believed their team was a genuine contender to win the cup. In the 26 games preceding that World Cup, they had lost just one game. However, in the lead-up to the tournament threats towards players and coaches left the team unsettled, with one of the player's sons even kidnapped and ransomed before being returned. The coach even benched a player key to the success of the team due to threats towards him, precipitating a 3-1 loss to Romania in their first game. Unfortunately, Andrés Escobar scored an own goal (an accidental goal against his own team) in Colombia's second-round game against the United States, which contributed to the Colombian National team crashing out in the group stages.

Six days later, Andrés Escobar was shot outside of a nightclub by two drug dealers, believed to be an act of revenge for the own goal scored, but emphasizing the lawlessness that had descended upon Colombia in the lead up to and especially in the aftermath of Pablo Escobar's death. He was a Colombian fútbol starlet that represented so much of Colombia's hope. Football in Colombia had become a proxy war for the Colombian drug cartels in the 80s and early 90s, but Andres stayed above it all, never associating with any cartel, keeping his head down, and securing himself a move to AC Milan, one of the best clubs in Europe at the time. The murder of Andrés cut too deep, with over 100,000 showing up to his funeral in the streets of Medellin. In a show of peace, two rival gangs in Medellin, guided by some brave college students, put down their weapons and played a game of fútbol (known as soccer in the United

States), what came to be known as *Fútbol por la Paz* (Football for Peace). It was in this model that Tiempo de Juego found its root methodology: that sport was a force of good and could mend wounds between fractured communities (Zimbalist & Zimbalist, 2010; Glendenning, 2018; Ponciano, 2020). Tiempo de Juego (TdJ) is the focus of this case study on the scaling of nonformal education. However, before discussing the origin of Tiempo de Juego, it may be better to understand the conditions that created the need for this program.

El Bogotazo, La Violencia, the Aftermath, and the Hope of Peace

Colombia has been the site of more than a half-century of violence and chaos. In 1948, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a presidential candidate of the Liberal party, was the victim of political assassination in Bogotá, the country's capital. To this date, it is unconfirmed by whom, however, it was reported immediately following that it had been conducted by the Conservative party. In the immediate aftermath, the Colombian capital erupted in violence, known as *El Bogotazo*. In the days, months, and years following, this conflict, known as *La Violencia*, spread to the countryside, ending in the death of more than 200,000 Colombians (Gale 1969; Ponciano, 2020). In 1958, after a decade of *La Violencia*, the two majority parties (liberals and conservatives) agreed to alternate control of the presidency and government offices to bring an end to the violence. This led to the exclusion, and rooting out of communist and other leftist political parties in Colombia, prompting the formation of Colombia's two largest militarized political groups in 1964, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Las FARC) and the National Liberation Army (El ELN). In the following decades, the instability in Colombia, a fractured populace, infighting, and a difficult mountainous landscape, made it the ideal country for the

genesis of some of the most violent and profitable drug lords ever known, in addition to the exiled revolutionary groups (BBC News, 2013).

In response to the out-of-control violence of right-wing paramilitary groups, leftist revolutionary groups, and drug lords in Colombia, Alvaro Uribe (president from 2002 - 2010) ushered in a period of state-sanctioned, all-out violence against these groups. It is during this time, that many Colombians lost faith in the government. Despite Uribe's success at killing rebels and drug dealers, too many instances of orchestrated manipulated violence - violence crafted to serve a political purpose through deceit and under false pretenses - became apparent. One such instance took place in Soacha, an impoverished suburb of Bogotá. In 2008, 22 young men were lured away from Soacha, murdered, and posed to be leftist guerillas in what is known as the "*falsos positivos*" scandal.

"'By inflating body counts, the officers and the soldiers got promotions, vacations and other benefits,' said Ivan Cepeda, a congressman who previously headed a state victims group. 'Hyped killed-in-action totals also fed the perception that the government was getting results in the fight against terrorists,' he said" (Kraul, 2012).

This is but a small snapshot of the terrible violence experienced by Colombian citizens; trust and security are foreign concepts (Cantey & Correa, 2018; Mootz et al., 2019).

Hope for Peace

"History will remember you for being willing to let us continue exchanging lead for 52 more years!" Mr. Moreno exclaimed, using slang for bullets, as he addressed lawmakers opposed to the deal. "Many of you who want the conflict to carry on, your kids don't serve in the army, they're not recruited by the guerrillas; when things get tough, they get sent abroad" (NY Times, 2016).

Mr. Moreno was speaking at a pivotal moment in Colombian history, referring to the 2016 Colombian peace agreement attempting to end over 50 years of violence. It had just failed the referendum posed to the people of Colombia, split 50.2% against the agreement to 49.8% in favor of the agreement. Mr. Moreno was not only imploring the Colombian government at the time to ratify the agreement but also describing the divide between those who feel the conflict directly in their everyday actions (the poor and rural areas of Colombia) and those who only feel the conflict indirectly in their wallets or see it on TV (the rich and urban areas of Colombia). It is my observation that no Colombian has been unaffected in some way by the violence. Thankfully, the peace agreement was ratified on November 30, 2016. While it has by no means meant an end to violence, with more than 1,300 social leaders murdered since the peace deal (Sánchez-Garzoli, 2022), the peace deal represented a significant moment of hope for the future of Colombia, and an opportunity to begin to heal from over five decades of violence.

A Snapshot of Colombia

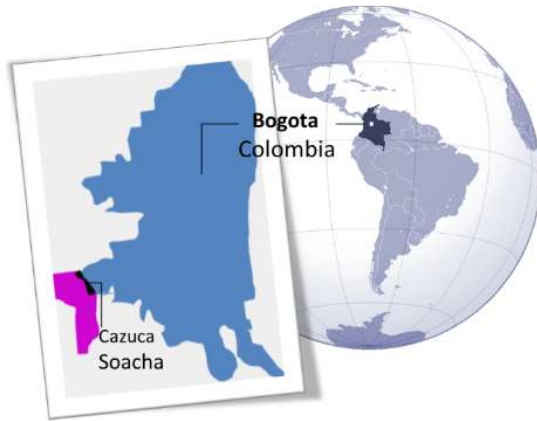
The violence has only exacerbated many of the problems currently facing Colombia. As alluded to above, Colombia is a deeply unequal country. “[T]he Colombian state and its encrusted elites remain stuck in a neoliberal frame (interlaced with what can only be termed a pseudo-colonialist paternalism)” (Rigueros Saavedra, 2013, p.232). One example of this can be seen in its education system, wherein private schools, considered to be for the upper class, make up 40% of schools in Colombia, they only service 23% of Colombian students, while 77% attend public institutions (World Bank, 2016). A 2016 OECD report showed that while more than 80% of urban students remained enrolled through the end of high school education, less than 50% remained enrolled in rural areas (OECD, 2016). There is a stunning similarity between the quotes of Mr. Moreno above and Gomez Valderrama (1964), as he describes, “In all the countries of

Latin America two worlds live side by side: an archaic world, medieval in character, in which the masses receive no more than the bare essentials of education, and the world of the privileged, often the white elite, who live much more in contact with the external world of culture than with the national population” (Gale, 1969, p. 8). The picture is more complicated now. Colombia's own socioeconomic stratification system classifies neighborhoods into six levels, with strata 3 and 4 representing a middle class that Gomez Valderrama's binary did not account for. But the divide remains stark. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty observed that the stratification system has entrenched rather than reduced segregation: rich and poor Colombians 'live worlds apart and these worlds very rarely collide,' and children in low-income communities become easy targets for recruitment by armed groups (De Schutter, 2024).

There is an incredible disparity between the richest and poorest Colombians. “[T]he country remains one of the most unequal in the world as indicated by both its income inequality (Gini at 0.56) and its land distribution (Gini of 0.86), making it one of the three most inequitable countries and the worst at land distribution (INDH, 2011, p.47; World Bank, 2010a)” (Rigueros Saavedra, 2013, p.222). These conditions, combined with the violence, have caused mass migration to the cities. As of April 2016, Colombia had the second-largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide with 6.7 million people (Edwards, 2016). This mass migration has brought about the creation of informal settlements, like Cazucá in Soacha, the one referenced above where the “*falsos positivos*” scandal occurred. Cazucá is the home of the first site of Tiempo de Juego (Sobotová et al., 2016).

The Origin of Tiempo de Juego - Cazucá, Soacha

Figure 1 – Geographical context of the case



(Figure 1, taken from Servantie & Hlady-Rispal, 2018, p. 8).

Soacha sits on the fringes of Bogotá, just within the reach of public transportation to the city, as seen above in Figure 1. Leo Dobbs of the UNHCR, describes the *barrio* (neighborhood) as “...a cultural, social, educational and careers dead end” (Dobbs, 2010, para. 2). Soacha is one of the places which has seen one of the largest influx of IDPs (Sobotová et al., 2016). This can create additional conflicts as victims fleeing violence in the countryside find themselves neighbors with perpetrators of that violence fleeing some other violence. It contains a high population density, and the majority live without running water, gas, sewage, or electricity. Houses and dwellings are built freely, and often “sold” by someone who does not actually own the land (Dobbs, 2010, Servantie & Hlady-Rispal, 2018).

As of 2013, nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ lived below the poverty line and $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population was under 18. Education rates are dismal and official avenues to employment are a challenge (Advantis, 2013; Hlady Rispal & Servantie, 2017). Dobbs (2010) believes that Soacha is negatively stigmatized due largely to the great numbers of displaced persons living there, despite that many of these

people move to Soacha due to how friendly its inhabitants are to them. This stigmatization makes finding work outside of Soacha difficult. Instead, youth are pushed and pulled into the streets to look for unofficial, potentially dangerous employment, i.e. joining a gang, selling drugs, prostitution, sex trafficking, etc. (Hlady Rispal & Servantie, 2017; Servantie & Hlady-Rispal, 2018; Busacca, 2019). Tiempo de Juego, translated as ‘*game time*’, offers a refuge from the conflicts of the street.

Tiempo de Juego - Game Time!

Founded in 2006 in the neighborhood of Alto de Cazucá, Soacha, Tiempo de Juego sought to provide a safe place for kids to play. With the streets in the condition they were, Andres Wiesner saw that kids had nowhere to go when outside of school to play, and thus the first game of Tiempo de Juego took place. It was soon after that Andres realized that these informal fútbol sessions had enormous potential to deliver alternative messages to these kids. Tiempo de Juego had gone from just fútbol, to fútbol and life skills and peacebuilding. It has since grown to offer many sports and creative pursuits, such as dance, film, and music. Tiempo de Juego provided an alternative to the allure of the streets of Cazucá. When I originally interviewed David Osorio in 2016, he told me how he had come to Tiempo de Juego, having been displaced by violence in Medellin, feeling trapped and hopeless (Busacca, 2019). At the time David (who goes by Paisa, a name for people from Medellin) was a program coordinator, having already graduated from the program and taken on a role within TdJ to help it run. In the years since, Paisa has studied sports development at a university in Spain with the help of a scholarship from Adidas and returned to TdJ as a coach of Cazucá Football Club. He epitomizes the opportunity TdJ can provide, but also the loyalty and commitment it inspires.

The Program

Tiempo de Juego began by offering two-hour training sessions every Saturday. On any given Saturday, they may have up to 600 kids show up. While the age range is technically from 5-18, I had it explained to me that it was more like 4-20 as they could never turn kids away. Each session is broken into three parts. First, the coach introduces the life skill or value of the day, and as a group, they agree on some rules for the day, such as teams can't score until a girl scores first, or the winner is the team that cheers the loudest for each goal. Second, the children split off into smaller groups with a monitor (older peer leader) to practice the activity. Lastly, all the children come back together and review the life skill or values, discuss the rules, evaluate their participation, and share a snack from the La Jugada (The Play, a bakery that will be explained below). This is meant to be a reflective moment, for example, as children are asked how to utilize the life skill learned in their life the following week (Sobotová et al., 2016; Busacca, 2019).

Triangle - Home, School, Tiempo de Juego

A key element of the Tiempo de Juego methodology utilizes the concept of the home, school, and Tiempo de Juego triangle, described here by William Jimenez:

"cuando desde tantos lados me dicen lo mismo...algo debe ser verdad y algo se me queda en la cabeza" (Personal Interview, November 17, 2016). (Busacca, 2018).

As a rough translation, this means when you receive the same message from so many places, some part of that message must be true. Teachers and parents are invited to participate in separate training sessions specifically for them, and some are encouraged to help facilitate training sessions for the children. Through these sessions, they can learn how to combine the life skills and values the youth are learning in their sessions in the classroom and at home. This

provides fun and constructive ways for children to hear the same message everywhere. TdJ believes that a united message will carry enough weight to counteract the negative influences of the street. This serves another purpose as well. As described above, these families are often victims of violence or poverty, which causes significant problems in their households and their lives. By learning to speak the same language, TdJ believes that parents can engage in new ways to talk about the problems their children are facing.

Escuela Liderazgo

Another pivotal component of the Tiempo de Juego model is the Escuela Liderazgo or Leadership School in English. This school has two purposes. First, to promote new leaders within the Tiempo de Juego program. These leaders, or monitors as they're referred to, begin to take on leadership roles during the weekly activities, such as setting up activities, running training sessions for the younger participants, or taking on administrative duties such as recording and tracking students. The second is to inspire them to become change agents outside of Tiempo de Juego, in their communities, homes, and schools. Upon completion, they receive a certificate of leadership from Tiempo de Juego.

The Sustainability Model - Self-Generating Income and Monitors

In addition to its leadership model, Tiempo de Juego's sustainability is due to its expansion into social businesses which provide self-generating income. In one building near the Tiempo de Juego headquarters, they have started several small businesses which fuel the program and provide opportunities for their participants. In one building, they have La Jugada, a bakery, Labzuca, a music and film studio, Pongale Color, a shirt printing factory, and on the roof, a garden. In addition to running like a normal bakery, La Jugada provides food and snacks

to the youth during every training session. Labzuca holds classes and sessions for older youth interested in learning about music recording and film, and also serves as an active income source for completing projects for the community. The shirt printing factory provides all of the jerseys for the youth at Tiempo de Juego, paid for by revenue from jerseys sold to local fútbol clubs. The garden while only providing a small crop, provides youth with the opportunity to learn how to garden.

Scaling Snapshot

The program began with 20 children in 2006. When I visited in 2016, many of those first youths were monitors and coordinators in the program. In addition, although it began just offering sessions on Saturdays, there are now daily activities covering 16 different sports and creative activities. On a yearly basis, it has around 2500 participants from ages 4-18. The various programs foster life skills, instill values of responsibility and cooperation, and build self-esteem. It has expanded within Soacha to other neighborhoods, and beyond Soacha to two other regions, in Santa Marta and Ciénaga (Northern Caribbean Coast), and Timbiquí (Southern Pacific Coast). In each of these sites they have initiated new social businesses; a hostel for volunteerism called El Habitante (The Inhabitant) in Santa Marta, and a ferry service called La Soñadora (The Dreamer) in Timbiquí. In addition to its own funding sources, it has tapped into various networks to receive funding from “many different local, national and international actors and donors (e.g. USAID, IOM, Adidas, Adidas, Women Win, Bancolombia, IBM, etc.)” (Sobotová et al., 2016, p. 523). Since 2015, TdJ has engaged local scholars from the Externado University of Colombia to assist in qualitative monitoring and evaluation methods. They are built and evaluated cooperatively between the staff, the monitors, and the youth (Sobotová et al., 2016). Tiempo de Juego has grown from one site to three sites and continues to grow at each of those sites, even

extending its reach beyond the program with methodological exchanges to other programs and communities. Tiempo de Juego has a successful method of growth and scaling, however, internally it is not viewed as a program, as much as it is a youth social movement.

Problem Statement, Significance, & Research Questions

Where formal schooling fails to meet every need of every child, it is often a nonformal education program -- think sports/arts/music/writing/advocacy -- that has the best opportunity to catch that child or teen falling out of the system, provide them with alternative opportunities, and in some cases, bridge the gap back to the classroom. In 1948, the world agreed that universal education should be a right and not a privilege (United Nations). And yet, 75 years later, we still haven't achieved this goal. If anything, in the aftermath of Covid-19, it seems we need more social-emotional learning opportunities outside of schools, not only for the most marginalized but for all children who may still be struggling to cope with the fallout of what feels like "lost years." This is true around the world. Unlike formal education, which is the result of national and regional policies, the beauty of nonformal education programs is that so often they are born out of a community need that grows organically. Current research does not capture this organic growth nor the scaling, of nonformal education programs to extend their coverage. One of the most challenging problems today is how can excellent but small programs scale up to reach a much larger population. What does organic education growth of nonformal education programs look like? How does it adapt to new contexts of need? Tiempo de Juego provides an example of how this can be done.

In 2016, I first witnessed Tiempo de Juego while doing research for my Master's Seminar paper at the University of Maryland. During site visits and interviews of its Cazucá location, I

became convinced that its model had something special to it. William Jiménez, Willy as you will see him referred to in this research, described it more like a social movement. However, even social movements seemed too abstract. What I witnessed, was a community of what seemed like family members, all working with humility, towards the same goal. The program is an exemplar, in both its methods of sustainable income generation, and community responsiveness, and in its contribution to the greater nonformal community. As I wrestled with one of the grand questions of our time, ‘How do we reach the educational needs of children everywhere?’ I continued to return to my thoughts of the empowering and adaptable nature of nonformal education, the need to grow solutions that work, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, or blindly transfer solutions from one context to another, and ultimately my thoughts would return to the what is now the focus of this dissertation. Through the use of interviews, observations, and document analysis, this case study illuminates the phenomenon of scaling a nonformal education program. The primary question to be investigated is:

How did Tiempo de Juego grow from one location to two other locations in Colombia?

Within that, I explore:

1. What is TdJ's approach to growth? How are new opportunities identified? How are connections established? What are the responses of the community and the participants? What features attract the community?
2. How are scaling decisions made and by whom? What is the leadership structure at each site, and how do they relate to each other?
3. What are the primary influences on the scaling process? How are financial resources mobilized and sustained? What difficulties are encountered? What lessons have been learned?

4. What are the implications for growing other nonformal education programs?

Dissertation Organization

In Chapter One, I introduced the focus of this dissertation, Tiempo de Juego, and the contextual factors that led to its founding and its necessity. Chapter 2 provides the foundation for this study with a review of the scaling literature, followed by an exploration of nonformal education theory and the critical theorists whose work informs the analysis. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach, including the research design, data collection, and analytical process. Chapters 4 & 5 present a narrative organizational history of Tiempo de Juego, structured chronologically across four eras from its founding in 2006 through the time of this research in August 2023. Chapter 6 organizes the evidence thematically around the four research questions, asking not just what happened but why. Chapter 7 speaks back to the literature, naming the theoretical contributions that emerge from the evidence and closing with reflections on what this case means for the future of scaling nonformal education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the literature surrounding the process of scaling, including both theoretical conceptions as well as practical lessons learned. In order for this dissertation to effectively wrestle with the complexities of scaling, I will provide a definition of scaling adapted from the literature. However, before I do so, I will utilize the most rudimentary version of this definition to present the typical discussion of scaling within much of the literature, and why scaling is discussed so fervently, yet with such an incomplete background of literature. Then, I will discuss the barriers and challenges to scaling, followed by examples of scaling and the lessons learned. Next, I will provide a complete definition of scaling, which includes a framework to understand the process of scaling as presented within various works but adapted here to provide the most comprehensive approach. Lastly, I will present a selection of nonformal theories to ground the purpose of nonformal education and provide insight into how specifically scaling nonformal education may be slightly different than the conceptions provided by the prevailing literature. Before concluding this chapter, I will discuss how this literature review will be used to inform and provide a reference of analysis to my dissertation.

What literature is present?

A good literature review will accomplish three things: provide the reader with an awareness of the topic with which to build a frame for judgment of the research to be presented, prove to the reader that I the author have a grasp of the topic and that the consequent research to be conducted has been done with the appropriate amount of background information, and lastly,

that I the author can attest that both of the statements above are in fact true. My search took two approaches, first a general search for all literature, and secondly, working backward from the most recent work, identifying any additional foundational works I may have missed in my literature search.

What is scaling?

In February of 2023, I attended the Center for Universal Education (CUE) Symposium titled Education Systems Transformation at the Brookings Institution. In a workshop discussing the lesson from their Millions Learning project, the room of attendees was asked to define scaling and equivalent translations in other languages. Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity, with hundreds of years of combined experience in the international education policy space, the collective struggled to produce equivalent translations and succinct encompassing definitions. The majority of contributions boiled down to scaling as an idea related to growth or expansion.

In my early conversations with Tiempo de Juego, I encountered a similar familiarity with the term. Despite its Latin roots from the Latin *scala* ('ladder'), *escalar*, the direct translation of 'to scale' in Spanish, is a poor fit. They knew the term, recognized from global English-speaking discourse related to international development, but with respect to Tiempo de Juego, *expansión* is preferred. In the following paragraphs I will explore what 'scaling' really means, why it is used so broadly, and why I insist on using this terminology for my dissertation

So.... What is scaling really and why the insistence on this terminology?

Although the scaling discussion predates Uvin and Miller's (1994) and Uvin's (1995a & 1995b) articles on the subject, their taxonomy of scaling is widely cited as the first "scientific" approach to categorizing scaling, and therefore the majority of modern scaling literature begins with this work (Pidufala, 2008; Hartmann & Linn, 2008; Mickelsson, 2018). Uvin and Miller broadly define scaling-up as "growth in size, number and activities" (1994) in order to reach a greater population and later confirm that expansion is a suitable substitute for this basic definition of scaling. Their taxonomy complicates this simplistic definition, as do many other authors in this literature review, but more on that later.

While the general consensus throughout the literature is on the idea of growth, there is disagreement with some of the prevailing ideas surrounding scaling, specifically that scaling up is primarily replicating programs, increasing numbers, quickly (Bradach, 2003; Coburn, 2003; Elias, 2003; Hartmann & Linn, 2008; Jowett & Dyer, 2012; Westley et al., 2014; Mickelsson, 2018). For instance, Elias warns against the type of thinking which focuses on quantitative outcomes:

"Use of analogies such as "scaling up," which conjure images of mass production of a tangible product so one can go from a local to a regional or a national market, create illusions about the nature of the processes necessary. Psychoeducational innovations are predominantly dependent on human operators, rather than technologies, for their implementation. Hence, analogies such as preparation for a sailing voyage (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000) and that of orchestral or jazz composition and conducting (Elias, 1994; Kelly, 1979) may be more useful than those based on factory production (Elias, 1997)" (Elias, 2003, p. 304).

With an emphasis on quick quantitative growth, both the reason for the initial programmatic success and the purpose for the programming in the first place are overlooked. As authors like Coburn and Westley et al. emphasize, the goal of scaling is to broaden the success of localized solutions to achieve change. “‘Scaling up’ refers to identifying opportunities and barriers at broad institutional scales, with the goal of changing the system that created the social problem in the first place” (Westley et al., 2014, p. 237).

This literature review will continue to wrestle with defining scaling, namely how much to include replication, if at all; however, before continuing with why scaling is such an important discussion, it is important to provide a definition of scaling which most accurately reflects the state of the most recent literature. Begovic, Linn, & Vrbensky’s slightly adapted definition from Hartmann and Linn (2008), scaling up is defined as “expanding, adapting and sustaining impactful policies, programs or projects in different places and over time to reach a greater number of people” (Begovic, Linn, & Vrbensky, 2017). This definition retains the key components of expanding, both geographically and in size while incorporating key ideas such as impact for change, adaptation in lieu of replication, and sustainability over time instead of efficiency. This definition will be complicated further, with discussions around phases of scaling, and individual categorizations of types of scaling. However, I will now explain why the need for scaling and scaling research is so important.

So why the insistence on scaling?

At the heart of the scaling education conversation is an understanding that too many children are either out of school or receiving poor-quality education around the world. Therefore, for many, scaling is central to the solution to the world’s education problem (UNDP, 2013;

Mickelsson, 2018). Beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing through the 1980s, Uvin and Miller connected the idea of scaling to the growing “bottom-up” grassroots movements as a “reaction against the perceived deficiencies and injustices of the top-down model” (Uvin and Miller 1994, p. 1). Scaling in these contexts, therefore, particularly in the Global South, represented a shift from the traditional national-level top-down implementations common in the international development paradigm (Uvin, 1995b).

In Uvin’s article *Scaling up the Grass Roots and Scaling down the Summit: The Relations between Third World Nongovernmental Organisations and the United Nations*, Uvin lays out the rationale for this shift from top-down to bottom-up. From the side of the International Organizations (IOs), the reasons for accepting this shift are, “increased funding, ideological preferences, programme effectiveness and sustainability, external pressure and the creation of constituencies” (Uvin 1995b, p. 499). More specifically, the Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) have increased local access to alternate funding sources, greater responsiveness to their community constituency, and more freedom to operate independently in politically divergent ways to their own governments, ways that IOs are unable to. In addition, due to the strong neo-conservative push for structural adjustment and privatization, the rhetoric of “self-help” really encouraged this locally driven change, outside the hands of centralized government (Uvin 1995b). Likewise, the increased political presence of NGOs through scaling growth came hand in hand with a need to collaborate with IOs. IOs recognized the knowledge and expertise that NGOs possessed with respect to on-the-ground project management, program design, and building a constituency, while NGOs recognized the power of IOs to accumulate resources and generate political momentum. They were willing to accept this collaboration for three reasons: “the availability of funds, the need to influence IO policies and programmes of direct concern,

and the possibility of influencing national government through the IOs” (Uvin 1995b, p. 500). Through scaling, these NGOs had increased access to resources and power to achieve more change at an institutional level.

Unfortunately, Uvin’s observations of this paradigm shift have not yet manifested in a new world order with IOs supporting bottom-up scaling efforts. The scaling literature reflects this and the gap is even more pronounced in education. As described in the 2016 Millions Learning report, a recent review of the scaling literature found that, “only 16 of 158 included a focus on education” (Robinson, Winthrop, & McGivney, 2016, p. 34; Pidufala, 2008), and that the primary focus of scaling within education has been on increasing access to education, not on improving learning. Mickelsson (2018) continues: “Scaling within educational research is not a new phenomenon, but conceptualizing it as scaling is a relatively recent development, and as Harwell (2012) points out, the field of scaling lacks theories based on empirical evidence” (Mickelsson 2018, p. 30).

At this stage, I can only speculate as to why the scaling literature hasn’t been extensive as of yet. Perhaps, this can be attributed to finding ‘Best Practices’ for policy transplants, rather than scaling up working solutions. In a critique of the World Bank’s SABER program, Klees, Ginsburg, et al. criticize the chase for “best practices as a technical activity that has some ‘correct’ answer” (2020, p. 50). In other words, the ‘Best Practices’ approach taken by SABER is an attempt to find a “true” best solution to many problems and implement it in any context. The search and promotion of ‘best practices’ is a veil to continue top-down decision-making made by a few in place of a participatory democratic approach.

Steiner-Khamsi (2013) describes cost and control as the primary reasons why this ‘Best Practices’ approach is so popular:

“There are also managerial reasons why institutions such as the World Bank, OECD, and other international organizations prefer to lend their portfolio of ‘best practices’ rather than support projects initiated and developed locally. Global reform programs are easier to handle and implement. Although what we could call the ‘data-fetishism’ of these organizations – that is, amassing statistical information on system variables and collecting data from quasi-experimental impact evaluations - seems expensive, it soon proves cost-effective. Once a reform is successful in one country, it can then be transferred more cheaply to dozens of other countries that are established as being similar in terms of context or system” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013, p. 30).

Best practices and scaling are not synonymous terms. ‘Best practices’ does not inherently represent scaling as it implies extracting an idea from one location and transplanting it into another. For instance, the work of the Millions Learning Project and the CUE team at Brookings could be considered a type of ‘best practices of scaling’. In their report, *Millions Learning: Scaling up quality education in developing countries*, they conducted 14 case studies to identify 14 core elements or practices of scaling which led to successful outcomes (Robinson et al., 2016). The Millions Learning approach, however, does not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach, and rather suggests a framework of solutions to investigate. It is not the idea of identifying working solutions and sharing that knowledge which is the problem, it is the implication of one correct idea and implementing that in all contexts.

However, some scholars discussed in this literature review would consider the policy transplanting of best practices a type of replication scaling, a la the Franchise model (Jowett & Dyer, 2012; Bradach, 2003). I believe it is important to differentiate the two. In practice, as described above, the ‘best practices’ model is more commonly a top-down approach of “correct”

solutions in disguise as bottom-up. Although the identified solutions or best practices are typically identified in successful local contexts, when transplanted, they do not represent the growth of the original program. Instead, they are a completely new implementation in a new context run by new implementers. In gardening terms, it is not even like taking a seed and planting it in a new environment. It is taking the watering and care instructions for one seed, and using them on another seed in a new environment. This is contrary to the position of early and modern scaling scholars who believe that scaling is fundamentally a bottom-up approach, focused more on growth than on replication or transplants.

The very crux of the Millenium Development Goals and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals is to find an answer that solves millions of problems for millions of people, within education and other spheres such as health, poverty, industry, climate, etc. At least with respect to education, it appears there may be an answer to be found in scaling. As Linn so eloquently describes the “missing middle”, “The answer to this question can be found in developing and implementing a systematic approach to scale up successful and impactful development interventions, projects and programs so that they effectively bridge the ‘missing middle’ between individual projects and long-term goals (Linn 2015a)” (Begovic, Linn,& Vrbensky, p. 5). In the words of the UNDP’s 2014-17 Strategic Plan: “Scaling-up strategies will be an essential aspect, to ensure better coverage and impact of development innovations” (UNDP, 2013, pg. 53). In the following section, this literature review will cover many of the theories and taxonomies which have governed the thinking around scaling.

Scaling Taxonomies, Pathways, Strategies, Stages, and Characteristics

Attempting to nail down a coherent presentation of scaling literature is as challenging as presenting an all-encompassing definition of scaling. Despite every scholar offering their own

slightly different conceptualization of scaling, I have created three broad categories of scaling taxonomy, which encompass the contributions of the authors contained within. Each taxonomy contains various pathways and strategies for scaling discovered in the literature. Lastly, I present the stages of scaling as discussed in the literature and finish with the introduction of the scaling-as-learning process with a discussion of scaling characteristics.

Up? Out? In? Through? Deep? Micro? Macro? Meso? The Loch Ness Monster???

An odd section title, but let me explain. Seemingly every other scholar reviewed included a new preposition to add to ‘scaling’ or redefine a former scaling-preposition pair to mark their own slightly different perspective on the scaling conversation. Perhaps no one better to begin this exploration are Uvin & Miller:

“All in all the literature of scaling-up is reminiscent of the Loch Ness monster. It has been sighted enough to make even the most skeptical give it a measure of respectability; and its description is as varied as the people who have written about it. We believe that this variety of definitions is important. It allows us to look at the phenomenon in a number of different ways, giving us some insight into the complexity of the associative sector itself” (1994).

In their seminal work on scaling, Uvin and Miller provided a “scientific” breakdown of the taxonomies of scaling to date to consolidate this broad range of understanding. They presented four classifications of scaling: Quantitative, Functional, Political, and Organizational.

Although these four categories are still referred to and built upon by much of the scaling literature, there have been some other important contributions. To present this section of the literature review I will utilize a modified version of the taxonomy presented by Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano (2015): Scaling Out, Scaling Up, and Scaling Deep. Using these three categories, I

will combine Uvin and Miller's taxonomy (1994) of four categories (quantitative, functional, political, and organizational), Van den Bosch and Rotman's (2008) three categories (thinking (culture), doing (practices), organizing (structure)), and Duggan, Smith, and Thomsen's (2013) three categories (vertical scaling, horizontal scaling, and scaling-in), as well as other contributions by various scholars. Within each category, I will present further breakdowns, including the pathways and strategies to achieve that type of scaling.

Scaling out - Include Horizontal and Functional Scaling - Capacity

Scaling

The first and most commonly referred to type of scaling is scaling out. Scaling out refers primarily to horizontal scaling or geographical spread of an organization or program, across communities, states, regions, nations, and even across borders. One key aspect of geographical spread is access to a greater population and typically resources as well. In addition to horizontal scaling, this also includes increasing the capacity of existing programs or organizations to welcome more participants. Scaling out also includes building up the functional capacity to serve the greater population they have access to, including for example creating more programs and hiring more staff. There are multiple pathways for each type of scaling (Uvin & Miller 1994; Duggan, Smith, & Thomsen 2013; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano 2015).

Pathways to Quantitative Scaling Up

Spread

Uvin and Miller suggest there are five pathways to quantitative scaling up. The first, spread, refers to the "almost organic" process of growth, in which organizations and programs

draw more people into them, and thus the organization and its programs grow naturally. It can happen at all levels of participation, and often without any outside influence, such as a development organization or government intervention. “It is most typical for grassroots organizations and for community-based programs, growing from a handful of villages working together around one charismatic leader to organizations with tens of thousands of members in hundreds of villages” (Uvin & Miller, 1994).

Hartmann & Linn (2011) refer to an ideal instance of this type of spread, spontaneous diffusion or explosion, “that [the spread of good ideas or practices] proliferates seamlessly from person to person, organization to organization and country to country” (p. 14). Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano (2015) suggest an alternative type of spread, that of spreading the principles of the program or intervention. They term this model ‘open scaling,’ “where the core principles and approach of the innovation were spread, leaving it to the local community to adapt it to local conditions: ‘You can scale an idea that lives out differently in every context’ (p. 78).

Replication

Replication seemingly deserves its own chapter, and in fact, there are a few articles that discuss only replication as a pathway to scaling. There is some agreement that the concept of replication is a deliberate transfer of a successful pilot program to a new location. Although similar to the definition of scaling, nailing down a precise definition of replication is challenging. The most synonymous replication pathway frequently referred to within the literature is a franchise model of replication (Uvin & Miller, 1994; Jowett & Dyer, 2012; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015). Whether initiated by the original organization, an external organization, or a government agency, the franchise model, “provides detailed, largely invariable programme guidelines to another organisation or franchisee, in exchange for a contractual agreement to

adhere to certain performance standards and maintain the initiative's integrity. The franchisor is likely to adopt a top-down approach, while providing continuous assistance, support and services to each franchisee" (Jowett & Dyer, 2012, p. 737).

Despite the general agreement that replication most closely resembles the franchise model, most of the literature specifies that replication should not mean duplication, but there remains a tension with maintaining fidelity. Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano (2015) deal with this by stating that the replication should protect the fidelity of the program by identifying the minimum specifications or non-negotiables. However, they were quick to follow that this focus led some organizations to shift to a spread of principles over replicating programs. This is echoed by Jowett & Dyer's description of concept replication: "Any organisation can take the basic principles and components of the initiative, or the 'concept', and adapt it as much or as little as they choose to suit their own local requirements. While the overall concept and goals may be replicated, consistency between sites is not required, as the main measure of success is respect for, and adaptation to, local contexts" (2012, p. 739).

Lastly, Elmore presents the cell division or reproduction model, which is in many ways a combination of spread and replication. The model is built by beginning with one successful implementation and taking the 'genetic' material from that implementation and spreading it to new sites. In practice, this would mirror the spread of good ideas, however, there is a practitioner included in the 'genetic' material. This practitioner or group of practitioners would be in charge of starting a new program in a new location.

"The reproduction model elicits more systematic thinking about what constitutes evidence of the "spread" of good teaching practice. Given the slipperiness of attempts to "replicate" successful programs or practices from one setting to another, the idea of

getting to scale should not be equated with the exact replication of practices that work in one setting to others. For example, when we reproduce as human beings, children are not identical replicates of parents; rather, each child is a new human being with a distinctive personality that may bear a family resemblance to the mother and father. Children from the same family differ quite dramatically from each other, even though they may share certain common traits. The reproduction model broadens notions of evidence in allowing for the dissemination of good teaching practices with “family resemblances” in different settings. It causes us to look at the fundamental process by which practices are chosen for reproduction, while others are bypassed or significantly modified. It also prompts us to reproduce “family resemblances” in a way as to have a meaningful impact on practice rather than merely promoting assimilation of symbols that do not go to the core.”

(Elmore, 1996, p. 23).

Integration

Whether by the demands of the organization or the state, the integration pathway to scaling refers to when an organization is integrated into existing government structures. Uvin is quick to point out that this can be seen as either the end goal, or a forfeiture of ideals “Such integration, although going against the ideological and organizational dynamics of most NGOs, is important in the light of both increasing impact and assuring sustainability” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). This integration serves as the fastest route to scaling up, and to be successful requires the state to adopt the principles of the program but will necessarily flip the program from a localized operation to a top-down one. Jowett & Dyer refer to this pathway to scaling as mandated replication but include that the organization may maintain control of the programs but through a

top-down partnership with the organization at its center, in effect, becoming a state institution (2012).

Pathways to Functional Scaling Up

Uvin and Miller (1994) describe both push and pull factors to scaling up functionally. On the push side, their constituents demand new programming or services. In some instances, this push comes from groups who are not yet part of an organization. Think, for example, of a sports education program trying to get young girls back into school, but there is a significant cry from parents for an option for their sons as well. The pull factors that Uvin and Miller refer to are also from external sources, but not from the community, such as new funding from another organization or government. “There exists a strong temptation on the part of the organization to take everything on that comes along; particularly if the funding will help it sustain itself” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). In some cases, this drive for funding can be the entire motivation for the creation of an organization.

Related to the push and pull factors above, Uvin (1995) described horizontal and vertical integration of programming as pathways for functional scaling. Horizontal integration refers to either adding new activities to existing programs or creating new unrelated programs. For instance, an organization that began with agricultural education spans to include health education as well. Uvin (2000) adds that while the initial conception of functional scaling is about growing the number of activities offered to increase their “total menu of activities”, they suggest vertical integration refers to adding, “upstream or downstream activities that complement their original program, seeking to better control the environment and ensure sustainability of impact” (p. 1411). In other words, adding pre- or post-programs to already existing programs to increase the length and level of the impact. Linked to its capacity for long-term survival, Uvin (1995) argues

that organizations that fail to increase its functional capacity to continue to meet its members' needs as well as its ability to sustainably meet them are doomed to failure.

Scaling up - Includes Vertical and Organizational Scaling - Structural and Political Scaling

Scaling up refers to increasing the effectiveness of the organization to meet its goals. In one capacity, this refers to improving the organization's stability, resiliency, and sustainability through the creation of a more robust structure through internal and external mechanisms, such as creating independent revenue streams, training employees, building new departments, public-private partnerships, etc. In addition, scaling up also refers to the political capacity to effect change, to begin to change some of the structural causes of the “problem” their solution solves (Uvin & Miller 1994; Duggan, Smith, & Thomsen 2013; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano 2015). Duggan also writes that vertical scaling is about scaling “higher up the ladder” in that it is “institutional in nature that involves other sectors/stakeholder groups” and brings an organization from the grassroots level to connections at national and international levels (Duggan, 2013, p. 159).

Political Scaling Up

Political scaling up is about achieving long-term structural change. Moore, Riddell & Vocisano simply write, “Based on the recognition that the roots of social problems transcend particular places, and innovative approaches must be codified in law, policy and institutions” (2015, p. 77). This strategy requires a premeditated plan to go “from the micro to the macro level” by developing relationships with the state or international organizations, building a

political power base, and lastly moving beyond service delivery to change the root structural causes of the problems facing the constituency of the program (Uvin & Miller, 1994; Uvin, 2000; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015).

In fact, in some cases, organizations leave behind their original initiative entirely to focus on policy change (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015). In addition, in Uvin's 1995 article about the relationship between NGOs and IOs, they also describe organizations that exist entirely in the space between grassroots service delivery organizations and these international organizations and state actors, which "bridge the gap between micro and macro" through policy creation and advocacy (p. 498). Although outside the scope of this literature search, there is an interesting discussion to be had about the location of these organizations, particularly in-country and out-of-country, and Global North vs Global South, and how they are able to operate in this space. (Uvin, 1995b).

In Uvin's later work, he wrote about going beyond political scaling up in their original research, which relied more on the impacting the role of the state, to broadening the indirect impact of the organization (2000). Organizations can likewise impact the behavior of the other actors who work with their constituents, such as private or other social organizations. Additionally, "the previous concept also focused attention foremost on lobbying and advocacy, while this category opens the door to a variety of less confrontational, but possibly no less effective, manners of influencing the behavior of other actors" (Uvin, 2000, p. 1412). Although the following paragraphs will describe this approach in more detail, they are not the only way to cause political and structural change. Due to the natural position of these organizations outside of the state, their very existence is political, and "if successful, development NGOs are agents of

redistribution and empowerment, which cannot fail to have political repercussions, on the local, regional and national levels (Uvin & Miller, 1994).

Pathways to Political Scaling Up - Information & Mobilization, Networking

The two primary pathways to political scaling up discussed in the literature are information & mobilization, and networking. Both are invested in increasing their political strength by recruiting, at both the constituent level and organizational level. The information & mobilization pathway is concerned with increasing the political participation of the community it serves. “It is designed to create general public awareness and sympathy for the propositions of an organization, and hence to put pressure on politicians” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). This can be done through various types of information campaigns (letters, brochures, media), conferences and workshops, and organizing local committees. They also cite Participatory Action Research as a method to galvanize participant voice and action.

An alternative method to increase political pressure and power is to network with other organizations on issues of joint interest. This type of coalition building has only become easier in the information age with increased capacity for communication, especially between organizations in various countries. In some cases, this can be horizontal networking, among community-level organizations, or in some cases this can be vertical networking between organizations at grassroots levels with international organizations. Horizontal networking can provide more cohesive solutions at a local level, whereas vertical networks can provide more power and political pressure for the grassroots organizations involved. (Uvin & Miller, 1994; Uvin 1995; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015).

Organizational Scaling Up

The goal of organizational scaling up is sustainability, or in other words, “financial and managerial autonomy” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). This is primarily accomplished by shoring up long-term funding and establishing a resilient organizational structure. Sustainability isn’t an end in itself, but rather likely the result of increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization and its programs. Rather than viewing organizational scaling up as a requirement of other types of scaling, it is instead an inevitable consequence of any other successful type of scaling (Uvin & Miller, 1994; Uvin, 1995a; Uvin, 2000; Jowett & Dyer, 2012). It is essential that organizations are able to grow without building dependence on non-renewable resources (such as unstable finances or key leaders), as “failing to realize this can lead to serious organizational problems if not destruction” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the pathways to increasing financial sustainability, and organizational resiliency.

Pathways to Organizational Scaling Up

Funding for the majority of non-state organizations is an incredible challenge and frequently is the greatest threat to their failure. One pathway to long-term financial stability is to diversify their external funding sources. Ideally, establishing stable non-discretionary funding, however, given the difficulty in finding these, they will typically rely on standard donors, government grants, or funding directed through intermediary funding organizations which typically provide short-term, discrete, project-based funding. In response to this challenge, organizations can opt to establish their own self-financing. “This can among other ways be done by the creation of lucrative activities such as joint ventures, cooperative or other enterprises, fee-for-service activities (including sale and rental of materials), consulting to other actors such as

the government and foreign aid agencies, or by subcontracting to the state or the foreign aid system” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). Their financial stability depends significantly on their ability to think creatively and leave no stone unturned (Uvin, 2000).

In addition to financial stability, organizations need to establish a resilient organizational structure to “handle unanticipated consequences that are waiting to confound work” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). To do so, organizations must grow internally and externally. Internally, one pathway is to diversify leadership, establish more participatory decision-making, and commit to investing in their staff. “They have to adopt policies of hiring, training, motivating, paying and promoting personnel, of managing and controlling budgets, of decentralization and innovating management, and of avoiding or overcoming dependency on one leader” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). This includes investing in their professional and technical skills as well.

Externally, this means building strong relationships outside of the organization, with other organizations and government entities. Although these organizations may be in competition with each other for resources, they can also establish strength in numbers via knowledge sharing, practice sharing, donor strategies, and more. Jowett & Dyer call this network replication, “two-way communication and mutual learning, with each organisation agreeing to join a network of organisations all working from the same original concept” (2012, p. 740). These relationships provide an untold wealth of information to make the organization more flexible, effective, and resilient.

Lastly, establishing the systems and procedures for quality organizational learning. This includes mechanisms for critical evaluation of internal administrative processes as well as programmatic processes. “This implies the need for quality documentation and archival systems, computerization, standardized procedures of programming, monitoring and evaluation, self-

criticism and openness, etc.” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). This self-reflection is considered a strategy with one of the largest impacts on improving effectiveness and resiliency; however, it is also one of the hardest aspects to grow and achieve.

Cultural Scaling - Includes Scaling In and Deep Scaling

This category is the most recent addition to the scaling taxonomy, formally introduced as a concept by Van den Bosch in 2008 in their work *Deepening, Broadening and Scaling up: a Framework for Steering Transition Experiments* and codified by several authors in the years since (Duggan, 2013; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015). Scaling in, or cultural scaling, refers to the transformations in practices, values, and relationships which form the organizational culture and structure. This includes routines, habits, activities, and ways of thinking that allow not only for the organization to operate daily at a larger scale but also continue to scale. The modus operandi of daily operation & scaling. As well, this includes an understanding of how the core drive of the organization relates to a need to scale. Lastly, it refers to the process of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of all who participate in the project (Van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008; Duggan, 2013; Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015).

Although it was not adopted as part of the scaling taxonomy until much later, Uvin & Miller did write about this, however, writing, “all types of scaling up (including the other aims of organizational scaling up), in various ways, have a tendency to promote institutionalization, formalization, professionalism, bureaucratization, distance between leaders and rank-and-file members, increased outside influence” (Uvin & Miller, 1994). They confess that although they argue for institutionalization and professionalization, they do not have solutions or pathways to prevent the negative cultural shifts, such as disenfranchisement or apathy, that occur in scaling

up. In the years since, however, several scholars have written about this type of scaling, agreeing that large-scale change “will necessarily involve changes to rules, resource flows, cultural beliefs and relationships in a social system at multiple spatial or institutional scales” and that “change must be deeply rooted in people, relationships, communities, and culture” (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015, p. 70; Van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008; Duggan, 2013).

Pathways to Cultural Scaling

Cultural scaling, similar to many other types of scaling, has both internal and external strategies. Internal cultural scaling refers to building transformative networks and communities of practice and knowledge. Utilizing learning these communities and networks, the participants in Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano’s study shared methods for encouraging and maintaining a positive organizational culture, including, “mentorship, deliberate transfer of practices, capturing and sharing organisational or community culture, and shared reflection and evaluation practices” (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015, p. 80). One of the participants interviewed in their study shared their experience with this process:

“What we learned was how to develop a community of learning that in turn develops the growth and development of the networks we created. It is the connectedness that is the strength of our networks and this connectedness can only be created through sharing experiences and best practices. What it was we wanted to scale was an experience rather than a particular programme or process” (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015, p. 80)

External cultural scaling should be considered part of the vision or theory of change of the organization. The key concept is to understand that the change within the organization,

without intentional action, may or may not spill out into the community. Therefore, organizations must think about scaling the necessary culture for the changes that occur in the organization to occur outside of the organization, and this requires, “scaling deep into the beliefs, ideas, and narratives of dominant social structures. Working with norms and values as vehicles for scaling innovations was described as critical because ideas live differently in every context but can spread rapidly” (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015, p. 79). By changing the narrative, participants felt they could address these deep-rooted issues. It is a complement to all other kinds of scaling. It is as much about increasing impact as it is about addressing root causes as it is about building support and momentum for change. “One practitioner explained that amalgamating stories from the individuals affected by the relevant social issues and translating them into a resonant framing enabled individual anecdotes to tell a more systemic story about the need for change” (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015, p. 79).

Scaling Stages

Broadly speaking, the first several steps of the scaling journey are as follows: (1) clarify the need and create the idea, (2) find a successful implementation or pilot, (3) spread at a local level, (4) prepare to scale - specifically determine what can and cannot be scaled - identify non-negotiables, (5) refine the approach to scaling - learn and adapt from early attempts, and (6) create networks & build a reputation (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2009; Westley et al., 2014). It is at this point that the authors observed, many organizations hit a “‘glass ceiling’ of diminishing returns” (Westley et al., 2014, p.255). In other words, the organizations had hit their relative limit of success because the root problems remained unchanged. This requires that organizations broaden the problem frame, i.e. adopt a systems-change perspective, and begin to engage all

three types of scaling if they haven't already (Uvin, 2000; Van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008; Binswanger-Mkhize, 2009; Westley, Antadze, Riddell et al., 2014; Moore, Riddell, Vocisano, 2015).

“...the learning process widened previously narrow constructions of problems and solutions, enabling organisational leaders to consider different types of scales, and to understand the complex interrelated layers of variables and phases of change that could influence their issue as they tried to scale their impact. Broadening their problem definition led several organisations to reconceptualise their goals, as they shifted from being focused on a specific issue, to being more deliberately focused on solving the roots of the problem” (Moore, Riddell, Vocisano, 2015, p. 76).

As organizations engage more pathways of scaling - out, up, and in - it will transform. These transformations are presented by scholars as stages or phases. These codified stages are helpful to conceive of how the organization changes, as well as its relation to the system. In addition, each relative stage represents a different set of considerations, concerns, benefits, and threats. This section will touch on some of these, with another section on trade-offs further below. I will review Uvin's four stages, which look more internally. and then end with Geel's, which looks at the organization's relation to the system.

Uvin - Stages as they relate to the organization

Uvin (2000) conceives of the transformation of scaling in four stages. The first stage, entrepreneurial initiatives, represents the ideation stage. In this stage, there is little clarity as to what works but energy and passion are high. It is characterized by continuous learning and experimentation. Lastly, there is little foresight as to what needs to be accomplished, so tasks are undertaken as they are conceived, by everyone available. Next is the stage Uvin describes as

Task Teams. The significant change at this stage is the creation of task teams with more distinct roles and responsibilities. Each task team operates much like the stage before, with all members within a team sharing responsibilities to achieve success. However, resources and an understanding of the labor necessary for success are still uncertain, making forward planning very challenging.

Once the organization has achieved a model for success and individual roles have been defined for each member, it arrives at the next stage and has become a project implementation organization. “In this phase, input-output relationships, scheduling of activities, and personnel requirements are well-known” (Uvin, 2000, p. 1412). Organizations in this phase are often just delivering on projects they’ve committed to, and thus yet haven’t defined a clear mission or established long-term strategic planning. Lastly, organizations become program institutions. They are characterized by being driven by a long-term vision based around a clear mission, rather than driven by the chase for resources and short-term commitments. In short, these program institutions operate with more independent agency than their former versions. Although they may not yet be financially self-sufficient, they have become established enough so that “it is very likely that some source of funding will always be forthcoming, either from the beneficiaries themselves or from a socially responsive external agency, whether foreign donor or local government agency” (Uvin, 2000, p. 1412).

Geels - Stages as they relate to the system

The multi-level perspective authored by Geels (2002a) presents a model of the process of system transformation. The model presents three developmental phases: niches, regimes, and landscapes. The niche or novelty phase is best described as an incubation phase. These niches are typically focused on solving the problems of current regimes and landscapes. “Niche-actors hope

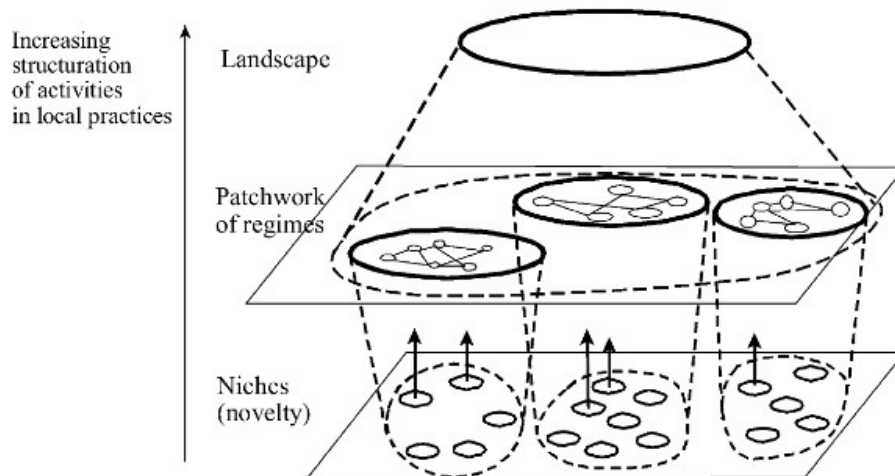
that the promising novelties are eventually used in the regime or even replace it. This is not easy, however, because the existing regime is stable in many ways (e.g. institutionally, organisationally, economically, culturally)” (p. 913, Geels 2004). Therefore, while the niche phase is the most vulnerable phase, it is also the most flexible and adaptable phase, as little structure and culture has been formalized. Each phase’s properties correspond to its role in the system. “Niches are crucial for system innovations, because they provide the seeds for change (p. 913, Geels, 2014). Van den Bosch & Rotman posit that, “scaling across multiple niches remains a critical step before being able to scale impacts to the regime, landscape, or both” (Van den Bosch & Rotmans, 2008, p. 81).

In the regime phase, much of this flexibility is traded for structural rigidity and sustainability. “The socio-technical regime forms the ‘deep structure’ that accounts for the stability of an existing socio-technical system” (Geels, 2011, p. 5). This ‘deep structure’ refers largely to the solidification of the culture of the organization, in other words, “the so-called ‘grammar’ of the system, i.e. the highly institutionalized, yet not necessarily coherent formal and informal rules (e.g. shared beliefs and values, routines, regulations, institutionalized practices, capabilities, etc.) that mutually construct and are constructed by actors in a system (Geels, 2004, 2011)” (Feunfshilling & Truffer, 2014, p.773). In this phase, change occurs at a much slower pace, if at all.

Lastly, we have the most resilient phase, the landscape phase. “The metaphor ‘landscape’ is used because of the literal connotation of relative ‘hardness’ and to include the material aspect of society, e.g. the material and spatial arrangements of cities, factories, highways, and electricity infrastructures. Sociotechnical landscapes provide even stronger structuration of activities than regimes” (Geel, 2004, p. 913). The landscape phase does not imply greater efficacy, but instead

both a positive and negative imperviousness to change, including the cultural beliefs and values of the organization. It is at this phase that true long-term impact has been achieved.

The two images below (Figures 2 & 3) are representations of these scaling stages, as envisioned by Geels (2004), and Westley et al. (2014). Figure 3 complements Figure 2, by demonstrating the processes between the three stages in Figure 2, Niches, Regimes, and Landscape. By engaging in scale-up thinking and scaling out, organizations move from a disorganized ineffective state to a more effective, connected, and sustainable state, to finally a state capable of systems change, by becoming a new part of the system or landscape.



(Figure 2, taken from Geels, 2004, p. 913).

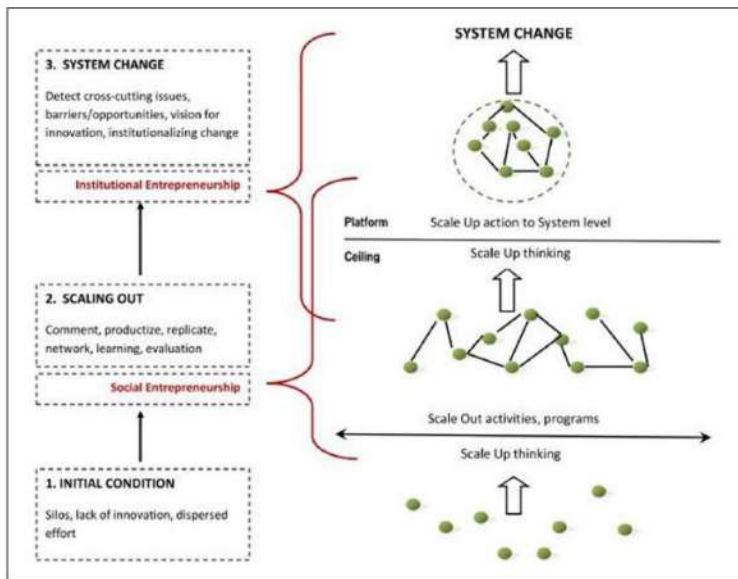


Figure 2. Platforms and ceilings in the process of scaling up.

(Figure 3, taken from Westley, et al., 2014, p. 255).

Scaling Characteristics

This brings us to our last conception of scaling; the nouns of the scaling relationship, the scaling object, subject, site, pathway, resources, and driver. These are presented alongside the scaling-as-learning process by Mickelsson et. al, (2019). The scaling-as-learning process is a counter-response to the concern of program replication without buy-in or ownership. Through the scaling process, those involved become owners.

“...as soon as the activity in question is encountered by those who are the designated receivers of it, the ESD [Education for Sustainable Development]-activity in question will be part of the meaning making, i.e. the environing process of those involved in the scaling process. In other words, the activity will transact with the new context and those involved in that context. This will potentially involve a process of proactive, critically

engaged adaptation to the specific character of the designated context, including the specific permutation of the particular sustainability challenges at hand” (Mickelsson et al., 2019, p. 137).

In other words, a scaling-as-learning process invites the learner-scaler to become an active part of the process, learning from and adapting to new contexts. In the following paragraphs, I will present the role of each scaling noun within the ESD framework. These characteristics provide a platform for understanding the process of scaling, particularly the relationships between the characteristics themselves, and their relative impacts on the process as a whole.

The scaling object, is, as it sounds, the object of the scaling process, e.g. the organization, intervention, or program. Given the perspective that scaling necessitates learning and adaptation to its new context, the scaling object will undergo a transformation through the scaling process. The scaling subject refers to all those who are involved in the scaling process, both those who are scaling and those who are receivers of the scaling object. “...both the instigators of the scaling process and the recipients of the scaling object should be engaged as active partners in adapting, re-contextualising and developing the ESD-activity to address the sustainability challenges in question and in situ” (Mickelsson, 2019, p. 142). The scaling subjects scale the scaling objects, at a scaling site. Scaling sites refer to where scaling activities take place, including a source site, where the scaling object originates, and target sites, where the scaling object is transferred to. Thus, a multidirectional transformational relationship is formed among the scaling objects, scaling subjects, and scaling sites.

The next two characteristics of ESD have been covered in great detail in the previous section on scaling pathways. The scaling pathway indicates how the scaling object will “travel.” As presented above, the pathways are ‘out’ (capacity), ‘up’ (structural & political), and ‘in’

(cultural). Scaling resources refer to what is necessary to achieve the scaling pathway. More than just financial or human resources, this refers to the network, partnership, and structural necessities. Lastly, and perhaps the unique addition of this framework, is the scaling driver. “A scaling driver is a function, event, action, circumstance or agent that boosts scaling-as-learning. Drawing on scaling literature (Slavin and Madden 2013; Looi and Teh 2015) visioning and leadership, incentives and accountability, external catalysts and communication are highlighted as important scaling drivers in general” (Mickelsson, 2019, p. 145). Some examples include context sensitivity, timing & local relevance, partnerships built on trust, families & communities defining the challenge, and educators in schools (Mickelsson, 2019). A scaling driver is an intangible necessity for the scaling to occur, a scaling secret ingredient.

What is nonformal education?

Despite perhaps getting quite lost in the weeds with scaling literature, it cannot be forgotten that this dissertation is not just about scaling, but instead the relationship between scaling and nonformal education. This dissertation will examine the very specific case of scaling a nonformal education program and therefore must include an in-depth discussion of nonformal education, how it is conceptualized, used, and theories that inform it. So, as the section title asks, what is nonformal education?

Another Loch Ness monster? No, I think not. Although nonformal education (NFE) is similarly broad as scaling as a concept, there is much richer, and more mature literature on the topic. As well, like scaling, nonformal education has seen a variety of definitions, those employed by international organizations, and those used by local organizations and NFE theorists. However, these definitions start from the same point, generally speaking, education outside of formal schooling, and branch out to all the potential educational opportunities which

fit that description. NFE does not have a defined form or shape, it looks very different depending on the context. It can take the form of a sports, theatre, music, or arts program for youth, adult literacy education, workforce preparation and vocational training, or short-term numeracy education in emergencies.

The first formalized definition of nonformal education (NFE) is attributed to Coombs and Ahmed (1974), “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). This definition grew to become associated with education relevant to disadvantaged groups, focusing on very specific outcomes, and flexibility in its organization (Fordham, 1993). “The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education... often provided in order to guarantee the right of access to education for all” (UNESCO, 2012, p.11). Given the importance of formal education and the near dependence of the definition of nonformal education on formal education, it may be prudent to position NFE within the larger learning ecosystem.

Where learning occurs is generally broken down into three categories: formal education, nonformal education, and informal learning (Stromquist, 2007; OECD, 2010; UNESCO, 2011; INEE, 2020). Formal education is defined as,

“education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies and, in their totality, make up the formal education system of a country. Formal education programs are thus recognized as such by the relevant national educational authorities or equivalent, e.g. any other institution in cooperation with the national or sub-national educational authorities. Formal education consists

mostly of initial education. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognized as being part of the formal education system” (UNESCO, 2011).

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies’ (INEE) 2020 background paper titled *Non-formal Education for Adolescents and Youth in Crisis and Conflict Contexts: a Proposed Taxonomy* posits there are two tracks for formal education; traditional academic schooling, and technical and vocational educational training. Additionally, formal education is managed by the government and provides certification or accreditation. Informal learning is defined as, “any activity involving the pursuit of knowledge or skills that happens without the presence of an externally imposed curriculum of formal and nonformal educational institutional programs. This type of learning frequently arises from learners' natural settings and is initiated by the learners themselves” (Dudzinska-Przesmitzki & Grenier, 2008, p. 15).

Unfortunately, within the sphere of international development, nonformal education has long been overlooked, largely defined by its relativity to formal education. Stromquist went as far as to call “NFE the poor sister of schooling” (2007, p. 60). As late as 2010, in an OECD brief, they said this about NFE,

“Mid-way between the first two, non-formal learning is the concept on which there is the least consensus, which is not to say that there is consensus on the other two, simply that the wide variety of approaches in this case makes consensus even more difficult.

Nevertheless, for the majority of authors, it seems clear that non-formal learning is rather organised and can have learning objectives” (OECD, 2010).

This seems to be changing, as Ngaka, Openjuru, & Mazur report that not only has interest grown in nonformal education globally, but it is being recognized as an essential partner to formal

education with a recognition that formal education cannot solve the education crisis (2012; INEE, 2020). In 2020, INEE define nonformal education as,

“the overarching term that refers to planned, structured, and organized education programming that is outside the formal education system. Some types of NFE lead to equivalent certified competencies, while others do not. NFE programs are characterized by their variety, flexibility, and ability to respond quickly to the new educational needs of learners in a given context, as well as their holistic, learner-centered pedagogy” (INEE, 2020, p. 39).

In recent years, there has been a significant effort to recognize the importance and contributions of NFE to civil society, and thus the drive for certification and accreditation has increased (Ngaka, Openjuru, & Mazur, 2012; INEE, 2020). INEE’s taxonomic breakdown refers to this as alternative education which is, “planned, structured education programming that leads to equivalent certified competencies in academic or technical/vocational subjects for out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth” (2020, p. 40). It would appear, however, this increased enthusiasm for nonformal education by international organizations is still in its service to formal and mainstream education objectives, those which received certification and accreditation.

In INEE’s taxonomic breakdown, NFE programs that do not accomplish this goal, fall under the umbrella of “Other NFE”. To complete the INEE breakdown, the last two categories of NFE are Transitional Programs and Support Services. Transitional programs are as they sound, programs that transition students from an NFE program back into the formal education system or an alternative education program. Support services are programs that are completely connected to other nonformal or formal education (INEE, 2020). Despite increased attention, some may find INEE’s discussion of NFE lacking.

“Other NFE may be more ad hoc, temporary, and single issue, usually due to the nature of the crisis it is implemented in. In the absence of formal education or fully equivalent alternative education programs, other NFE programs fill a much-needed gap, but they may not provide the structure, intensity, and certification of a full alternative education program. Other NFE programs often are implemented by non-education actors who have identified a need and responded with good intentions” (INEE, 2020, p. 43).

It is clear in their view that formal education, or at minimum certification, is the end goal of NFE, with other NFE only an appropriate stand-in under certain circumstances.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have painted a picture of NFE largely from the perspective of the international development community. This is not the full picture. Although Coombs & Ahmed are credited with formally defining nonformal education in the early 70s, that was not the beginning of nonformal education, nor is it the only definition of nonformal education. In fact, many scholars would argue that the definitions presented above are missing key components of nonformal education, empowerment and social change (Kindervatter, 1979; Stromquist, 2007 & 2015).

“On the whole, however, these institutions have not taken their analyses far enough.

None have clearly articulated a particular view of development and NFE's corresponding role in it. Perhaps this can be attributed to a dependency on agency funding or to a concern with academic "objectivity." But, education can not be neutral. Implicitly if not explicitly, its forms, content, relationships, and processes contribute to certain outcomes in this case to outcomes either consonant with or antagonistic to 'another development.'” (Kindervatter, 1979, p. 58).

What Kindervatter is arguing here, is that NFE is not simply a vessel to “bridge the gap” between formal education but instead may have its own unique form of education with its own goals, either in support of maintaining the status quo, or changing it.

Kindervatter is quite clear in their belief that NFE should be seen as challenging the status quo. They employ the term ‘another development’, formulated by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, to mean, “need-oriented; endogenous; self-reliant; ecologically sound; and based on the transformation of social structures” (1979, p. 46). In other words, from the community, for the community; reflexive, relevant, adaptive, and most importantly, transformative (Stromquist, 2007). In a 2015 article about the importance of Women-Led NGOs, Stromquist writes, “It is through access to knowledge that they can gain a greater understanding of their condition in society, identify the obstacles they face in escaping oppression and devise strategies for reshaping institutions” (p. 67). Rather than just a “complement” to formal education, NFE serves as a way for communities to identify their own challenges, craft solutions, and change their circumstances.

Formal education should be engaged in this work as well, changing and shifting society to become more equitable for all, but, whether by lack of resources or the stomach for true change and conflict, this is often done in half measures, and therefore, “education outside social structures regulated by certificates, exams, and selection offers a greater possibility for the creation and transmission of transformative knowledge” (Stromquist, 2007, p. 29). It is for this reason that nonformal education and informal learning possess such power and possibility. In a 2015 article about the importance of Women-Led NGOs, Stromquist writes,

“we are beginning to recognize the fundamental importance of nonformal education (the acquisition and transmission of knowledge and skills involving non-traditional students

and teachers through institutions outside the school system) as well as that of informal learning (the acquisition of knowledge and skills through action linked to social change efforts). For informal learning, the awareness-raising principle formulated initially by Freire (1970) and the learning for social action concept posteriorly raised by Foley (1999a, 2004) have been particularly useful. These two forms of education demonstrate that it is possible to learn *for* action as well as to learn *from* action” (p. 65).

This final point about informal learning is an important one; the process of action can be a teacher as well. With Mickelsson’s (2019) scaling-as-learning framework, it begs the questions, what informal learning is achieved while scaling nonformal education?

In the following section, I will investigate the work of three nonformal and informal theorists. Stromquist (2007; 2015) cites Gramsci, Freire, and Foley as key critical theorists in the space of nonformal education and informal learning. Gramsci believed that the marginalized must unite, create their own educators (termed intellectuals), and create a long-term strategy for change. Freire believed that the marginalized must raise their consciousness, and through this process begin to learn how to challenge their position in society. Lastly, Foley believed that structure must follow theory and principle; in effect, that transformative action can be an educative one if the structures and processes communicate the same principles. These three scholars contribute significant ideas to the work of nonformal education, specifically for social change, and therefore provide important lenses with which to view my research.

Gramsci

Gramsci, in the context of adult education, viewed it as a vessel for political revolution against hegemony. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci identified two functions of power within society: 'hegemony,' which the dominant group exercises throughout civil society,

and 'direct domination,' exercised through the State (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). Gramsci saw that the existence of this hierarchical relationship was problematic and must be addressed in order to achieve the revolutionary change he desired. He saw all hegemonic relationships as an educational relationship, in that they reinforce the notion of hierarchy through repetitive learned behavior or position. Schools are not 'neutral' in this context and instead serve to maintain the existing hegemonic structure. As Gramsci wrote, "The fundamental division into classical and vocational schools was a rational formula: the vocational school for the instrumental classes, the classical school for the dominant classes and the intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 26). Gramsci further reinforced his position by arguing against early vocational specialization for children, as it only further cemented this process of production.

Gramsci does not explicitly comply with the ideas of determinism and fatalism, in that he advocates for a very particular opportunity of agency and therefore the antithesis to the preceding ideas.

"For Gramsci, hegemony is characterised by a number of features: it has a nonstatic nature (it is constantly open to negotiation and renegotiation, and therefore to being renewed and recreated); it is incomplete, selective; and there exists moments wherein the whole process undergoes a crisis. This indicates that there can be room for counter-hegemonic activity which can be very effective in highly determinate moments" (Mayo, 1999, p. 38).

These moments of 'crisis' within the process of renewal and recreation represent the hope that Gramsci operates with. Gramsci believes the site of struggle for this counter-hegemonic activity inevitably falls within civil society, as the state will not initiate the change.

There are two wars Gramsci proposes, one which acts in accordance with these opportune moments of change, and one which essentially creates these moments. A ‘war of manoeuvre’ as he called it, is a head-to-head confrontation between those seeking to change societal relations and the state. However, Gramsci does not believe these can be successful without a ‘war of position.’ This is described as “a process of wide-ranging social organisation and cultural influence” (Mayo, 1999, p. 38). It is through this process that a historical bloc, a key concept of Gramsci, is formed. Gramsci writes,

“Every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas among masses of men who are at first resistant and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition” (Mayo, 1999, p. 39).

Without an awakening to the plight suffered not only by one person but by others, in what can be considered consciousness-raising, these people will remain more concerned with their own struggles. This is where adult education and educators play a vital role. Mayo comments that in addition to accompanying a ‘war of position’, adult education has played a role in a ‘war of manoeuvre as well’, as a revolution requires the mass dissemination of counter-hegemonic knowledge to succeed.

There were two types of intellectuals, as Gramsci called them, those who sought to preserve the *status quo*, and the subaltern intellectual, such as teachers and priests, who work in favor of the dominant group. Gramsci proposed new intellectuals, which he named ‘organic intellectuals’. As the name suggests, they develop naturally with new historical moments, out of the other classes of intellectuals. The organic intellectual which generates from a subaltern group is of interest to us, as they are to become the adult educators. They are the ones who will be

engaging in the ‘war of position’. As Mayo points out, it is necessary for these educators to contribute an “‘intellectual and moral reform’” (Mayo, 1999, p. 41). This is important, as he goes on to emphasize that these educators must have a commitment to those they are teaching. If a dissonance exists between these two points, then there cannot be effective learning.

The role of the working-proletariat is essential to Gramsci, but as it is slightly myopic, we will only focus on the informative aspects of Gramsci’s theorizing. First, Gramsci believed that members of this class must produce their own intellectuals, as well as assimilate traditional intellectuals. This is partially due to Gramsci’s belief that the movement must appropriate the dominant culture, which is crucial to a ‘war of position’. Additionally, Gramsci believed that, while including the peasants, the movement must be led by the working class. This is due to the elevated status and education the working class have over peasants.

Gramsci insisted that no movement could be successful without the formation of a historical bloc, which required a solidarity beyond classes. In the ‘war of position’ no site should be ignored as an opportunity to create intellectuals and solidarity. The movement must create an organizational body with which to define the scope and goals of the movement. One necessary step for the working class intellectual is to “acquire complete mental control over the production process in order to ‘replace management’s power in the factory’” (Mayo, 1999, p. 46). In Gramsci’s view, once they understand their role in the factory, their role in the process of production, they will understand their role in society, and ‘become a producer’ reducing the strength of the hegemonic control of knowledge. Those educating would design a program to transmit the democratic principles of the movement, through a reciprocal relationship of educators and workers, “whereby ‘every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher’”

(Mayo, 1999, p. 47). However, educators will retain an elevated position, in that they bring knowledge not held by the students, with which to inform their dialogical relationship.

Lastly, Gramsci debates the formation of the content of education for the creation of the new intellectuals. Particularly, related to his belief that the dominant discourse must be appropriated, he believes that educators must master the knowledge of the dominant class. Through this knowledge, they can create counter-hegemonic discourse such as novels or other art, with which to create the necessary prerequisite knowledge to build the new society. Gramsci, also believed in the importance of praxis but that will be spoken of in greater detail with Freire.

Freire

Freire is famous for his writing on the relationship between the oppressed and oppressor. He wrote about it in such a generalized way that it is easily applicable and relatable across all spectrums of power dynamics. Freire was particularly critical of the banking model of mainstream education, like Gramsci, in that it perpetuates the idea that the student is an object of production, rather than a subject. This authoritarian approach to education has a silencing effect on those within it. Additionally, Freire argued that it is both cultural alienation, pushing the student away, and cultural invasion, impressing upon them a culture not their own.

“Educators must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf are they working” (Mayo, 1999, p. 60). Freire believed that educators must confront the reality of their actions, he goes on to say, “Neutrality is a convenient alternative to saying one is siding with the dominant” (Mayo, 1999, p. 60). Freire, like Gramsci, despite their cynical views of education, remained optimistic. Freire, influenced by Liberation theology, a Christian theological approach for the liberation of oppressed peoples, opposed the fatalistic and deterministic rhetoric proposed

by traditional churches. He argued instead that those oppressed can free themselves from their oppressor.

The process of liberation, if inhibited by a banking model of education, must then be different. Freire, like Gramsci, argued that educators should operate with democratic principles through dialogue. “Through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (Freire, 1970, p. 80). However, Freire took this discussion further. This process requires the teachers to do more than just learn the knowledge of the students but go further. They must understand the world of the learner from the learner’s perspective. Then they must act in solidarity with the learner. This is how they can achieve what he calls ‘class suicide’, by ““immersing themselves in the culture, history, aspirations, doubts, anxieties and fears of the popular classes”” (Mayo, 1999, p. 68).

Freire goes into much more depth on the role of praxis in liberation. Freire defined praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). “Through a ‘pedagogy of the question’ rather than a prescriptive pedagogy, the educator enables the learners to reflect on the codified version of their ‘reality’ (their own world of action) in a process of praxis. The codification serves its purpose in distancing the learners from their world of action so that, through reflection the educatees begin to see it in a different, more critical light” (Mayo, 1999, p. 63). Through repetitive action and reflection, one can begin to achieve transformation and conscientization. In the words of Mayo, without both, you end up with “mindless activism or empty theorizing” (1999, p. 63). Freire believed that through this conscientization process, you begin to understand your world, build agency and identity, and engage in struggle. The result is “learning to perceive social, political, and economic

contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 35).

Freire and Gramsci specifically diverge in their investment in the different classes. Freire expresses distrust in the working proletariat, in that due to their more privileged position, they may find themselves in a position to be deceived and manipulated by the dominant class. Therefore, Freire placed his trust in the *campesinos*, or peasants. However, Freire, like Gramsci, recognized the knowledge hierarchy that is bound to develop, and in some cases, the students will be so accustomed to the dominant model of education and the dominant ideology that the educators must still employ some traditional banking methods. Like the organic intellectuals as well, educators should utilize a political vision for the learners.

Freire described the political position that educators must take: “I think politically, every time we can occupy some position inside of the subsystem, we should do so. But as much as possible, we should try to establish good relationships with the experience of people outside the subsystem in order to help what we are trying to do inside” (Mayo, 1999, p. 70-71) One can’t fully exist outside of the system, otherwise there would be no discernible effect, and so they must operate tactfully, one foot in and one foot out. Social movements are the space with which to operate outside of the system. Freire believed that praxis should result in action toward a common good, a theory of service. This is quite harmonious with involvement in a social movement.

Foley

The major contribution of Foley is his intentional awareness and valuation of informal learning. In Particular, Foley writes about the spaces in which this informal learning happens, the conditions under which informal learning can happen, and some of the processes which lead to

informal learning. To comment and utilize the contributions and observations of Foley, we will use three chapters of his book, *Learning in Social Action: A Contribution to Understanding Informal Education*. The chapters are titled as such: “Learning in a Green Campaign”, “The Neighbourhood House: Site of Struggle, Site of Learning”, and “Adult Education and Capitalist Reorganization.” These chapters follow three separate sites with which to examine informal learning, thus providing a plethora of examples.

Foley, like his predecessors, Gramsci and Freire, who likewise spent a lifetime focusing on life in the struggle against the dominant paradigm, observed that freedom was an evolution over time, passing through various stages. At each stage, from awakening to action, informal learning occurs. Foley identifies two types of informal learning. The first is skills acquisition, otherwise seen as learning through practice or observation, and factual knowledge related to topics previously unknown. However, Foley’s larger emphasis was to observe and utilize the informal critical learning that occurs in the process of social action. Related to Freire and Gramsci, this can be most closely linked to the reflection that must accompany praxis.

With Foley, the reflection that accompanies this praxis, or social action, should take into account all informal learning that is taking place. Sites of learning are infinite. Of particular interest are sites of struggle. Critical learning is a particular instance of this learning in which consciousness is raised. However, Foley would likely agree that in order to learn the most from sites of struggle, an individual should begin to have an understanding of their world, their place in it, and begin to develop agency first. These beginnings will help build conviction and further exploration into what power structures they are awakening to. Foley describes in his concluding thoughts in the chapter titled “The Neighbourhood House: Site of Struggle, Site of Learning”,

“This process of critical learning involves people in theorising their experience: they stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values and choice. It is also clear that this critical learning is gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses” (Foley, 1999, p. 64).

Examples include but are not limited to organizational structure, social movement strategy, political skills, social relationship dynamics, confidence, and conviction.

We will discuss briefly and include Hart’s list of five “‘enabling conditions’ or principles for authentic consciousness-raising work” (Foley, 1999, p. 50), which are as follows:

1. “The learning group must be representative of an oppressed or marginalized group.
2. The experience, assumptions, and social position of members of the learning group must be relatively similar.
3. The learning group must develop a ‘structure of equality’.
4. The members of the learning group must have the motivation and the time to reflect critically on their subjective experience.
5. Members of the learning group must gain a ‘theoretical distance to a personal experience’.”

(Foley, 1999, p. 50).

The discussion of motivation and time is poignant. It brings into question what are the conditions for the proper motivation and time to reflect critically. First and foremost, to discuss the motivation aspect, those who are engaged in this process of developing consciousness, must reside in between two states of being. The first state, as Gramsci writes in the ‘traditional intellectual’, is someone who is interested in the maintenance and operation of the *status quo*.

The second state, while not described specifically, are those who fall into a category of pure-survival. They have not yet reached the conditions wherein they are able to reflect or learn theory. Examples of this class of people are those suffering serious domestic abuse, poverty, which includes the inability to eat, or to stop working for fear of starvation. In these cases, we must first find ways to bring the person past a state of pure-survival. While there is overlap with the category of those suffering for time, it is not a complete match. As such, different measures must be taken in order to grant time to the time-deficient, such as small stipends for the overworked, or child-care for mothers and fathers.

Additionally, in order to reflect critically upon one's experience, people must have theoretical knowledge with which to do so. Quoting Hart further, Foley writes, regarding the distancing of oneself from personal experience,

“Theory ‘does not follow the contours of immediate experience’. It ‘sets a distance’ which enables people ‘to fathom aspects of the world hidden from the eyes of its own authors and actors’, and to ‘make transparent the relations that obtain among isolated and fragmented incidents of personal experience’ (Hart 1990a: 66-7)” (Foley, 1999, p. 50).

Without the distance one might only attain learning with respect to one's own experience, and not relative to the greater power structures and relationships at play. This makes the learning rather hollow with respect to the group, as it does not provide value to the greater community, which is so essential, as no one person can emancipate themselves from the structural conditions of their oppression, but rather with the help of others.

Of particular importance is Foley's observation about the political leaning of the working class in the chapter titled “Adult Education and Capitalist Reorganization”.

He states:

“Workers’ political learning is determined by their place in the capitalist mode of production, specifically by their ‘wage labour relation with those who control the means of production’ (Metcalf, 1988: 131). This relationship between capitalist and workers is, as we have seen, essentially one of domination and subordination. Capitalists and their agents (managers, supervisors, some workplace trainers) view workers as instruments of production and use a variety of means to try and coerce and manipulate workers to be optimally productive. Further, workers are in a relationship with each other as well as with capitalists. Worker-to-worker relations are as much serial as collective; they are characterized by ‘passive dispersal, interchangeability and potential rivalry’ as much as by cooperation and solidarity. This means that the working class is best seen as ‘a complex moving relation’ which generates ‘different and often inconsistent responses’ to the ‘shared challenge’ of capitalism. It is therefore wrong to lionise the working class for its solidarity and resistance, or to berate it for its ‘false consciousness’ or desire for a comfortable life. Instead, we need to recognize the heterogeneity of forms of working-class consciousness and action, and to understand that these emerge as responses to the challenges that workers face in actual lived situations (Metcalf, 1988: 132-6)” (Foley, 1999, p. 82-83).

Foley goes further to describe that the role of the adult educator in assisting in the necessary restructuring of capitalism is made difficult by the complexity of this spectrum of relationships between capital and labor. This is due to the fact that these parties have different motivations and interests. However, Foley insists, educators have two choices. The first is to acknowledge that restructuring is a complex process full of class struggle, which will create conflict. In this

instance, Foley argues that the informal learning particularly between these class relationships, the reality of what is needed, must be included to avail any success in restructuring. Or, alternatively to ignore the struggle inherent, by continuing the implementation of top-down hierarchical manager workshops without the input of any informal learning, which as Foley puts it, will “contribute to maintaining or extending (the latter being more likely in the current environment) oppression and exploitation” (Foley, 1999, p. 85). This is in essence, teaching for the maintenance of the *status quo*.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this dissertation contribute generalizable knowledge to the scaling literature as a whole, but the true value is the interpretative value available for other nonformal education programs. Formal and nonformal education don’t just occupy separate spaces, inside of school and outside of school, but their purposes don’t overlap. As discussed above, many consider them to be complementary, with nonformal education filling the gaps missed by formal education, with extra learning opportunities, life skills, or assisting those who are out of school to re-enter school. However, as we have explored in this section, while many nonformal education programs operate with this complementary orientation, formal education is quite often a stand-in for education maintaining the status quo, while nonformal education, at least in the perspective of these authors, should represent education for social change. It is for this reason that I have included nonformal education and informal learning theory to contribute to the analysis of the findings of this dissertation. Through this analysis, I will answer in what ways *Tiempo de Juego* embodies nonformal and informal theory and demonstrate the impact of that embodiment on the scaling process. In effect, an answer to the question: Is there anything unique about how a

nonformal program approaches the scaling process? Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, future research may be able to use these findings to analyze the difference between formal and nonformal education scaling.

Conclusion

This research study sought to understand the process of scaling a nonformal education program. Therefore, this literature review brings together both the prevailing literature on scaling as well as on nonformal education and its theoretical underpinnings. The scaling debate seems to have left behind the conversation of whether or not scaling should fundamentally only be bottom-up, driven by a need for social change, or can at times be top-down. Instead, the scaling literature has continued to get more and more “scientific” in its taxonomic breakdowns and attempts to understand the scaling process. However, I think this may be missing a key component. There is no discussion of the important people, or the cultures of scaling, the collective identities of the people within the scaling literature. Scaling appears to be an algorithmic process, and yet the formula hasn’t yet been achieved.

Nonformal education, meanwhile, has seen its importance elevated, as crises around the world see more children displaced from the formal school system, including during Covid; there seems to be a greater recognition that formal education may never suffice entirely. However, these co-opted versions of nonformal, similar to that of scaling, seem to miss out on the purpose, social change. They instead focus on pathways back to formal education and accreditation.

In the following chapter, I describe how I conducted this research. In the chapters that follow, I use the literature presented here to analyze TdJ's scaling story and bring forth contributions to the academic community and to nonformal education programs seeking to grow.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research design, data collection, and analytical approach used to study the scaling process of Tiempo de Juego, a nonformal sport-based education organization in Colombia. The broad question guiding this study was: How did Tiempo de Juego grow from one location to two other locations in Colombia?

Within that, four research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What is TdJ's approach to growth? How are new opportunities identified? How are connections established? What are the responses of the community and the participants? What features attract the community?
2. How are scaling decisions made and by whom? What is the leadership structure at each site, and how do they relate to each other?
3. What are the primary influences on the scaling process? How are financial resources mobilized and sustained? What difficulties are encountered? What lessons have been learned?
4. What are the implications for growing other nonformal education programs?

These questions address the how and why of the scaling process of Tiempo de Juego, and therefore required a qualitative research design, specifically a case study, to be answered through interviews, document analysis, and observations.

Research Design

Maxwell writes, "Understanding the process by which events and actions take place... a major strength of qualitative research is in getting at the processes that led to these outcomes, processes that experimental and survey research are often poor at identifying" (2012, p. 30).

Qualitative research was the correct choice to explore the process of scaling. Numbers could not tell the story of scaling, despite being a helpful measure of scale in many instances. Maxwell adds that qualitative research is effective at "generating results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, both to the people you are studying and to others" and "conducting research that is intended to improve existing practices, programs, or policies" (2012, p. 31). Referring back to my research questions, the implication of my findings for other programs and embodying an ethic of reciprocity for Tiempo de Juego was paramount.

The particular type of qualitative research I conducted was a case study. Merriam describes case studies as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. "Particularistic means that case studies focus on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Descriptive means that the case study produces a "thick" description, which is "not just in the factual account of what happened or what something was like but the underlying meanings, basically, an account needs to include some amount of interpretation so the reader can truly understand what was happening" (Rubin, 2021, p. 148). Heuristic means that the case study "can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30).

A single case study was chosen over a comparative design because the goal was to tell one organization's story with the richest possible detail, not to compare features across multiple organizations. The depth required to understand how TdJ scaled across nearly two decades, three regions, and multiple crises demanded that kind of sustained attention. This case study focused on the phenomenon of one nonformal education organization scaling from one site to multiple sites across Colombia. The research was fully bounded to all activities concerning Tiempo de

Juego and its members. Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and observations, and analyzed using inductive, deductive, and in vivo coding.

Case Selection

I first encountered Tiempo de Juego in 2016, when I conducted brief research on the program for my University of Maryland master's seminar paper, which was later published. Within that paper, I reviewed twelve successful education programs targeted at improving the lives of marginalized youth from across the world to establish a comparison of successful practices (Busacca, 2019). In 2016, I spent several Saturdays visiting Tiempo de Juego, building relationships, observing the program, and became convinced of the depth of impact the program was able to accomplish. Since then, TdJ has grown to multiple sites and established a program for sharing its practices with other nonformal education programs.

Prior to the research trip, I had conversations with the leadership of Tiempo de Juego, who recognized the importance of this research study and were fully committed to providing open access to themselves, their resources, and their programs. I was asked to provide all of my findings, critical included. All of these factors made Tiempo de Juego an ideal case for this research. I was familiar with the program, had established relationships, and understood that the story would be of value to other programs and to the broader literature on scaling nonformal education.

Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, I used three forms of data collection: interviews, document analysis, and observations. Interviews provided in-depth information from people about their experiences, opinions, and knowledge. Document analysis provided relevant

organizational context, historical detail, and institutional perspective. Observations provided rich settings information, specifically about activities, environments, relationships, and the texture of daily life within TdJ's programming. The combination of these three forms of data provided the basis for "thick" description, and they informed each other reflexively throughout the research process.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with twenty-four individuals across all levels of the organization, totaling nearly thirty hours of recorded conversation. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. I had met every interviewee in person, either during five weeks of fieldwork from July 16 through August 19, 2023, or through prior engagement with the organization dating to 2016. During the fieldwork, I visited all three of TdJ's regional sites. The fieldwork began in Bogotá, where I attended a board of directors meeting on July 17. From July 21 through 26, I traveled to the Pacific coast, visiting Guapi for an Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing) event and Timbiquí, where I observed programming and conducted interviews. From July 29 through August 5, I visited the Magdalena coast, spending time in both Ciénaga and Santa Marta. From August 6 through 19, I was based in Soacha and Bogotá, where I attended programming sessions, a Cambio de Juego activity, a Soacha Leadership School training, and a second board meeting, conducting the majority of the remaining interviews during this period.

Of the twenty-four, twenty were conducted during the in-person fieldwork period, though two of these were begun in person and completed virtually when time ran short. The remaining four were conducted entirely online between November 2023 and February 2024. Of those four, three were with individuals I had interacted with during the fieldwork period, but who were unavailable for a full interview at the time; one was with a person I had known since my first

visits to TdJ in 2016 but who was not present during the research trip. I also attended a virtual *café regional*, a meeting between Nairo, the Director of Operations and Coordinators, and Regional Coordinator of Santa Marta and Cienaga, in November 2023, which provided further observational context for the Magdalena region's operations. All interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed. The transcriptions were reviewed anonymously with assistance from my Spanish teacher, Julián Díaz, to ensure correct transcriptions and the meaning of certain phrases for the following translation.

The interview sampling was a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. I had established contacts from prior visits and traveled with Willy Jiménez, who works with and travels to the various sites frequently. Beyond the founder and regional leadership, I relied on established relationships and the knowledge of those within the organization to identify the most valuable interviews.

Document Analysis

I conducted a document analysis of reports, books, curriculum materials, and other documents produced by or about TdJ. Key documents included the *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego* (2015), the organization's first comprehensive internal document codifying its pedagogical approach; *Un Gol a la Violencia* (A Goal Against Violence) (Wiesner, 2011) and *La Pelota de Trapo* (The Rag Ball) (Wiesner & Jiménez, 2018), two books documenting TdJ's founding story and methodology; three annual management reports (*Informes de Gestión*, 2021, 2022, 2023); program-specific documents for Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing), Cambio de Juego (Game Changer), and Escuela de Liderazgo (Leadership School); and press coverage including a profile in The City Paper Bogotá, Emblin (2019). Some of these materials were reviewed before arriving in Colombia; the majority were reviewed during and after fieldwork.

Observations

I collected observational data throughout my time at Tiempo de Juego, paying careful attention to describing in rich detail the environments, activities, and relationships between TdJ entities and members. Observations included attending two board of directors meetings in Bogotá, an Aprender Jugando community event in Guapi, programming sessions in Timbiquí, a parade performance in Ciénaga, dance classes at El Habitante (The Inhabitant), a Cambio de Juego activity, a Soacha Leadership School training, and daily interactions at regional sites. I visited the organization's community spaces in each region, including the cultural house and hostel El Habitante in Ciénaga, the Santa Marta branch, the Soacha headquarters, and the Timbiquí operations. These observations took the form of jottings converted into more extensive field notes, followed by nightly reflections. Select observations are woven into the narrative and analytical chapters. Photographs taken during fieldwork are referred to in the main text of the dissertation and presented in Appendix A.

In addition to fieldwork observations, I assisted TdJ in organizing a fundraising screening of their documentary in Washington, D.C. on October 27, 2023, facilitating the venue and providing audiovisual support. While not formal fieldwork, this event deepened my understanding of the organization's relationship with its diaspora network and international support base.

The fieldwork was not without logistical challenges. Travel to the Pacific coast required coordination with TdJ's own schedules, as regional instability made independent travel inadvisable. Bank holidays and retroactive days off reduced available observation time in the Magdalena region. Weekend programming in Soacha had largely ceased by the time of my visit, limiting observation opportunities there. These constraints are noted not as apologies but as

context: the data I collected reflects what I was able to access, shaped by the same institutional realities, resource limitations, and security considerations that shape TdJ's own operations.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interviews I utilized inductive, in vivo, and deductive coding. Inductive coding was derived from the interviews themselves: trends, significant moments, and emergent ideas relevant to the theme of scaling. In vivo coding captured direct speech from interviews, preserving participants' own language. Because all interviews were conducted in Spanish, in vivo codes were drawn from the original Spanish-language transcripts. Deductive coding drew from the scaling and nonformal education literature, as well as from the document analysis, to provide a final analytical frame. Following Merriam (2009), inductive coding was conducted first, to allow the story to emerge from the evidence before the literature shaped it. Deductive coding was applied subsequently. The three sets of codes were consolidated into a codebook and refined into thematic categories. These categories informed the thematic analysis presented in Chapter 6.

All twenty-four interview transcripts, field notes from observations and informal conversations, and organizational documents were coded in NVivo. Initial coding produced over fifty codes and subcodes. These included descriptive codes used to reconstruct the organizational narrative, such as growth, origin of Tiempo de Juego, and TdJ programming, and analytical codes that addressed the research questions directly, such as culture, challenges, localization, permanence, and scaling as learning. Several Spanish-language terms that carried meaning untranslatable in English were preserved as in vivo codes and appear throughout the text in italics. Organizational documents, including the Metodología Convivencial, the Informes de Gestión, Un Gol a la Violencia, and La Pelota de Trapo, were analyzed both to construct the chronological narrative and to triangulate participant accounts against the organization's own

institutional record. Where discrepancies arose between interview accounts and documentary sources, they proved analytically informative. Participants did not always recall dates, sequences, or program names accurately, but what they did carry forward, the experiences that shaped them, the lessons they internalized, the moments they returned to, revealed what had actually mattered in their growth and in the organization's scaling trajectory. For factual details such as dates, program names, and organizational milestones, documentary sources took precedence. But the analysis privileged what participants felt they experienced, learned, and carried with them, because those are the things that shaped behavior, decisions, and identity over time.

Through iterative review, codes were consolidated into broader thematic categories. Initial consolidation produced approximately fifteen themes, which were then refined through repeated engagement with the transcripts, returning to the data to test whether the categories held across regions and across participants' varied positionalities within the organization. Several themes were combined when the evidence revealed they were dimensions of the same phenomenon rather than distinct findings; for example, codes related to culture, values, family, organic, and horizontal converged around what became Theme 2.3, the role of belonging in scaling decisions. Other themes were reframed as the analysis deepened: what began as a code for challenges evolved into the more specific construct of the formalization paradox as the pattern across interviews became clear. The final ten themes were organized around the four research questions, with three themes under each of the first three questions and one theme under the fourth.

The analytical process unfolded over approximately two years, from the first interview in July 2023 through the completion of the final chapters in early 2026. Transcription began after the last interview was completed in February 2024, and coding in NVivo began in summer 2024.

Writing began in the fall of 2024, though the process was not strictly sequential: drafting revealed gaps in the coding, which sent me back to the transcripts, which in turn reshaped the themes. The extended timeline allowed for sustained immersion in the data, a quality that proved essential for a case study of this depth. This is nearly twenty years of organizational history, told by twenty-five people from three regions with different entry points, different roles, and different relationships to the organization's growth. Doing that story justice took time.

Findings Architecture

The findings of this study are presented across three chapters that serve complementary purposes. Chapters 4 and 5 provide a narrative organizational history of Tiempo de Juego, structured chronologically across four eras, from its founding in 2006 through the organizational crisis of 2023. They tell the story of what happened: how TdJ grew, what decisions were made, and what the consequences were. Chapter 6 is a thematic analysis organized around the four research questions, drawing on the same interviews and documents but asking why: why the organization grew the way it did, what shaped it, what it cost, and what it produced. Chapter 7 then speaks back to the literature, naming the theoretical contributions that emerge from the evidence.

The decision to present findings across three chapters, two narrative and one analytical, reflected a deliberate design choice rooted in two convictions. The first was that TdJ's story deserved to be told in the voices of the people who lived it before being subjected to analytical interpretation. Chapters 4 and 5 are constructed almost entirely from participant accounts and organizational documents. My own commentary is minimal and clearly marked. I did not want my analytical lens to color their story before the reader had the chance to encounter it on its own terms. The participants described their experiences with nuance, humor, pride, and pain, and I

believed the most respectful and most persuasive way to present those accounts was to let them speak first.

The second conviction was narrative. TdJ's history has an arc: a beginning that no one planned, a period of growth that tested everything, a crisis that nearly ended it, and an ongoing reckoning with what growth cost. That arc is lost if the evidence is organized thematically from the start. Structuring Chapters 4 and 5 chronologically allowed me to build the story the way it actually unfolded, with foreshadowing, with tension, and without spoiling the later developments that give the earlier ones their meaning. A reader who encounters the Cartagena failure in Chapter 4 does not yet know that it will produce *Aprender Jugando*. A reader who sees the Saturdays in all their energy does not yet know they will disappear. Those narrative choices were deliberate. They reflect an authorial judgment that the impact of TdJ's story, and therefore its analytical value, is best served by experiencing the trajectory before dissecting it.

Chapter 6 then organizes the same evidence thematically around the four research questions, asking not just what happened but why. The themes in Chapter 6 draw on material from across the entire chronological narrative, pulling evidence from multiple eras and regions to build analytical arguments that the chronological structure could not support. A reader who has lived through the narrative is equipped to evaluate the analysis differently than one who encounters the themes cold. I was conscious throughout of maintaining a narrative thread even within the analytical chapter. The ten themes are not presented as isolated findings but as a connected argument that builds across the four research questions, each theme setting up the next. This choice reflected the same instinct that shaped the narrative chapters: the evidence tells a story, and the analysis should honor that.

Generalizability

This research speaks about the process of one organization scaling in one cultural, political, and economic context. External generalizability, "generalizability beyond that case, setting, or group, to other persons, times, and settings" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 136), is left to the reader. As Stake writes, "The most distinctive characteristic of qualitative inquiry is its emphasis on interpretation" (1995, p. 8). With case studies, generalizability depends on sufficient "thick" description to allow the reader to make their own heuristic conclusions: "Describe extensively the setting within which the activity occurred, consider the report as a story, look for ways in which the story is incomplete... help the reader discern typicality and relevance of situation as a base for generalization" (Stake, 1995, p. 53). The onus on me as the researcher was to provide a fully detailed account of TdJ's scaling process, with enough depth and context for the reader to assess its relevance to other settings.

Trustworthiness

There were two key aspects to demonstrating the trustworthiness of my findings: trust in the researcher and trust in the data.

Triangulation and Member Checking

Built into the research design was the capacity for triangulation. "By combining three different probes, we identify different elements that would otherwise be hidden if we looked at only one probe. Additionally, some of the data will duplicate, which increases our confidence in those findings and helps us with thick description" (Rubin, 2021, p. 158). By triangulating interviews, observations, and document analysis, the claims of this research were strengthened. An additional strength of the triangulation was that data were collected across three distinct

regional sites, providing further opportunities for comparison and verification. I maintained an organized archive of all transcripts, coded documents, field notes, and analytical memos throughout the research process.

Member checking occurred throughout the research process. During fieldwork, I regularly shared emerging interpretations with interviewees and sought their feedback on whether my understanding matched their experience. The virtual interviews conducted between November 2023 and February 2024 also served as opportunities to confirm and deepen earlier findings. I presented preliminary themes and concepts informally on several occasions, including at the second board meeting I attended, to engage reciprocally as well as prompt further insight. During certain interviews, after I had completed the research protocol, I asked on several occasions follow-up questions about developments I had learned throughout the trip. Member checking did not occur post-writing due to staff turnover during a significant time lapse between data collection and dissertation completion.

Positionality

As a white American male traveling abroad to a foreign country in the Global South, I believe my motives and perspectives deserve scrutiny. I look no different than many who have come before and, whether intentionally or by accident, abused power differences and created harm purely for self-benefit. I have questioned my own involvement as an educator entering the international development space. However, upon greater reflection, with invaluable assistance from Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others," I found myself able to answer this question: "Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for validity? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 7). The answer in short is: as long as I remain

accountable to the people I hope to serve, speaking with and never for, unless by their request, to raise their voice, and for their betterment before mine.

In 2015 I traveled to Colombia for the first time, on a whim. I spoke no Spanish. I had just spent a year in France wrestling with the lie that is the American Dream. And on a night out dancing, I met a woman who convinced me to keep coming back to Colombia and who would eventually become my wife in 2017. Since we met, I have traveled much of the country, spent close to six months there, and become confident in speaking Spanish. I have learned the terrible history of Colombia. I have seen the most beautiful nature and cities built on public transportation for the poorest people to access everything. I have also seen extreme poverty. I have heard mentions of kidnappings and murders of family members at the breakfast table, in passing conversation. I now have two sons who are half Colombian and half American and will inherit all the good and bad of Colombia as well as the United States as his heritage. I am fully invested in the people and success of Colombia.

This familiarity and connection to Colombia alone does not give me *carte blanche*. Instead, it creates a sense of duty and responsibility for me in my work. In my academic career, ethics of research and specifically whose voices are elevated have been of incredible importance to me. If it is not clear enough by the choice of this dissertation topic, I have serious doubts about the ability of international organizations around the world to ever reach the most marginalized communities. I have also come to learn that people do not need saving; they need encouragement and support. I hope to be able to provide the story of TdJ, this beautiful program, as the beginning of a career in elevating similar stories. Although I benefited significantly from this research, I am committed to reciprocity. I have communicated my findings and will produce relevant findings in Spanish for TdJ to use for their own purposes.

I should also name what is likely already apparent: I admire Tiempo de Juego and the people who built it. That admiration gave me access, trust, and a depth of understanding that a more distant researcher might not have achieved. It also carried the risk of softening my critique. I have tried to let that closeness sharpen the analysis rather than dull it, to write with the honesty that the people who opened themselves to me deserve.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

This study was reviewed and determined to be exempt by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. I carefully explained the purpose of the interviews and my research as a whole before beginning any interview and received consent. Although many of the people connected to Tiempo de Juego come from marginalized and vulnerable communities, this research was about the organization's scaling process, not the experiences of the youth who participate. With that said, the story of Colombia is trauma. These topics surfaced naturally in interviews, brought up by members as a result of their experience, motivation, and lessons learned with TdJ.

Pseudonyms are used for all participants to protect confidentiality. The exception is the organization's founder, Andrés Wiesner, and its co-founding leader, William "Willy" Jiménez, whose identities are inseparable from the publicly documented history of Tiempo de Juego. Both are named in organizational publications, news coverage, and public media, making anonymization neither feasible nor meaningful given that the organization itself is identified by name. Additionally, both provided explicit permission for the public disclosure of their comments in this study. David, known within TdJ as "Paisa," and also Jasmín are identified by first name, as their roles and stories are also documented in TdJ's published works. David provided explicit permission for the public disclosure of his comments in this study. Lastly,

Esteban Reyes, a key figure in the organization's early history, is referenced by name as he appears in published news sources and organizational documents cited in this study. All other participants are assigned pseudonyms and identifying details have been modified where necessary to minimize the risk of indirect identification.

Limitations

This is a single case study. Its depth is its strength, but its findings cannot be generalized to all nonformal education organizations or all scaling processes. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The researcher's existing relationship with TdJ shaped what was visible and what was not. Access was extensive, but that access was granted and facilitated by leadership, and the perspectives of those who left the organization were not included. Because the dissertation traces nearly two decades of organizational history, the voices of those who have been with TdJ the longest, particularly Andrés and Willy, are more extensively represented than those of newer staff. Similarly, the system-level questions at the heart of the research questions meant that centralized voices from the Bogotá office feature more prominently in certain themes than those of regional staff

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated by the researcher. Transcriptions were reviewed with a Colombian Spanish teacher to ensure accuracy of phrasing and colloquial meaning, and I plan to present my written findings to Tiempo de Juego in Spanish for their own use. Translation nonetheless involves interpretation, and the decision to present quotes in English means the reader encounters the participants' words filtered through translation rather than as they were originally spoken.

The fieldwork occurred in August 2023. The interviews capture TdJ at a particular inflection point, not across the full arc of its history. Participants' reflections on earlier eras are

retrospective accounts shaped by the present. Member checking occurred in conversations during fieldwork and in the virtual interviews that followed, but not post-writing, due to time constraints and significant staff turnover in the period between data collection and dissertation completion. Finally, this study does not include the voices of TdJ's primary participants: the children and youth. The interviews were with staff, leadership, and adult community members. What the young people themselves experience and learn through TdJ remains, for this study, visible only through the eyes of the adults who work with them.

Chapter 4: The Seed of Revolution

Tiempo de Juego (Game Time) began when one Rolo (term for someone born in Bogotá) brought a soccer ball to play with kids on a fateful Saturday in 2006 in El Lomo (the hill) of Cazucá, Soacha. On that day, a seed was planted, and since taking root, it has not only grown into a small forest there but has been transplanted into two other locations, changing the course of life for thousands of children and, through those children, families, and communities. In the following pages, I will do my best to recount the story of Tiempo de Juego, as told from the perspective of those who have played a part in it. It is my hope that in Chapters 4 and 5, you will understand the full context, with depth, of specifically how Tiempo de Juego grew. Through books, articles, interviews, conversations, site visits, activities, and observations, I have come to know what can only be considered a snapshot of a much larger story, and hopefully, it is enough.

To understand why that Rolo went to play soccer with some kids in an urban sprawl growth of Bogotá, please allow me to introduce the Rolo, Andrés Wiesner. Andrés began his professional career and has continued for most of his nearly 20 years with Tiempo de Juego, working as a journalist in some capacity. In 2004, through his involvement with Conexión Colombia, a local organization that worked on leveraging what he describes as the second largest component of Colombia's economy, the Colombian diaspora around the world sending money back to the country; he was recruited to work on an article for *La Semana*, a Colombian political magazine, to explain the alarming number of young people dying in what was called "social cleansing." Wiesner describes in *Un Gol a la Violencia* (2011), "Young people with drug problems, delinquency, and gang membership became perfect prey for violent actors, who offered them an opportunity in illegality. When they refused, the price was simply death" (p. 97).

This article would take him deep into Cazucá, a neighborhood that would become central to his life's work. Cazucá is a relatively young neighborhood, only about 50 years old, with roots in Colombia's violent political history. The area was initially settled by former members of the M-19 guerrilla group, an organization that included Gustavo Petro, now Colombia's 34th president, who, after demobilizing, sought a place to rebuild their lives. "There they could escape the war..." Andrés recalls. After turning over their weapons, they began searching for housing, and they began occupying land in Cazucá, constructing informal, illegal housing in the absence of government support. Cazucá became a microcosmic slice of the war and trauma of Colombia. Andrés describes the situation:

I had to go do an investigation into Cazucá because in the nineties and early 2000s, the first decade of the 2000s, the most difficult years of the war occurred in Colombia and Cazucá was a place that experienced the war in a very profound way. When they [ex guerrilla] hand over their weapons, they begin to search for their right to housing and they find in Cazucá a place... they occupy it and begin to build illegal housing... Then when the war in Colombia is at its worst, all the displaced people from the war from different places wanted to come to Bogotá thinking that there they could find new opportunities, that there, they could escape the war, but Bogotá is very difficult because it is very difficult to find housing, to find housing with the little money you have and opportunities, so they end up arriving in Cazucá. ... Cazucá was the largest recipient of displaced people in the country, so this obviously brings many problems and then add to that that the extreme right groups, the most radical paramilitaries, also due to the location of Cazucá, very close to Bogotá, but very absent from the State, without the presence of

police... in their place to plan their entire political-military offensive in Bogotá. (Andrés, Interview)

The violence and desperation Andrés witnessed while working on the *La Semana* article stayed with him. As Andrés explained, the situation for youth in Cazucá was dire. “So left, right, displaced people, young people without opportunities, young people who are easy to recruit for war because they have no option for anything, come together... I think about 250 young people were murdered in one year” (Andrés, Interview). The following year, in 2005, while taking a Communication for Development class at the Faculty of Social Communication at Universidad de La Sabana, he and his classmates were encouraged to visit vulnerable places to understand the work of NGOs in the country. It was a natural fit: through his ongoing involvement with Conexión Colombia, Andrés connected with Shakira’s Fundación Pies Descalzos, which supported a school in Cazucá. It was during this time that he noticed something crucial: the school only operated three days a week, and the free time the children had outside of school posed a major threat to their safety and well-being. As Andrés describes it, witnessing all of this violence while still having an itch to have football be a part of his life in a meaningful way. Having long since graduated from the days of football in private school, he decided he wanted to open a school for football. He had no idea what he was doing, but he had observed that free time was the problem.

So that’s when I felt, well, free time is what makes these young people more vulnerable to being recruited by armed groups, to joining gangs, to girls getting pregnant at an early age, to having higher rates of alcoholism and drug addiction. What do I do to fill your free time? And in reality, the only thing I know in life, or half know in life, is to play soccer. Well, what I like most in life is playing football. Football has been decisive in my

life for many things. Then I said: ‘I’m going to set up a football school.’ (Andrés, Interview)

He goes on to describe that he really just wanted them to laugh. He had encountered so much sadness. “The only thing I want is for them to laugh, and the only way I can bring them joy is to play soccer” (Andrés, Interview).

The “first Saturday” is a bit of a historical blur, caught up in various forms of facts, romance, and storytelling. One thing remains the same, no matter the source, book or interview, the program spread like wildfire. Andrés (and likely a few of his classmates from Universidad de La Sabana) went from classroom to classroom, inviting these children to join them on Saturday to play football. Somewhere between 10 and 40 kids showed up on June 12, 2006, ages 5 to 18, ready to play on a concrete and dirt field. They played and laughed, and so he asked them to play again the next week. The following week, more arrived. The next, more. Then even more. The number continued to grow. So, in a little over a month, the number grew from fewer than 40 kids to 150. On July 19, 2006, the inaugural match of what would become known as Tiempo de Juego took place, with the attendance of Colombian football stars Faustino Asprilla and Lucas Jaramillo. The 150 children who had been attending the improvised soccer school every Saturday received their first official uniforms, black with white lines and a shield on the chest whose initials read: Club Independiente Cazucá.

The seed had been planted and was growing fast.

Era 1: A Movement Takes Root (2007–2009)

In these early years, especially before its formal establishment as Fundación Tiempo de Juego in 2008, the organization was spreading its roots in the community, finding early resources, and growing from seedling to sapling. It was during this period that Tiempo de Juego

discovered its working formula, though neither Andrés nor the youth nor the community knew it at the time: external resources and volunteers, internal leadership development, community involvement, and promotion from within. Brought to Cazucá by an outsider, Tiempo de Juego's core ideals became firmly rooted in the community's necessity to survive. Although the organization has grown immensely, its key idea and theory of change were formed in these early years: provide a safe place for youth to play during their free time, give them opportunities to grow, and they will create the change they want to see in their community.

Feeding a Growing Movement

As Tiempo de Juego began to take root in Cazucá, Andrés learned quickly about the demands of a growing movement of children. Unable to turn anyone away and needing to meet an ever-growing number of community needs, he drew on the resources he had from Bogotá to support this expanding community. He began to rely on volunteers for as much as he could. In his words, "I believe that Tiempo de Juego is forged and grows and is born from volunteering" (Andrés, Interview). The first volunteers Andrés called on were his friends from Bogotá, who he explained, despite not understanding why Andrés was going to Cazucá, jumped at the chance to help him.

So, as I told you, at the beginning, I went and my friend made me, she donated the brownies to me to give to the children. The one who had a bar had a party so we could raise funds and buy uniforms. The one who knew advertising made the flyers for the party. The one who knew about architecture designed the headquarters. Everyone, from their place, from their passion, from their knowledge, began to contribute to the foundation. (Andrés, Interview)

While these outside volunteers have remained vital since the very beginning, Andrés soon learned that Tiempo de Juego could not be sustained by external intervention alone. He needed local support. Enter Willy.

Growing the Taproot: Cultivating Leadership from Within Soacha

Perhaps a destined meeting, Andrés and Willy finding each other is a key moment for the success of Tiempo de Juego. Willy, a local of Soacha, the municipality on Bogotá's southern fringe where Cazucá sits, a Soachuno, lived in a house across the street from one of the first fields where Andrés and the youth played. Standing out front, he watched skeptically, and he didn't hide it. Reflecting on their first encounter, Andrés laughed as he recalled Willy's suspicion: "'This one coming?... this one who comes here, supposedly to help the children play soccer?' He looked at us kind of strangely" (Andrés, Interview). So, Andrés invited him to come join them and see what they were doing.

Willy's skepticism ran deep. He had seen others come to Soacha before, creating what he called a "welfare system": outsiders who came to "do good" but only gave handouts without solving anything, then left. He thought Andrés would be just like them. But Andrés just kept showing up with a soccer ball, playing with the kids. Willy admits he was eventually worn down by Andrés's consistency and lack of pretense. Still, Willy couldn't resist teasing him. Speaking as if Andrés were in the room with us, he joked: "I joined the cause because I told you, I saw Andrés training and I said: 'The man has no idea about football.' I mean, he plays football, but football training as such had to have an order" (Willy, Interview).

So, what did Willy bring to TdJ? A few things made the meeting between Willy and Andrés particularly impactful. In Willy's words, nearly twenty years ago when TdJ started, he was unique in Cazucá. He had not only finished high school but also graduated from university

with a degree in physical education, and he had taught in Bogotá for nearly 15 years. He joked that if someone else had a university degree and a professional career among the nearly 30,000 people who lived in Cazucá, he hadn't met them. But he lamented that he had never had an impact where he grew up and lived. TdJ provided him with the opportunity to change that. Willy brought the technical knowledge from being a PE teacher—a pedagogical lens that he knew Andrés didn't have.

Not in the background but in the way he was doing it. The idea was great, but there were ways in which he wanted to send a message that I believed was not, was not the way, and suddenly that ease that I, that knowledge that I had of the young people in the area helped us so that we could lower that discourse that he had to a more direct dialogue with young people, and we began to have, well, a series of processes within Tiempo de Juego that led to the methodology that we use today. (Willy, Interview)

This shift in approach unlocked something essential. Everything to that point had developed so organically, the soccer school, for lack of a better term, had begun. And then every week after practice, while they ate their snack and cooled down, enjoying the sense of community and perhaps not immediately wanting to leave the comfort TdJ had provided, the youth began to open up to each other and to Andrés. TdJ represented “an oasis in the middle of a desert where there is only aggression and there is only violence” (Willy, Interview). The children and young people had nowhere to let their guards down. “When they are at home, there was a lot of pressure from home, when they were on the normal streets, there was a lot of violence, the only space in which they were soft was when they came to play soccer” (Willy, Interview). Willy understood what was happening in those moments:

I think that's when Andrés realized that the young people arrived with their souls much calmer, unarmed—I'm not talking about physical weapons—but unarmed at heart, and that they began to play soccer and share with their classmates, which was a good time to give them a transformative message, if you understand me? ...'Let's change life' 'Let's do something for the neighborhood'—'Let's do something for ourselves'..., but said in a 'lighter', softer way, without so much protocol, in a football match and I think that was part of the success of Tiempo de Juego. (Willy, Interview)

But Willy brought something else, something Andrés couldn't learn in any classroom: he was from La Loma, as the hill is affectionately known. He understood what drew the youth to the streets, the pressures they faced at home, the violence that shaped their daily lives. He could bridge the gap between outsider and community in a way Andrés never could, building trust with parents and youth alike. He was a cultural broker who understood both worlds, the world of education and opportunity Andrés represented, and the world of Cazucá, where survival was the daily reality.

More than that, Willy became a model for what was possible. "The boys saw that someone from Cazucá had managed to do important things, and that he had studied and that now thanks to the study that I had, I had been able to begin to develop in other aspects, and until my economic situation improves, okay?" Willy explained. "So, I had two roles: one very work-related, very knowledge-based due to my career, and another very community-based, how I could motivate other young people to start doing things, because we had to make decisions ourselves" (Willy, Interview). He saw potential in these youth that they didn't see in themselves.

After about two to three years of Willy volunteering with Tiempo de Juego, Andrés made a call that would change both of their lives. A touching paragraph from *Un Gol a la Violencia* (A

Goal Against Violence) (Wiesner, 2011), a book documenting TdJ's founding story, describes the moment:

William [Willy] cries. His green eyes shine when he remembers, when he talks, when he thinks about the boys, when he recalls the call that made him cry. Because he had to put down the phone because of the tears, and on the other end of the line, Andrés Wiesner was crying too. That day, when the phone rang, Wiesner broke the news to him as if it were a tragedy: I need you all the time, every day, at all hours of the day at Tiempo de Juego. And William couldn't speak anymore. He began to cry because that was what he wanted, what his body and heart were asking for. Because from that day on, he knew, his little revolution would begin. A whole constellation of stories and chance events had aligned to put Tiempo de Juego in his life. (*Wiesner, 2011*)

Andrés recognized what Willy brought, and what he himself could not. Willy became the first coordinator of Tiempo de Juego, the first full-time staff member, and in many ways, the taproot that would allow the organization to grow deep into the community. "This very community role, Andrés very skillfully makes me the Tiempo de Juego coordinator," Willy reflects.

"I was the first Tiempo de Juego coordinator, and then it kind of allowed me to have that link with the community, with the base, with the street, with the parents, but also within the organization. So, I had the ability to be able to attract young people and since I lived in the community, I knew what problems there were and addressed them within the community, within the organization, within Tiempo de Juego" (Willy, Interview).

The Roots Spread

Andrés planted the seed. Willy grew the taproot. The youth themselves became the roots, extending throughout the community. Willy attributes the success of TdJ to this: the community took ownership of it. The youth were the first. Willy saw it happening in real time:

[People] asked about the Tiempo de Juego foundation, and they said: ‘Ah, those are the kids who get together, right?’ I mean, they saw it. I said, ‘It’s a revolution.’ That is, it is like the young people wanting to do something and the community saw them, the community did not see [us], but rather saw the boys doing things, and that was what allowed people to accept Tiempo de Juego in their neighborhood. (Willy, Interview)

Like Willy, the community was hesitant to outsiders coming to “do good” in their neighborhood, but TdJ was different. Instead of seeing a bunch of clipboards and monogrammed collared shirts, they saw animated children organising, recruiting other youth, and finding places to play. “Let’s make a *parche*, let’s make a group of cool friends to go clean there, because we’re going to play soccer there,” Willy recalls them saying. Because of this, Tiempo de Juego became a focal point for the community itself.

With an absence of anything like extracurricular activities or safe spaces in the community for people to gather, Tiempo de Juego became a paradise, as Andrés described it. Not only for the children, but it became a meeting place for their parents as well.

A soccer school there, it was a paradise. Plus, we brought them something to drink, something to eat that my friends gave me, etc. So, it became a meeting point for children to be friends with others, but also a very important thing happened, and that is that their parents, who had not yet had a way to communicate with their neighbors, had a lot of fear, a lot of mistrust. The soccer school allowed, when they were picking up their child, ‘Hey, what are you doing in life?’ ‘Me? I am a carpenter’ ‘I am a painter’ ‘I am a baker’

So it created a very valuable community meeting point, and that made more children arrive, and more children arrive, and then even more children. (Andrés, Interview)

TdJ had become far more than a soccer school. It was becoming a social movement in Cazucá. But as it grew into the hundreds of children weekly, Andrés, Willy, and the other adult volunteers could not keep up with the demands. The community would have to invest itself into TdJ, and it did.

The Monitores

Andrés remembers when the need outgrew the capacity:

Still, at that time we did not talk about football and development, about methodologies, about anything, just playing and well, you know, the interesting thing about what happened at that time is that when about 200 children came, and I no longer had resources, not at all, the same community was the one that said, ‘I am perhaps capable of satisfying those needs that are arising... Of the snacks, the bakery, the uniforms,’ but the most important thing, was that of the *monitores*. (Andrés, Interview)

Informally, Andrés asked one of the youth to lead a session with some of the younger kids. They were so impressed with the results that the *monitores* system began, selecting a few leaders from the youth to lead other youth. “And really the *monitores* are born within Tiempo de Juego, that you know the strategy of the young people, how they become empowered to work with other young people. And it was because our work team was very small” (Willy, Interview). Although a decision made for the operational self-sustainability of the organisation, it became a foundational principle of TdJ’s success.

I don’t have money to find a coach or hire coaches. I can’t be a coach for 200 kids. Help me make them coaches... 17 years later, the Leadership School, the entire Tiempo de

Juego model. Young leaders guiding other young people is something that is vital to me. And what they managed... is that they transformed the imagination of what was possible or the previous idea of leadership. Because before all the little ones, all the children, wanted to be like the one in the gang, like the one who earned easy money, like the one who had a motorcycle. Now they see a Paísa, a Brayan, dressed in Adidas, they travel the world, they are at university, they have a healthy life, a quiet life. Then the little kid says: 'I prefer to be like this other one.' (Andrés, Interview)

Un Gol a la Violencia captured what these new leaders represented:

What is a *monitor*? They are leaders whom others follow and respect, not because of their strength or the ability to inspire the fear seen in the neighborhoods up the hill, but because they are capable of listening and respecting others, of teaching the work methodology, and because, being from the neighborhood, being one of them, they demonstrate in their lives, not just in words, that amidst so much difficulty and adversity, one can shine. (Wiesner, 2011)

Among the first *monitores* were youth whose own journeys became proof of the power of TdJ.

When David arrived to Cazucá from Medellín at the age of 12, he felt confused and hopeless. He wanted answers as to why he was forced to move due to violence. All around him, he saw poverty, gangs, crime, drug use, and social problems and couldn't understand why he had to experience all of this. If not for Tiempo de Juego and the motivation to provide a better example to his brother, he may have fallen into the cycle of violence so ever present in Cazucá.

Obviously at some point I used drugs, I got close to gangs, but I always had that fear of falling into those situations, also because of an older brother I had who had fallen into

this cycle... I didn't want to put my family through those difficult situations and on the contrary, I wanted to help my brother recover. So, I said to myself: 'I don't have much chance, but I'm going to try. I'm going to try to get ahead, to change my reality.' (David, Interview)

He credits TdJ for providing a safe place for him. Friends and family directed him to TdJ after they had seen a game of football developing in the neighborhood. It had only been a month or two since Andrés had begun bringing a ball to Cazucá. He didn't have football cleats but that didn't stop him.

No, well my impression was a space where one could go to play, have fun, learn values... That was like my first impression in Tiempo de Juego, because in the end it was not a structure as a foundation, but it was a recreational space. Tiempo de Juego began as an idea to occupy the children's free time, and that was what helped me to continue projecting myself into different dreams and change my reality. (David, Interview)

He continued, describing what drew him back each week:

Andrés Wiesner, one of the founders of Tiempo de Juego, was the one who welcomed me... I have always called him *profe* because from that first day I called him *profe*. So, it caught my attention to be able to be there on Saturdays and I longed every Saturday to be able to go and participate. (David, Interview)

David became one of the first *monitores* and would go on to shape TdJ in ways no one yet imagined.

René, another early participant, described a similar story. He followed some friends who were going to TdJ to help hand out snacks. He explains that he didn't go to help, but instead he saw a place where he could do drugs.

Well yes, there were two friends at school who were... going to distribute the snack, but then I kind of said: ‘Well, let’s go.’ But then I did it because... Not to go help Tiempo de Juego to do social service, because it didn’t grab me yet, but because I saw a space in which I could go do other things, which was like taking drugs, right? (René, Interview)

Willy remembers quite a few kids like René, who at first just came to see what was happening. They couldn’t believe kids were playing in their neighborhood. Many joined in, like René.

In addition to creating a safe space, they gave these kids, or *pelados* as they are called colloquially in Colombia, a snack.

Like these pelados had a snack, which was kind of cool because many of these pelados sometimes arrived without breakfast or they didn’t have breakfast or lunch, but rather a meal somewhere around four or five in the afternoon and that’s it. So, it was kind of impressive to see, cool as an organization or... a group of people, because I didn’t know what an organization was yet... that some people could do so much for a community that needed many things, right? (René, Interview)

René also commented, “I knew that on Saturday [Andrés] would arrive” (René, Interview). Trust was being built up by showing up every week. But it wasn’t just the volunteers like Andrés. He saw kids his own age, who were receiving the same snacks and training, turning around and helping others. He was struck by the empowering nature of what was happening. The catalyst came when a friend of his was shot and hospitalized in serious condition. He had been doing the same things as his friend. It was a wake-up call for him.

So, after that, I started to bond more, to distribute more snacks... I suddenly began to interact with the *monitores*, and who led the training sessions. So, I kind of started to get

more involved with them and be more into the story of giving training and helping other kids. (René, Interview)

Like David, René became one of the first *monitores*. And like David, his story with TdJ was far from over.

The *monitores* became the backbone of TdJ—not as paid staff, but as volunteers from the community who had lived the methodology, a values-based approach to sport woven into every training session, themselves. *Un Gol a la Violencia* described them as “the umbilical cord between the field, the headquarters, and the neighborhood, and because they have intensely experienced the work methodology, they end up becoming an academy of knowledge” (Wiesner, 2011). Willy put it more plainly:

“And the young people who lived in the same community did not earn anything, but they become the *monitores*, they become the managers and they are the ones who begin to take charge of the organization, to teach the classes, to clean the headquarters, to clean the spaces where we go. They don’t earn anything for it, they do it voluntarily for their community” (Willy, Interview).

This was the engine of Tiempo de Juego, not outside expertise or institutional funding, but young people from Cazucá choosing to build something for their own community.

Beyond Soccer

The *monitores* did not just increase TdJ’s capacity; they changed its direction. Willy believes the most important thing was not that the youth led training sessions, but that they began to make decisions about where TdJ should go.

And the young people began to show us that they were very strong. And when Andrés realized that, we decided that we had to empower them much more. And that’s when we

started delegating things to them within the organization. Then they begin to teach the classes themselves. But that's not what's really important. I mean, it was very visible that they went and assumed responsibility within the activities that the children did, within football, within athletics, within basketball, within whatever happened, but what happened within the organization was what was really important and that was that we sat down to make decisions about where to direct Tiempo de Juego, what do we want to do? (Willy, Interview)

The first such decision, as Willy remembers, was moving beyond soccer. Willy recalled a conversation with David: "And he said, we have to do athletics... there are kids who like to run. It was not an idea from [us]" (Willy, Interview). For the *monitores*, it was about opening the door of TdJ wider. They had seen that not every kid was drawn to soccer, some were drawn to the *parche* of kids doing something different in their neighborhood.

A girl who said: 'No, I don't like football, but I like to dance, I like to draw.' And it was like looking for those people who could support us. Then we no longer had just football, but we had dancing and drawing, later we had basketball, later we had athletics. So, it's like TdJ didn't always stay in that bubble of: 'We only know football, we started with football. We're going to stay with just this.' No, but TdJ continued to explore many more things that were needed. (René, Interview)

With the freedom and responsibility to make TdJ their own, they began to dream bigger to impact their community. The new ideas driven by the *monitores* didn't stop at activities. They felt that Tiempo de Juego needed to address the needs of the community, in the way that they had first experienced those important conversations sitting with Andrés after practice.

And they take it based on the needs that they are experiencing in the neighborhood or the community, yes? People don't just want to do football, well, then, people want us to talk about other things, they want us to talk about honesty or they want us to talk about X thing and they take it themselves, yes? Then it is like the community begins to find solutions to problems through the organization. At Tiempo de Juego, in the community, at that time, they did not see us as a foundation. (Willy, Interview)

What had started as informal conversations after practice (Andrés and the youth sitting together, eating snacks, talking about their lives) was becoming something more structured. The community was using TdJ not just as a place to play, but as a place to solve problems. And the *monitores* were leading the way.

The Foundation Forms (2008–2009)

By 2008, the pieces were in place. TdJ had grown from one volunteer with a soccer ball into a community-driven organization with *monitores* leading training, expanding activities beyond soccer, and incorporating values-based conversations into every session. What remained was to begin formalizing what had been built intuitively.

In 2008, Tiempo de Juego was officially established as Fundación Tiempo de Juego. That same year, Alejandro Arenas, co-creator of the Football for Peace methodology in Medellín, visited TdJ and introduced a framework that would become foundational: mixed teams establish their own coexistence agreements before playing, matches are played without a referee—only an observer—and afterward, teams self-evaluate. The winner is not the team that scores the most goals, but the team that best upholds its agreements, as described in the *Metodología Convivencial* (Coexistence Methodology) (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2015). For a community

that had already been weaving values conversations into every session, this was less a new invention than a structure for what was already happening.

Also in 2008, TdJ launched *Acompaña la Jugada* (Follow the Play), a program designed to extend TdJ's impact beyond weekends and beyond soccer. Ana María Guerra, TdJ's first manager, recalled: "We were strong in football on weekends, but during the week there was a lot of empty time, and since we already had a headquarters, we could make that more dynamic" (*Wiesner, 2011*). Under this umbrella, new partnerships flourished.

"The Punta y Taco Foundation then offered its rhythm classes to a group of children that quickly grew. Shortly after, several of the first students became dance instructors. This seemed to have a magnetic impact, and Bancolombia contributed a small but well-stocked library, and with it emerged the children's literature workshops" (*Wiesner, 2011*). Small donations also began to flow in through Plan Pase Gol, named after the final pass before scoring a goal, a campaign for small personal donations to sponsor children and programs. By March 2009, the *monitores* training program was formalized as an official community leadership structure.

In February 2009, a major opportunity arrived. SENA, Colombia's national training service, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), inaugurated a Tecno-Academia in Cazucá, a state-of-the-art educational center where 280 TdJ children and youth began training in robotics, physics, chemistry, and nanotechnology. *Un Gol a la Violencia* described the scene: children who had grown up surrounded by violence were now filling laboratories, discovering "that they are not only capable of understanding all of science, but that they can also creatively respond to the overwhelming questions of everyday life" (*Wiesner, 2011*). The Tecno-Academia was a

glimpse of what became possible when TdJ's community base connected with institutional resources.

That connection deepened in October 2009, when TdJ signed its first formal agreement with USAID and IOM to support its work with children and youth at risk of recruitment by illegal armed groups. This institutional funding brought resources at a scale TdJ had never seen, and with it, the confidence to look beyond Cazucá. It was this confidence, combined with the passion that had always driven Andrés, that turned his eyes toward Cartagena.

First Transplant: Cartagena (2009)

The Dream of Expansion

Similar to how Cazucá found its way into Andrés's heart, Cartagena entered his life through journalism. In 2008, while working on a documentary about the corruption plaguing Cartagena, Andrés met Elkin, a gang member who had lost his girlfriend and unborn child to a stray bullet. Elkin showed Andrés around the neighborhood of Santa Rita, introducing him to many of the youth there. It was then that Andrés began dreaming of bringing TdJ to Cartagena.

Wherever I arrived, especially covering the conflict, covering the war, wherever I arrived I said, 'The same thing happens here, here there is excess of free time, here they love soccer here, this can also happen here.' I had no way to do it, but I felt it, and I thought about it, and my dream at that moment is at some point in my life: 'This is going to be all over Colombia.' (Andrés, Interview)

Willy recalls Andrés coming to him with the idea, saying "'Hey, if this is working for us in Cazucá, why don't we share this, this knowledge with Cartagena?'" (Willy, Interview). Willy was convinced:

We heard through the media, through information from the State, about the situation of what was happening in Cartagena and we wanted to intervene, and because in some way it was very similar to Cazucá, the growth was very similar, the issue of gangs in Cartagena was very strong, the level of poverty was very high, so that's why we wanted to go there. (Willy, Interview)

And so, they began to try to bring TdJ to Cartagena. The need was clear, the passion was there, and the model had already proven itself in Cazucá.

Behind the Walls

Cartagena is a city that struggles to evolve beyond its history. Despite being the first Colombian city to declare independence from Spain, it still caters to the wealthy and foreign class. A former jewel of the Spanish Empire, its colonial walls now separate wealthy tourists enjoying luxurious restaurants and Caribbean beaches from the poverty that exists just beyond them. Even the city's geography reflects this historical divide: Getsemaní, a neighborhood of street art and hostels just outside the colonial walls, was once the slaves' quarters. Andrés described it as "a glamorous tourist city, with millionaires who go there to spend their vacations, but it has poverty behind those walls like nowhere else" (Andrés, Interview). Willy echoed this sentiment: "Either you are very, very rich or you are very poor. In other words, there is no middle ground. The difference is totally radical" (Willy, Interview).

Perhaps Andrés was not only moved by the compassion he felt for Elkin and the other youth of Santa Rita but also swept up in the story of bringing TdJ to Cartagena, a place so well known inside and outside of Colombia, where staggering wealth and riches stood in stark contrast to staggering poverty. Tiempo de Juego would find its home in a neighborhood outside

those storied historic walls, in Santa Rita. Despite being hundreds of miles from Cazucá, it felt familiar to Andrés and Willy.

Far from the wealth of the tourist areas, poverty has gnawed at its community for years.

The young people of Santa Rita face all kinds of dangers: drug dealing and use; violence caused by gangs and the urban arms of paramilitaries and guerrillas; and prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies. (*Wiesner, 2011, p. 97*)

In Santa Rita, Andrés and Willy had found what they believed was rich soil to bring Tiempo de Juego, plagued by so many of the same conditions that had built something so personal to them.

Blossoming in Santa Rita

Elkin, who quickly grew to become a community leader through his involvement with TdJ, was able to organize children in Santa Rita at El Campito, a dusty abandoned baseball field. Like Cazucá, the program grew quickly. The first session had 80 children, soon 150, and within a few months over 200. TdJ supplied them with donated cleats and uniforms. Within a short while, TdJ had gained cooperation with the Cartagena Mayor's Office's Interior Secretariat. But the real watershed moment for TdJ came when they began the formal partnership with IOM and USAID in October 2009, as mentioned in the previous section, TdJ's first major institutional funding, which brought both resources and expectations.

TdJ in Cartagena was able to scale their programmatic offerings much quicker than Cazucá had been able to. "In addition to soccer training, other programs were launched: English classes, reading workshops, photography, and art classes. Professional training was also initiated in conjunction with SENA. The first project was to open a bakery in which everyone participated, under Elkin's direction" (*Wiesner, 2011*). In less than a year, there were already 300

children involved. In less than two years, Cartagena had developed a range of programming that had taken Cazucá over six years to build. The Foundation set up operations in a building belonging to the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare. Willy was brought on full time as the Coordinator for Cazucá, but also to drive the implementation of Cartagena. In addition to the original staff, a manager and a psychologist joined the team. Then an unexpected ally appeared: the Colombianitos Foundation, led by Ángela Patricia Janiot, joined forces with Tiempo de Juego and increased its reach to 600 children. The partnership also allowed them to expand into the Ricaurte neighborhood of the Olaya Herrera sector.

From the outside, with the help of IOM, USAID, and donors excited to see growth in TdJ, Santa Rita wasn't just blossoming; in some respects, it seemed to be outpacing Cazucá itself. Increased programming, partnerships with SENA, major institutional support, much was happening in Cartagena, even a bakery. In Cazucá, growth had been slow, unresourced, and driven by the youth themselves. In Santa Rita, it was fast, well-funded, and driven by Tiempo de Juego, thus more top-down.

Unrooted, Overwatered, and Planting in Untested Soil

Once Andrés had the idea in his head, he sent Willy to lead the project in Cartagena. "I went to Cartagena a lot, I almost lived in Cartagena, trying to do it there" (Willy, Interview).

Willy, reflecting upon his experience there, felt this was perhaps the first mistake.

I shouldn't have gone. No, well... I should have gone, but not that I was the one who is going to do everything. No. We had to identify a William there, if you understand me? In other words, not that I lead [the project], but that someone from the community who had a profile like mine did it. First, because people didn't know me. Second, because I did not

have that recognition from the people like I had in Cazucá, but above all, because I did not know the community. I never made a diagnosis. (Willy, Interview)

When Andrés had first arrived to Cazucá, Willy was skeptical, wary of yet another outsider making promises. Even with Willy as a bridge to the community, that trust had taken months, even years, to build. In Cartagena, Willy was now in Andrés's position—an outsider arriving with good intentions but no history in the community. Here, both Willy and Andrés were outsiders and could not connect with the youth in the same way or understand the community in the same way. Although they had identified Elkin as a local ally, one person was not enough. In Cazucá, Willy had been part of a growing community of youth who took ownership of the project over time. In Cartagena, there was no such base, and the resources arriving to fund the project would ensure they never had to build one slowly.

They grew too quickly. The grants won and the donors behind them meant that not only did they have money to spend, but they also needed programs and evidence to show for it. Unlike Cazucá, where growth had been slow and unresourced, Cartagena had funding from the start, and that funding changed the nature of everything.

When Cazucá started we didn't have money, but when Cartagena started there was money and then the people, the *monitores*, the leaders could be paid, and then they didn't see, they initially didn't see the community benefit, but the economic benefit. (Willy, Interview)

This shift in motivation fundamentally changed the dynamic between the youth and the Foundation.

Tiempo de Juego Cazucá grew out of a need, because the young people wanted to do it, because we identified the leaders, because the leaders wanted to do it, because there was

love for what they did, because they saw that they were making decisions and it was important. (Willy, Interview)

In Santa Rita, Willy said, the youth in leadership positions saw it as a job, they weren't showing up intrinsically motivated, but because they were paid to. And it made sense. In Cazucá, the first *monitores* and leaders had grown in the organization for months and years before assuming leadership. In Cartagena, no such time or pipeline existed. Willy described how the relationship became transactional:

Come, help me do this like I tell you to do it, I'm going to give you money. And if there was no money, then what's going to happen? And since there was no entry through the base, but we wanted to enter to develop a project, there was no sense of belonging.

People did not make Tiempo de Juego their own. The people of Santa Rita did not feel the love that was felt in Cazucá for the foundation, for Tiempo de Juego. (Willy, Interview)

The money did not just change who showed up; it changed how TdJ operated. Rather than investing time in developing leaders organically, as they had in Cazucá, they hired them. Rather than letting the community shape the project, they arrived with a plan. Willy admitted as much: "We did not want to teach them how to do it, we made the mistake of what we now know should not happen, is that we came to tell them: 'Do this and do this and do this'" (Willy, Interview). Andrés reflected on this with painful clarity:

It is different to give power than to empower. I gave him 'power' without a job behind him. I brought uniforms and snacks without having a process. Imagine it was me with my money, traveling, carrying everything from here. And without any process behind. That is, simply go and tell the leader of the gang: 'You are no longer going to be a gang

member, but now you are going to be the soccer teacher.’ Well, nice, but that is not as easy as if there is no real process behind. (Andrés, Interview)

In Cazucá, the *monitores* system had emerged organically out of necessity, youth grew into leaders over time through experience, mentorship, and community recognition because the program had no funding for coaches. In Cartagena, they tried to appoint leaders without building the process underneath them. Although they had identified Elkin, they did not build a community of young people around him to share the work of leadership. There was no time. Motivated by the dream of greater impact, and the required deliverables to their donors, TdJ had settled for delivering projects, forgetting to develop people.

Perhaps nothing illustrated this more clearly than La Panadería, a bakery funded by USAID and IOM grants to become a sustainable income project for the organization. Elkin was hired to run it, but as Andrés recalled, the signs were quickly apparent: “Not even the first day we opened it the baker arrived. It didn’t open, not even on the first day, was the baker ready to sell bread. There was no discipline, there were no dynamics, there were not many things” (Andrés, Interview). La Panadería was a dream for both Tiempo de Juego and the community to take an active role in feeding, both literally and financially, the children and the Foundation. However, without the trust and capacity building that had taken TdJ in Cazucá years to build, it quickly became a symbol of power without empowerment, investment without roots.

But the problems in Cartagena ran deeper than leadership and resources. Beneath the operational struggles lay a more fundamental issue: Tiempo de Juego had never truly understood the community they were trying to serve.

“I never made a diagnosis,” Willy lamented. They had assumed that because the conditions looked similar to Cazucá (the poverty, the gangs, the youth with too much free time),

the same approach would work. Matching conditions did not mean matching context. The challenges facing Santa Rita's youth may have mirrored Cazucá's, but the community's culture, its relationship to sport, and its history with outside organizations were entirely different. Santa Rita was Caribbean, shaped by baseball rather than football, and accustomed to a pattern of outside organizations arriving with resources and eventually leaving.

Perhaps emblematic of this, Willy reflected that they had started with the wrong sport entirely:

We realized that we should not necessarily start with football, but rather we should see what people wanted to do, right? What happened was that football had worked so well for us here, but we never realized that Cartagena, for example, had other dynamics, had other interests. In Cartagena football is not as important as in the rest of the country. In Cartagena baseball is their great sport. They play soccer, but their strong sport is baseball. So, if we had started playing baseball, it probably would have been more meaningful. But we wanted to start like in Cazucá, with soccer. (Willy, Interview)

They had begun their training sessions on El Campito, a dusty, abandoned baseball field. The answer to what the community cared about was literally beneath their feet. But they came with a plan. In Cazucá, Andrés may have gotten lucky, his love of soccer matched the community's. Tiempo de Juego grew from the community's existing passion. In Cartagena, they unfortunately brought the wrong balls to a baseball field.

The failures in Cartagena compounded one another. They had entered without local leadership, grown through money rather than organic commitment, and built on a community they had never diagnosed. They had replicated the form of Cazucá—soccer, training, *monitores*, programs—without replicating the process that had made those forms meaningful: listening,

trusting, and letting the community lead. Willy summarized it plainly: “I think we didn’t have the diagnosis, it wasn’t done well enough, and it was our first experience. So, I think we learned what I’m telling you, identifying the leaders correctly, not entering with such a strong economic basis, and making a much more efficient diagnosis” (Willy, Interview).

On the Other Side of the Wall

They had been outsiders from the start and never saw it. The signs were hard to ignore. Andrés recalled the contrast with painful clarity: “There they stole from us. In Cazucá, I have never lost a pencil in my life. There they stole my cell phone, they robbed our headquarters, staff lied to me, the money was lost, there was no impact, it was a mess” (Andrés, Interview). Willy echoed the experience: “We even had some computers robbed; they broke in and stole them. There was no sense of belonging to the organization” (Willy, Interview). In Cazucá, the community protected Tiempo de Juego because it was theirs. In Santa Rita, it was not. Tiempo de Juego was not a movement of the community; it was just another organization looking to “do good.”

The problems were not only internal. Unknowingly, they had entered an aid hotspot. Cartagena, unlike Cazucá, was already saturated with organizations trying to address the same issues. Willy described a crowded and disorganized landscape:

In Cartagena, there were many organizations. Cartagena is overdiagnosed and many organizations are trying to do and are doing things in Cartagena. There were already many people trying to do it, each one from their own perspective, or using their methodology or using their way of wanting to intervene in the community, that we were doubling efforts. I think we were wasting time because there were organizations that already had gained more space than us. (Willy, Interview)

In Cazucá, Tiempo de Juego had been the foundation upon which other organizations built. When groups like Pies Descalzos and World Vision arrived, they came to TdJ for guidance, because TdJ was already rooted in the community. In Cartagena, TdJ held no such position. They were one voice among many, each operating independently, and the community had learned to receive from all of them without owning any of it.

It was here that Willy confronted an uncomfortable truth. When he had first encountered Andrés in Cazucá, he had been deeply critical of outside organizations that arrived bearing gifts but created dependency, “people asked for food, but they didn’t ask to be taught how to solve the problem” (Willy, Interview). In Cartagena, TdJ had become exactly what Willy had once critiqued. The community, Willy reflected, “was used to receiving and stretching out their hand and receiving the bread here and the ball here. And the community was not prepared to take on a project of their own” (Willy, Interview). They had not intended to recreate the dynamic Willy had been so wary of. But without roots, without time, and without a true understanding of the community, good intentions had produced familiar results. They were doing more harm than good, duplicating rather than strengthening. The community did not need another organization—it needed the ones already there to work together. TdJ made the difficult decision to step back from Cartagena. Although Cartagena had failed, the dream to expand did not end there.

Seeds to Carry Forward

Cartagena was, by any measure, a failure. But it may have been Tiempo de Juego’s most important experience. Andrés acknowledged as much: “Surely the children were being happy when they played soccer and such... But no, that was, I believe, the greatest learning so that today Aprender Jugando has all its stages well structured” (Andrés, Interview). The disorganized, intuitive approach that had failed in Cartagena forced TdJ to formalize what had

previously been instinctive. The result was Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing), a structured replication model with clear stages, diagnostic tools, and a process for identifying and developing local leaders before launching programs. Without Cartagena's failure, Aprender Jugando would not exist in its current form.

Cartagena also produced an unexpected innovation. Even in the midst of failure, listening revealed something important about Cartagena's relationship to tourism. Andrés recalled:

With this intention of letting oneself be guided by the community, to understand the problems of the community, what we saw in Cartagena is that tourism was disastrous. It took more from the city than it gave. And we said: 'How do we get the tourist to leave the community?' And that was when the El Habitante model was created. We won the awards for the first financing of El Habitante in Cartagena. What happened is that since the Foundation failed and buying land in Cartagena was so complex, we migrated the entire model, but the idea of the Habitante emerged in Cartagena. So, from that failure, a great idea arose. (Andrés, Interview)

El Habitante (The Inhabitant) is a cultural house and hostel that connects tourists and volunteers with the local community through responsible tourism, reinvesting profits directly into the Foundation's social programs while creating training and employment opportunities for local youth.

Andrés also recognized a more foundational lesson: "It is very difficult to obtain resources when there are no clear indicators, when you cannot demonstrate an impact so easily. So, I think that you had to first consolidate the model in Cazucá and then think about taking it to another place" (Andrés, Interview). The model had to be proven before it could be shared. Cartagena taught them that expansion required more than passion and resources; it required a

process, local ownership, and the humility to learn a community before building within it. These lessons would be put to the test as Tiempo de Juego looked beyond Cartagena for the next opportunity to grow.

Cartagena was the first transplant, and it did not take root. But the seeds it produced, Aprender Jugando, El Habitante, and a set of hard-won principles about diagnosis, local leadership, and community ownership, would grow into the foundation of everything TdJ built next. The failure was not the end of the dream to expand. It was the greatest lesson they could learn, and it would contribute to everything that followed. “But perhaps we would never have learned it,” he reflected, “if we had not also lived through five years of mistakes, blows, and failures” (Andrés, interview).

What follows is a quieter story. If Cartagena was the dramatic lesson, what came next was the slow, unglamorous work of building the systems that would make everything else possible. It is less cinematic, but in the view of nearly everyone I interviewed, it was more consequential.

Era 2: Consolidation & Methodological Formalization (2010–2014)

Strengthening the Trunk

The lesson from Cartagena was clear. “You had to first consolidate the model in Cazucá,” Andrés reflected, “and then think about taking it to another place” (Andrés, interview). The dream of expansion was not dead, but it would have to wait. What TdJ needed was not more ambition but more structure: a way to document what it had been doing intuitively for five years, formalize it into something teachable, and build the organizational capacity to sustain it. In Cartagena, TdJ had signed an alliance with Fundación Colombianitos in 2011, merging operations to continue working with over 600 children in the city (TdJ Timeline, an internal

organizational chronology; *Metodología*). The chapter was closed, but the lessons came home with them.

The first sign of what consolidation would look like arrived not as a program or a grant, but as a person. Esteban Reyes had been part of TdJ's story almost from the beginning, one of the early volunteers who accompanied Andrés to Cazucá to read stories to children after the soccer games were over (Andrés, interview). He had studied law at the Universidad de Los Andes, earned a master's in education, and studied children's rights in Paris before Andrés recruited him to help with the foundation's financing (Emblin, 2019). In July 2011, Esteban took over as TdJ's director, and he saw immediately what the foundation could become. "When I joined the organization," he later told *The City Paper Bogotá*, "it became very evident that we were all in this for the long-haul" (Emblin, 2019). Where years of intuitive community work had built the foundation's soul, Esteban channeled that energy into systems. "When Esteban joined the team," Andrés explained, "all of that was channeled and more pedagogical, more playful, more technical tools could be introduced, modernize everything, systematize everything, get indicators" (Andrés, interview).

They moved quickly. In February 2011, TdJ partnered with Fundación Contacto Vital to begin its first formal systematization exercise. The work was concrete and unglamorous: formalization of formats, templates, and cross-functional knowledge management within the foundation, work that was explicitly designed to lay the groundwork for eventually transferring TdJ's methodology to other organizations (Wiesner, 2011). That September, TdJ opened an office in Bogotá to handle its administrative, financial, and logistical work, a physical separation of the organization's growing back-end from its community programming in Cazucá (Wiesner, 2011). That same year, TdJ published *Un Gol a la Violencia*, a book that chronicled the

foundation's first five years, and in its conclusion, articulated the forward vision in unmistakable terms:

This challenge is the focus of our efforts, with the support of the Vital Contact Foundation, to systematize our practices and strengthen our operational capacity. In its second five-year period, Tiempo de Juego will deepen its pedagogical model, supporting it with a very detailed psychosocial diagnosis of each population. This will ensure that all the programs and strategies we implement are relevant to the community and contribute to addressing the main shortcomings and difficulties we identify. Our commitment for 2016 is to preserve, enrich, and multiply the happy faces you've seen in these photos and the exemplary and moving stories you've read in these pages. (Wiesner, 2011, p. 123)

The foundation's second five years had a roadmap.

Sharing the Game

The partner who would make that vision possible arrived in 2012. The Fundación Compartir, a foundation whose mission was to support other foundations rather than running programs of its own (Rigoberto, interview), formed an alliance with TdJ called Compartir Jugando, "Sharing through Play." For the first time, TdJ had sustained funding to maintain its entire Soacha operation. It was, in Rigoberto's assessment, a watershed: "From 2008, Tiempo de Juego was formalized as a foundation... from then to 2012, the greatest resource that arrives is in 2012–2013 with the Share Playing program. And there, let's say, the idea of organizing the foundation and improving its strategy begins" (Rigoberto, interview).

What Compartir Jugando made possible was not just funding but form. The program organized TdJ's work into three distinct lines that would define the foundation's structure going forward: free time activities, known internally as ATL (actividades de tiempo libre), the sports,

arts, and recreational programming at the heart of TdJ's mission; a psychosocial and pedagogical strategy for training monitors; and partnerships with local schools to bring TdJ's methodology into formal educational settings (Rigoberto, interview). Before Compartir Jugando, these threads existed but had never been separated into clearly defined programmatic areas. Now they had names, budgets, and people responsible for each one.

And it was the people who made the difference. The professionals who would build those lines arrived in quick succession. Mariana, a psychologist, came on as psychosocial coordinator in 2012, the first professional hired to shape what had been intuitive practice. That same year, Sandra joined as an athletics teacher, bringing formal sports training to what monitors like David had started from community demand. In January 2013, Rigoberto, a sociologist with experience in international cooperation, arrived to coordinate the Compartir Jugando program itself. And Nairo, a schoolteacher from the neighborhood who had been piloting TdJ's methodology in his own classroom, was recruited by Esteban to coordinate the school partnerships line, teaching mornings, coordinating afternoons.

Mariana, Sandra, Rigoberto, and Nairo — these were part of a broader wave of professionals who joined TdJ during the Compartir Jugando period, each bringing specialized expertise to an organization that had run for years on community energy and volunteer commitment. They did not replace that energy. The foundation that had been built on Andrés' vision and Willy's tireless community work now had a professional team building systems around it. With Compartir Jugando, the three programmatic lines that would define TdJ going forward, free time activities, psychosocial strategy, and school partnerships, finally had the structure and funding to grow.

In 2013, the operation got a physical home to match. TdJ established a new regional headquarters in the Quintanares neighborhood in Soacha, a hub where staff could work, resources could be stored, monitors could gather for workshops, and the quality of tutoring and complementary activities like homework support, crafts, reading, and film could improve (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015; TdJ Timeline).

The *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego* (Coexistence Methodology), TdJ's first comprehensive internal document codifying its pedagogical approach, produced several years later, noted that even during this period of professionalization, the team working under *Compartir Jugando* was "composed half of adolescents from the community" (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). That detail is worth pausing on. Even as TdJ professionalized, even as lawyers and sociologists and sports scientists joined the staff, the foundation's commitment to community leadership held. The monitors were not replaced by professionals. They worked alongside them.

Branching Out

The three programmatic lines that *Compartir Jugando* had organized (free time activities, psychosocial strategy, and school partnerships) were containers. What filled them was an explosion of activity that pushed TdJ far beyond its origins as a football program.

The push had been building for years. In Era 2, it was the monitors themselves, David, René, and others, who first insisted that TdJ had to be more than soccer. By August 2011, an athletics team had been formally created to participate in Nike races (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). In 2012, Adidas partnered with TdJ on a project called *Diversificación Deportiva* (Sports Diversification), and a WomenWin agreement brought the foundation's first formal gender programming (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). That same

year, the figure of the *gestor comunitario*, the community manager, was created, formalizing the role of young people from the community who were paid to lead TdJ programming in the neighborhoods (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). Carolina was among those who would fill the role. A social work student who had come to TdJ in 2013 to complete her university practicum, she stayed on as a volunteer for a year before becoming a community manager leading craft activities, one of several young people for whom the *gestor* role turned a first professional experience into a vocation (Carolina, interview). In 2013, the Segundo Tiempo (Second Half) program opened music and theater activities through partnerships with Llorona Records and Corporación Otra Escuela. By 2014, the Labzuca creative laboratory had been inaugurated, a recording studio for musical, audio, and video production, funded by Fundación Arturo y Enrica Sesana, and the first Cazucá Suena (Cazucá Sounds) festival showcased the artistic and cultural life that had grown up alongside TdJ's sports programming (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015).

But the clearest story of what diversification looked like in practice belonged to Sandra. When Mariana arrived in 2012, the programming was still dominated by football. "There were very few free time activities," she remembered. "I think one was like arts or literature, I don't remember. The rest was football and all its categories" (Mariana, interview). Sandra had been hired that same year as an athletics teacher, the trained specialist behind what monitors like David had started from community demand, when he told Willy "we have to do athletics... there are kids who like to run." But what she found was a different kind of evolution unfolding in front of her:

Tiempo de Juego starts only occupying the children's free time... So, for example, I was the athletics teacher, but my passion and my love also for that sport began to generate

other things. So, it was no longer just about occupying the children's free time, but I saw very positive results in them in terms of physical abilities. So, some were very fast over short distances, others showed great stamina when I put them to do two kilometers, three miles, four miles. So, they were very good and we began to participate in municipal, departmental, national, and international events. (Sandra, interview)

What Sandra was describing was a shift in identity, not just for the children, but for TdJ itself. The foundation had started as a space where kids could be safe on a Saturday afternoon. Now those same kids were representing Soacha in competition, being scouted by federations, qualifying for international events. "The children no longer only wanted to occupy their free time," Sandra said, "but also to generate something like: 'I am a sports representative of the municipality, of the department, of the country.' Then they began to make their own personal brands, they began to be called by the federations, for example the Athletics Federation. They qualified for international events, for Central American ones" (Sandra, interview).

It was, as Sandra put it, an evolution, "from having a very large group to starting to have selected kids who were passionate about sports, about art, about music, about soccer" (Sandra, interview). The pattern was the same across every activity. What began as free time programming revealed potential that the foundation's original structure was not built to hold. As Willy explained:

Football is and continues to be its central axis. Because football generates passion. But it is also true that something curious was happening and that is that in the community not everyone likes soccer. There could be other kids who come to football and who begin to realize — because at the beginning, everyone is Messi or everyone is Maradona, or everyone is Pelé — but when they start to realize that they do not have the ability

necessary, they say: “Well, I kind of quit.” But we began to realize that, we began to give them options, so that they had other possibilities that if you don’t like football, but it could be that you are very good at music. And it may be that if you are not good at either football or music, you may have a skill in dance. And we translate that into one thing and that is a life project. (Willy, interview)

Willy believed this to be one of the most transcendental moments in TdJ’s history. The kids who had arrived at age ten were now twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and the foundation had to decide what it was for: “Do we just want to get them off the streets, just protect them from the violence that happens around them, or do we really want to go further and make sure that they have a life plan?” (Willy, interview). TdJ chose to go further, to move beyond offering a safe space and toward providing young people with the opportunity to find and build a proyecto de vida, a life project. “We cannot have them playing soccer all their lives,” Willy said. “So, we have to generate a life project for them... so that he sees that the world is much broader than simply Cazucá and there is much beyond just football” (Willy, interview).

TdJ had undergone, as René put it, “that evolution in not just staying in one thing, but in expanding its knowledge and meeting the community’s needs”, into gender programming, environmental work, arts, technology (René, interview). Football had been the entry point. But the youth of Cazucá wouldn’t let them stop there.

Writing It Down

The diversification of programming was visible, new sports, new arts, new partnerships. But a quieter transformation was happening underneath it, one that would prove more consequential for TdJ’s long-term survival. The foundation was learning to codify what it knew, to solidify the trunk that would support everything growing above it.

Since 2009, TdJ's monitors had been running activities using a three-moment structure, an opening focused on coexistence agreements, a middle devoted to technical content, and a closing built around reflection and a life skills challenge. But the structure lived in practice, not on paper. Monitors learned it by doing it, passed it along to newer monitors the same way, and adapted it session by session based on what was happening in the neighborhood. The *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, published in 2015, would later describe the philosophy plainly: "The methodology promotes peer training and youth leadership. It is based on the principle that everyone, from childhood, has knowledge that they can share and build upon with others. Therefore, the activities carried out using this methodology remain within the communities, as they arise from their needs" (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). Willy had long named this guiding principle *capacidad instalada* (installed capacity), the idea that what TdJ knew could not depend on any single person, but had to be documented, transferred, and rooted in the community so that the capacity remained regardless of who stayed or left.

That was the ideal, and for an organization that wanted to grow, that had already tried and failed to transfer its model to Cartagena, it had to become more than practice. The methodology had to be captured, documented, and made teachable.

Rigoberto had arrived at TdJ drawn by the vision laid out in *Un Gol a la Violencia*. "At the end of that book, it says: 'In five years, Tiempo de Juego wants to systematize its methodology and also how to strengthen that strategy of change that it is proposing from football,'" he recalled (Rigoberto, interview). He took that aspiration as his mandate. The effort codified the criteria that would make TdJ's work replicable, "the criteria of impact, sustainability, replication, feasibility", and systematized "the step-by-step methodology of how

to do a workshop, some classes” (Rigoberto, interview). The result, which would eventually become the *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego* (2015), included workshop templates for each session type and a timeline of TdJ’s organizational evolution that built on the one published in *Un Gol a la Violencia* (A Goal Against Violence), extending the story through 2015.

Mariana, meanwhile, had found her calling in the young people who were already leading. Monitors like Paisa were leading sessions, and the Compartir Jugando project offered them their first formal work experience. “I got hooked seeing their stories,” she said. “The power of transformation... the impact that Tiempo de Juego had had on their lives” (Mariana, interview). She saw in TdJ “the possibility of being one of the first pioneers in how to polish the methodology, structure it, give it shape and then begin to create training scenarios that could transcend a training space and go to other spaces, such as their lives” (Mariana, interview). That meant building the psychosocial measurement system that would track whether any of it was actually working. “A whole strategy is created at the beginning of the year, where life skills are worked on month by month and gradual measurements are made of the impact,” she explained (Mariana, interview). The methodology was not just being written down; it was being held accountable to its own ambitions.

In 2014, the pilot project for formalizing the School of Monitors began, supported by Corporación Otra Escuela and Corporación Cultural MiniKuSuto (TdJ Timeline; *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). By that year, 38 trained monitors and 62 teachers from five institutions in Cazucá were applying the coexistence methodology. The three-moment pedagogical sequence had been integrated into standardized formats. And the systematization of those advances was captured in the *Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, the first

comprehensive document to codify TdJ's approach. As the document would note, the "transformative agents" of TdJ's work were its "monitors, community managers, teachers, and volunteers", and their power came from "leadership, talent, commitment, and empathy" rather than from professional credentials (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015). It codified, in essence, TdJ's theory of sustainability: the organization would endure not because of any single person, not because of Andrés, or Esteban, or any professional hire — but because its knowledge was rooted in the community itself. The monitors were not just program delivery; they were the mechanism through which TdJ's methodology became permanent. Rigoberto recognized peer education as TdJ's distinctive contribution: "That model of believing in young people teaching other young people," he said, that was what gave TdJ its value against other organizations (Rigoberto, interview).

Beyond the Field

The Compartir Jugando partnership, as described in the previous section, had been designed with three elements: free-time activities, a psychosocial program, and work with educational institutions. That third element asked a question that would reshape how TdJ thought about its role. As Nairo recalled: "How could this model or this proposal that was being created in Tiempo de Juego be known by professors, teachers from formal educational institutions? And how could this methodology help us manage coexistence in a positive way?" (Nairo, interview). The answer meant following children into the spaces they inhabited every day. Rigoberto described the logic that would eventually crystallize into what became known as the triangle:

"The idea of the triangle came out when we said: 'What does a child do in a day?'

It starts with the family, then goes to school, then is in the neighborhood or on the street, and then again with the family and so on. So that's where that idea of the

triangle and the environments where the boy or girl will spend their life starts”
(Rigoberto, interview).

If TdJ could be present across those spaces, not just in the afternoon football sessions but in schools and in the home through family workshops, its influence would extend far beyond the hours of any single program. From 2012, EMpower, an international organization focused on empowering young people ages 10-24 (*Metodología Convivencial Tiempo de Juego*, 2015), began strengthening teacher training and school activities alongside Compartir, providing a dedicated funding anchor for the school-related work specifically (TdJ Timeline).

Nairo had been struck by what made TdJ different from other organizations working in Cazucá: “It wasn’t something that had come from outside and that had been installed, as most foundations do... It had been born right there in the neighborhood. That seemed very significant to me” (Nairo, interview). His own school had been the pilot. In August 2012, he and six or seven fellow teachers began testing TdJ’s methodology in their classrooms. “We piloted the methodology for three months, the remainder of the school year, and well, we were happy, we found it very interesting,” he recalled (Nairo, interview). By January 2013, Esteban Reyes arrived with a proposal: Nairo’s school “had had the best results,” and Esteban wanted him to coordinate the program across the area (Nairo, interview). Nairo negotiated a dual role, mornings at his school, afternoons with TdJ, and began scaling what had worked in one institution to five others: two private schools and three government institutions “where generally the programs do not work, because, well, there are many issues, a lot of bureaucracy in schools, distrust of teachers” (Nairo, interview).

His credibility came from the same source that powered TdJ’s monitor model. “It’s a bit like what happens with our monitors in Tiempo de Juego, it works much more for a young

monitor to work with his peers. So, a little of that happened with me and the role I had,” he recalled (Nairo, interview). He was a teacher telling other teachers what he had tried, not a foundation arriving with a prepackaged curriculum. “I tried it, it works. Let’s try it, let’s continue implementing it,” was how he described the pitch (Nairo, interview). In that first year, the strategy reached sixty teachers across six educational institutions. The school line, which had begun under the *Compartir Jugando* umbrella, was becoming its own program, *Colegios en la Jugada* (Schools in the Game), with EMpower as its long-term sponsor for what would become a full decade of support, from 2013 to 2021. Rigoberto placed the school work among TdJ’s foundational pillars: “Schools in the Play was one of the main ones,” alongside free-time activities and the psychosocial strategy, “basically it was taking our methodology to the schools in the area where we were” (Rigoberto, interview). Nairo coordinated this line alongside Rigoberto and Mariana, the same professional team that was simultaneously building the *Metodología Convivencial*. The work in schools and the work on the methodology were part of the same project: the classroom was both a testing ground for the formalized approach and a proof of concept that it could travel.

What that testing ground looked like in practice, however, did not always resemble a formal classroom. Carolina, who ran craft workshops in local schools as a community manager, recalled classes that looked to visiting teachers like disorder. “I told them: ‘Teachers, calm down, everything is under control, I know what I’m doing; the children are safe,’” she said (Carolina, interview). She had learned to let participants find their own way in: “In the end they ended up making some very powerful artistic constructions because they managed, out of chaos, to find something that they really liked to do and that had meaning for their lives” (Carolina, interview). TdJ’s play-based approach, built on letting young people explore and discover, was a departure

from traditional instruction — but for children who had never found their way in through conventional methods, the freedom to create resonated.

Early Harvest

While the professional team formalized TdJ's pedagogy, a parallel experiment was unfolding in the organization's physical spaces, one driven not by methodology but by necessity.

By the time TdJ had three hundred children showing up regularly, the informal support networks that had sustained its early years were breaking. Andrés recalled the moment: "My friends who donated the brownies and cookies for the snack, they already said: 'No, I can't make 300 brownies anymore'" (Andrés, interview). The same was true of uniforms, friends who played football had donated theirs, but at scale, charity could not keep pace with need. The solutions came, as they often did in TdJ's story, from the community itself. "The children's mothers told me: 'I know how to make bread.' 'I can make snacks.' Ready!" Andrés remembered (Andrés, interview). There was no business plan. There was a problem and people who could solve it.

In June 2010, with support from USAID and IOM, whose partnership with TdJ dated to the Tecno-Academia and the first formal agreement to support at-risk youth in 2009 (TdJ Timeline), two production units were created simultaneously: the bakery La Jugada (The Play) in Cartagena and the screen-printing workshop Póngale Color (Add Some Color) in Soacha (*Un Wiesner, 2011*). Both were designed as vehicles for youth training and organizational self-sustainability, and international cooperation provided not just the financing but the training to get them running (Andrés, interview). The logic was communal: "'There is a young man who knows how to paint.' 'There is a young man who knows how to print.' 'There is a mother who knows how to sew,'" Andrés described, and so a workshop materialized (Andrés, interview). When the

Cartagena chapter closed, the bakery concept did not die with it. In 2013, La Jugada was reborn in Soacha as TdJ's second production unit, with mothers and young people trained to provide snacks to the nearly one thousand children now participating in activities (TdJ Timeline). Willy described the economic reasoning: "Let's not continue buying the uniforms for 40 thousand pesos, but now if we make them during Tiempo de Juego, then they will no longer cost 30 to 40 thousand pesos, but rather they will cost 20 thousand" (Willy, interview). Self-production meant savings, and savings meant more resources for programming, and in theory, at least for a time, these ventures could also sell externally and generate income both for the foundation and for the families involved.

Willy offered a different lens on who these ventures served. "I very beautifully and very passionately say that the mothers at the bakery make snacks for the children, and of course, that is very nice," he said. "But that is very nice for us. But the reality is that for moms, that ended up becoming a business. It ended up making money for them" (Willy, interview). The ventures had been born from TdJ grants and organizational need, but what they produced was mutual: the foundation got affordable snacks and uniforms, and the mothers built livelihoods.

The media and arts programming followed a different trajectory entirely. What had started as a free-time activity, young people learning to film, record, and produce content as part of TdJ's diversification beyond sports, began attracting attention for its quality. "What the collective participants did looked very good, very beautiful, with very good aesthetics," Andrés recalled. More than the quality, it was the perspective that mattered: the young people "told from their place, 'I like this neighborhood, cool things happen here'", a counter-narrative to the danger and desperation that outsiders projected onto Cazucá (Andrés, interview). In 2014, the Labzuca creative laboratory was inaugurated with support from Fundación Arturo y Enrica Sesana,

serving as a recording studio for musical, audio, and video production (TdJ Timeline). It was not yet a social business — that transformation would come years later, when Andrés would eventually leave his career in media to direct it full-time. In 2014, Labzuca was something more elemental: a space where young people could discover that their futures did not have to look like the neighborhood's past.

Willy's story of a boy called Monkey captured that spirit. "There was once a boy we called 'Monkey,'" Willy recalled. "And when he arrived, I always told him that as a soccer player, he was a very good singer, because he was never good at playing soccer. But singing went very well" (Willy, interview). When TdJ began setting up a recording studio, Monkey discovered musical production — and with it, a *proyecto de vida* that football had never offered:

"He decided that his life was going to be on the side of musical production and so on, and he already said: 'I don't want to sing, because the one who earns money is not the singer.' I told him: How so? 'No, teacher, the one who earns money is not the singer, the one who earns money is the producer.' And he learned to do, and now he works as a music producer and works in studios." (Willy, interview)

Labzuca was a mechanism for generating the life projects that TdJ's pedagogy promised, tangible proof that diversifying beyond football was not just philosophical aspiration but practical reality.

Andrés saw all three ventures, Póngale Color, La Jugada, and the Labzuca lab, as expressions of a single principle: "Those social business models are very organic. They have been born from the neighborhood, from the community, from needs and therefore allow a certain self-sustainability" (Andrés, interview). Whether these ventures could actually sustain an organization that was growing far beyond a single neighborhood, whether the income from a

bakery or a screen-printing workshop could keep pace with the demands of a foundation that was professionalizing and expanding, was a question that would not fully surface until later. In the consolidation era, what mattered was simpler: the community was not just receiving TdJ's services. It was producing for itself.

By 2014, Tiempo de Juego had become something its founders could not have imagined when they brought a soccer ball to a vacant lot eight years earlier. Andrés had said it after Cartagena: "You had to first consolidate the model in Cazucá and then think about taking it to another place" (Andrés, interview). Five years later, they had. The methodology was documented. The team was professional. The school partnerships were running. The monitors had a formal pipeline. And the social businesses had established the principle that the community could produce for itself, not just receive. The trunk was strong. What happened next, the period I describe as the forest years, would test whether that trunk could support far more weight than it had ever been asked to carry. The question was no longer whether TdJ was ready to grow. It was where.

Note: Fieldwork photographs from the sites and activities described in this chapter are presented in Appendix A.

Chapter 5: The Branches

In 2006, a seed was planted on a hill in Cazucá. Its earliest youth participants became its leaders, paving a path forward for the young organization. By 2009, TdJ had attempted its first expansion to a new city, and failed. That failure shaped everything that followed: a formalized methodology, a professional staff working alongside community youth, programming that stretched far beyond football, and an organizational infrastructure built to support it all. By 2014, TdJ was ready to grow again.

Era 3: Planting Seeds and Cultivating New Roots (2015–2019)

Conspiracy of the Stars

Cartagena had been a failure, but it had also been a rehearsal. And it had not been entirely fruitless. The concept of El Habitante (The Inhabitant), a cultural house and hostel connecting tourists and volunteers with TdJ's community, had been born from listening to Cartagena's relationship to tourism, and the foundation had already won awards and initial financing for the model before the Cartagena operation collapsed. The idea survived the failure. It just needed a home.

When the next opportunity came, it arrived not through strategic planning but through what Andrés called “pure coincidence and conspiracy of the stars” (Andrés, Interview). Among the volunteers drawn into TdJ's orbit in Soacha was a bar owner who hosted fundraising parties for the foundation. “The owner of that bar said: ‘I love what you do. I can volunteer and I can become a soccer teacher,’” Andrés recalled. “And he had a house in Santa Marta” (Andrés, Interview). The volunteer wanted to replicate something like what he had seen in Cazucá on the Caribbean coast. He had enthusiasm, he had resources, and he had a physical space, “a divine

house,” as Andrés described it, where El Habitante could finally operate (Andrés, Interview). With the El Habitante concept funded but unhoused after Cartagena, and a volunteer offering both a base for programming and a location for the hostel model, the pieces converged. “We went to Santa Marta!” Andrés said (Andrés, Interview).

Sara, a community leader who had been secretary of the Community Action Board in the La Lucha neighborhood, described the place plainly: “a neighborhood with a lot of crime, robberies, gang members” (Sara, Interview). She had been running a children’s environmental group through the mayor’s office, looking for any project that might keep kids occupied and off the streets. When a teacher named Ivonne, who already knew Tiempo de Juego from Soacha, mentioned that the foundation was looking for a neighborhood, Sara did not hesitate. “But teacher, bring them here,” she said (Sara, Interview). She did not know TdJ’s methodology. She did not know what they would do. “I didn’t know anything about Tiempo de Juego, I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know its methodology, I didn’t know what it was,” she said. “If someone came who could help us, cool” (Sara, Interview).

The first Saturday, Sara and Camilo, a coordinator TdJ had sent from Bogotá, went to “a little improvised field that we had in the neighborhood, a vacant, loose field, garbage around that we cleaned” (Sara, Interview). Four children showed up. Three of them were Sara’s own.

The following Saturday, there were seven. Three were still hers.

It didn’t work, my God! We started walking to the hill to look for children. I started looking for children like crazy. The following Saturday only seven children arrived and three were mine... But my son, Carlos Darío, found in one of the corners a ball of rag, a sheath all tied up... And they started playing crazy there with it... And at that same moment that they, those seven children, began to play, children began to come down,

they began to come down, then there were no longer seven, but 12-13 little boys who were there. (Sara, Interview)

The rag ball, a detail that echoes the very origins of Tiempo de Juego in Cazucá, was the catalyst. By the following Saturday, nearly thirty children had appeared. “You know what?” Sara told the Community Action Board president. “We weren’t the ones who had to look for the children... [The children] were the ones who had to know what they were doing so that they could start making their own call” (Sara, Interview). Just as in Cazucá, word spread through the kids themselves, one child telling the next, one Saturday building on the last.

Carlos, Sara’s son, became what he calls “the number one participant of the Foundation” in Santa Marta. Through his mother, word had reached the Community Action Board, and through the Board, it reached the children. “The first day of training they told us: ‘Find the ball,’” Carlos recalled. “And we had a rag ball... Then, after two more training sessions, they brought a new ball, which was new for us, some bibs [colored practice vests] to differentiate us, and that’s where we started” (Carlos, Interview). But Carlos’s initial impression had not been trust. Other organizations had come to La Lucha before:

They came, did two training sessions, took photos and left; they didn’t come back again. So, I thought it was going to be the same as the previous times, but my impression... it seemed to surprise me more because the person kept coming and kept bringing material, then he brought us snacks, then we set a schedule established, then some rules were respected. So, my impression there had already begun to be very positive. (Carlos, Interview)

The person kept coming. It was the simplest thing, steady presence, Saturdays that kept happening, and it was what set TdJ apart from every program that had come before. Carlos

would later articulate this distinction with precision: “The Mayor’s Office does a program in a community for three months... the teacher does what he is going to do, takes photos and leaves. So, they make the communities lose credibility in the people that they do want to do good things” (Carlos, Interview). It was the same lesson Willy had learned in Cazucá years earlier: that permanence was the precondition for trust. Egan, another participant from day one, felt it too. TdJ’s arrival carried an unmistakable signal: “they want to help us” (Egan, Interview).

What happened next in La Lucha followed the same organic pattern that had taken shape in Cazucá nearly a decade earlier. One teacher. Sixty children. Not enough hands. Carlos described the moment the program outgrew its single instructor: “The Foundation expanded to another neighborhood. It was already all of La Lucha, the three sectors of La Lucha... there were already 60 children, there was no one to work with the little children” (Carlos, Interview). The solution was the same one TdJ had discovered in Soacha: older participants stepped up to help with younger ones, and the monitor pipeline, the same organic practice that was, in Soacha, just beginning to be formalized, began forming again in Santa Marta. Egan was among those identified. He described the progression as a kind of ascent, from participant to monitor to manager to teacher, with each step bringing deeper immersion in TdJ’s methodology. “They teach us the methodology in more depth... they educate us to be monitors,” he said (Egan, Interview). Nairo, watching from Bogotá, would later call this pipeline “the backbone of Tiempo de Juego.” In Santa Marta, it emerged again without being imposed: “organically this little bush began to grow” (Nairo, Interview). In 2014, Tiempo de Juego began permanent operations in La Lucha (TdJ Timeline).

As the children kept coming, so did their mothers. Sara described the shift:

The mothers fell in love... They were looking at the fact that Tiempo de Juego... was not the complete solution to all the problems that were seen in the neighborhood, but it was contributing a grain of sand so that the children were there doing something, something beautiful and something educational, and something that was teaching them and that was leaving them something. (Sara, Interview)

A grain of sand. It was a modest claim, deliberately so, and it was enough. Sara could point to tangible change among the children who stayed in the process: fewer dropping out of school, fewer drifting into the patterns that had long defined the neighborhood (Sara, Interview). But the trust was built not through grand promises but through that same steady presence, the same quality Carlos had noticed from the beginning. Other organizations had come and gone. TdJ kept showing up.

If Cartagena had taught the organization what not to do, Santa Marta was teaching it what could happen when a community chose to adopt the process rather than having it delivered from outside. And as the program grew, it also diversified, driven not by institutional strategy but by what the community showed it wanted. Dance arrived first, and the response was immediate. Sara recalled that “all those girls wanted to dance” (Sara, Interview). Music followed more slowly, attracting twelve or thirteen children at first. Egan, who watched the program grow from a single sport into multiple activities, captured what made the approach distinctive: “Beyond soccer, they teach us how to kick a ball, they taught us to be people, they instilled values in us. They taught us a lot about how to relate to society” (Egan, Interview). TdJ had arrived in Santa Marta far more malleable than it had been in Cartagena, willing to listen, willing to adapt, and willing to let the community lead.

As the program took root in La Lucha, pressure to expand came from an unexpected direction. New funding arrived, a project that, as Sara put it, “needed more children” (Sara, Interview). But meeting the project’s requirements was not the struggle it might have been. La Lucha’s reputation preceded them:

They accepted us in Villa Bethel, they accepted us in Altos de Simón Bolívar, in Pando we had an excellent acceptance, we went to Luz del Mundo and they also accepted us there... It was easier to accept the project because there was already a person from another neighborhood saying: “This works. Come, this works. Let’s do it, try it... Try it, and if you like it, we’ll stay; and if not, nothing has happened.” (Sara, Interview)

The contrast with Cartagena was stark. In Cartagena, TdJ’s arrival had been driven by outside enthusiasm and external forces, without the community buy-in to carry the growth deeper. In Santa Marta, the expansion moved neighborhood by neighborhood through the Community Action Boards. The leaders, as Sara emphasized, “are from those neighborhoods” (Sara, Interview).

Meanwhile, El Habitante, the social business concept born from Cartagena’s failure, had been operating out of the bar owner’s house in Santa Marta for several years. But the arrangement was not permanent. “The owner decided that, for his reasons, he needed that space,” Sara explained (Sara, Interview). TdJ searched for a new location. Sara recalled being taken to “several places” around Santa Marta, but could not find suitable land in the city. The solution emerged in Ciénaga, a coastal town about an hour’s drive south. “Something came out in Ciénaga, and in Ciénaga it came out,” Sara said. “And they found a nice place where it could be done” (Sara, Interview).

Ciénaga was practical: close enough to remain part of the Magdalena regional operation, but offering something Santa Marta's chaotic tourism industry could not. Sara noted that international volunteers "don't know Ciénaga... when they realize that it has such a beautiful beach... they fall in love with her" (Sara, Interview). For a social business built on connecting volunteers and tourists with community programming, Ciénaga's quieter coastal setting made it a more viable base. Without the toxic relationship between tourism and an impoverished community that had plagued Santa Marta, community acceptance "is a little easier... Acceptance is faster" (Sara, Interview).

El Habitante drove the broader Ciénaga expansion. As Sara described it, TdJ went to Ciénaga to find a place for El Habitante. What they found was that the community genuinely wanted TdJ's programming, and so they began recruiting children (Sara, Interview). The hostel came first; the sports and arts programming followed. Ximena, a circus artist and dancer who arrived through a cousin working in Santa Marta and began as a volunteer, eventually became El Habitante's coordinator in Ciénaga. She described the slower work of earning trust in a new community: "We grew in the community's trust in us," she said, recalling how children arrived shy and skeptical and then, over time, "they really believe in the purpose of the foundation that they create for themselves and then see them how they now lead, organize, they plan, they execute" (Ximena, Interview). By 2019, the Magdalena region encompassed both Santa Marta and Ciénaga, with local leaders rooted in both communities (Cecilia, Interview).

El Habitante was becoming what Andrés had always envisioned: a place where "social and community tourism" served as "a platform for local entrepreneurship" (TdJ, 2021 Informe). International volunteers paid to stay at the hostel, contributed financially to TdJ's operations, and participated in programming alongside Ciénaga's children. By the late 2010s, it was regularly

recruiting foreign visitors who “in addition to providing financial resources, shared their knowledge with the Ciénaga participants” (TdJ, 2022 Informe). The concept born from Cartagena’s failure had found a home, and, for the moment, it was working.

Sara, the community leader who had started it all by inviting a stranger with a methodology she did not understand to a vacant lot in La Lucha, put TdJ’s survival in the simplest terms: “If suddenly it had been a Foundation that the community didn’t like, we wouldn’t be here anymore” (Sara, Interview).

“Do You See What a Ball Does?”

Santa Marta had arrived through an invitation from a volunteer with a house and a dream. Timbiquí arrived through a different kind of invitation, and a decision to stay longer than anyone planned.

In 2015, ACDI-VOCA (Agricultural Cooperative Development International / Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance), an organization channeling USAID resources, partnered with the Association of Community Councils in Timbiquí, a remote Afro-Colombian municipality on the Pacific coast of Cauca accessible only by boat or small plane. The partnership aimed to bring five development programs to the municipality, addressing problems ranging from waste management to youth idle time. ACDI-VOCA invited Tiempo de Juego to implement one component: a sports school that would identify and train community leaders to sustain the work after the project ended. The contract was for three months (Andrés, Interview; Catherine, Interview). It did not last three months.

Catherine, who would become TdJ’s regional coordinator in Timbiquí, described the logic from the community’s perspective: “Among those five proposals comes: creating a soccer school here, and identifying community leaders who can generate this process so that the installed

capacity stays here... bring someone from outside, but to teach us how to do it” (Catherine, Interview). The language was telling. From the beginning, the Timbiquí community framed TdJ’s presence not as a permanent installation but as a knowledge and skills transfer, outside expertise that would be absorbed and owned locally.

Andrés described the entry with characteristic honesty about TdJ’s own romanticism. “We arrived in Timbiquí with the same philosophy of, ‘Let’s put a ball in the middle of the neighborhood, see what happens,’” he said. “At that time we were more romantic” (Andrés, Interview). It was the same instinct that had launched everything in Cazucá: a ball, a gathering, and the faith that something would emerge. Three months came and went. “We felt in those three months that we could strengthen the model for a year,” Andrés recalled. “‘Let’s stay here for a year with what we’ve learned.’ And we ended up staying” (Andrés, Interview).

But it was not that simple. The story Willy tells adds nuance. In his telling, TdJ did not simply linger past the contract: they left. “In Timbiquí we arrived and taught it and left, and then what we left behind was a problem because they didn’t know how to support it and we didn’t have the money to do it” (Willy, Interview). A month or two after TdJ’s departure, the call came from Timbiquí asking for support. And it was the community’s commitment to continuing the work, their refusal to let the process die after three months, that compelled Andrés and Willy to return and make Timbiquí work as the foundation’s third branch.

What they found in Timbiquí was a place where the stakes of idle time were not abstract. Timbiquí had suffered Colombia’s internal conflict acutely. FARC guerrillas had controlled the region for years; illegal mining and coca cultivation were among the only forms of work. Children learned to pan for gold on the riverbanks before they finished primary school, and the guerrillas actively recruited teenagers. Catherine described a landscape where the initial diagnostic

phase had found “there were no good activities, as a use of young people’s free time,” alongside an open dump, unreliable garbage collection, and environmental degradation (Caterine, Interview). Each of the scattered communities had its own distance and its own dangers. The most remote community TdJ eventually reached was eight hours away by boat (Caterine, Interview).

Into this landscape walked Jasmín.

A published profile of Jasmín, the first community leader identified by TdJ in Timbiquí, tells a story that condenses the realities of the Pacific coast into a single life (Jasmin, Profile). At five years old, she was planting coca in her parents’ field in the hamlet of Velásquez, three hours by canoe from Timbiquí. By eight, she was working in the gold mines on weekends, trading her school uniform for rubber boots and a bucket. At nine, she dropped out of school entirely. The FARC displaced her family from Velásquez in 2008, and her mother fled to Cali while Jasmín stayed behind, washing guerrilla uniforms by the river. The commanders told her she had “the attitude of passing work” and tried to recruit her. The rank-and-file soldiers, when the commanders were not around, warned her that joining meant ending up dead or killing someone (Jasmin, Profile).

And then, one afternoon, returning from the mines, she saw people in colorful bibs on the soccer field in San José Alto. She was tired, but she played. “That day they told us that each team had to have one or two women and that the first goal had to be scored by a girl,” she recalled. “It was the day I learned about the Tiempo de Juego Foundation” (Jasmin, Profile). Caterine confirmed the moment from the operational side: “The first leader they identified was Jasmín, who is a girl who is very good at soccer, and she began the process on a field in the San José Alto neighborhood, which is a mud field, and there the process began” (Caterine, Interview).

Jasmín joined in 2015 and started with ten children. Each contributed 200 pesos until they raised the 10,000 that a ball cost. The rule was that whoever ran the fastest would buy it. Within months, she was managing a hundred. “Before, many of these children used to spend their time with little wooden guns that they used to use gunpowder to burn others,” she said. “You don’t see that as much anymore. I’m sure that football changes their mentality” (Jasmin, Profile). When she reflected on what soccer had meant for her own life, she was blunt: “I think that if I hadn’t known soccer, I would be dead carrying a rifle in the mountains” (Jasmin, Profile).

The operational realities of Timbiquí were unlike anything TdJ had encountered. Freddy, one of the early local leaders, described the logistical challenge plainly: “It’s not like being in Bogotá, like you took a car and left... Here everything is by sea” (Freddy, Interview). Moving between communities for training or monitoring meant boat trips that could take hours. Equipment, balls, bibs, cones, had to arrive by plane and then by river. Communication was unreliable; reaching a leader in a remote community could take days. When TdJ tried to establish a regular training program for monitors across the scattered communities, Freddy described the constant friction: “sometimes it was difficult, with problems for them to move from their communities to here, because the resource is always complex” (Freddy, Interview).

But Timbiquí also produced something that none of TdJ’s other locations had achieved: the integration of communities that had historically kept their distance. Catherine described how TdJ’s play-based methodology became a bridge between Afro-Colombian and indigenous Sia communities that were “geographically close but culturally distant,” as the Jasmín profile put it:

It is like the union of the Afro and indigenous communities, because I feel that there has always been a barrier there... how Tiempo de Juego, by linking African and indigenous

people through sport, and generating those play spaces... began to enhance those encounters in the community, because before they were not so common... “We are going to have mixed matches.” (Caterine, Interview)

Gender was another confrontation. “Timbiquí is something very sexist, where there are certain stereotypes and things for women, so girls hardly played soccer,” Caterine explained. ““The girls’ sport is basketball. You don’t get involved, you stay still, you’re there for something else. ’”” (Caterine, Interview). TdJ’s insistence on mixed play, “we always played three women, two men,” as Freddy confirmed, was met with resistance. “At first it was hard, but we persisted, it was moved forward” (Freddy, Interview). The change was incremental, and Caterine was honest that the gap persisted: “the majority of participating children are boys. And the girls go very little. One asks them, ‘What did you have to do?’ ‘No, I had to help around the house”” (Caterine, Interview). But the fact that the conversation was happening at all, that parents were beginning to accept their daughters on the field, marked a shift in a territory where such participation had been unthinkable.

The leaders who emerged in Timbiquí were not trained professionals. They were, as Yuri, the psychosocial coordinator, described them, “kids from the community who are passionate about sports and do it with the aim of educating” (Yuri, Interview). TdJ adapted its training for this context, bringing leaders from scattered communities into the urban center once a month for what became the Timbiquí version of the monitor system: a combination of sports training and psychosocial preparation that equipped them to run sessions in their own communities (Caterine, Interview). The Visit of Inspiration, a trip that brought Timbiquí leaders to Soacha to see TdJ’s original, more established operation firsthand, became a powerful motivational tool. “For them it was wonderful to live that experience and see what was happening in another territory, how

[Soacha] did it and how they could draw on it so that they also began to replicate it here” (Catherine, Interview).

By the time the initial ACIDI-VOCA contract ended, TdJ had established itself in the territory, but the question of how to sustain the work remained. The answer arrived in 2017 through Construir Jugando, a three-year partnership with Fundación Selección Colombia that became, as Catherine described it, “the project that the longest it has lasted in the territory” (Catherine, Interview). Construir Jugando (Building by Playing) expanded TdJ’s reach to eight communities and over 1,100 participants, an enormous footprint for a region accessible only by river.

In its third year, as the partnership prepared to wind down, the sustainability question resurfaced, but this time, the approach was different. Construir Jugando brought in outside organizations to facilitate workshops with TdJ’s Timbiquí leaders on generating their own income. “All the leaders and the team were invited to the workshops, and many business ideas came out, and very powerful things came out,” Catherine said (Catherine, Interview). Tourism proposals surfaced. Timbiquí had a nature reserve, beautiful beaches, rare frogs. But the seed capital was modest: roughly 25 million pesos. The ideas had to fit the budget.

“And there was the issue of the boat,” Catherine said (Catherine, Interview). Andrés remembered the moment with characteristic directness: “The community raises its hand and says, ‘Here in Timbiquí we are not going to do the Labzuca. Here in Timbiquí it is a river, we need a boat.’ And that’s how the Dreamer is born” (Andrés, Interview).

La Soñadora, The Dreamer, was purchased with the seed capital. The vision was both practical and poetic: the boat would generate income through passenger trips along the river while giving TdJ access to the scattered communities that could otherwise take hours to reach.

Like El Habitante on the coast, it was an attempt to weave sustainability into the operation itself, a social business defined not by TdJ's institutional imagination but by the community's own understanding of what they needed. "The idea is through the Dreamer, to be able to fulfill each of those dreams" that the children carried, Catherine said (Catherine, Interview).

Yet something was growing that budgets could not fully explain. Communities TdJ had never contacted began seeking them out. "Something very particular happens here in Timbiquí," Catherine said,

"and that is that I don't even look for communities, people from communities come to me, community leaders come to me... 'Professor, they tell me that you coordinate a process that is like this... We want to be there.' So, there is always a long line wanting to get in, and it hurts my soul not to be able to get everyone in" (Catherine, Interview).

It was the same dynamic that had played out in Santa Marta, reputation spreading through community networks, demand outpacing supply, but amplified by the Pacific coast's extreme isolation, where any organized activity for children carried enormous weight.

When Jasmín eventually moved on from her role, it was Leicy who replaced her. Leicy described how Jasmín had drawn her in gradually, "she injected me with that essence of Tiempo de Juego DNA, little by little," until the day Jasmín told her: "Who else but you to replace me?" (Leicy, Interview). The handoff was itself an expression of the pipeline: one community leader identifying and cultivating the next, passing on not just tasks but identity. "I think Tiempo de Juego has been very important in my life, both personal and social," Leicy said. "Today, I can't imagine my life outside of Tiempo de Juego" (Leicy, Interview).

On an afternoon in Timbiquí, as rain began falling on the Herencia de Timbiquí field and children kept running through the puddles, Jasmin watched from the stands. “Do you see what a ball does?” she said (Jasmin, Profile).

A Different Look

The social businesses that had taken root during the consolidation years, the bakery, the screen-printing workshop, the early media collective, had been survival responses: community members stepping in with whatever skills they had to fill gaps the foundation’s growth had created. “There is no methodology there, that’s just how it happened” Andrés admitted (Interview). But those improvised ventures established a pattern that would define TdJ’s approach to self-sustainability: see a need, find someone in the community who can meet it, build something organic, and figure out the rest later. The same instinct would later produce *El Habitante* (The Inhabitant) on the coast and *La Soñadora* (The Dreamer) on the river, each one shaped not by institutional planning but by the specific community that birthed it.

Of all these ventures, one found its fullest expression in Cazucá itself. Labzuca had begun as a communications collective, one of TdJ’s free-time activities in Altos de Cazucá. Young people learned photography, video production, and radio. With donated equipment and alliance-built studio space, the collective grew. And what its participants produced carried something that caught Andrés’s attention: a perspective that no outside journalist could replicate. “A different look,” he said, “not with the look that pointed out that it was a dangerous neighborhood, that it was a complex neighborhood, but they told from their place, ‘I like this neighborhood, cool things happen here’” (Andrés, Interview).

In 2014, TdJ formalized the collective into Labzuca, a professional audiovisual production and publishing company (Labzuca, n.d.). From the beginning, the model paired

experienced journalists, directors, and documentarians with foundation participants who had been trained professionally in audiovisual and editorial work, young people for whom media production had become, in Labzuca's language, "their life project" (Labzuca, n.d.). It was the Labzuca formula: professional scaffolding around youth voices, not replacing them.

Andrés, who had spent over a decade in Colombian journalism before founding TdJ, saw the opportunity clearly. "We said: 'There is an incredible opportunity. Let's turn it into a social business model. With social content,'" he recalled. "And that's when I resigned from the media, I went to direct 'Labzuca' and we began to be very successful in offering content made by the young people themselves with a complement of journalists and filmmakers" (Andrés, Interview). By around 2019, Andrés had committed to Labzuca full-time, bringing his media career permanently inside the foundation. For the first time in TdJ's history, its founder was drawing a salary from the organization he had built. "I have been a director all my life and until four years ago when 'Labzuca' began, I never received a dollar from Tiempo de Juego. Never," he said (Andrés, Interview).

In 2018, Labzuca produced *La Pelota de Trapo* (The Rag Ball), a book funded by USAID through ACDI-VOCA that told the stories of TdJ's communities in their own voices (La Pelota de Trapo, 2018). It was an early proof of concept, evidence that a production company rooted in Cazucá could deliver professional-quality work with social content at its core. El Observador Noticias, a journalism platform created and produced by young participants, had started in print and by late 2019 migrated to the web. The ecosystem was taking shape: youth journalism, youth radio, and a growing documentary production arm, all under one roof, all mixing professionals with foundation participants.

What made Labzuca different from every other social business TdJ had attempted was not just the quality of the product but the fact that its founder committed to running it, personally, professionally, full-time. The bakery, the screen workshop, El Habitante, La Soñadora, each had been born from the community's own instincts and needs. Labzuca was born from the same instinct, but it was the first venture where someone with the professional expertise to make it work had chosen to embed himself in the operation permanently. The young people of Cazucá had always had a story to tell. Labzuca was becoming the platform to tell it.

Prepare, Aim, Goal

By the mid-2010s, nearly a decade of experimentation had crystallized something fundamental about how Tiempo de Juego understood its own future. The foundation was not going to keep opening branches. Three permanent operations in Soacha, Santa Marta, and Timbiquí were already stretching the organization's capacity. But the demand was real: communities across Colombia wanted what TdJ had built, and funders were willing to pay for the methodology that made it work. What TdJ needed was not more locations. It was a way to share what it knew.

The seed had been planted on the Pacific coast. TdJ's first experience transferring its methodology to a new territory had been designed as a short-term engagement: go in, train local leaders, and leave. But the community wanted more, the process had not been structured enough to stand on its own after TdJ's departure, and before long the foundation found itself returning to stay. It was a fortunate mistake, one that would grow into a permanent operation the foundation deeply valued, but it was also one they knew they could not afford to repeat everywhere. The experience revealed two things simultaneously: there was enormous appetite for TdJ's approach, and sharing the methodology required more scaffolding than they had built. The next time, the

process itself would need to be stronger. That process, aptly named *Aprender Jugando* (Learning by Playing), would become one of TdJ's most significant innovations.

In 2016, TdJ formalized the program, beginning with a methodological transfer in the steel towns of Nobsa and Paz del Río in Boyacá, where they partnered with Fundación Social Acerías Paz del Río to train youth leaders, sports instructors, teachers, and community representatives in TdJ's coexistence methodology (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c). Shortly after, a similar transfer followed in Pereira with the Frisby Foundation (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-b). The concept was deceptively simple: instead of opening new TdJ locations, which required permanent staff, funding, and institutional infrastructure the foundation could not always sustain, TdJ would train local leaders to run their own programs. The communities would own the process. TdJ would provide the scaffolding and then step back.

Three phases, Prepare, Aim, and Goal, gave the transfer process a clear arc. In the first phase, Prepare, TdJ went to the territory to understand the context. Typically, a funding partner, whether a corporation, an international NGO, or a government agency, had already identified the community and was financing the project. TdJ's role was to enter that community, build trust, and find the right people to lead. Willy, who facilitated many of these transfers personally, described how the diagnosis worked: "Normally I go to the communities without anyone knowing who I am and I start talking to the communities. I start talking to people and identifying [youth] leaders" (Willy, Interview). The funding partner often had its own suggestions for who might participate. "Save the Children tells us: 'It seems to us that we can work with these.' They suggest some to us and we identify others in the diagnosis," Willy explained (Willy, Interview). TdJ then ran participatory workshops with young people to surface problems, dreams, and

potential, and held a kick-off festival to introduce the methodology to the broader community (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-b).

In the second phase, Aim, the identified young leaders (typically ages 18-28) were brought to Cazucá, not to a hotel but into the homes of TdJ's monitors, to live the methodology from the inside out. "We give them a place to sleep, so that they stay and live in the houses of our monitors so that these young people can see what work they do," Willy explained. "What they get up to do at 7 am, how they do the planning, that is, what are their responsibilities... So let them live as the monitors live for 15 days there" (Willy, Interview). Back in their territory, the leaders then worked with TdJ to begin imagining what they could build in their own community. "They don't know that," Willy said of this stage, "but what they are generating is a project" (Willy, Interview). TdJ was not handing them a template. It was getting them to dream: What did they want their community to look like? What could they start? What would it take to sustain it? By the end of the phase, those dreams had taken the shape of a concrete plan, one the leaders felt was theirs because it was.

In the third phase, Goal, TdJ supported the actual implementation. The Aprender Jugando framework outlined a range of activities that varied with each project's scope and funding: training and support visits, inauguration of local sports or arts schools, and a closing event for the community (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-b). For projects with longer timelines, a second stage could follow, the establishment of a five-month monitor school to train young people from the community as replicators, building the generational pipeline that would sustain the work after TdJ stepped back (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-b). Willy put the philosophy plainly: "Tiempo de Juego does not have the money to open in all parts of the country. So, what we realized was easier, for us to go and teach what we have learned and for each community to start

doing their own projects” (Willy, Interview). Guided by a principal core to the original magic of Tiempo de Juego, young people teaching young people, they had discovered a path forward for the organization.

But Aprender Jugando was more than a replication strategy. It became, as Mariana described it, a sustainability bridge for the entire organization. Mariana, a psychologist who joined TdJ’s administrative team and rose to direct the Aprender Jugando program, explained the financial logic: “Aprender Jugando and methodological transfers, I think, has been that bridge and the possibility of sustaining these processes that we have as a base, with processes that happen outside” (Mariana, Interview). The revenue from each project flowed back to support TdJ’s permanent operations. As Willy explained: “What Save the Children pays us to do that, well it is money that is not going to remain in, not in my salary at all, but rather what they pay is for the branch of Timbiquí to help support Timbiquí operations” (Willy, Interview). In this example, the workshops and knowledge transfer for a project in Guapi, a neighboring municipality on the Pacific coast, occurred primarily through the Timbiquí branch of TdJ. Through Aprender Jugando, the regional branches were not just receiving support from Bogotá; they had the opportunity to generate it themselves.

Mariana also brought a hard-won lesson about adaptation. “I learned that each of the territories has different characteristics, and that we tried at first to take verbatim or punctually everything that was done in Soacha to the regionals,” she said. “And we realized... that not necessarily the same things that worked in Soacha worked in the regionals. So, what we went for was to make individual creations by territory” (Mariana, Interview). Cold-climate Soacha and river-laced Timbiquí and Caribbean Santa Marta each required different approaches. The methodology was the constant, but the expression was local. “We can work in any territory,”

Mariana concluded, but only because TdJ had learned to let each territory shape the work (Mariana, Interview).

Between 2015 and 2019, the program grew rapidly. The project list told its own story: steel workers' children in Boyacá with Acerías Paz del Río, youth leadership in Pereira with the Frisby Foundation, Construir Jugando in Timbiquí with Fundación Selección Colombia, sports and coexistence projects in Cundinamarca with ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare) and Fundación Bolívar-Davivienda, and *Cambio de Juego* (Game Changer), TdJ's juvenile justice program, in its first iteration in Bogotá with Children Change Colombia. By the end of the decade, TdJ had completed approximately fifteen Aprender Jugando projects across eight Colombian departments, working with partners as varied as Save the Children, UNDP, Bancolombia, and Equion Energy (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c). Each partnership brought a different population and a different context, and each required the same process: Prepare, Aim, Goal. TdJ had found a model that let it share what it knew, sustain what it had, and trust that communities could carry the work forward on their own terms.

The Backbone

From the beginning, Tiempo de Juego's leadership pipeline had been organic. A thirteen-year-old who showed up on Saturday kept coming, learned to referee, helped with younger children, gradually took on more responsibility, and one day was standing in front of sixty kids running a session. No one had written a curriculum for it. No one had defined the role. It simply happened, again and again, in Cazucá and then in every territory TdJ touched. But by the mid-2010s, TdJ was operating in three regions, running dozens of projects, and training hundreds of young leaders. The organic pipeline that had worked when Willy could walk across Cazucá and

know every monitor by name was straining under the weight of the organization's growth. What had been instinct needed to be documented.

In January 2019, TdJ published the *Escuela de Liderazgo* (Leadership School) curriculum, a methodological booklet developed with support from WISE Philanthropy Advisors and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation that codified, for the first time, the leadership development process that had been evolving since the earliest days in Cazucá (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019). But the booklet was only the visible artifact of a deeper transformation. What TdJ formalized was not just a document but a school, an actual program with applications, structured training cycles, and certifications for participants who completed it. The informal Saturday workshops that had characterized TdJ's early years became an intentional pipeline with clear stages, expectations, and recognition. Esteban Reyes, TdJ's General Director, framed the philosophy in the booklet's presentation: "The actions we initiate at Tiempo de Juego would be very short-lived if they always depended on the person who initiated them. But these actions endure and grow when that seed is embraced by others, who make it their own and continue to nurture it" (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019). Three mantras, Act, Educate, and Reflect, anchored the entire curriculum. Action without training would be short-lived. Training without reflection would be hollow. And reflection without action would change nothing.

The school was divided into two tracks. Carolina Castellanos, a psychosocial coordinator in Soacha, described the structure simply: "There are the monitors, who are the kids that we train every Saturday, who are participants in the activities. And the other part of the school are the teachers and managers, who are the ones in charge of the activities... these teachers and managers receive biweekly training at a psychosocial and gender level" (Carolina, Interview). In Timbiquí, where communities were scattered across remote river towns, Catherine ran the same

two tiers but adapted the logistics: managers traveled monthly to the urban center for their training, while monitor leaders were identified locally, “boys and girls that we identify... so that they can be the replacements” for the current generation (Caterine, Interview). Sandra, who oversaw regional operations, confirmed that the structure held across all three regions, each maintaining “its School of Monitors, because what they wanted to do is replicate much of what happens here in Soacha... taking into account that the regions are different, but that the structure continues to be maintained” (Sandra, Interview).

The published curriculum gave this structure its formal definitions. Monitors were young people between the ages of 13 and 17, “individuals with strong communication, leadership, and teamwork skills, who find pleasure in acquiring, applying, and replicating knowledge” (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019). Community Managers were young adults between 18 and 28, living in the community, with “considerable training and leadership skills, as well as a clear motivation to represent the foundation’s mission and principles” (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019). A third profile, the *Multiplicador*, (Multiplier), described those who had been trained by TdJ and could carry the methodology to new communities, people who knew “how to recognize the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of the communities in which they work” (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019). Beyond these three core roles, the curriculum outlined profiles for free time activity Teachers, School Teachers, and Volunteers, creating a complete ecosystem of leadership with distinct responsibilities and training pathways.

Four modules structured the training. The first, “Es Tiempo de Juego” (It’s Game Time), grounded participants in TdJ’s history, methodology, and organizational structure. The second, “Hacer Pedagogía” (Doing Pedagogy), focused on practical teaching tools and the application of the Metodología Convivencial (Coexistence Methodology), the play-based approach to building

life skills that had been refined over a decade. The third, “*Formar al Ser*” (Forming the Self), addressed intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community dimensions of leadership, integrating a gender perspective as a core component. The fourth split into two tracks, Art and Culture or Physical Activity and Sport, allowing specialization based on each leader’s strengths and interests (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2019).

Sandra, who had spent years as an athletics teacher working alongside monitors half her age, understood why the peer model reached young people in ways professional instruction could not: “I, for example, am 38 years old, I couldn’t understand youth or adolescence or children of this time so much, but a peer partner can do it” (Sandra, Interview). It was the same principle that had powered the monitor model from the beginning, now built into the training process itself.

But the impact of Escuela de Liderazgo (Leadership School) extended well beyond producing capable leaders for TdJ. The skills it taught reshaped how young people moved through their lives outside the foundation. Camila, a young woman in Santa Marta who had joined TdJ as a dancer and progressed to become a dance teacher, described the change plainly:

Before I got into Tiempo de Juego, I always had problems because I was very impulsive. I said everything that came my way, I didn’t think, I just did everything on impulse... and now that has diminished a lot thanks to the leadership school, because the leadership school helps us with psychosocial skills. I feel that it has been very good because the relationship with my parents has improved a lot. The same with my brothers as well, because we were fighting every day. So. the relationship between the family has been improving. Before I came in here I had a very different way of thinking than I have now. (Camila, Interview)

When asked what specific lesson had helped most, she had two words for it: “assertive communication.” She described telling her family, whenever conflict arose: “Communicate well, let’s talk well, let’s dialogue... because that’s what we need, we don’t have to go out and fight.” With her brothers it was the same: “They start talking loudly; I don’t say anything, I tell them: listen to me, understand me, and then you talk. And that has been taught to me by Tiempo de Juego because previously they spoke loudly to me, I also spoke loudly, because I have always been a person who does not like to be bossed around” (Camila, Interview).

Carlos, a young man also in Santa Marta, described a similar transformation but through a different relationship. “I always had with my father, not such a good relationship, because my father did not have that example of a father, so my father didn’t know how to be a good dad either,” he said. “So, I clashed a lot with my dad because of that, and thanks to talks with the psychologist, thanks to understanding what life skills were, how to put myself in the other person’s shoes, the relationship with my dad has been improving for a couple of years” (Carlos, Interview). The psychosocial skills that appeared as modules in the Escuela de Liderazgo curriculum, assertive communication, empathy, perspective-taking, were not abstractions for Camila and Carlos. They were the tools that had reshaped their daily lives.

What the Escuela de Liderazgo formalized was TdJ’s philosophy of growing its own leaders. The entire model depended on young people from the community becoming the teachers, coordinators, and eventually the directors of the work in their own neighborhoods. In Magdalena, Cecilia could already see it happening: “The team has grown, because also as a result of the leaders of the Leadership School who have been climbing, we have graduates of the Leadership School as teachers. That is also a very significant change” (Cecilia, Interview). Without a pipeline, the methodology died with whatever outside professional had brought it.

With one, as Esteban had written, the seed could be “embraced by others, who make it their own and continue to nurture it.” The booklet, the school, the certificates, the structured tiers made explicit what had been true since the earliest days in Cazucá: the leadership had to come from within.

Something More

René Herrera had been part of Tiempo de Juego for more than sixteen years by the time he sat for his interview. He was, by then, the national trainer for *Cambio de Juego*, traveling every fifteen to twenty days to cities across Colombia to monitor teams working inside juvenile detention and child protection centers (René, Interview). The program had reached more than fifteen cities. But Cambio de Juego had not started as a program. It had started with René, inside a correctional facility, trying to bring a little bit of the spark of TdJ’s methodology to the place where he was locked up.

“For X or Y problem, I was in one of these correctional facilities,” René said. “But then, like, when I was in this correctional facility, Tiempo de Juego never turned its back on me, but was always present” (René, Interview). Esteban Reyes, the foundation’s director and a lawyer by training, visited him. Came to see the facilities. Stayed engaged with his process. TdJ did not abandon him, and while he was inside, René tried to make life a little more bearable for the others, introducing games, shifting the rhythm of the daily routine, carrying the methodology into a space it had never been designed for.

When he was released, the impulse was immediate. “I left this center and I kind of felt like I had to do something, like give back to the people who helped me at that time,” he said (René, Interview). He proposed returning to the center where he had been held, not as an inmate but as a facilitator. TdJ agreed. “We went and did some activities at the center where I was,” he

recalled (René, Interview). And then, while at the men's center, the coordinator of the Women's Home saw what was happening and asked if they could bring it there too.

The visit to the women's center changed René. "I came away from there more shocked, right? Listening to the girls in a different way, that is, the same things that they had done, well, I had already heard them from other guys, but it seemed to impact me much more to hear it from women" (René, Interview). The shock turned into a proposal. He went to Esteban and said he wanted to do something bigger. Esteban told him to write it up.

"I wasn't very good at writing, or spelling, or in this whole issue of arranging ideas, but what I did was write and write," René said (René, Interview). A project manager at the foundation helped him shape the proposal into something formal. They started shopping it around, and everyone said no. "We started going to various entities to look for a budget and they always closed the door on us... 'No, like no, not this, because there is already another entity doing this'" (René, Interview).

Then a call came out from the United Kingdom, a funder looking specifically to work with young women at risk of recruitment by armed groups and early pregnancy. The focus aligned with what had shaken René at the women's center. The UK organization funded them for three years. Around 2015, *Cambio de Juego* had a home.

After the initial three years of UK funding, René and the team organized a closing forum, not a quiet internal event, but a public gathering that brought together judges, prosecutors, public defenders, representatives from ICBF and the mayor's office, and adolescents who were or had been deprived of liberty. The young people were panelists. "We held a forum for them and they were panelists, and we talked about everything," René recalled. "And from there we got more financing... And with various entities we became known much more. So, we grew and grew and

grew” (René, Interview). Cambio de Juego was becoming a recognized part of the rehabilitation landscape.

The growth was rapid. By the time of René’s interview, the program had operated in more than fifteen cities across Colombia, working inside both juvenile criminal responsibility (SRPA) centers and child protection facilities. The scaling model followed TdJ’s instinct: hire a local team, a trainer, a psychologist, and a coordinator, and then René traveled to accompany them, teaching the methodology and monitoring implementation. “Many of them have worked with the system but not working like with the methodology that Tiempo de Juego works,” he explained (René, Interview). TdJ brought the play-based approach, the games, the methodology that turned a training session into something the young people actually wanted to attend, and the local teams brought the knowledge of their own systems and populations.

From Cambio de Juego, a smaller initiative emerged. CazuCasa was, as Mariana described it, TdJ’s first program working with young people after they left the juvenile justice system: “a training school for people who are graduates, who can have eight months where they can be received after they leave and help them with accompaniment and reintegration to return to their neighborhood, where the gangs are, where they were, to their family, to real life” (Mariana, Interview). An opportunity manager helped graduates access education, legal employment, and professional development. A psychologist provided therapeutic support. What made CazuCasa distinctive was that it had no external funder. Mariana was explicit about this: it was one of “these projects that do not have financing, but that we believe have all the potential” (Mariana, Interview). The 2023 *Informe de Gestión* (Annual Management Report) confirmed the arrangement, listing CazuCasa as a “proyecto agenciado por TDJ,” a project managed by TdJ itself, while every other Cambio de Juego initiative appeared alongside an external partner: Open

Society Foundations, Children Change Colombia, UNODC (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023). CazuCasa was a bet TdJ made on its own, because the need was visible after years of working inside the system, and the foundation believed it had the tools to help.

René's trajectory, from participant to inmate to national trainer, was itself the most powerful argument for TdJ's model. The foundation had not written him off when he entered the justice system. They stayed present. And when he came out, they had given him the space not just to rebuild but to create something that would reach thousands of young people in situations like the one he had survived. Looking back, René described the arc simply: "I joined Tiempo de Juego because I saw a space to do other things, but what I saw to do other things began to turn into doing other things for other people" (René, Interview).

A Drought on the Horizon

By the end of the decade, TdJ had built something far larger and more complex than the Saturday soccer sessions that had started it all. Three permanent regional operations. A leadership school with a published curriculum. A methodology transfer program generating revenue across eight departments. A national presence inside the juvenile justice system. Social businesses. International partnerships. More than two hundred staff (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). The forest Esteban had imagined was standing. And then, in March 2020, the world stopped. The fields went quiet. The Saturday gatherings that had defined TdJ since its first day in Cazucá ended overnight.

Era 4: The Drought (2020–2023)

When the Fields Went Quiet

In March 2020, the world stopped. For an organization built on the act of gathering, on children arriving at a field to play, on the physical presence of monitors in neighborhoods where trust was earned face-to-face, the COVID-19 pandemic did not merely disrupt operations. It struck at the foundation of what Tiempo de Juego was.

“It generated a programmatic and financial crisis,” Rigoberto recalled, “and it implied that all the strategies were rethought, especially the pedagogical one, because the pedagogical area should provide the answer to what a manager does if he no longer has participants involved” (Rigoberto, Interview). The question was existential. TdJ’s methodology was built on play, on bodies in space, on a circle of children listening to a monitor lead a reflection. What would they do?

For an organization where, as Mariana put it, “virtuality was not part of us at all,” the shift was total (Mariana, Interview). But necessity produced invention. Rigoberto, who was leading the pedagogical area at the time, described a team that moved through platforms rapidly, trying YouTube trainings and structured video calls first, then landing on what actually worked in their communities. “We tried many formal interaction platforms,” he recalled, “but we also managed to develop all the content through WhatsApp and some things through Facebook, like the basics of the basics” (Rigoberto, Interview). They created *Mundos de Papel* (Paper Worlds), a program of psychosocial activities designed to be printed on sheets of paper and hand-delivered to children who could fold, draw, and work through exercises without an internet connection. Tiempo de Radio emerged as a children’s radio program that could travel through speakers where Wi-Fi could not. In Timbiquí, where connectivity was nearly nonexistent and the rivers

between townships could mean hours of travel just to reach a single community, these analog strategies were not backup plans. They were the only plans. Mariana, looking back, saw something unexpected in the wreckage: “It was a challenge, but we did well and it has also taught us to be technological... how do we create virtual games? How do we do online training?” (Mariana, Interview). The pandemic had forced them into a space they never would have chosen, and some of what they built there would outlast the crisis itself. The innovations were not only technological. Fabiola, the psychosocial coordinator in Magdalena, described a team that had been repeating the same life skills curriculum for five years, with youth who were, as she put it, just going through the motions. The pandemic broke the cycle. “The issue of the pandemic helped us a lot, to reinvent how to work with the children, and to realize that it is easier to reach the children from a psychosocial perspective, talking about themes or problems that they are experiencing” (Fabiola, Interview). A national psychosocial diagnosis followed, revealing that while some themes were universal, each territory’s challenges were particular, and the curriculum had not kept pace with either.

Initially, the financial toll was serious. Programs could not operate, staff could not work, and some would lose their jobs. Those who remained stood together as best they could. “Many of us donated part of our salary so that we wouldn’t fall,” Rigoberto said (Rigoberto, Interview). But what followed was not the collapse they feared. A wave of pandemic-era grants allowed the organization to not only recover but grow, swelling the staff to more than two hundred by 2021. The effects of COVID would not be felt all at once. The organization weathered the initial storm through sacrifice and ingenuity. But a drought followed. The tree would need to be pruned to survive.

“It was hard,” Mariana said, “and that transition was also hard, right? It’s like after being locked up for a year, almost two, here in Colombia, arriving again, inhabiting the spaces again... It was strange” (Mariana, Interview). Even when in-person activities gradually returned, the logistics were disorienting: deciding which children would attend in person and which would remain virtual, running hybrid sessions that satisfied neither format. It was, she said, “a very confusing season” that lasted well into 2022 (Mariana, Interview). She estimated that 2023 was the first year things felt “back to normal.”

For Luisa, the Soacha regional coordinator who commuted two hours each way to reach the hillside neighborhoods she had made her life’s work, the pandemic was not an operational disruption. It was a severance. “I entered a very strong state of depression,” she said, “which I remember and makes me want to cry, because it was a feeling that I was not close to the community, that I could not do what I like to do. I felt trapped. I dreamed every day of our return” (Luisa, Interview). When she was finally able to return, she cried, this time with happiness. “Being able to hug again, to be able to see the children, for the children to be in their classes again, to play soccer, to make music. That’s what makes me happiest in life” (Luisa, Interview).

Not everything born of the crisis was temporary. The Café Nacional, nicknamed El Mañanero, was a virtual meeting space created during the pandemic to keep TdJ’s three regional offices connected. Catherine, the coordinator in Timbiquí, described it as “a space that was created as a result of a pandemic, but... that was left to be more connected and to be able to provide information about what is happening in all the territories” (Catherine, Interview). During the height of lockdown, the meetings were frequent. By the time in-person work resumed, they had settled into a monthly rhythm, a space where teams across Soacha, Santa Marta, and

Timbiquí could share what was working, what was not, and what was coming (Catherine, Interview).

In Timbiquí, the virtual infrastructure became something even more essential. Because of the region's geography, townships separated by rivers and hours of boat travel with no roads connecting communities to the municipal center, physical meetings between TdJ staff had always been logistically difficult. The team created the Café Timbiquireño, a daily virtual check-in connecting the Timbiquí team with the national operations director, where they could review project progress, address challenges in real time, and coordinate across distances that would otherwise require a full day of river travel. "It's like more than a follow-up," Catherine explained. "It's like, 'Let's look, let's analyze, what can we do? How are we going, like on the fly? How are we executing each thing?'" (Catherine, Interview). The daily rhythm meant problems could be solved before they compounded. "We can solve more *chicharrones*," she said, using the Colombian slang for sticky, knotty problems. "We are never alone" (Catherine, Interview). In a territory where the tides determined schedules and a single monitor might serve three townships reachable only by *lancha* (small boat), this daily virtual touchpoint was not a convenience. It was the connective tissue that held a dispersed operation together. The pandemic had forced an innovation that the Pacific coast had always needed.

False Spring

The recovery was swift and, by the numbers, remarkable. By 2021, Tiempo de Juego had rebounded to more than thirty-four active projects with over fifty partner organizations, enrolling 5,320 children and youth in regular programming and reaching an additional 1,800 through festivals and short-term actions (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). In Soacha, activities expanded into communes 2, 4, and 6. In Timbiquí, community leaders carried programming into

the townships of San José, Santa María, and San Bernardo. In the Magdalena region, El Habitante, TdJ's cultural house and hostel in Santa Marta, reopened, hosting cultural events, an urban art festival, mural work with Artolución, a community mural arts organization, an entrepreneurship fair, alongside its hostel operations (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). Getting children back was its own challenge. Ximena, the dance coordinator in Ciénaga, described a team that refused to wait for participants to return on their own. "How to invent, always create, we are always in movement and in creation of what we are going to do, what is going to happen, what is the next step," she said (Ximena, Interview). They devised Ciénaga Baila, a strategy where youth took their choreographies into the streets, touring the town to call other kids back to programming. One event built on the next, each bigger than the last. By 2022, TdJ was running 39 projects with more than 5,226 regular participants (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2022).

But the programmatic recovery masked a quieter contraction. In 2021, 218 people worked at Tiempo de Juego. The vast majority were drawn from TdJ's own ecosystem: 170 came from the communities where TdJ operated and 161 were young people, categories that overlapped significantly, reflecting an organization whose workforce was inseparable from its mission (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). By 2022, the contraction that COVID had set in motion finally arrived, though not in the form anyone expected. Total revenue reached its highest point on record, but the cost structure built on pandemic-era grants had outgrown even that, recording a loss for the year. Impacts were felt across all branches and all levels. Staff was cut nearly in half, to 112. In Magdalena, Cecilia, the regional coordinator, described: "There was a year (2022) where the foundation here in Magdalena had no projects," she said. Youth on staff fell from 161 to 46, and community members from 170 to 76 (Fundación Tiempo de Juego,

2022). In Timbiquí, the monitor school, the pipeline through which participating youth graduated into staff roles, had shut down during the pandemic and was only beginning to be rebuilt (Yuri, Interview). By 2023, total staff had climbed slightly to 140, but only 48 were young people (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023). The tree was growing back, but it was growing back differently.

Nowhere was the post-pandemic momentum more visible than at Labzuca. The communications collective that had started in a small recording studio in Cazucá was now producing work that competed at a national level. Its podcast, *Aguante la Paz*, partnered with *El Espectador*, one of Colombia's leading newspapers, and became one of the platform's most popular audio programs (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). The Labzuca team contributed production work to an Amazon Prime Video series about the Colombian national football team. They released *Primer Campeón*, a documentary about the eighty-year history of Independiente Santa Fé, and the first episode of *Adicto a Ti*, a documentary fiction series exploring the relationship between young people and psychoactive substance use (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). But the crowning achievement was *Los Gatos*, a documentary that began its route through international film festivals and in 2022 won the India Catalina Award for Best Television Documentary, one of Colombia's most prestigious media honors (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2022). That same year, Señal Colombia, the country's public television network, selected Labzuca through its competitive co-production market to produce *Tiempo de Juego, la película*, a feature-length documentary that aired in January 2023 (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023). By 2023, Labzuca had been named a UNICEF audiovisual provider, won the Suma Journalism Award for best community radio program with *La Otra Esquina Radio*, and was generating enough revenue from external film production contracts to become a significant

income source for the foundation (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023). In October and November of that year, the *Tiempo de Juego* documentary toured internationally, screening at embassies and cultural events in New York, Washington, and London. Andrés joined panels alongside representatives from the Inter-American Development Bank, USAID, Common Goal, and New York FC, while the London screening featured members of the Colombian women's national football team (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023).

Cambio de Juego, TdJ's juvenile justice program, expanded into new partnerships and new cities. A project called Future Connection, supported by the British Council, directly served 120 young graduates of the Adolescent Criminal Responsibility System (SRPA) across Medellín, Cúcuta, and Cartagena, with TdJ maintaining participation of 98% of beneficiaries by the end of 2021 (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2021). A separate project with the Open Society Foundations, focused on alternatives to juvenile incarceration, ran from 2022 through 2024 across Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá. And from the inside of this work, CazuCasa, the self-funded reintegration program for graduates of the juvenile justice system described in the previous era, continued to operate as one of the few initiatives TdJ sustained without external financing.

Back in Soacha, another dream was taking shape, one that carried the full weight of TdJ's pipeline story. David "Paisa" Osorio had arrived in Cazucá at twelve years old to a panorama he described as "very sad and desolate" (David, Interview). He had a brother whose path frightened him. "I didn't want to make my family go through those difficult situations," he recalled. "I told myself: 'I don't have many possibilities, but I will try'" (David, Interview). TdJ was barely a month or two old when David showed up to play. There were thirty children, one day a week, Saturdays only.

When the foundation began to grow—thirty children became a hundred, became two hundred, became three hundred—Andrés could no longer coach alone. He turned to the children who had been there from the beginning and asked if they could lead. David became a coach at thirteen or fourteen, running his own group, falling in love with the project one Saturday at a time. He finished high school. Then Adidas selected him for a university scholarship, and he enrolled at the Universidad Santo Tomás in Bogotá. It was difficult. “I came from a place where there was not a very stable education,” he said. “I didn’t have much university-level knowledge, and it was difficult to adapt... But I think that when you want something, you achieve it. I read a lot, I practiced” (David, Interview).

After graduating, David won a university exchange scholarship to Spain and left to study Sports Sciences. He traveled through Europe visiting clubs and organizations: France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Holland. He was the first person in his family to travel abroad. The first of his brothers to finish a university degree. “Getting to a new place is difficult,” he said, “but it was incredible, it was a once in a lifetime experience. I met many people, cultures, realities, opening the panorama a little to the aspect of football” (David, Interview). He returned to Colombia with coaching credentials, a physical education background, a European football network in his contacts, and a dream.

TdJ opened its doors again. “It is always my home,” David said (David, Interview). But this time he did not come back to fill an existing role. He came with a proposal: create a competitive football club within TdJ, a high-performance track for the most talented players the foundation’s recreational programming had already identified. “And it began, and I’m the manager,” he said. “I’m living my dream” (David, Interview). Without TdJ, he reflected, the story would have ended differently: “If Tiempo de Juego doesn’t cross my path, my story would

be very different and I can assure you, I would be on drugs, lost in the world, or even the truth, in a cemetery, dead” (David, Interview). Instead, he built a future of possibilities for other children like himself.

Cazucá FC (Football Club) entered the Bogotá Football League in Division C in 2021 and finished first in its group stage. By 2022, it had been promoted to Division A. By 2023, the club had consolidated four competitive categories: U15 and U17 for men, U15 and an open category for women, with 71 registered players, all formally entered in COMET, Colombia’s national soccer platform that recognizes training rights and permits participation in official tournaments. That November, the women’s category won the Bogotá League championship. Two players were selected by Millonarios FC, one of the country’s top professional teams (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, 2023). The boy who had arrived in Cazucá without cleats was now directing an operation with a coaching staff, a psychologist, a board of directors, and a pipeline of athletes whose lives he gets to touch favorably.

Aprender Jugando, too, continued to evolve. The methodological transfer program that had begun with a single project in Boyacá was now operating across multiple departments, with partnerships stretching into new territories: Bancolombia in Sierra Nevada, reaching 1,400 children through community leaders (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c); a UNODC research project spanning twelve Colombian cities with 143 young people (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c); Campeonas de Sueños (Champions of Dreams) with the Fundación Selección Colombia (Colombia National Soccer Team Foundation), training 14 leaders and 125 girls in Tenjo (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c); Guardianes del Bosque (Guardians of the Forest) in Caquetá, connecting youth with forest conservation in the Amazon (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c). Environmental education, school coexistence programming (*Pásala*), and gender equity

initiatives (*Entornos Escolares Inspiradores*) were all emerging through Aprender Jugando partnerships by 2023--2024 (Fundación Tiempo de Juego, n.d.-c). Mariana described the program as having become a “laboratory” for innovation within TdJ, a space where new ideas could be tested before being adapted for the regional offices. “Things are happening in Aprender Jugando that are not happening even in the regionals,” she said, pointing to environmental education projects and new thematic areas that had not yet migrated to TdJ’s permanent operations (Mariana, Interview).

The Pain of Growing Up

By any external measure, TdJ had emerged from the pandemic stronger than it entered. But the Tiempo de Juego I came to find in 2023 was so much different than what I had found in 2016.

When I first visited TdJ in 2016, my only touchpoint was the Saturdays. I volunteered for several of them, and as I described in an earlier publication (Busacca, 2019) what I witnessed was remarkable. As many as six hundred children gathered in a large group at the center of a sports complex each Saturday morning. Willy delivered a brief lecture on the value of the month, rallied the kids’ excitement, and sent them off to follow their monitor to their activity. His energy was infectious. I played in soccer games where the rules had been redesigned to embody TdJ’s values; for instance, every player on a team had to touch the ball before a goal could count, and it did not matter where the actual goal was. During the sessions, which changed over every hour for several hours, new children arrived in waves. Young monitors buzzed around, taking attendance, keeping records. Separate athletics sessions ran for parents, teaching the same value of the month. After each session, the children received juice and bread from La Jugada, the bakery operating out of the ground floor of TdJ’s headquarters. One morning, Willy took me on

a tour of the building: in the basement, Labzuca's recording studio, as professional as any I had ever seen; upstairs, Póngale Color (Add Some Color), the jersey screen-printing operation; on the roof, a small garden terrace collecting rainwater and growing vegetables. Afterward, he invited a few of the "poster children" of TdJ, young people who had been there from the beginning, David "Paisa" Osorio among them, to join us. I can still remember Willy, the proud parent, presenting them like his own children.

It was those Saturdays that made me decide to come back and research this organization. It was the energy of that gathering, the scale and the intimacy coexisting, the methodology visible in every interaction, the community showing up, that convinced me something worth studying was happening in Cazucá.

By 2023, the Saturdays were gone. The pandemic had ended them, and they had not returned. But those who had lived through the shift did not frame it as a loss. David, who had grown up inside those Saturdays, was direct: "It is anti-pedagogical to have a monitor train with 200 children, that cannot be done," he said. The growth "increased the supply and also increased the need to improve the processes" (David, Interview). Luisa, the Soacha coordinator, showed me the weekly schedule during my visit, with activities spread across every day. "Before they were mostly concentrated on Saturdays," she said. "Breaking the mold on what happens in Soacha... we have to expand and diversify the offer and link other participants" (Luisa, Interview). Programming had shifted to weekday sessions, individual activity classes, formalized schedules accommodating different school timetables. The organization was bigger, more professional, reaching more children in more ways than a single Saturday ever could. But something had changed in its texture.

Andrés, who had lived through every stage of TdJ's growth, named it directly:

I who have lived through the entire process, I feel nostalgic, with what you are talking about, right? When everything happened like this, we could chat more, we could give joint feedback, we more or less knew the names of all the children, we knew all the families. I think that, now that you ask me, it had a lot of impact, and you really felt that you were making an effort, a very personal connection with the children, with the beneficiaries, with the young people, with the community. (Andrés, Interview)

He paused, then continued:

But it's like the pain of growing up, right? It's like the pain of growing up and feeling that you can impact more boys and girls in a different way, that the foundation may still touch them, that you may give them tools, that you may strengthen their life project... And we have had to adapt to that, thinking that in this way, you can have greater reach. But yeah, I kind of think the growth consumes everything, right? It depersonalizes the project a little, but it helps more children to be beneficiaries. But it is a difficult question, how to judge what is better, but I feel that we have had to adapt to that by trying to reach more children, but I would be lying to you if I told you: "I think now the impact is better." No, I doubt it, you know? Because, think about it, this pain of growing up means that even today, the snacks are not so good... I could take the entire foundation to a stadium, right? Like symbolic things that I think have a lot of impact and that now cannot be done, but at the same time, other things happen... They have competitions, they travel, some go to university, right? Like you win at some things and not at others. (Andrés, Interview)

Let me be clear: Andrés and Willy are still proud parents. I believe anyone who works at TdJ for any substantive time feels that way. The organizational culture, as this narrative has

shown, and as Chapter 6 will examine, is familial. But a significant shift had occurred, and I do not believe either founder could point to a single moment when it happened. It was gradual. The “right” decisions were made at the “right” times, expanding to new territories, formalizing the methodology, professionalizing the staff, diversifying programming, and pursuing partnerships that provided new funding avenues for the organization. Each decision, taken individually, was defensible. Many were necessary. What had also quietly disappeared was the gathering itself, the weekly moment when the entire community arrived at the same place, at the same time, and the organization belonged to the neighborhood as much as the neighborhood belonged to it. What accumulated, over the years, was a distance from the thing that had made the organization feel like what it felt like when I sat on that hillside in 2016 watching Willy send hundreds of children off to play.

In an informal conversation during my fieldwork, Willy shared a version of this concern that cut closer to the bone. The program had changed so much, he told me, that TdJ would likely never see cases like David or René again. In the beginning, they had chosen the kids no one else would have chosen and given them responsibility. Now, the leadership school was credentialed through a partnership with a local university and had an application process where they selected the most qualified candidates. Young people were motivated because it could help them get into college or lead to a paid position. He assured me it was a good thing, even if he missed those early days (Field Notes, 2023).

If Nothing Changes

The first signs that TdJ had undergone and was undergoing significant “growing pains,” as Andrés called it, became visible to me on the first day of my research trip. I attended two board meetings during my research trip in the summer of 2023. The first, on my very first day in

the country, had the energy I expected from seven years of admiring TdJ from afar. In attendance, Andrés, the founder and interim-director; Mariana, the director of operations; Rigoberto, who led the pedagogical area; Santiago, the director of alliances; Nairo, the director of projects; and Tatiana, the finance director, sat around a table, loosely led by Mariana, discussing the agenda freely, making comments, asking each other questions, trading jokes. There was laughter. Lots of laughter. Everyone sat relaxed in their chair. There was no visible hierarchy, despite the founder being in the room.

But then, near the end of the meeting, the word *crisis* surfaced. It was mentioned almost in passing, a note about financial pressures, about the need to tighten resource management. The conversation moved on. I looked around the room, searching faces for a reaction commensurate with what I thought I had just heard. There was none. I sat with the word. I wondered if I had misheard, if my Spanish had failed me. But the word stayed with me, a pea in my shoe, as I traveled across the country over the following weeks, to Timbiquí, to Santa Marta, to Soacha. In every site, I met staff members whose jobs I now privately wondered about. In Timbiquí especially, I could feel it: this was the branch furthest from the center, the one with the fewest staff and the hardest logistics. If the tree needed pruning, the outermost branches would go first.

What had preceded the crisis talk was, in some ways, just as telling. The directors had been discussing the standardization of internal communication: WhatsApp protocols, HR policies, new procedures for how teams across regions should coordinate. Necessary, perhaps, for an organization of TdJ's size. But sitting there, thinking about the Saturdays, about Willy rallying six hundred children by the force of his voice and the trust of a community, the professionalization felt like it belonged to a different organization than the one I had known before.

The second meeting came near the end of my trip. It was more somber. Tatiana, the finance director, presented the budget in full. The numbers were plain. If nothing changed, if no new grants were secured, if no significant adjustments were made to the cost structure, the foundation would run out of operating funds before the year was over. She was telling them they had four months.

Andrés, at the end of the meeting, addressed the room. “We have been through this before,” he said, “and we will do it again” (Field Notes, 2023). It was meant as reassurance. And it was true: they had survived the failure in Cartagena, they had survived COVID through sacrifice and solidarity. What would be required this time?

What the Tree Could No Longer Carry

Tatiana had joined Tiempo de Juego as administrative and financial director nine months before my visit. She had held a similar role in the reconciliation and peace sector, working with organizations that served adults and victims of violence. She had never heard of TdJ before a former colleague mentioned the opening. “I really liked the challenge,” she said. “I didn’t think it was this level. They didn’t tell me the size of the challenge” (Tatiana, Interview).

At the beginning of our interview, she asked me about her presentation at the board meeting the day before. “Do you think I got through to them how serious this is?” (Field Notes, 2023). She was exasperated.

I don’t know how this financial issue was handled before; I think it was not shared with the team, and I asked Andrés to allow me to share it. What was happening? First, because I feel very burdened, that is, the monthly burden is too much. When there are payments, I start looking for where I get resources from. And if I feel very loaded. So, I told him, “I need to feel like someone else is carrying the burden and not just me.” And then first I

went to the Board of Directors and shared clearly with them what was happening, because it was also commented that Monday that, in that meeting, which was specified to the Board, only the achievements were taken. So, it is very difficult for you to carry the achievements and for someone to help you grow because they feel that you are doing well, but when you also carry the crises, it is time now, yes, everyone, to support each other and watch how we grow, because the Crisis allows us to change the way we are doing things and question ourselves about what we are doing. (Tatiana, Interview)

Sharing the crisis with the broader team was itself a departure, and not everyone supported it. “I don’t know if that shows us vulnerable, and that is bad,” she reflected. “I don’t know if showing yourself vulnerable ends up being bad for the team or if it generates a sense of solidarity and teamwork about how we all get through this” (Tatiana, Interview). There was fear, she said, particularly from the operations team and the interim director, that transparency about financial distress might demoralize rather than mobilize. And even after the information was shared with some coordinators, Tatiana felt it had not fully filtered down: “It doesn’t come down to territory, and they continue to make demands of me, and I say: ‘No, there’s not the resource to comply with that’” (Tatiana, Interview). Staff at the regional level continued to operate with “a sense that it is a rich organization and that nothing is ever going to happen” (Tatiana, Interview). I left Colombia unaware of what the foundation’s response would be.

Months later, in January 2024, I had a follow-up interview with Andrés. TdJ had clearly survived the four-month warning Tatiana had given them. How? Shrink, at least for the time being. Andrés described it in the language of focus and necessity: “We even had to reduce teams, but very aware that it is the way to continue growing... We also closed the bakery, the screen workshop... But temporarily, to hopefully start again in a much more organized way” (Andrés,

Interview). The closures went further. El Habitante, the hostel in Santa Marta that had been one of TdJ's first social business experiments, the building where volunteers slept, where cultural events were hosted, where the Magdalena operation had its emotional center, was shut down. "It is not part of our 'Core,'" Andrés explained.

"It is not part of something that we know how to do at all, that generates expense, which seems very romantic and a very good idea to us, but in order to continue growing, you have to focus a little more on the things that really are the essence of the foundation" (Andrés, Interview).

In Timbiquí, La Soñadora, the ferry boat that the community had identified as their version of a social business and named *The Dreamer*, was put up for sale. "It also seemed risky to us," Andrés said, "and it seemed it was not generating much utility" (Andrés, Interview).

The decisions were, by Andrés's framing, painful but correct. The language was that of an organization learning to distinguish between what it wanted to be and what it could afford to sustain. And there was truth in this. Some of the programs being cut had never achieved financial viability. The social businesses, with the exception of Labzuca, had struggled from the start. But what was also being lost, in the pruning, were some of the very things that had given TdJ its character: the bakery that fed children on Saturdays, the screen-printing workshop that gave youth their first jerseys, the hostel that connected the organization to the world beyond Cazucá, the boat that connected communities across the rivers of the Pacific coast. And the cuts went deeper than the social businesses. Andrés acknowledged that "attempts were made to reduce some of the free time activities" themselves (Andrés, Interview). During one of the Café Nacional meetings I observed, coordinators discussed a new policy: any class with fewer than twelve participants would be cut.

The story told in this chapter has been, at its core, a story of growth: its origins, its mechanisms, its costs. From a single Saturday on a hillside in Cazucá to a national presence spanning eight departments, three permanent regional offices, a published methodology, an award-winning media collective, and a model for youth justice intervention replicated across Colombian cities, TdJ's trajectory is, by any measure, extraordinary. But in 2023, it was in financial crisis, and much of the romance of its early growth seemed to be set in contrast to the stark realities of keeping a massive organization afloat. This is the context of *Tiempo de Juego* as best as I could present it.

In Chapter 6, we will answer the questions I posed at the beginning of my dissertation:

1. What is TdJ's approach to growth? How are new opportunities identified? How are connections established? What are the responses of the community and the participants? What features attract the community?
2. How are scaling decisions made and by whom? What is the leadership structure at each site, and how do they relate to each other?
3. What are the primary influences on the scaling process? How are financial resources mobilized and sustained? What difficulties are encountered? What lessons have been learned?
4. What are the implications for growing other nonformal education programs?

Note: Fieldwork photographs from the sites and activities described in this chapter are presented in Appendix A.

Chapter 6: Analysis and Findings

Chapters 4 & 5 told Tiempo de Juego's story as it unfolded. Insights emerged within that narrative, but they were embedded in the flow of events. Where Chapters 4 & 5 follow time, Chapter 6 follows questions. This chapter reorganizes the same evidence around the four research questions, drawing connections across eras, sites, and roles to surface patterns the chronological narrative alone could not isolate.

RQ1: What is TdJ's approach to growth? How are new opportunities identified? How are connections established? What are the responses of the community and the participants? What features attract the community?

TdJ's approach to growth has not been singular. Across its history, the organization moved from spontaneous, community-driven expansion to externally funded, project-based growth, and the tensions between these modes shaped everything that followed. Along the way, a methodology emerged (*Aprender Jugando*) that offered a more sustainable vehicle for entering new communities. But underneath both the organic and the structured growth, the interviews consistently point to the same soil: trust and relationships are what enabled growth and what drew communities from skepticism to children inviting children.

Three themes emerged: the character of TdJ's growth and the organizational demands it created, the emergence of *Aprender Jugando* (Learning by Playing) as a sustainable scaling strategy, and the foundational role of trust and relationships in making growth possible at all.

1.1 A Maturing Tree

If there is a single word that participants reach for when describing how Tiempo de Juego grew, it is organic. Across interviews, from the founding leaders to the newest volunteer

coordinators, from Soacha to Santa Marta to Timbiquí, the language is remarkably consistent. Andrés recalled the earliest days in Cazucá: "Everything was very organic, everything was very intuitive, there was never any intention of anything, there was never any intention here" (Andrés, Interview). Rigoberto, who joined TdJ when it had only three full-time employees and had yet to successfully expand beyond Soacha, described this same quality from someone watching it unfold in real time:

I always thought of it as a community movement, that is, as something that arises in the community, which is then formalized, which is perhaps very different from a project of international cooperation that brings initiatives and is generated in a context. This, I think, was more organic. (Rigoberto, Interview)

Esteban Reyes, reflecting on TdJ's trajectory in a published interview with *The City Paper Bogotá*: "It was a spontaneous project and this is part of the magical ingredient" (Reyes, as cited in Emblin, 2019).

What is striking is not just the consistency of this language but how closely it echoes what Uvin and Miller (1994) identified as the "spread" pathway to scaling, an "almost organic" process through which grassroots organizations grow by drawing people in rather than pushing outward through deliberate strategy. But where Uvin and Miller describe spread in general terms, TdJ's case reveals specific mechanisms at work: children recruiting children at the local level, relational networks opening doors to new geographies, and a project-driven growth cycle that, once set in motion, created its own demand for more.

Nearly every participant, regardless of when they joined or where they are located, tells some version of the same growth story: a handful of children on the first Saturday, a few more the next, and then an inflection point, where children started recruiting children. You hear it from

Sara in Santa Marta, from René in Cazucá, from Cecilia in Ciénaga, each telling their own version with the same arc. Sara, the community mother in La Lucha whose account of TdJ's first Saturdays in Santa Marta was told in Chapter 5, captured the underlying dynamic: "We weren't the ones who had to look for the children... [The Children] were the ones who had to know what they were doing so that they could start making their own call" (Sara, Interview). Willy described the foundation of it all:

The base is children. The birth is exponential, but it is also very basic and organic because we do not need to make a call, but simply that the other children know what we do makes the children arrive. (Willy, Interview)

In Soacha, in Santa Marta, in Timbiquí, the pattern held. TdJ did not recruit participants through formal outreach campaigns; the activity itself served as an invitation, and children became their own ambassadors. Yet this organic dynamic exists alongside a less romantic reality: the organization needs participants for funder reports, and funders need participant numbers to justify their investments. The children come because they want to; the organization needs them to keep coming because its survival depends on it. Theme 3.3 will address this tension between organic recruitment and institutional need.

This pattern operated not only at the neighborhood level but across geographies, though in ways that defy easy categorization. As Chapters 5 & 6 documented, none of TdJ's expansions beyond Soacha followed a strategic growth plan. But they did not all happen the same way, either. Not all of these expansions were organic in the way Soacha's internal growth had been; some were opportunistic, others externally driven. Santa Marta was coincidence and aspiration. A volunteer happened to have a house on the Caribbean coast; Andrés saw the same needs he had seen in Cazucá, and the pieces converged. Timbiquí was an external invitation to bring the

methodology to the Pacific coast; Bogotá was project-driven expansion that quietly became permanent. What these stories share is not a single logic but the absence of one: need appeared, a door opened, and TdJ walked through it.

Yet organic growth does not mean growth without vision. Even as participants describe the process as spontaneous, the interviews reveal a persistent tension between the organization's community-rooted origins and the passionate, empathetic conviction of its founders that what worked in Cazucá could and should work elsewhere. Andrés himself embodied this tension. He recalled seeing need everywhere he went. "Wherever I arrived I said, 'The same thing happens here, here there is excess free time, here they love soccer here, this can also happen here.'" That recognition translated into a dream that far outpaced the organization's capacity: "my dream at that moment is at some point in my life: 'This is going to be all over Colombia'" (Andrés, Interview). It was this conviction that drove him to open TdJ's first branch in Cartagena, which, as Chapter 4 described, he undertook before the organization was ready. Tatiana, the organization's financial director, offered a complementary perspective on what fueled TdJ's growth, identifying not just community need but the founders' charismatic capacity to communicate their vision:

When you work in the social sector you really have to believe in what you do because you don't have something tangible to sell. So, if you don't sell it from passion, it is very difficult for it to happen. And in that... they are successful. That they knew how to sell the story. (Tatiana, Interview)

The interplay between these two forces, community need pushing the organization outward and leadership vision stretching it toward new territories, echoes the push and pull factors Uvin and Miller (1994) identified as drivers of functional scaling. The TdJ case reveals

something Uvin's framework does not account for: contraction. The reality that organizations sometimes must shrink and leave communities they entered is absent from the scaling literature entirely. Santiago, the Director of Alliances, articulated this dynamic:

And a project of that style arrived, which involved expanding the operation, and when the project ended, the operation seemed to not finish contracting. Do I make myself clear?

It's like it grows and then doesn't contract. So, the growth of Tiempo de Juego, I find it related to the arrival of very large projects that make us grow and then we cannot, we do not know how to return to our original size, because it means leaving a community again or... So, for example, there are cases that are not as visible as Timbiquí and Santa Marta, but we are present in Soacha, right? And with the 2018 and 2019 project that I arrived with, we reached five different locations, and more or less 500 kids in Bogotá, not in Soacha; but in Bogotá. And we are still present in three locations in Bogotá, but there is not much talk about it. But there we are, every week, right? In Ciudad Bolívar, in Usme, in Kennedy, we are there. And that is why, it is for the same reason, because we had a very big project that took us there and then we did not know how to return. (Santiago, Interview)

What Santiago is describing is something the scaling literature does not quite have a name for. When a large externally funded project enables TdJ to enter a new community, the organization hires local staff, enrolls children, builds relationships, and becomes woven into the social fabric of that place. When the project ends, the funding disappears, but the children, the relationships, and the responsibility do not. The three Bogotá neighborhoods are a vivid case in point: sustained quietly, week after week, simply because leaving was unthinkable. Fabiola, the psychosocial coordinator in Ciénaga, described this same dynamic from the field: "If there is a

large project, it allows us to reach smaller and more territories, but if there is a medium or small project, then we have to reduce" (Fabiola, Interview). Yet what Fabiola frames as fluctuation, Santiago named as something more stubborn: growth that resists reversal because contraction means abandoning communities, and TdJ's culture resists this. The result is an organization that grows with each new project cycle but never fully contracts when funding recedes. Contraction can and does happen, as we will see, but it happens painfully, at a cost, and against the grain of everything the organization believes about itself.

The reality is that growth is not infinite or linear, and in an organization built on relationships with real communities, contraction is never just the end of a contract or a line in a spreadsheet. It is felt. Yuri, the regional coordinator in Timbiquí, lived through what that contraction looks like:

Last year we were expanded in one, two, three, like seven communities. And now we are [in] only four, right? And all the communities are saying: "Hey, I want you to come here. Hey, come here because that helped us a lot." ...Bringing the leaders from there to here was too expensive. I spent almost what was budgeted for the year... It was decided to leave those communities because we had to think about the budget issue... That hurt us a lot because we felt that we were contributing a lot to the construction of peace, we were contributing to the transformation of the children, that they would make other decisions, that there would be other paths. So, at first that did hit us, it hit us super hard because they were communities that really needed the program. (Yuri, Interview)

In communities where stability has never been a given, showing up consistently is not just a programmatic strategy; it is the foundation on which trust is built. What it means when that

foundation cracks and what permanence costs an organization that cannot always afford it will be explored in Theme 3.3.

But the need to abandon projects is a symptom of a larger issue: TdJ's revenue model requires continuous growth. Mariana, who directs the Aprender Jugando program, described this from the organizational center:

Where the most projects come out are in the area where I am, that is, projects outside our regional ones and it has been difficult to sustain the base regional ones... it is always like this anxiety of: "We have to do things to maintain our headquarters." (Mariana, Interview)

Mariana's anxiety points to a structural bind at the heart of TdJ's growth. The revenue from Aprender Jugando projects and other external contracts is not surplus; it is what keeps the organization alive. Each project is expected to fund itself, contribute to the regional branch that implements it, and feed the central administrative structure in Bogotá that wins and manages the contracts. The result is that TdJ must say yes to nearly every opportunity that appears, not only because each one serves a real need, but because the entire organizational apparatus depends on the revenue these projects generate. Whether this represents strategic flexibility or structural overextension is a question the organization was still reckoning with at the time of my research, a question several participants addressed directly, and one that Theme 3.3 will take up.

By the time of my research in 2023, participants across the organization had begun articulating this recognition openly. Luisa, a coordinator in Soacha, stated it plainly: "We have already grown too much. It's our turn to hold back and not continue growing" (Luisa, Interview). Ximena, a coordinator in Ciénaga, echoed this concern: "We cover a lot of things... sometimes I think it's a lot of things, a lot of things... at some point there's going to come a point where we

have to say: 'Well, let's stop and we focus again'" (Ximena, Interview). David, one of the earliest leaders from Cazucá, observed the same reality from a different vantage point: "The structure is so gigantic that sometimes it cannot be checked anymore, obviously they are beginning to see shortcomings, and you have to prioritize" (David, Interview). Andrés acknowledged the shift: "I had to learn to say 'no.' Before everything was like that, we did everything, now we have to learn to say 'no'" (Andrés, Interview).

Nairo offered an extended metaphor that captures both the organic character of TdJ's growth and the organizational response it eventually demanded:

In a word, it is organic; It's an organic structure, but not messy at this point, okay?

Because sometimes you think: "Organic is like anything without a structure..." But I think it has grown progressively since it began as a community movement. Tiempo de Juego has a particularity, and that is that it grows based on opportunities, and it has a lot to do with community decisions. In other words, there is not a person who says: "This has to be done this way and that." Like a boss; There is no such figure, I believe, even if we have a director, but rather: "Let's understand what is happening and how this tree is growing."

That is, at the beginning it was a small tree... last year it was a leafy tree, and these structures, each of these branches, progressively, Cameron, have become areas, coordinations, directions. So, it has grown, perhaps, yes organically, but in a conscious way. (Nairo, Interview)

Nairo, speaking on his role as Director of Operations he began in 2022:

My job has been, precisely, to prune the tree a little, yes? Like this thing that had grown a little, at a certain point it was kind of messy, like we took on anything, yeah? ...And that's good, that's good because it allowed us to learn a lot. But I believe that there was already

a time in which we should focus on certain fruits, and continue taking care of them, continue strengthening them. So, my mission from that moment was to ensure that the programs, the very operation that we were developing in our three regions, were increasingly more effective, more efficient, not only in economic terms, but efficiency of human resources, efficiency in what we do, in how we really invest our time, how we can reach more territories without necessarily growing haphazardly, but very consciously.

(Nairo, Interview)

Then, in 2023, a different kind of force arrived. Describing the financial crisis, Nairo extended the metaphor: "last year, that big leafy tree was shaken by a storm; and ripe fruits fell, dry leaves fell and the silhouette of the tree became a little clearer by 2024" (Nairo, Interview). The pruning had been deliberate; the storm was not. He placed TdJ's current moment in developmental terms: "we're already an adolescent... about 16-17 years old... we are really close to adulthood... we have to take things seriously" (Nairo, Interview).

Nairo's tree captures the arc that emerges across these interviews. TdJ's growth was neither fully planned nor accidental; it was organic in the deepest sense, emerging from the interaction between community need, relational networks, and the passionate conviction of its founders. But organic growth, by its very success, demanded institutional structures the organic model was never designed to support: international partnerships, administrative overhead, regional branches, funder reporting. What began as children recruiting children became an organization that needed project revenue to survive, and project revenue came with requirements that pulled against the organic character that had made TdJ what it was. Now, as Nairo put it, the organization is approaching something like adulthood, and with adulthood comes the harder work: deciding what to keep, what to let go, and how to grow deliberately rather than by instinct

alone. The tension between organic growth and organizational necessity is not a problem TdJ has solved; it is a condition the organization continues to inhabit. What this condition means for the broader scaling literature, particularly Uvin's assumption that functional scaling can be managed through deliberate calibration of push and pull factors, will be examined in Chapter 7.

1.2 Teaching the Game: Aprender Jugando as the Sustainable Growth Solution

The tension described in the previous section, that TdJ grows with each project but cannot shrink when the project ends, raised a question the organization had to answer: if it cannot keep opening permanent locations, and it cannot stop growing, what can it do? The answer, as Chapter 5 documented in detail, was Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing), TdJ's structured methodology transfer program. But while Chapter 5 told the story of how AJ emerged and how it works, the question here is what it represents: a strategic pivot in TdJ's approach to scaling, and one that carries its own contradictions.

Aprender Jugando did not emerge from a strategic planning session. It was born, as so much in TdJ's history was, from failure. Andrés traced its origins directly to Cartagena: "I believe that [Cartagena] was the greatest learning, so that today Aprender Jugando has all its stages well structured" (Andrés, Interview). The Cartagena experience, in which TdJ attempted to transplant its operations to a new city without the community roots or the local leaders to sustain them, forced a reckoning. TdJ could not replicate *itself*. What it could do, the organization gradually realized, was diffuse what it *knew*. Rigoberto, the Knowledge Management Director, pinpointed the moment: "In 2016, the Aprender Jugando methodological transfer program begins... And there you start to think, oh, what we are transmitting can also be systematized, turned into a model" (Rigoberto, Interview).

The distinction matters for the scaling literature. What TdJ arrived at through trial and error maps closely onto what Jowett and Dyer (2012) termed "concept replication," in which an organization shares its core principles and approach while leaving it to the receiving community to own as well as adapt them to local conditions. This stands in contrast to the franchise model of replication, which demands fidelity to a standardized template. TdJ's version of concept replication was designed to ensure that the receiving community owned the process rather than merely hosting it. Willy articulated the philosophy and the catalyst:

Tiempo de Juego no longer wants to open more locations. They told us: "Hey, how nice it is to have Tiempo de Juego in La Guajira, or how nice it is to have Tiempo de Juego in Belén de Andaquíes, in the Amazon". But Tiempo de Juego does not have the money to open in all parts of the country. So, what we realized was easier, for us to go and teach what we have learned and for each community to start doing their projects alone. In other words, they take advantage of the knowledge that we have so that they can start from their knowledge, from their already known ability, to start a project, but that what they learn from Tiempo de Juego can be used to do it (Willy, Interview).

The key phrase is *their projects*. What TdJ transfers is not a program to be implemented but a set of principles built on prior experience, structured around three phases (Prepare, Aim, Goal). In the Prepare phase, TdJ conducts a territorial analysis and participatory assessment to understand the community's context and identify local leaders; in the Aim phase, those leaders travel to Cazucá for an inspirational immersion in TdJ's programming, then plan how to implement the adapted model in their own territory; in the Goal phase, TdJ provides training and accompaniment as the community implements the methodology on its own.

At the heart of this transfer model sits a concept staff and leaders return to repeatedly: *capacidad instalada*, or installed capacity. The term refers to the knowledge, skills, and leadership that remain in a community after TdJ steps back. Tatiana, the financial director, described the strategic logic: AJ creates the "opportunity for the methodology to go to many more places... really bring, and leave installed capacity in the communities and not continue concentrating in one place, because we will not be able to grow" (Tatiana, Interview). Catherine, the regional coordinator in Timbiquí, described the same principle from the receiving end: the community's expectation from the beginning was to "bring someone from outside, but to teach us how to do it" (Catherine, Interview). Installed capacity is not just a programmatic feature; it is the philosophical core of Aprender Jugando. It represents TdJ's answer to the permanence question: you do not need to stay forever if you leave something behind that can sustain itself.

But AJ is not only a mission strategy. It is also, and staff are frank about this, a financial one. René put it plainly: "Methodological transfers... was to teach our methodology, leave it implanted, impregnated in other communities, in other organizations, so that they continue carrying the methodology... but in addition to that, it generates a resource for us" (René, Interview). Willy was equally direct: "Aprender Jugando in Tiempo de Juego has also become a way to sustain ourselves. So, we charge for knowledge" (Willy, Interview). As Mariana described in Chapter 5, AJ functions as a bridge between TdJ's permanent operations and its project-based revenue: "Aprender Jugando and methodological transfers, I think, has been that bridge and the possibility of sustaining these processes that we have as a base, with processes that happen outside" (Mariana, Interview). What Esteban once called TdJ's "magical ingredient" and what Tatiana described as the founders' ability to "sell the story from passion," AJ had turned into something that could be structured, shared, and sustained. This dual function, mission

and survival, is perhaps AJ's most significant feature. It allows TdJ to spread its concepts and methodology without overstressing its institutional capacity, while generating the revenue needed to sustain the permanent sites it already operates.

What makes this more than a straightforward sustainability story is what happens when the methodology enters new contexts. Because each AJ project enters a new context with new challenges, the program generates learning that flows back to TdJ's permanent operations. The regionals first demonstrated this cross-pollination effect. Luisa described how Magdalena's arts programming had inspired Soacha to develop its own high-performance dance and music: "They were pioneers in that. Yes, we must admit it. Very good in music and dance. And I feel like, I wanted to achieve what they were able to achieve with their participants, and I feel like we have" (Luisa, Interview). Nairo described what Timbiquí had taught the organization about inter-ethnic bridge-building: "Timbiquí has taught me that... it is possible to generate through leadership processes, unite communities that were also separated, such as the Afro community and the indigenous community" (Nairo, Interview). AJ was not just carrying TdJ's methodology outward; it was producing knowledge that reshaped what TdJ understood itself to be. And for the first time during Nairo's tenure, a regional site conducted a methodology transfer independently of the central team:

That team showed me, and I am very pleased with it, that it is also capable of developing transfer processes, because transfers are very centralized in Tiempo de Juego. In other words, normally those from Bogotá or those from Soacha went somewhere else to inspire communities, but with a project that I coordinated last year, which had a focus on emigrants, we were able to make a transfer, specifically with this team from Santa Marta to La Guajira. So, we worked with migrants... So, that was crazy, and I continue to

demonstrate, or the team itself continues to demonstrate that it has replication capabilities, and that is one of the determining factors for Tiempo de Juego... Since it is a replicable model, that's in our strategic plan. (Nairo, Interview)

The capacity to replicate was no longer concentrated in Soacha; it was growing in the regionals themselves. Mariana saw something further on the horizon. "Things are happening [in Aprender Jugando] that are not happening even in the regional ones," she said. "Aprender Jugando is now that laboratory of things that perhaps can be migrated to the regional ones to innovate" (Mariana, Interview). AJ began as a way to share the methodology without opening new branches. It became a revenue model, a vehicle for cross-pollination, and now, in Mariana's telling, a laboratory.

Aprender Jugando, then, is TdJ's answer to a question the scaling literature often frames as binary: replicate the program or spread the principles (Moore, Riddell, & Vocisano, 2015). TdJ has chosen something closer to the latter, but gave it structure and a philosophy of community ownership the literature does not specify. Whether this model can be sustained, especially as the financial pressures described in the previous section intensify, is a question even the founding leaders cannot answer with certainty. Willy, reflecting on the Guapi transfer, acknowledged what happens after TdJ leaves: "Tiempo de Juego unfortunately disappears... they did not have the resources for us to provide accompaniment for, ideally, one or two years, so that they could find solutions" (Willy, Interview). The tension between an identity built on permanence, and a methodology designed to depart, will be explored in Theme 3.3 and more fully in Chapter 7.

1.3 The Soil Beneath the Roots: Trust and Relationships as Growth Infrastructure

If Aprender Jugando is TdJ's strategic answer to the question of how to grow, trust is the condition that makes growth possible in the first place. Across every site, throughout TdJ's nearly twenty years, those interviewed described relationships and trust not as byproducts of good programming but as preconditions for it. Nothing works, the interviews suggest, until trust is established, and trust, in TdJ's world, is not abstract. It is built through presence, consistency, and the willingness to listen before acting.

The first trust stories in TdJ's history belong to the children who showed up to that first Saturday in Cazucá and kept coming back. But the story of how TdJ's co-founding relationship was built is itself a trust story. Before Willy was a founding leader, before the soccer school, before the Foundation existed, he was a skeptic. As Chapter 4 described, he had watched people come to Cazucá before:

My relationship with him at first was not good... I had seen how in the neighborhood people came to want to do things, to give away a market... But then they left and the same problem remained, and what they did generate was a welfare system. (Willy, Interview)

Willy's suspicion of Andrés was not cynicism; it was earned through experience. Organizations arrived in Cazucá with resources and good intentions, distributed things, took photos, and left. What remained was not capacity but dependency. Andrés had to prove he was different, and he did so not through declarations but through presence. He kept showing up. He played soccer with the kids. He did not arrive with money. "I never received a dollar from Tiempo de Juego. Never," Andrés recalled of those early years. "It also made the community say, 'This guy is not here looking to get rich thanks to us, but it is something that really shows a genuine intention to help us'" (Andrés, Interview). The trust Willy eventually extended to Andrés was not given freely; it was earned through the same process that earned the community's trust, what Andrés described

as “listening to the community, hearing it, understanding it, being able to understand what its needs were, what its dreams were. And those were five years of a lot of walking, of a lot of dialogue, of doing a real immersion process” (Andrés, Interview).

This origin story matters because upon reflection, it was what Cartagena had been missing. After that experience, trust was no longer something that happened along the way. It was where everything began. In Santa Marta, communities had the same skepticism. Carlos, whose mother Sara had helped launch TdJ in La Lucha, described it: “They came, did two training sessions, took photos and left; they didn’t come back again. So, I thought it was going to be the same as the previous times, but... the person [with Tiempo de Juego] kept coming and kept bringing material” (Carlos, Interview). In Timbiquí, Yuri described identical initial doubt: “When they started in 2015... it was seen as something temporary... ‘it’s going to be just another program, like so many who pass by here that they have no durability.’ No, but the foundation came and settled” (Yuri, Interview). Sandra, the sports coordinator in Soacha, affirmed what permanence produces: “[The community] never closes the doors on us, why? Because you know that Tiempo de Juego is an organization where the processes are stable” (Sandra, Interview). Each of these accounts tells the same story from a different vantage: trust is not earned through what you promise, but through the fact that you keep showing up.

Showing up, in fact, proved so central to maintaining trust that TdJ had to rethink its entire approach to volunteering around it. External volunteers, international and domestic, had always been part of TdJ’s ecosystem. But Willy described the problem they created: when a volunteer arrived, built relationships with children, and then left after a few weeks or months, the departure “generated frustration for the kids.” TdJ’s response was to require every external volunteer to transfer their knowledge to two internal monitors instead of with a group of

children, so that the community retained something after the person was gone. "Your volunteering is important when you not simply come for a while, but when you leave me your knowledge, so that with your knowledge we can continue transforming the community" (Willy, Interview). This is, in Willy's telling, where the concept of *capacidad instalada* was born: not from a strategic planning exercise, but from the need to protect the trust that showing up had built and that leaving threatened to destroy. The connection to Theme 1.2's discussion of installed capacity is direct: AJ's philosophy of leaving knowledge behind rather than maintaining permanent presence grew from this early reckoning with what happens when presence ends.

Trust also has an institutional dimension. TdJ does not enter communities unannounced. In several accounts, the Community Action Board (Junta de Acción Comunal, or JAC) appears as the institutional gateway. Sara, who had served as secretary of the JAC in La Lucha, described the process: "Here all the neighborhoods have a Community Action Board... before you go and sit down, you go to a president of the Community Action Board and you express what you want to do" (Sara, Interview). Catherine described the same structure in Timbiquí, where TdJ's entry was negotiated through the Association of Community Councils. Sandra described a diagnostic approach: "We try to investigate, search, talk to the community, the needs... we do not necessarily enter any territory... We try to map out what is needed" (Sandra, Interview). The JAC is not just a bureaucratic formality; it is a trust mechanism. By entering through the community's own institutional channels, TdJ signals that it respects existing structures rather than bypassing them.

But the deepest source of trust, the one those interviewed cite most frequently and most emphatically, is that TdJ's staff come from the communities they serve. As René articulated, "The trust has been earned from the community because the community has created trust... the

same people from here in the community are the ones who work in the community" (René, Interview). When the monitors, the teachers, and the coordinators are people who grew up in the same neighborhoods as the children they work with, the organization is not something imposed from elsewhere. Willy made this connection explicit: "I within the neighborhood, had some type of recognition... people knew that I had been able to study, that I was a teacher... And I also knew what was happening in the neighborhood" (Willy, Interview). His credibility came not from TdJ's brand but from his own biography. The same is true of David in Cazucá, of Sara in La Lucha, of Jasmín in Timbiquí: each was trusted not because of the organization behind them but because they were homegrown, knew the community, and treated other community members.

The community's sense of ownership, once established, became self-reinforcing. Willy described the endpoint: "The people felt that Tiempo de Juego was really theirs. Over time, people began to feel that they had an impact on Tiempo de Juego. And this is starting to happen because all the projects that were developed, the ideas that were had about how to train, who to train, at what time, what to do? They started coming from the same guys" (Willy, Interview). Rigoberto described this as an operating principle: programming flows upward from community voice, not downward from institutional strategy, always "in that cycle from the community to the organization" (Rigoberto, Interview). What happens to this principle when external funders arrive is the subject of Theme 3.3

Carolina, a community mother and coordinator in Soacha, comments: "If Tiempo de Juego is positioned very strongly today in Soacha, it is because the people and the community have also believed in this" (Carolina, Interview). Catherine, coordinating from Timbiquí, captured the result: "I don't even look for communities, people from communities come to me, community leaders come to me... There is always a long line wanting to get in" (Catherine, Interview). When

communities are waiting to join rather than being recruited, trust has become the invitation. What draws them in, consistently across sites, is the experience of being listened to, the consistency of showing up, and the invitation of play itself. This is the infrastructure on which everything else in TdJ's growth story depends: invisible, relational, and slow to build.

RQ2: How are scaling decisions made and by whom? What is the leadership structure at each site, and how do they relate to each other?

TdJ describes itself as horizontal, and nearly every participant uses that word. But the organization also has a hierarchy that grew more visible as it scaled, and scaling decisions live in the tension between the two. The people who make those decisions at the community level are, overwhelmingly, people who grew up in the programs themselves. And what holds the structure together across sites and roles is not an organizational chart but a shared culture of belonging that both enables and constrains the choices the organization makes.

Three themes emerged: the negotiation between TdJ's horizontal aspiration and its hierarchical reality, the leadership pipeline that grows its own leaders from within, and the culture of belonging that holds the organization together and shapes its scaling decisions.

2.1 The Circle and the Ladder

Ask anyone at Tiempo de Juego about decision-making, and you will hear, almost without exception, that the organization is horizontal. The word appears in nearly every interview. Catherine, coordinating from Timbiquí, described TdJ as "very circular. We are even collaborators with each other, we are like holding hands" (Catherine, Interview). Egan, a teacher in Santa Marta, affirmed the same: "No matter how much there is a rank, they always listen to each other" (Egan, Interview). Fabiola, who brought experience from other organizations, called TdJ "inspiring... flexible, it adapts, and it adapts to each territory... we see ourselves as very

linear... We don't look at each other like, 'Oh, I'm the boss.' No, nothing" (Fabiola, Interview). Below you will find the circular organizational chart they describe, with the community at the center.

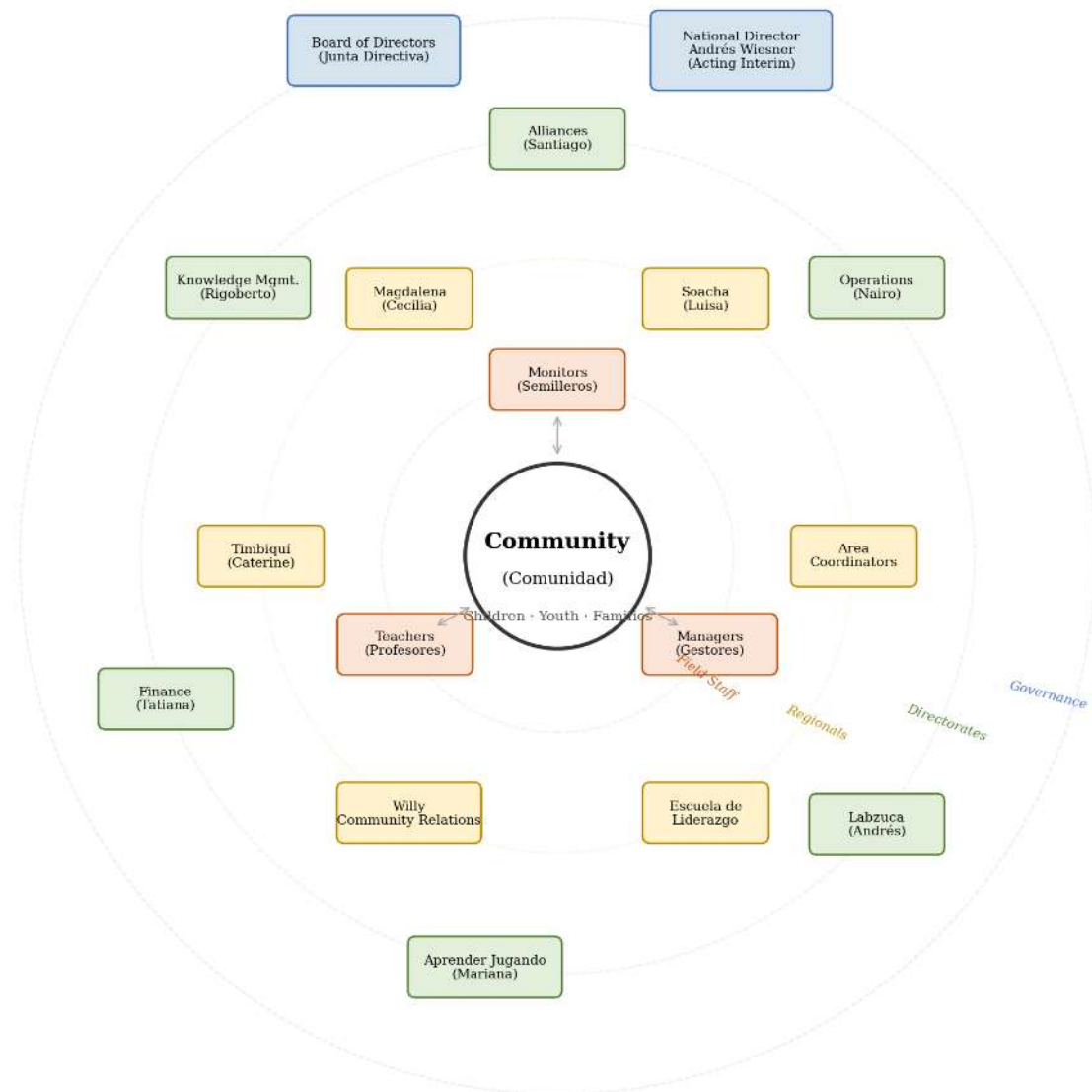


Figure 4: Tiempo de Juego - The Circle: How TdJ Describes Its Relationships

And yet. TdJ has a Board of Directors, a National Director, five directorates, regional coordinators, area coordinators, teachers, managers, and monitors. Santiago, the Director of Alliances, described the formal structure:

The structure of Tiempo de Juego is a relatively simple structure, since it has a governing body, the highest governing body is the Board of Directors. Below it is the management or the National Director. And below the National Director there are five directorates, which make up the entire government structure... Finance and Administration, Alliances, Knowledge Management, Operations... and Communications is flying around. (Santiago, Interview)

The organization chart below is more akin to the description Santiago and Rigoberto gave me.

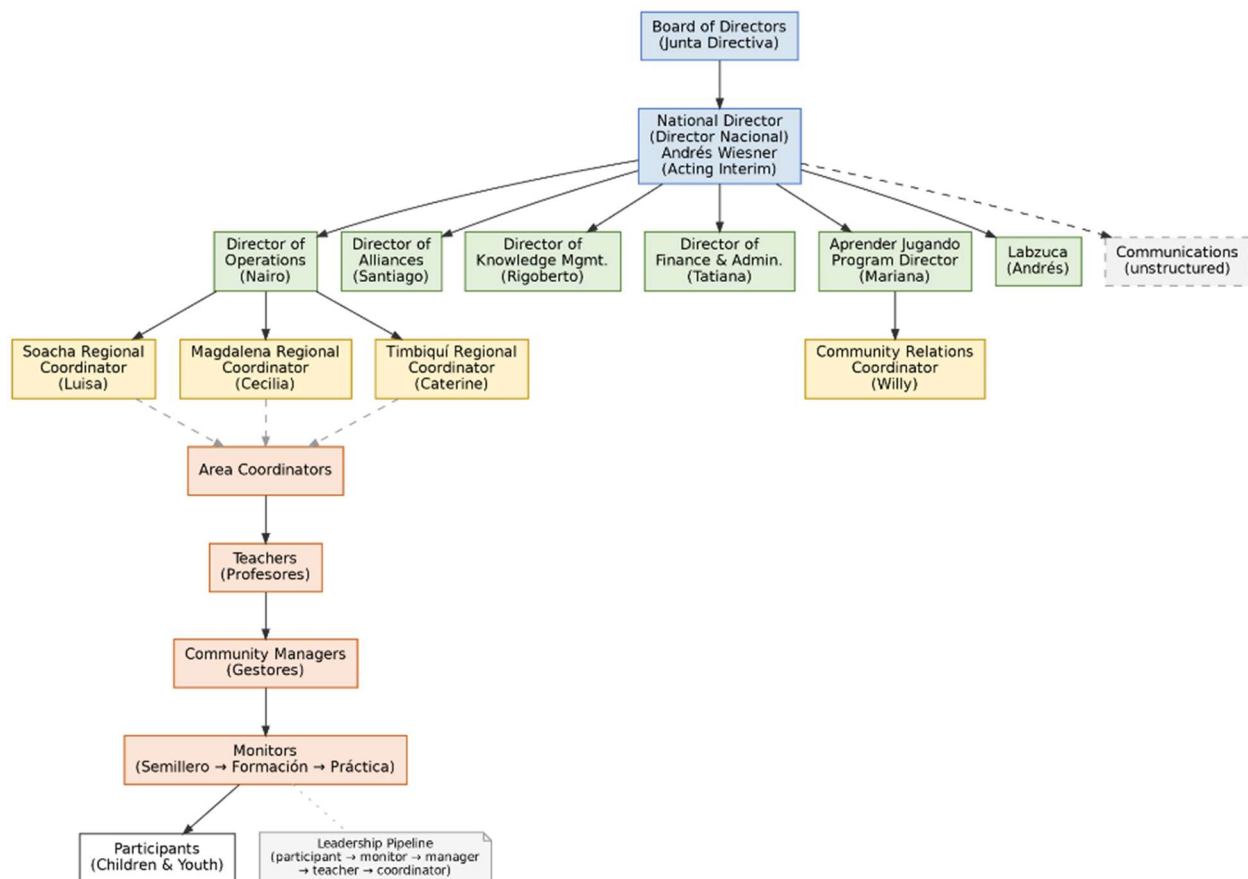


Figure 5: Tiempo de Juego Organizational Structure

Mariana traced the evolution:

We have made a thousand organizational charts that are not hierarchical organizational charts, but the relationships are not unilateral, but bilateral... But to the extent that we have been growing, I believe that nearly in 2024, well, we do have a hierarchical structure. (Mariana, Interview)

Rigoberto articulated both sides of this duality. The openness is real:

There is generally a lot of autonomy, there is a lot of horizontality in the sense that anyone in the operation can speak with the director, with the managers or with the coordinators. Also that the managers and coordinators go to the field and get involved in the activities. (Rigoberto, Interview)

But the autonomy that allows anyone to speak to anyone also means that no one always knows who is doing what:

Due to that autonomy also in the teams and in the areas, many times communication is fragmented, and we have an internal communication problem, that many times there are people who are sometimes doing the same task or who cross paths or who do not find out that something very cool and positive happened. (Rigoberto, Interview)

During a board meeting I attended in August 2023, I witnessed a snapshot of this dilemma between the founding culture and the ever-growing formalization. The team debated whether to formalize their WhatsApp communication, the platform that served as both their primary work tool and their social glue, full of memes, jokes, and the easy informality that defines TdJ's internal culture. But with over twenty group chats covering every aspect of operations, important information routinely got lost in the noise. The directors recognized the

problem but lamented any solution that would kill what made the communication feel like a community rather than bureaucracy.

What the interviews reveal is not hypocrisy but a genuine duality. The horizontal aspiration is real; it comes from the organization's origins as a community movement and, as Nairo noted, from its very methodology: "We draw a lot of inspiration from our methodological base, which is Football for Peace... it gave us light not only in our pedagogical proposal, but also in how we understand relationships within the organization" (Nairo, Interview). The game itself teaches consensus, shared rules, and collective decision-making. TdJ has tried to organize internally the way it organizes a football match. But as the organization scaled from three people to well over a hundred, the distance between the Bogotá office, where central decisions about funding and strategy are made, and the regionals, where active programming meets community need, has grown. The horizontal aspiration has not disappeared, but it now operates across a much larger and more complex terrain.

René captured the operational division clearly. Day-to-day decisions about programming, activities and community engagement are genuinely collaborative: "The decisions are always made from this little team... We always make them as a team." But "those drastic decisions I already refer to as monetary issues, decisions also regarding continuity or non-continuity of personnel, are made by much higher management" (René, Interview). Sandra, from the Soacha operations, described the same dynamic as a bottom-up communication chain: "The leader, the monitor that we call, comes first. We always take their opinion. This passes to the teacher, from the teacher to the area coordinator. I always escalate it to the regional coordinator, which is Luisa. Regional coordination goes up to the operational coordinator who is Nairo... communication always goes from bottom to top and according to the need that the community

has" (Sandra, Interview). Feedback and ideas flow upward through the chain Sandra described. Financial and personnel decisions flow from the top. Both described this as functional rather than contradictory, but the gap between where voice originates and where decisions are made widens as the organization grows.

Tatiana, who arrived as financial director after Esteban Reyes's departure, described the leadership model he had built as deeply horizontal. That model, she observed, generated real strengths: "People feel empowered... they feel motivated." But it also carried risk. Without clear policies and accountability structures, initiatives that ran on ideals rather than practical metrics could continue unchecked, and decision-making in moments of crisis could stall entirely. "Informality is not going very well to meet the requirements," she noted, particularly when it came to the strict reporting demands of international funders (Tatiana, Interview). Luisa named the most concrete consequence: projects sometimes arrive that were "formulated up there on a desk" without consulting the community or the regional team, and "those of us who are in the middle of the sandwich... find ourselves suffering to float a project that is of no interest to the community" (Luisa, Interview). The horizontal aspiration means everyone feels entitled to voice concerns. The hierarchical reality means the project runs anyway, because the funding depends on it. Catherine's circle coexisted, uneasily, with the ladder the organization had quietly built.

The sharpest illustration came during the leadership transition after Esteban Reyes's departure as National Director in early 2023. Santiago described the paralysis that followed:

"There was an urgent situation that was well the economic situation that gave no wait, and a governing body that did not have a procedure to make decisions. Nobody wanted to impose themselves on anyone, because no one is above anyone. So, I think there was a moment of strange anxiety... we made some decisions collectively, but the most difficult,

the most critical ones, we postponed and waited for the new director to arrive so that she could make them. But no, it doesn't mean that this is a good practice, because she arrived without context and there were some very hard decisions, like closing certain things in our operations, which implies laying off people, right? ...it was a very clumsy process.” (Santiago, Interview).

The culture that had empowered everyone to speak became the very thing that prevented anyone from deciding. No one felt authorized to lead because the culture had taught them that leadership was collective. And the result was that their financial director carried the weight of the crisis alone for months, and the new director arrived to find that her first task was laying people off.

What emerges from these accounts is not a failure of organizational design but a scaling challenge the literature anticipates. As Uvin (1995) noted, organizational scaling requires increasing internal structure, and the negotiation between preserving grassroots culture and building institutional capacity is inherent to the process. TdJ's version of this negotiation is distinctive because the horizontal aspiration is not merely rhetorical; it is methodological, rooted in the very pedagogy the organization teaches. The organization's ongoing navigation between circle and ladder will be taken up more fully in Chapter 7.

2.2 Growing Your Own: Organic Intellectuals and the Leadership Pipeline

If the previous section described how decisions are made, this one asks: by whom? The answer, across TdJ's history, is overwhelmingly the same. The people who lead TdJ's community-facing programs are, in most cases, the people who grew up in them. At the strategic and administrative level, the picture is more mixed, with professionals from outside the community joining and absorbing the organizational culture. But in the regionals, where programming meets children, the pipeline runs from the inside out.

Andrés traced its origins to a moment of sheer necessity: "I don't have money to find a coach or hire coaches. I can't be a coach for 200 kids. Help me make them coaches... 17 years later, Escuela de Liderazgo (Leadership School), the entire Tiempo de Juego model" (Andrés, Interview). What began as a resource constraint became a philosophy and eventually an institutional system. Willy described the emergence:

Monitors are born within Tiempo de Juego... the young people begin to show us and begin to show Andrés that they had very, very strong power. And when Andrés realized that, we decided that we had to empower them much more. (Willy, Interview)

The pipeline that resulted follows a recognizable arc. Willy traced it in full: "Many of the base, the children, of the beneficiaries, some end up being monitors... those monitors became community managers, and many of those community managers are now coordinators... knowledge has been growing" (Willy, Interview). Fabiola, from outside the Soacha core, described the formalized version:

They start as a *semillero* monitor, which is like knowing what Tiempo de Juego is. From there they move on to a training-style monitor, who already has a role, a little more responsibility, supports the teacher in classes... And then comes a practical monitor, who... already has a group of kids at his disposal and he himself directs the class... And those who, because they like the career and the projects we have allow us, we call them to be managers. These managers are the teachers we have today. (Fabiola, Interview)

The language of organic growth that pervaded Theme 1.1 is not merely metaphorical; it is embedded in TdJ's institutional vocabulary. The entry-level position in the leadership pipeline is called a *semillero*, literally a seedbed, a nursery for growing new leaders.

The power of this model lies not only in its structure but in its stories. David started as a participant at twelve, became a coach at thirteen or fourteen, earned a scholarship, studied Sports Sciences in Spain, and returned to found the Cazucá Fútbol Club. René began by distributing snacks at TdJ events, became a monitor, and eventually created and now leads the *Cambio de Juego* (Game Change) program nationally. Leicy, a sports teacher in Timbiquí, followed a similar path from the periphery: she had been watching TdJ's activities, interested, until Jasmín invited her in. Camila, a dancer in Ciénaga, moved from participant to instructor to El Habitante (The Inhabitant) staff in two years.

What these trajectories share, and what distinguishes them from conventional hiring, is that the leaders emerge from the community rather than being placed into it. Their authority derives not from formal credentials but from shared experience and community embeddedness. Andrés articulated the logic:

A young man who teaches a neighborhood soccer class knows much more about the other child than anyone else. He knows their problems, he also lived them, he knows what their pains are, what their anxieties are, what their happiness is, what their reality is. So, that peer language is, I think, very accurate. Having a young man who knows you be your teacher is very successful... And then the possibility of giving back to that community what you are learning thanks to an organization that gives you new tools to strengthen a life project. (Andrés, Interview)

The peer educator does not need to be educated in the community's reality; they already carry it. Andrés also named the practical logic: "It is more profitable for you to work with these young people than to hire from elsewhere" (Andrés, Interview). This is what gives TdJ's programming

its distinctive texture and what makes the pipeline more than a staffing strategy: it is a theory of change.

The pipeline also produces innovation. The people who came up through TdJ's ranks did not just fill existing roles; they created new ones. David grew a fully fledged football club, Cazucá FC (Football Club), from the same fields where he had once been a twelve-year-old participant. *Cambio de Juego*, TdJ's program for youth leaving the criminal justice system, was born from René's own experience with incarceration. The arts programming that Magdalena pioneered and that Soacha later adopted came from regional staff who saw what their community needed and built it. These programs were not designed from above. They were realized by the people the pipeline produced.

The pipeline is not without limitations. As TdJ has grown, the demands on its leaders have grown with it: budgeting, funder reporting, project management, and the institutional skills that international cooperation requires. The monitors who were perfect for a Saturday soccer school may not have been prepared for an organization managing multi-year contracts across three regions. How the organization bridges that gap remains an open question. Nairo captured what is at stake: "If you ask me what the backbone of Tiempo de Juego is, it is the Escuela de Liderazgo" (Nairo, Interview). Not the methodology, not the funding, not the founder's charisma, but the system through which communities generate their own leaders. What this system means for how we understand leadership development within scaling, and its theoretical significance, will be taken up in Chapter 7.

2.3 The Glue That Holds: Belonging and Its Role in Scaling Decisions

The previous two sections described the structures and the people. This one asks what holds them together. The simple answer across the interviews was a sense of belonging. Those

interviewed describe TdJ not as a workplace but as a family, a home, a community within a community. And this culture of belonging is what allows the circle and the ladder to coexist.

Mariana, who has been with TdJ for over a decade, explains:

Tiempo de Juego creates a very familiar culture. The truth is that you come in and there is something that generates a sense of belonging so great that not only with what happens in the community, but also what happens within the organization, which makes it not easy to leave Tiempo de Juego, that is... you like it, it's a safe place. (Mariana, Interview)

David put it in the simplest terms: "Tiempo de Juego opens its doors to me, it is always my home" (David, Interview). Leicy, in Timbiquí, said she could not imagine her life outside of TdJ: "Since I've been in Tiempo de Juego... it's given me an identity. Previously, I was just another member of the municipality, on my way to getting lost there" (Leicy, Interview). Even Jackeline, who had been working as a database assistant in Timbiquí for only three months at the time of my research, spoke about the organization in the language of family: "Here we all know each other; it is a small municipality... we are all family" (Jackeline, Interview). Already the sense of belonging had taken hold.

This belonging is not abstract. It is produced through specific practices. Willy described a foundational one: "Volunteering that I call 'community volunteering.' And the young people who lived in the same community did not earn anything, but they become the monitors... they do it voluntarily for their community" (Willy, Interview). The word he used was *parche*, Colombian slang for a crew, a hangout, a group of friends doing something together: "Let's make a *parche* to go clean there, because we're going to play soccer there. So that becomes volunteering" (Willy, Interview). Belonging was born as friendship with purpose.

Egan described how even the internal meetings at TdJ follow the same coexistence methodology used in the programs: "We do the same methodology as the classes in the work meeting... The beginning that we do the recreational activity introduces us to the skill. The knot, where we talk about everything... And there is the reflection" (Egan, Interview). The organization practices internally what it teaches externally. This principle extends to how new staff are brought in. Rigoberto described the philosophy behind TdJ's onboarding: "Something that is going to be important here is knowing the terrain, the field, the activities, being present in workshops, in the different actions... And also be part of the methodologies" (Rigoberto, Interview). Onboarding itself is a game: "Tiempo de Juego must be presented while playing. That is its purpose. I'm not going to tell you what it is, let's play, let's play and you understand" (Rigoberto, Interview). Santiago described visiting Cazucá before joining and being struck by "a very authentic organization... very connected to its purpose, with a team that was also very connected to the purpose and with very good energy" (Santiago, Interview). What better way to introduce someone to the culture of the organization, to understand it, how it feels, and the impact it has, than by bringing them to experience it firsthand?

Santiago, arriving from outside TdJ's community origins, traced the culture back to its geographic roots: "Tiempo de Juego has a culture that is very unique, very powerful, and that has a lot to do with camaraderie and humor and having a good time... comes from the community where everything originated, which is Cazucá. So, I believe that Cazucá and the relationship that Andrés Wiesner developed with Cazucá, is like the origin of the Tiempo de Juego culture" (Santiago, Interview). Remember, Cazuca before Tiempo de Juego was a place where neighbors feared each other instinctively before ever talking to each other. Now, it is spoken of as having a unique camaraderie and humor. TdJ is also a place for progressive values, a rarity in a culture as

traditionally conservative as Colombia's. René described this openness: "Here it doesn't matter if you are gay, if you are lesbian, if you are transsexual, if you are black, if you are white, if you are an atheist or you are Catholic... What interests us is the passion and commitment you have to working in the social part" (René, Interview). The culture of TdJ is bound by genuine belief in the purpose of the organization, to create leaders who create positive change within their homes, families, and communities.

The consistency of the language is itself worth noting. 'Organic' appears unprompted in at least six interviews. 'Horizontal' in seven. 'Family' across regions and roles. When a monitor in Ciénaga, a teacher in Timbiquí, and a director in Bogotá describe TdJ in the same words, they are not reciting a brand message; they are signaling their membership in a shared project. But membership in a professionalizing organization looks different than membership in a community movement. When the organization contracts, it revokes that membership for people who considered TdJ family. In Cartagena, the absence of belonging and commitment to the project were factors in the failed expansion. Now, Santiago described this challenge appearing in 2023: "The relationship that these kids develop with Tiempo de Juego, well, it's: 'Well, you pay me and I do this.' And that's fine, I like it, but it's not like I love this organization and I do it with all my heart, let's say, that may have been lost a little" (Santiago, Interview). What Santiago describes is the quieter version: belonging that was built, slowly thinning as the organization becomes a workplace.

RQ3: What are the primary influences on the scaling process? How are financial resources mobilized and sustained? What difficulties are encountered? What lessons have been learned?

Three forces shaped TdJ's scaling more than any others: failure, context, and money. The organization's most formative lessons came not from strategic planning but from painful experience, and those lessons reshaped the methodology that now drives its expansion. Each new community then pressed its own reality into that methodology, so that what grew in one place never looked quite the same in another. And running beneath both the learning and the localization is the funding ecosystem that makes the work possible, one whose logic and timelines do not always align with the communities TdJ serves or the fundamental culture that TdJ developed.

Three themes emerged: the learning TdJ accumulated through its scaling experiences, the localization imperative that forced the organization to reinvent its methodology at each new site, and the partnership paradox that sustains TdJ financially while pulling it away from its founding commitments.

3.1 Learning the Hard Way: Scaling as Learning

Mickelsson et al. (2019) propose that scaling is a learning process in which the methodology, the people, and the sites all transform through the encounter. What arrives at the destination is not a copy of what left the source; it is something new, produced through the transaction between the two. TdJ's history is, in many ways, a case study of this framework in action, though the organization arrived at its insights not through theory but through experience. The most generative experience was Cartagena. Andrés captured the lesson in a single image: "I brought uniforms and snacks without having a process" (Andrés, Interview).

Willy named what went wrong from three angles. First, TdJ sent Willy rather than finding a local leader: "We had to identify a William there" (Willy, Interview). Second, payment preceded relationship. In Cazucá, trust and intrinsic motivation had come first; volunteers showed up because they believed in the work, and professionalization came later. In Cartagena, it was the reverse: "there was money and then the people, the *monitores*, the leaders could be paid and then they didn't see the community benefit, but the economic benefit. So there had been no volunteering; there was a job" (Willy, Interview). The issue was not that people were compensated, which is both right and necessary. The issue was that extrinsic motivation arrived before intrinsic motivation had a chance to take root, and without that foundation of trust and ownership, the transaction became the relationship rather than supporting it. Third, TdJ assumed what worked in one context would work in another: "In Cartagena baseball is their great sport... if we had started playing baseball, it probably would have been more meaningful" (Willy, Interview).

What Cartagena illustrates is what happens when the mutual transformation Mickelsson describes is skipped. TdJ imported a leader rather than growing one from the community. It substituted money for trust. It imposed a methodology and an activity rather than letting the community reshape it. Mickelsson et al. (2019) describes what scaling-as-learning looks like when it works; Cartagena shows what it looks like when it is violated. But the violation produced the learning. Willy summarized: "Cartagena is the biggest frustration that Tiempo de Juego has had... But what we learned was more than what we failed" (Willy, Interview). And Andrés traced a direct line from that experience to TdJ's most important innovation: "I believe that [Cartagena] was the greatest learning so that today Aprender Jugando has all its stages well structured" (Andrés, Interview). Without Cartagena, there may be no Aprender Jugando.

What changed after Cartagena was not just TdJ's strategy but the organization itself. This is what distinguishes scaling-as-learning from simple trial and error: the scaling object transforms through the process. TdJ's methodology in Santa Marta was not the same methodology that had operated in Cazucá. In Timbiquí it adapted further. Each encounter with a new context reshaped what TdJ understood itself to be doing and how, because each site and the people in it pressed their own reality into the methodology. Rigoberto described the organization's trajectory as one of continuous reinvention: "There is not a year in which we are the same, because something always appears that puts us there as a challenge to continue learning, thinking that we know it all; we don't" (Rigoberto, Interview). Mariana offered a specific example: "We tried at first to take verbatim or punctually everything that was done in Soacha to the regionals. And we realized... that not necessarily the same things that worked in Soacha worked in the regionals. So, what we went for was to make individual creations by territory" (Mariana, Interview). The scaling object had to be reinvented at each site, not because the original was flawed but because authentic growth requires it.

By 2023, the crisis had forced its own reckoning. Tatiana, arriving as financial director in the middle of it, framed it explicitly: "The crisis allows us to change the way we are doing things and question ourselves about what we are doing" (Tatiana, Interview). Yuri, in Timbiquí, drew a more practical lesson from the painful contraction of her operation: "A lesson learned is to budget well every project... Budget well... Take a good look at what approach we really want... the trauma when processes are cut is also something else" (Yuri, Interview). These were operational lessons. But the crisis also produced something deeper: a founder reckoning with what growth itself had cost.

When asked whether the organization's growth had improved its impact, Andrés did not give the expected answer:

I would be lying to you if I told you: "I think now the impact is better." No, I doubt it, you know? Because, think about it, this pain of growing up means that even today the snacks are not so good, the uniforms... I could take the entire foundation to the stadium, right? Like symbolic things that I think have a lot of impact and that now cannot be done, but at the same time other things happen... They have competition, they travel, some go to university, right? Like you win at some things and not at others. (Andrés, Interview)

"The pain of growing up." The phrase echoes Nairo's metaphor about the organization approaching adulthood, and it captures something the scaling literature rarely names directly: that growth moves an organization further from its origins. Whether the tradeoffs Andrés describes represent a failure of scaling or an inevitable condition of it is a question this dissertation cannot resolve from the outside. But his willingness to sit with that uncertainty, rather than narrating the organization's growth as progress, is evidence of reflection and learning. The learning runs deeper than strategy or methodology. The organization learned how to enter communities, how to adapt its programs, and how to survive financial crisis. But it also learned something about itself: what it was willing to lose, what it could not afford to keep, and what it still does not know.

3.2 What Soacha Knows That Timbiquí Doesn't: The Localization Imperative

TdJ operates in three regions that could hardly be more different: Soacha, an urban sprawl on Bogotá's southern edge; Santa Marta and Ciénaga on the Caribbean coast; and Timbiquí, an Afro-Colombian municipality on the Pacific, accessible only by boat and airplane. The scaling challenge is not merely logistical; what works in one place does not automatically

make sense in another. Willy learned this the hard way. In Cartagena, "We wanted to do it just as we had done it in Cazucá... That was the first mistake" (Willy, Interview). Football was not Cartagena's sport. The social dynamics were different. The leaders TdJ identified did not carry the same community authority or trust. The template, applied without adaptation, failed. By the time TdJ reached Santa Marta and Timbiquí, the lesson had begun to take hold. What worked in Soacha could not be transplanted whole.

What emerged was not a single adaptation but a series of localized negotiations, each shaped by the community it entered. In Ciénaga, Ximena described a negotiation over dance programming in which youth rejected traditional folklore outright. TdJ had to listen: "It was not possible to teach them folklore because they don't like it. So, we try and try, well no... So, let's give them a voice, what do they want to do? What do you like?" (Ximena, Interview). What followed was an evolution through hip-hop, break-dancing, and Afro styles before arriving at a form that honored both the community's culture and the youth's own preferences. In Santa Marta, Carlos described how basketball classes that worked in Soacha failed entirely on the coast, where football dominated and the sport simply had no foothold (Carlos, Interview). Each site required TdJ to listen before acting, and in each case, what the community wanted differed from Soacha.

Timbiquí's adaptations were the most radical. In Timbiquí, Yuri described how even the coexistence methodology required modification: "'This is the methodology.' But it turns out that we can't do it with the exact seven steps, because Timbiquí, those guys have a different dynamic" (Yuri, Interview). The physical environment imposed its own logic: in one community, the playing field was tidal, and "there is no established schedule... they themselves set their schedules according to how the tide rises and falls" (Caterine, Interview). The methodology literally ran on the tide. Caterine described how even the language of the programming had to

change: assessment instruments designed in Soacha were incomprehensible in some Timbiquí communities, where children did not learn Spanish until third grade and sessions had to be translated in real time through community leaders (Caterine, Interview). And TdJ's presence in Timbiquí produced something that had no equivalent in Soacha: the integration of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities who had historically remained separate. "The union of the Afro and Indigenous communities, because I feel that there has always been a barrier there... by linking African and Indigenous people through sport... Tiempo de Juego began to mix that" (Caterine, Interview). Gender norms, too, required direct confrontation in a territory Caterine described as deeply machista: "Girls hardly played soccer... 'the girls' sport is basketball. You don't get involved. You stay still.... Go help Mom" (Caterine, Interview). TdJ pushed back, mixing teams and creating space for girls, and slowly, "people are changing their mindset."

Santiago, who works across all three regions from the Bogotá office, named the deeper challenge: "We come from very different contexts, we also have very different ways of working... it is a very big challenge to combine, like understanding the rhythms" (Santiago, Interview). The difficulty was not just programmatic but relational: "the way of relating to the land, to property... is very different; or the way of relating to money, to resources" (Santiago, Interview). What counted as accountability in Bogotá did not translate to how Timbiquí related to resources. Nairo, from the operational side, had learned to state it plainly: "You have to understand that here you are not in the city, here is another world" (Nairo, Interview).

The learning did not flow in one direction. Sandra described the value of the shift from a center-out model to something more reciprocal:

At the beginning of the year, we always meet regionally We share knowledge: what does not work, and what does work. So, I think that many times in those conversations they

remain tasks for both oneself as a person, but also as part of the Tiempo de Juego Foundation. So, they also teach us a little about how things are handled from other regions, because it is not the same, right? Starting with the weather. So, they also adapt their spaces according to the time, the schedule, that the sun is not so strong, well. So, I think I have learned that from them, to learn to adapt to spaces and conditions. (Sandra, Interview)

The regionals were not simply receiving Soacha's wisdom; they were producing their own. Luisa noted that Magdalena had pioneered high-performance arts programming that Soacha later adopted (Luisa, Interview). Carolina offered a developmental metaphor that several staff echoed: "Timbiquí feels a bit like a Tiempo de Juego from Soacha about 12 years ago... like a baby that's trying to crawl... And Magdalena, I already feel like a slightly more mature Tiempo de Juego" (Carolina, Interview). The regions are not parallel operations; they are siblings, shaped by the same lineage but raised in different soil.

But localization has a limit. Even if TdJ adapts to each new context, Willy named something the scaling literature rarely acknowledges:

With Tiempo de Juego it works in Cazucá. By chance, because the young people who were there arrived... But it was a matter of chance, of destiny, of the cosmos, of the universe that aligned itself so that exactly who they were would arrive. That's what's hard to do in other places. (Willy, Interview)

This names what the scaling literature often assumes away: that the success of a grassroots initiative may be, in part, unreplicable. The specific people, the specific moment, the specific community chemistry that produced TdJ in Cazucá cannot be manufactured elsewhere. What can be transferred is a methodology, a set of principles, a philosophy of community engagement. But

the magic belongs to the place where it was born. And perhaps what TdJ's experience in Timbiquí and Santa Marta shows is that when the right principles are shared, new magic can spark.

3.3 The Hand That Feeds: The Partnership Paradox and the Cost of Permanence

Understanding the tensions that define TdJ's relationship with its funders requires first understanding how the organization mobilizes resources. Santiago, who directed the Alliances area from 2021 to 2023, described a dual strategy. The first was structured: "There are a series of public and private calls of different natures, to which Tiempo de Juego is continually applying, and that to a large extent represent the greatest income of Tiempo de Juego" (Santiago, Interview). In practice, this meant adapting the organization's narrative to match whatever a given funder was seeking. The second strategy was organic: the personal relationships cultivated by Andrés, Esteban Reyes, and successive directors, which Santiago described as "a very natural function of relationships" that "sometimes leads to the generation of new alliances, which sometimes could not be achieved in any other way" (Santiago, Interview). Santiago traced one example from a personal social connection to a volunteer placement to a \$100,000 MasterCard donation for the Copa América. Both strategies fed the same revenue structure. As of 2023, Santiago estimated that international NGOs accounted for slightly less than 50% of TdJ's income, private companies for slightly less than 40%, international cooperation agencies for roughly 10%, individual donations for just over 5%, and public entities for the smallest share (Santiago, Interview).

This dependency existed alongside a long-standing aspiration toward self-generated income. From the earliest days, Andrés had improvised revenue from within the community itself, selling donated clothing at symbolic prices through what he called La Oferta (The Sale).

During fieldwork in Santa Marta, I visited one of TdJ's community stores, a direct descendant of that model fifteen years later: a small space selling donated clothing, books, and assorted items. Inspiring, and built a sense of community, but hardly a revenue engine. The more ambitious efforts came through production units in Soacha: the bakery La Jugada (The Play), the screen-printing workshop Póngale Color (Add Some Color), and the audiovisual company Labzuca, each channeling community skills into income. The regionals attempted their own versions: El Habitante, a cultural house and hostel in Ciénaga, and La Soñadora, a boat in Timbiquí. These ventures ran the full spectrum of success, with Labzuca the clear standout. By 2018, Labzuca alone was generating approximately COP\$600 million annually through institutional video production (Esteban Reyes, as cited in Emblin, 2019). By 2023, however, Labzuca's revenues had fallen to COP\$320.4 million, with documentary screenings accounting for the largest share of income (Informe de Gestión 2023), a fraction of the organization's multi-billion-peso operating budget.

Willy was realistic about the limits of these ventures at the organization's current scale: "Now it is a mega monster. Cazucá is a monster. Tiempo de Juego is now a mega monster that has 5000 children across the country. So, entrepreneurship helps, but we can't think that it is the solution" (Willy, Interview). As Chapter 5 documented, most of these ventures would not survive the organization's financial crisis; with the exception of Labzuca, the social businesses struggled to cover their own costs, and several were eventually shut down or sold. They had been born from necessity and remained expressions of TdJ's ethos, but they had never come close to replacing the grant-dependent model that sustained the organization's core operations. It was this model, and the specific way TdJ navigated the relationships it produced, that generated the paradox at the heart of the foundation's scaling story.

The paradox is this: the same partnerships that enable TdJ's work also distort it. Santiago, whose job is to manage these alliances, described the dynamic directly:

The search, more than us selecting who we want to work with, is how to accommodate what the market offers us. So, if an organization in the United Kingdom puts out a call to finance projects that are related to football and gender, well, we adapt our story, our narrative and so on, to be able to access those resources... What ends up happening is that organizations, and Tiempo de Juego being one of them, adapt their programs to what is being financed... So, it ends up being like a game of: "I report to you that I'm doing exactly what you want me to do, but here I am doing it, more or less, but I'm mostly doing my thing." ... It is a dynamic that is perverse and happens all the time. (Santiago, Interview)

I heard versions of this from nearly every person I spoke with. Appease the funders. Find ways to still carry the mission. TdJ needs the funding, the funders need their reports, and the gap between what is funded and what is needed is bridged through creative compliance. Even the number of children TdJ serves, the very thing that began as organic recruitment, children inviting children, is shaped by funder quotas and reporting requirements that bear little relationship to community demand.

Willy was less diplomatic. He described how international organizations like Save the Children "unfortunately do not know the community inside, and when they want to do things, they have a very good intention, but first you have to know what happens within the communities" (Willy, Interview). He offered a concrete example from the Guapi AJ event, where Save the Children altered TdJ's community-designed festival: changing the date from the 8th, reducing the number of children from 120 to 60, and switching which schools could participate

to meet their own reporting requirements. "The community is right," Willy said. "If the community said that [on the] eight[h], if the community said that with 120 children, if the community says that the activity should be that way. It must be done like this. Not how the aid worker wants" (Willy, Interview). What Willy is asserting here, and what the community in Guapi had already asserted through its own planning, is a form of agency the partnership dynamic is designed to override. The funder sets the terms; the community pushes back; TdJ mediates. During my own fieldwork in Guapi in August 2023, I observed this tension between community plans and funder requirements play out in real time. At one point during the planning, Save the Children proposed sending their own staff, none of whom had been to Guapi before, into a neighborhood controlled by the ELN to collect children, a decision Willy and the youth thankfully intervened to stop. What they did not understand was that not only were they putting their own lives at risk, but they could have jeopardized the youth's safety and any hope they had of starting a movement.

Luisa described the same dynamic from the regional level as the person caught between headquarters and community. "What is formulated up there on a desk for the community is not interesting. So, it doesn't participate. And then those of us who are in the middle of the sandwich, in this case me and my coordinators, find ourselves suffering to float a project that is of no interest to the community" (Luisa, Interview). Rigoberto traced the problem to its structural root:

It happens that they bring their lines of work, their formats, their times... And then the organization that wants to be autonomous begins to give in. By giving part of your desire, you begin to give it, to support yourself. And there is a very clear example for me, and it is one of the projects with the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, which is a public entity, with a purpose very aligned with Tiempo de Juego and what we do, but being

public it has many bureaucratic issues and has inefficiency in time management. So, they may propose a project to us now in August or September, to be executed in three months or less, but they should have done it before, only they have to invest the resources they have for 2023 and propose it. And the organization says: "Yes, because we need the resources." But what happens is that the entire team changes directions. So, what we are doing is oriented towards that project and responding with lists, with ICBF platforms, with ICBF heads, with the ICBF brand... the team ends up unmotivated, worn out. There are people who leave. (Rigoberto, Interview)

Rigoberto is not describing a single compromise but a cycle. The organization says yes because it needs the resources. The team redirects. The work that TdJ had planned for its own communities gets deferred. Staff burn out, and some leave. And when the next call arrives, the organization is weaker, more stretched, and more likely to say yes again. The autonomy is not taken in one moment. It is surrendered incrementally, one project at a time. Each decision, taken on its own, is rational. The organization needs resources. The call is open. The team can manage. But the cumulative effect is an organization that has drifted, project by project, from the priorities it – and the communities it serves – set for itself.

The partnership paradox extends beyond individual projects to the organization's relationship with its own funding model. Santiago identified the structural bind: TdJ's instinct, "due to financial urgency, tends to be like 'yes' to everything" (Santiago, Interview). The organization has said no in some cases, particularly to public-sector contracts that proved too restrictive, but the general posture is acceptance because rejection means losing revenue that the organization cannot replace. Tatiana laid bare the financial mechanics: in order to remain competitive for international cooperation calls, TdJ underprices itself. "We only charge direct

costs, and we charge almost no administrative fees. Then it becomes unsustainable. And if in addition the direct thing that should be covered, which is the operation of the regional ones, is not, then it is an additional burden on the operation" (Tatiana, Interview). The result is a cycle in which TdJ takes on projects to cover its costs, but each project fails to cover its true share of the overhead, and the gap is filled by cannibalizing resources from the permanent regional operations. "You get resources to cover something else, and what you have left you send to the regional. But we should get resources to cover the regionals. That should be the focus" (Tatiana, Interview).

TdJ has attempted to address this through self-sustainability initiatives, but the results have been mixed at best. In Timbiquí, as the three-year Construir Jugando (Building by Playing) project with Fundación Selección Colombia (Colombia National Soccer Team Foundation) came to a close, TdJ purchased a boat, La Soñadora, with seed capital intended to generate independent revenue for the regional operation. But the venture stalled: leaders were too busy with their own livelihoods to manage it, and when TdJ attempted to introduce a monthly payment model for families, the community rejected it. "This went against what we do as Fundación Tiempo de Juego, which was free time activities, but without any charge. And the community was already used to the fact that we didn't charge them" (Caterine, Interview). La Soñadora's sustainability model contradicted TdJ's founding identity. The majority of the social businesses ran on ideals rather than practical metrics, and by January 2024, every one except Labzuca had been closed. The sustainability gap they were meant to fill remained open.

The deepest cost of this paradox is not organizational stress but the communities left behind. As Theme 1.1 and Theme 1.3 established, TdJ's identity is built on permanence: showing up and staying. But the partnership model imposes temporality. Funding cycles close. Projects

end. And the communities that trusted TdJ to stay are the ones who bear the cost of departure. Mariana named this plainly: "There are always projects that leave you with a bitter taste or we say: 'We did it in a very short time or we were only there for a month and we left expectations in the community and we cannot sustain that process'" (Mariana, Interview). The organization's commitment to permanence collides with its dependence on temporary funding, and the gap between the two is filled with broken promises.

Freddy, a coordinator in Timbiquí, described what this looks like on the ground. Even after stepping down from his coordination role, he still visits communities where TdJ once operated: "I have even had to arrive, now that I am not a coordinator, to parts where they are no longer operating, and they see me suddenly with this shirt and: 'Oops, the coordinator arrived.' And you start chatting with them, and I always told Nairo: 'No, we have to reintegrate those communities where the children are very enthusiastic'" (Freddy, Interview). The children are still there. The enthusiasm has not disappeared. But the programming has. "Because it is no secret to anyone that, no longer having an activity in the afternoons, they can pick up any other vice" (Freddy, Interview). The resource cycling is relentless: "There are years when it deteriorates and there are years when it improves... right now it seems that the social [psychosocial] position is being removed due to resource problems" (Freddy, Interview). Even the psychosocial position, which Freddy described as central to the TdJ's work with youth, was being cut due to resource constraints. The communities experience TdJ's presence as stable, which is precisely what makes its withdrawal so painful. Trust is built, hope is grown, and then the funding runs out.

Tatiana, seeing the structural picture with fresh eyes, posed a question that cut to the heart of TdJ's founding promise: "Can we give up having fixed headquarters and rather have the transfer?" (Tatiana, Interview). Her reasoning was blunt: "The problem remains the same, and

we have not solved it in time, in all this time, the issue of sustainability. So, maybe we have to look for other ways to do it, even if the mission is not lost and the model remains the same... but without having such a dense structure and fixed points" (Tatiana, Interview). She was not proposing to close the Bogotá office; she was questioning whether TdJ could sustain its permanent regional operations in Timbiquí and Magdalena given what those operations cost. The alternative she suggested was to embrace the AJ model more fully: go where the resources allow, leave installed capacity, and move on. Whether this represents pragmatic evolution or the beginning of a retreat from the communities TdJ has promised to serve is a question the organization had not resolved at the time of my research.

It is important to mention not all partnerships distort. Andrés credited the Street Football World network and the Red Fútbol y Paz (Football and Peace Network) with opening international doors and enabling exchanges that enriched TdJ's methodology. René described how a UK-based call funded Cambio de Juego when Colombian institutions had closed their doors. Catherine credited the Construir Jugando project with Fundación Selección Colombia as the longest and most productive partnership in Timbiquí's history. The question is not whether partnerships are good or bad but whether TdJ can maintain its community-driven identity while depending on institutions whose priorities, timelines, and reporting requirements operate by a fundamentally different logic. The partnership paradox, then, is not a flaw in TdJ's strategy; it is a condition of the sector. Organizations like TdJ, which exist to meet social needs that neither the state nor existing institutions have addressed, depend on external funding to survive, and that funding comes with strings that pull the organization away from its founding commitments. What this means for how the scaling literature treats partnerships, and for the funding architecture that produces this paradox, will be taken up in Chapter 7.

RQ4: What are the implications for growing other nonformal education programs?

The previous nine themes documented how TdJ grew, who led that growth, and what shaped it. This final question asks what it means beyond TdJ itself. The answer the interviews point toward is not a replicable model but something less portable and more significant: what a nonformal education program produces through the way it operates may matter more than the programs it delivers. One theme emerged, drawing together the threads of the previous nine.

4.1 Seeds of Change

Tiempo de Juego began as a safe space. Andrés said it plainly: "The only thing I know in life, or half know in life, is to play soccer... I said: 'I'm going to set up a football school.' But with the simple intention that they would occupy their free time, or not even, that they would laugh" (Andrés, Interview). That was the entire plan. Show up with a ball. Let the children play. Willy described what the children found: "An oasis in the middle of a desert where there is only aggression and there is only violence, and they came to Tiempo de Juego to play soccer, and they began to find that they could have fun there" (Willy, Interview). The oasis was not a classroom. It was not an NGO with a strategic plan. It was a field, a ball, and someone who kept coming back.

But the youth wanted more. Willy traced the moment the organization outgrew its own founding impulse:

Those children who reached the age of ten began to be 12, 13, 14 years old and we cannot have them playing soccer all their lives. So, we have to generate a life project for them. What are they going to do in the future?... I think it was a moment in which we had to make the decision of, "Do we just want to get them off the streets, that is, just protect them from what is happening, from the violence

that happens around them, or do we really want to go further and that they have a life plan." (Willy, Interview)

The answer was to go further. And the mechanism for going further was the pipeline. As Theme 2.2 established, TdJ's leadership structure grows its own leaders from within, beginning with the *semillero*, the seedbed. TdJ is planting seeds. What those seeds grow into is not just monitors and teachers and coordinators; it is people who carry the ethos of the organization into every part of their lives: facilitation, mediation, collective decision-making, and the discipline of reflection.

Carlos, who entered as a child in Soacha, described what this looks like: "The whole issue of life skills has hit me hard... the issue of planning everything in my life... It has also helped me with my life project" (Carlos, Interview). He then traced the trajectories of those around him: "I have colleagues who work at Juan Valdez... the Foundation helped him, directed him towards his life project, to be a bartender... One works at the reception of a hostel; he has traveled all over the world. More than five or six are in university... So, it's like 70% of the young people who have gone through that leadership process have directed their lives to be better people in society" (Carlos, Interview). Catherine described a powerful case in Timbiquí:

Right now we have a boy, who is from the indigenous community. He was a participant, then he became a monitor, then he became a leader-coach and right now he is studying languages, English in Bogotá, ...all that was the methodology, going all the way and also generating a life project for him, right?... And he is a reference for his community. A lot of guys sometimes say, "Well, I want to..." And they're all very excited about him coming back as a professional, right? These are things that also change the vision of the kids a little, and that they don't just think about staying there in their community, suddenly about agriculture, but

that they can also look at other scenarios, other ways of making a living, and learn new things (Caterine, Interview).

One life project, visible to an entire community, changes what the others believe is possible.

Andrés recalled the impact of René, David, and some of the first *monitores*: the younger children stopped wanting to be like the gang leader and started saying, “I prefer to be like this other one” (Andrés, Interview). Andrés commented at another point, “Here we offer you the opportunity to understand that the world is bigger, and that you may suddenly be able to live from what you like. And without a doubt, if you live from what you like, if you can live from your passion, if you can work on what you want, you will be a happier person. And the more happy people there are in life, the clearer the transformations will be” (Andrés, Interview). A new future had been placed within their reach.

This is what Kindervatter (1979) argued nonformal education should be. Not a supplement to formal schooling. Not a gap-filler or, as Stromquist (2007) called it, “the poor sister of schooling” (p. 60). Nonformal education, in the critical tradition, is need-oriented, endogenous, self-reliant, and based on the transformation of social structures. From the community, for the community. TdJ meets every one of those criteria. Its programs emerged from community need in Cazucá. Its leaders come from within. Its pipeline generates its own educators. And it does not simply serve the existing social order; it produces people equipped to imagine a different one.

The *semillero* monitor who learns to facilitate a coexistence match is learning more than a methodology. They are learning that rules can be made collectively, that conflict can be resolved through dialogue, that their voice matters. Egan, a teacher in Santa Marta, described “Here there is space to learn, here everyone is equal” (Egan, Interview). Caterine, in Timbiquí,

framed the same work against the backdrop of armed conflict: the pipeline offers young people "a life project with a vision different from what the environment, due to all the problems and the war, suddenly shows us. They don't see that having a rifle is something cool and gives us greatness, but that having a ball is also something that can take you to another level" (Catherine, Interview). The curriculum has value. But what the organization produces by virtue of how it acts may run deeper: growing its own leaders, trusting youth with real responsibility, staying present year after year until the community stops expecting it to leave.

Foley (1999) argued that the most significant learning often happens not through designed curricula but through the process of social action itself: people "stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values and choice." This learning is "gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses." TdJ's staff and leaders have been engaged in sustained social action for nearly twenty years. The informal learning that has accumulated through that engagement, about power, about community, about what it means to offer hope in a place where hope is not supposed to survive, is not captured in any management report. It lives in the people. Willy called himself 'the first beneficiary of Tiempo de Juego' (Willy, Interview). René joined because he "saw a space to do other things, but it turned into doing other things for other people" (René, Interview). Leicy credits Tiempo de Juego for the way her community sees her: "Previously I was just another ordinary girl... Today, many, both children and parents, see me as that exemplary person who is active on the fields and doing something for the children of our territory" (Leicy, Interview). These transformations were not planned. The organization transforms its communities. The communities transform the organization. And the people inside are changed by both.

Freire (1970) insisted that education is never neutral. It either reinforces existing power structures or challenges them. TdJ does not call its work political. But offering an alternative in a context that profits from the absence of alternatives is itself a political act. When Labzuca trained youth to tell their own neighborhood's story, "not with the look that pointed out that it was a dangerous neighborhood... but they told from their place, 'I like this neighborhood, cool things happen here'" (Andrés, Interview), that was a political act. When Catherine mixed boys' and girls' teams in a territory described in Theme 3.2 as deeply machista, that was a political act (Catherine, Interview). When René carried TdJ's methodology into a correctional facility "to make it a little more harmonious," that was a political act (René, Interview). None of these were planned as political interventions. All of them challenged what was considered normal. Rigoberto on his purpose and the mission of TdJ observed:

In Colombia, in the situations that we live in, no profession should be absent from the social sense, but on the contrary, it should ensure that its work has a social impact or that they are not unaware of it or are indifferent, because otherwise they would be part of the problem. So, basically it is proposed that people believe that Tiempo de Juego is a place in which they can develop their life project and that they believe in the purpose as part of that project as well. That's it, that's the message. (Rigoberto, Interview).

The message is simple: your life project should serve more than yourself.

Luisa named what that looks like in practice. Describing the youth in her programs, she said: 'They could not imagine themselves without Tiempo de Juego, and their life was in Tiempo de Juego. That when what we want and what I think should be is that Tiempo de Juego... is a springboard for them to catapult themselves into a life project' (Luisa, Interview). A springboard, not a home. The purpose of the pipeline is not to retain people but to launch them.

And when it works, what it launches into the world are not employees or beneficiaries but change agents: people who carry the experience of being heard, the practice of resolving conflict through dialogue, and the conviction that their community deserves better. They themselves became proof that change was possible. Their example reached further than anyone anticipated.

In Cazucá, Willy described how TdJ navigated the presence of armed actors in three stages. At first, the gangs ignored them: "The gangs didn't mess with us, or they never cared that Tiempo de Juego was there, because they saw us as totally harmless" (Willy, Interview). Being underestimated was, paradoxically, a form of protection. As the program grew, the dynamic shifted: "There were already so many of us, or the group was so large... that even these armed groups, or these gangs... were already afraid of us" (Willy, Interview). The community had organized around TdJ to such an extent that interference would have meant confronting not an NGO but a neighborhood. And then something deeper happened. The gang members themselves began sending their children:

These young people who were already in crime, surely had children or have children, and they have brothers, and they have nephews, and they know that the life they chose is not the best, so... it was better that their children or their grandchildren... were in Tiempo de Juego because it was a way to isolate them from that violence that they had always experienced. (Willy, Interview)

Those who have fallen victim to the cycle of violence are now choosing to break it by sending their children to TdJ. They do not mess with us, Willy explained, "because they know that Tiempo de Juego is perhaps the only opportunity that relatives had to not fall into the same thing that they were" (Willy, Interview). What began as indifference became protection, and that soon turned into belief in a different future. When the people inside the cycle of violence choose a

different future for their children and kin, something has shifted that no program evaluation can measure.

What the evidence across all four research questions reveals is an organization whose most significant products are not its programs but the people who carry its ethos into their communities. The pipeline does not simply staff TdJ; it develops leaders who emerge from the same streets they now serve. The curriculum has value, but what the organization produces by virtue of how it operates, growing its own leaders, trusting youth with real responsibility, staying present year after year until the community stops expecting it to leave, runs deeper.

The implication for other nonformal education programs is not a formula to follow but a set of questions to ask. Does your organization grow its own leaders from the communities it serves, or does it import them? Are you willing to be changed by the communities you enter, or do you arrive with a fixed methodology and a reporting template? Does the way your organization operates, its culture, its hiring, its internal relationships, teach the same values your curriculum does? Do you accept external funding, and if so, are you prepared for the challenges it will provide to your culture, your mission, and your ability to place the community first in decision-making? And do you understand what your organization produces, not only through its programs, but through the informal learning that accumulates in the people who live it year after year?

The seeds TdJ has planted are not programs. They are people.

Chapter 7: The Forest

Throughout this dissertation, I have relied on the metaphor of a tree: seeds, soil, roots, transplants, branches, pruning, harvests, droughts, storms.

The scaling literature offers a different image: interventions, inputs, fidelity, replication, benchmarks, targets, dissemination, rollout. It never acknowledges its own metaphor. But if I apply the scaling literature's language to something living, this is what I see: a laboratory for cloning. Sterile steel tables. Fluorescent light. The plant has been identified as a successful intervention, and now it must be taken to scale. A technician makes a precise incision, removes a cutting, and places it in a controlled environment: curated soil, optimal proportions of carbon and nitrogen, a replication protocol designed to ensure fidelity to the original specimen. With the correct, precise inputs, the standardized growing conditions, and a monitoring framework to track its progress, it will be declared a successful pilot plant, and the model will be ready for dissemination. The new plant joins the franchise. It will be evaluated against the same benchmarks, sustained through the same resource mobilization strategy, and reported on through the same reporting template. The theory of change has been validated. The intervention can now be rolled out across target sites.

TdJ grew nothing like this. A man showed up with a ball. Children came because other children invited them. Trust was built through consistency. Leaders emerged not through a capacity-building initiative but because a twelve-year-old wanted to keep playing. The methodology was not designed in a headquarters and disseminated to implementing partners. It was discovered on a field in Cazucá and reimagined by every community it touched. The soil was not curated. The rain was not scheduled. And what grew was not a specimen. It was a movement.

If not the laboratory, then what? The alternative image, for me, was always a forest. Trees grow. They are enriched and supported by their local ecosystem. When they grow, they provide oxygen, retain water and nutrients in the soil, offer protection during storms and shade under the sun. The relationship between the tree and its environment is reciprocal: the tree feeds the ecosystem, and the ecosystem feeds the tree. It does not require an outside injection of resources, because the environment is rich enough. Nature tends toward balance. There is no discussion of sustainability within a forest.

I brought this image with me to Colombia. And then the participants gave it back to me in their own words: Nairo's tree that grew wild and was shaken by a storm, the *semillero* that names TdJ's entry-level monitors after a seedbed, the imagery of their own psychosocial tree. I did not impose the metaphor. I didn't have to.

The world is far from balance, and there are deserts everywhere: of resources, of education, of peace. Scaling, as the literature describes it, is like trying to bring a tree to a desert. If we just bring enough resources, this tree can grow. But without the right soil, without the ecosystem around it, how can it take root and grow into something that feeds its environment and is fed by it? It cannot. Not alone. There must be a symbiotic relationship: tree to ecosystem, ecosystem to tree. The laboratory conditions the scaling literature imagines do not exist. The precision instruments fall short. The reporting template cannot measure the roots growing underground.

So what must be done? Accept the mess. A forest floor is messy. That is where things grow.

And what moves between the trees is not instructions from a headquarters. It is cross-pollination. TdJ's staff and youth travel between communities, carrying what they have learned

in one place to another, and bringing back what they find. Magdalena's arts programming traveled to Soacha. Timbiquí's inter-ethnic bridge-building taught the whole organization. Youth from Pacific coast communities visit Cazucá for an immersion and return home carrying something that will grow differently in their own soil. This movement defies a hierarchy. There is no center dispensing knowledge to a periphery. There are organisms in a relationship, enriching each other through contact, each one changed by the encounter. The scaling literature has no framework for this. It has pathways, stages, drivers, and resources. It does not have pollination.

The scaling literature's closest gesture toward this reality is the concept of adaptation. Mickelsson et al. (2019) describe a "proactive, critically engaged adaptation to the specific character of the designated context" (p. 137), and that is more humanizing than most of the literature manages. What TdJ's case reveals is something closer to adoption: when a seed, a youth, or an idea takes root in different soil, with full agency over the direction of its growth, a different tree grows. It may closely resemble the original. It may be a different height, with different leaves, even different flowers. But it belongs to the soil it grew in, not to the place the seed came from.

I have come to dislike the word scaling. To scale, in its English usage, carries the connotations of engineering: an algorithm, a series of discrete and exact steps to increase size, scope, and reach. Scale a server. Scale a production line. The assumption embedded in the word is that the unit has been solved and what remains is replication. Turn the dial. More of the same, louder. The word leaves no room for a twelve-year-old who showed up because his friend told him there were snacks. Their language evokes the laboratory. The forest is mine.

The metaphor is an aspiration, not a description. Tiempo de Juego has always depended on resources from outside its ecosystem. How it grew and what it grew with those resources is what makes the case worth studying. The question is what those resources cost. What does it mean when the thing that makes an organization worth scaling is the very thing that scaling threatens to erode? This chapter addresses that question. It names a paradox the existing literature does not, extends Mickelsson et al.'s (2019) scaling-as-learning framework in four directions, and argues that the most significant product of scaling nonformal education may be the informal learning that accumulates in the people who live it.

The Formalization Paradox

The scaling literature is, almost entirely, a top-down literature. It describes how organizations, institutions, and external actors expand programs into new contexts. Uvin and Miller (1994) identified four types of scaling, all of which promote "institutionalization, formalization, professionalism, bureaucratization, distance between leaders and rank-and-file members." Geels (2004) described this as the niche-to-regime transition, in which flexibility gives way to codification and "deep structure." Moore, Riddell, and Vocisano (2015) offered a gentler version through concept replication, but even that requires enough structure to package knowledge and ensure consistency. The scaling literature, in all its variations, assumes that formalization is the pathway through which impact grows. The costs it acknowledges are organizational: growing pains, bureaucratic drag, the predictable distance between founders and staff. Uvin called these inevitable. The literature treats them as an acceptable tradeoff.

TdJ's case reveals what that framing misses. The costs of formalization are not only organizational. They are human, relational, democratic, and philosophical.

The critical nonformal education literature describes something that moves in the opposite direction: education that emerges from the community, from the grassroots. Kindervatter (1979), building on Freire's earlier work and echoed by Stromquist (2007, 2015), argued that nonformal education should be need-oriented, endogenous, self-reliant, and based on the transformation of social structures. Stromquist called nonformal education "the poor sister of schooling" (2007, p. 60), not to diminish it but to name the hierarchy that marginalizes it and argued that "education outside social structures regulated by certificates, exams, and selection offers a greater possibility for the creation and transmission of transformative knowledge" (2007, p. 29). Freire (1970) insisted that education is never neutral: it either reinforces existing power structures or challenges them. In this tradition, what makes nonformal education transformative is precisely its distance from formal institutional structures. The informality, the organic character of how leaders emerge, the relational warmth, the porousness that lets people wander in, the play that precedes the pedagogy: these are not deficiencies to be corrected through professionalization. They are the active ingredients.

TdJ lives in the space between these two demands: formalize to survive or protect the informality that makes the work transformative. Every act of formalization that made scaling possible also risked eroding the qualities that made the organization worth scaling.

A distinction is necessary here. Nonformal education and informal learning are not the same thing. TdJ's nonformal programs, its Metodología Convivencial (Coexistence Methodology), the Escuela de Liderazgo (Leadership School), Aprender Jugando's (Learning by Playing) three-phase transfer model, are structured, intentional, and designed. They are nonformal in the sense Kindervatter (1979), Stromquist (2007), and the broader critical tradition use the term: education that operates outside the formal system but with clear pedagogical

purpose. Informal learning, as Foley (1999) described it, is something different: "gained informally, through experience, by acting and reflecting on action, rather than in formal courses" (p. 64). It emerges not from designed curricula but from sustained social action, when people "stand back from it and reorder it, using concepts like power, conflict, structure, values and choice" (p. 64). In TdJ's case, the nonformal structure creates the conditions. The informal learning emerges through participation in what those structures make possible. This distinction matters because what formalization threatens is not TdJ's nonformal programs themselves, which can be codified and transferred, even credentialed, but the informal qualities that make those programs transformative: the way trust is built, the way leaders emerge, the way communities come to feel that the organization is theirs.

The evidence for this paradox ran through nine of ten themes in Chapter 6. TdJ had to formalize to survive, and every formalization carried a cost the scaling literature does not name. Human costs: relationships shifted from vocational to transactional as the organization professionalized, and the pipeline that produces organic intellectuals depends on organic conditions that formalization disrupts (Themes 2.2, 2.3). Relational costs: trust built through years of presence cracked under project-cycle timelines, and communities that TdJ entered and then could not sustain were left with broken promises (Themes 1.3, 3.3). Democratic costs: the horizontal culture rooted in TdJ's own pedagogy gave way to hierarchy as the organization grew, and community voice moved further from decision-making (Theme 2.1). Programmatic costs: funder requirements distorted what was offered, reshaped participant numbers by quota rather than community demand, and imposed ethics constructed outside the community's context (Theme 3.3). And a philosophical cost the literature has no language for: formalize the pipeline into a human resources process and it stops producing change agents; depoliticize programming

into service delivery and it stops challenging the existing order; treat communities as recipients and what travels is a method, not a movement (Theme 4.1).

Two of these costs deserve particular attention because they strike at the foundations Chapter 6 documented most extensively. The relational cost is not abstract. In Cazucá, Andrés spent years walking, listening, and immersing himself in the community before TdJ became what it is. In Timbiquí, Catherine described communities lining up to participate. That trust was built through consistency, through showing up when others had left, through proving the organization would stay. Project-cycle funding can compress that timeline into four months to a year, and when the project ends and TdJ cannot sustain its presence, the broken promise damages not only the specific community but the organization's credibility in neighboring ones. The democratic cost is equally specific. TdJ's horizontal aspiration is not just organizational culture. It is embedded in the pedagogy: coexistence teaches collective rule-making, the pipeline teaches shared voice, the methodology itself models the participatory decision-making the organization aspires to internally. When the organization's structure contradicts what its programming teaches, staff feel the contradiction at every level. The circle and the ladder are not just competing organizational models. They are competing values, and the ladder's advance is felt as a betrayal of what drew people to TdJ in the first place.

Uvin was right: organizational scaling requires internal structure. But his framework does not account for what that prescription costs when applied to an organization whose transformative power comes from the very qualities that resist structure. Uvin's model assumes organizations can steer their own growth. TdJ's was driven by coincidence, relational networks, and community demand rather than strategic planning. And formalization pulls against the very criteria that make TdJ transformative. The more TdJ depends on international cooperation for

survival, the less endogenous it becomes. The more its methodology is packaged for transfer, the less room there is for the organic emergence that made it work. The more accountable TdJ must be to funders, the less accountable it can be to the communities it serves.

There is a subtler cost. The logic of bottom-up, community-based education begins with whoever shows up, especially those with nowhere else to go. It strengthens the chain from its weakest link. The logic of formalization trends in the opposite direction: institutional investment flows toward proven performers, credentials go to those who have already risen, and organizational energy concentrates at the top of the pipeline rather than its base. TdJ began by serving the children Willy described as the worst cases. The Escuela de Liderazgo now invests most heavily in the pipeline's strongest. The university credentials go to monitors who have already made it through. The founding impulse was to start at the bottom. Formalization has quietly redirected institutional energy toward the top.

INEE's (2020) taxonomy reflects its origins as a network for Education in Emergencies, a lens that privileges pathways back to formal schooling and positions nonformal education as a temporary substitute rather than a transformative practice in its own right. Its classification of programs like TdJ as "Other NFE" implies a lesser form of education that fills gaps the formal system leaves open, rather than a complementary necessity. TdJ's evidence challenges this directly. The "Other NFE" programming that INEE places at the bottom of its taxonomy may be the most transformative category precisely because it is not constrained by certification requirements or standardized curricula. Stromquist's "poor sister" is not poor at all. She is doing work the older siblings cannot. And yet: by 2023, TdJ had begun partnering with the Universidad de Monserrate and the Universidad Javeriana to offer certified diploma programs through the Escuela de Liderazgo, with four cohorts of community leaders receiving formal credentials in

community playful leadership. The certification did not make TdJ transformative; TdJ was already transformative and then added credentials. The INEE hierarchy would have dismissed TdJ before the university partnerships existed. What the certification does is formalize what the pipeline had already produced, giving institutional recognition to learning that was happening informally all along. This is formalization done in service of the community rather than in service of a funder's taxonomy, and it suggests that the relationship between nonformal and formal need not be adversarial when the nonformal program controls the terms. But controlling the terms is not what the literature envisions as success. Geels (2004) frames this trajectory as the goal: innovations succeed when they move from niche to regime, when the formal system absorbs them. For nonformal education, that logic inverts. State adoption of TdJ's methodology would not validate it; it would formalize away the very qualities that make it transformative. The niche is not a stage to pass through. It is the space that allows organizations like TdJ to remain responsive to the communities they serve.

The scaling literature also assumes linear growth trajectories. TdJ's reality is waves, contractions, crises, and recoveries, a tree that grew wild, was pruned, was hit by a storm, and is now approaching something like adulthood. When the literature assumes linearity, organizations that contract feel as though they have failed rather than recognizing contraction as a phase. Unrealistic conceptions of growth create harm: projects taken haphazardly because the revenue model demands it, communities entered and abandoned when funding runs out, staff burned out by relentless cycling. The literature, and the field, needs a framework for non-linear pathways, not just for growth that goes up and to the right.

There is a further tension. Aprender Jugando, the methodology that now drives TdJ's expansion, is temporary by design: enter a community, transfer the methodology, build installed

capacity, and leave. TdJ's founding identity promises the opposite: permanence. The formalization paradox pushes TdJ toward the temporary model because project-cycle funding demands discrete, time-bound deliverables. The organization's newest growth edge and its deepest source of legitimacy operate on contradictory timelines, and every scaling decision navigates between them.

The formalization paradox, then, is a condition every nonformal education organization that attempts to scale will encounter. TdJ's experience suggests a principle: formalize the conditions under which organic, informal, relational processes continue to happen. Protect the emergence. The nonformal structure can be codified. The informal learning that emerges through it cannot and should not be.

But the paradox as stated assumes the current funding architecture is fixed. The formalization paradox exists in its present form because international cooperation operates on a transactional logic: we fund, you perform, we evaluate. If funding operated as facilitation rather than transaction, if the verbs were support and accompany rather than monitor and report, the paradox would soften considerably. TdJ would formalize when formalization served the community, not when it satisfied a funder's reporting template. But this is not simply a matter of better implementation. Sriprakash (2023) argues that the development industry cannot be “fixed” within its own terms, that it has been “active in the maintenance of injustice” rather than its redress. The formalization paradox is not a bug in the system. It is the system working as designed: organizations like TdJ are shaped in the image of funders whose priorities, timelines, and accountability structures were never built with communities like Cazucá or Timbiquí in mind. The formalization paradox is not inherent to nonformal education. It is inherent to the

funding architecture that currently governs it. Change the architecture and the paradox changes too.

There is a further horizon worth naming. If nonformal education succeeds fully, if it transforms the social structures that made it necessary, then the work shifts from transformative to affirming. The community that once needed TdJ to show its children a different future becomes a community that produces those futures on its own. Nonformal education that works perfectly eliminates the conditions that define it. That is not a failure. It is the point. But it is also, if Sriprakash (2023) is right, precisely the outcome the current architecture is not designed to produce.

Scaling-as-Learning: Extending Mickelsson

Mickelsson et al. (2019) proposed that scaling is a learning process in which the scaling object, subjects, and sites all transform through the encounter. TdJ's case, documented across Themes 3.1, 3.2, 1.2, 2.2, and 4.1, confirms this framework. It also extends it in four ways that the framework, as currently formulated, does not capture.

Co-Authorship, Not Just Adaptation

Mickelsson et al. (2019) describes the scaling object undergoing "proactive, critically engaged adaptation." TdJ's communities did something more. They did not merely adapt what arrived. They co-authored what it became. Timbiquí ran the programming on the tide, translated sessions for children who did not speak Spanish, bridged Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, and confronted gender norms the methodology had never encountered. Ciénaga's youth rejected the programming TdJ proposed and pushed until they arrived at something that

was genuinely theirs. What TdJ is in Timbiquí is not an adaptation of what TdJ is in Soacha. It is a different thing that shares a lineage.

This is Freire's (1970) dissolution of the teacher-student binary applied to organizational scaling. Both teach, both learn, and both are transformed. The evidence from Theme 1.2 reinforces this: Magdalena's arts programming flowed back to Soacha. Timbiquí taught TdJ about inter-ethnic bridge-building. Santa Marta conducted a methodology transfer independently. The learning was not only flowing outward from the center. It was flowing in every direction.

This extension has an implication the scaling literature has not confronted. If the scaling object is genuinely co-authored at each site, then the question the literature asks, how do we take what works here and bring it there, may be the wrong question. The better question is: how do we help communities discover what works for them? And beyond that: what do those communities have to teach the organizations that enter them? Every community should have the opportunity to start its own movement, the agency to choose which movements it joins, and the power to shape what those movements become. Scaling that begins with “how can I help?”, follows with “this is what I can do for you,” and closes with “what can I learn from you?” is invitation. Scaling that skips the first and third questions is imposition, however well-intentioned. Aprender Jugando at its best does the former. The Guapi event is what it looks like when an organization arrives with answers instead of questions.

Informal Learning as the Deeper Product

Mickelsson's framework tracks the transformation of objects, subjects, and sites. What it does not track is the informal learning that accumulates in the people who live inside the scaling process year after year. Chapter 6 introduced Foley (1999) to name the informal learning visible

across TdJ's staff and leaders. Here, the claim goes further: the scaling-as-learning framework needs this dimension.

Theme 3.1 documented how Andrés, asked whether growth had improved impact, answered with doubt rather than certainty: "I would be lying to you if I told you: 'I think now the impact is better.'" That doubt is not a failure of leadership. It is what Foley describes: critical learning that emerges when people stand back from experience and reorder it using concepts like power, conflict, and choice. Theme 4.1 traced this learning across the organization: Rigoberto saying the game "changed the perspective of the world... and it changed me"; Andrés describing his evolving role as the "grounding pole that preserves the essence of TdJ." These are not programmatic outcomes. They are the products of two decades of sustained social action.

Mickelsson asks what the scaling object, subjects, and sites learn through scaling. Foley asks what people learn through the experience of social action itself. TdJ's case suggests that the informal learning produced through the process of scaling may matter more than the formal scaling outcomes the literature measures. This is the answer to the question Chapter 2 posed: what informal learning is achieved while scaling nonformal education? The learning is everywhere, in everyone, and it does not stop when the program ends.

TdJ's case shows that the organizational transformation and the human transformation are not separate processes. They are a cycle. The methodology changes because the people change. The people change because the communities change. The communities change because the methodology meets them where they are. Scaling-as-learning and Freirean pedagogy are, in TdJ's case, the same thing operating at different scales. The informal learning Foley describes is what accumulates with each turn.

Organic Intellectuals and the Pipeline as Scaling-as-Learning in Institutional Form

TdJ's leadership pipeline, documented in Theme 2.2, extends Mickelsson's framework in a way his categories do not anticipate. In Mickelsson's formulation, scaling subjects are "engaged as active partners in adapting, re-contextualising and developing the activity." TdJ's monitors go further: the scaling subjects ARE the scaling object. The pipeline does not just participate in scaling. It is both the method of scaling and the thing that is scaled. Each generation of leaders carries the learning forward, and each new community produces a new generation. The framework's distinction between object and subject collapses.

Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison about Italian factory workers and adult education, theorized that every social group creates its own intellectuals organically, leaders whose authority derives from shared experience rather than credentials (Mayo, 1999). The context could not be more different. But the concept travels. The monitors who grew up in Cazucá and now teach children who face the same pressures they once did are organic intellectuals in practice. What the pipeline produces goes beyond staffing. It produces change agents who carry the ethos of the organization, facilitation, mediation, collective decision-making, and the discipline of reflection, into families and communities and careers TdJ itself may never reach. This is Kindervatter's (1979) transformative nonformal education made personal: not a curriculum that teaches democratic values but an organizational experience that cultivates them.

The shared vocabulary documented in Theme 2.3, "organic," "horizontal," "family," and the first-Saturday origin story repeated across regions and hierarchies, fits what Gramsci described as a historical bloc: a shared consciousness and common language that unites a group across internal differences and gives its collective project coherence and durability (Mayo, 1999). The context is radically different from the European industrial setting Gramsci wrote

from. The concept travels further than Gramsci intended. TdJ did not set out to build a historical bloc. But what emerges from the interviews is a shared narrative that binds the organization across geography and hierarchy and gives its work a durability that does not depend on any single leader, funder, or program.

Unreplicable Magic

The scaling literature assumes, as a premise, that what works in one place can be made to work in another. Willy is not so sure.

If you ask me how to choose [youth leaders], it's pure instinct. There is no exact table that says I have to find that they have these studies or that they have... no. There is something much more deep down that is very, very human. And it is wanting to do things, and that cannot be determined by a profile, but rather that there is something that one feels that the person is. Sometimes it may be yes, and we get the leaders right, but other times it may not be and the projects fall through. With Tiempo de Juego it works in Cazucá. By chance, because the young people who were there arrived... But it was a matter of chance, of destiny, of the cosmos, of the universe that aligned itself so that exactly who they were would arrive. That's what's hard to do in other places.' (Willy, Interview)

This is not false modesty. It is an honest accounting of what scaling can and cannot do. What can be transferred is a methodology, a set of principles, a philosophy. The three-phase AJ model, the coexistence approach, the installed capacity philosophy: these travel. But the alchemy of specific people in a specific place at a specific moment cannot be manufactured. The trust Andres built over years, the particular children who showed up on the first Saturday, Willy living across the street, and the community chemistry that turned a football school into a social movement: this cannot be packaged.

The scaling-as-learning framework should incorporate this finding. The learning that occurs through scaling includes, eventually, learning that cannot be replicated. The literature's assumption of transferability has limits, and honoring those limits is not a concession. It is intellectual honesty. But the story does not end there. TdJ's experience in Timbiquí and Santa Marta suggests that when the right principles are shared, new magic can spark. The alchemy of Cazucá cannot be reproduced. But the conditions under which alchemy becomes possible can be cultivated: trust, time, local leadership, community ownership, and play as invitation. Aprender Jugando does not transplant Cazucá. It provides the seeds and the growing conditions, and what grows is something new.

Contributions and Future Research

The methodological boundaries of this study are discussed in Chapter 3. Within those boundaries, this dissertation makes several contributions.

Seeds Planted - Contributions

This dissertation's central contribution is the formalization paradox: a framework for understanding what happens when organizations whose transformative power comes from informality, relationality, and organic emergence are compelled to formalize in order to grow. The scaling literature prescribes formalization without accounting for what it costs organizations like TdJ. The critical NFE literature warns against formalization without offering a way to scale without it. The paradox names the space between these two demands and offers a principle for navigating it. Formalize the structures that create space for organic processes: the schedule, the methodology, and the pipeline's architecture. Protect what emerges through them: the trust, the leaders, the learning, and the sense of community ownership that no program design can

manufacture. The dissertation further argues that this paradox is not inherent to nonformal education. It is inherent to the funding architecture that currently governs it. Change the architecture, from transactional to facilitative, and the paradox changes too. This framework speaks to any practitioner, funder, or scholar working with grassroots organizations that are asked to professionalize or bureaucratize in exchange for support. The costs documented here, human, relational, democratic, programmatic, and philosophical, are not unique to TdJ. They are structural features of the current relationship between nonformal education and the institutions that fund it.

The second contribution is the extension of Mickelsson et al.'s (2019) scaling-as-learning framework in four directions. TdJ's case pushes the framework from adaptation to co-authorship, from organizational transformation to informal learning as the deeper and more durable product, from scaling subjects as participants to scaling subjects as the scaling object itself, and from assumed transferability to the honest acknowledgment of an unreplicable remainder. Together, these extensions reframe scaling as something that happens with communities rather than to them, and they bridge Mickelsson's organizational-level framework with Freire's human-level insistence that both teach, both learn, and both are transformed. For researchers studying scaling processes, these extensions offer a vocabulary for what current frameworks leave out: the agency of receiving communities, the learning that accumulates in people rather than programs, and the honest limits of transferability. Of these, the informal learning dimension may be the most significant. Documented through Foley's (1999) lens, the learning is everywhere, in everyone. It is what the people inside TdJ describe when they talk about how the work changed them, and it is what they carry into their families, careers, and communities long after the program ends.

This study also provides the first detailed case study of a Colombian sport-for-development organization's scaling trajectory. The scaling literature draws overwhelmingly from health, agriculture, and formal education interventions. Sport-for-development programs, and nonformal education programs more broadly, are largely absent from that evidence base. TdJ's case offers a counterweight example: an organization that scaled not through institutional channels but through community trust, organic leadership, and a methodology that was reinvented at every site it entered. In doing so, it offers a documented case for Gramsci's organic intellectuals and historical bloc operating inside a contemporary nonformal education organization, tracing not just the concept but the pipeline through which organic intellectuals are produced.

The study further challenges the INEE (2020) classification of programs like TdJ as "Other NFE," a designation that diminishes its impact within the nonformal education taxonomy. TdJ was already transformative before it added university-partnered credentials. What the certification did was formalize learning that was already happening informally, giving institutional recognition to what the pipeline had produced on its own. This suggests that the relationship between nonformal and formal education need not be adversarial when the nonformal program and/or the communities controls the terms, and that the INEE hierarchy may be measuring the wrong things.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this dissertation gives faces to a literature that has largely operated without them. The scaling literature speaks of organizations, interventions, and pathways. This study speaks of Andrés, who showed up with a ball and spent years gaining trust. Of Willy, who watched Andrés arrive with suspicion and years later called himself 'the first beneficiary of Tiempo de Juego.' Of René, who turned his own incarceration into a program for

youth living within and also leaving the justice system. Of Yuri, whose operation contracted from seven communities to four when the budget ran out, leaving behind communities she knew still needed the program. Of Carlos, whose mother invited strangers with a soccer ball and changed the trajectory of a family. Of the twenty-one others whose journeys with and through TdJ fill these pages. The people, and what happened to them, for better and for worse, as TdJ grew, is what the scaling literature has no framework to measure.

Seeds For Future Growth - Future Research Directions

Perhaps most important is a longitudinal perspective. This case study, despite spanning interviews from August 2023 through February 2024, is a snapshot looking backward. What has happened since is already raising questions the snapshot cannot answer. A new Director General was named in September 2023 and stayed approximately two years. As of January 2026, Andrés appears to have assumed the role permanently. Many of the directors interviewed for this study, some of whom had been with the organization for over a decade, have since left. Timbiquí, which features prominently in these pages, appears to have closed. And TdJ has launched a project in Madrid, Spain, where Santiago relocated to pursue a master's degree, a pivot that may signal a new chapter in the organization's scaling story. Each of these developments speaks directly to the formalization paradox, the leadership pipeline, and the tensions documented in Chapter 6. A follow-up study, even two or three years from now, would reveal whether the crisis deepened the formalization paradox and the costs it carries, or whether TdJ found ways to navigate it that this snapshot could not yet capture.

This study locates what Westley et al. (2014) describe as the glass ceiling for social innovation not in the organization but in the funding ecosystem. TdJ's methodology works. Its pipeline produces leaders. Its communities trust it. What limits it is the architecture of

international cooperation. Future research should examine that architecture directly: what would facilitative rather than transactional funding look like? What would it mean to fund organizations like TdJ on their own terms, with timelines set by community trust rather than project cycles? The 2025 cancellation of 83% of USAID programs worldwide, including the near-total elimination in education-related funding to Colombia, has made this question urgent in a way it was not when this dissertation began. My proposed Fulbright research takes up this question directly: a qualitative study of how Colombian education civil society organizations adapt to the sudden withdrawal of \$216 million in USAID funding, conducted in partnership with Universidad de los Andes (Crawford & Gelandar, 2025; ACAPS, 2025; ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d.). If the formalization paradox describes what happens when NFE organizations formalize to meet funder requirements, the USAID withdrawal asks what happens when the funder disappears from the ecosystem entirely. Do organizations find new autonomy, or new dependencies? Does the formalization remain even after the force that imposed it is gone? What new funders enter the ecosystem, and what impact do they have?

The communities Aprender Jugando has entered deserve their own study. In one example, a private hotel on a tourist island contracted TdJ to bring its methodology to help navigate the challenge of building a positive relationship between the hotel and the surrounding community. How does the installed capacity of TdJ's methodology and ideals hold up against the pressures of commercial tourism? In another, if TdJ has in fact left Timbiquí, a study of what remained after departure, what survived, what didn't, and what the community built on its own, would test the permanence question directly. The installed capacity philosophy is TdJ's answer to how an organization built on presence justifies leaving. Whether that answer holds in practice, years after the formal programming ends, remains unknown.

Finally, this is a single case. The formalization paradox emerged from TdJ's story, but whether it is specific to TdJ or a general condition of scaling nonformal education can only be answered by studying more organizations, in more contexts, with different funding dynamics, different cultural settings, and different relationships to the state. Each new case would add voices, depth, and detail that a single study cannot provide. Comparative research across countries and types of nonformal education would test whether the paradox holds, whether the Mickelsson extensions apply beyond this case, and whether the forest metaphor, an alternative to the scaling literature's implicit language of engineering, resonates with practitioners and scholars working in other contexts. The more cases that are documented with this level of detail, the stronger the foundation for a literature that currently has very few.

Conclusion

How did Tiempo de Juego grow from one location to two others in Colombia? It began with one man, a ball, and a group of children in Cazucá. It grew because those children brought others, because the adults who showed up kept showing up, and because the young people who came through the program became its next generation of leaders. It failed first. An early attempt to transplant the program to a new city collapsed because TdJ tried to replicate itself rather than grow something new. That failure forced a reckoning. The organization could not scale its presence, but it could scale what it knew. It built a methodology transfer program that entered communities, trained local leaders, and left the work in their hands. It started social businesses to generate its own income. It sought outside funding to sustain what volunteerism alone could not. And it formalized, because funders required it, because growth demanded it, because there was no other way to keep the lights on across three regions.

But formalization carried costs the scaling literature does not name: human, relational, democratic, and philosophical. Relationships shifted from vocational to transactional. Communities were entered and abandoned when project cycles ended. The horizontal culture rooted in TdJ's own pedagogy gave way to hierarchy. Funder requirements reshaped what was offered and to whom. The organization said yes to nearly everything because it had to, and the mission drifted under the weight of always saying yes. This is the formalization paradox, and it is not a problem TdJ failed to solve. It is the condition of scaling nonformal education under the funding architecture that currently governs it. What the scaling literature misses, and what Mickelsson's scaling-as-learning framework begins but does not finish, is that the most important transformations are not organizational. They are human. The people inside TdJ, the monitors, the coordinators, the communities, were changed through the process of growth itself, and became change agents capable of carrying what they learned into families, careers, and communities the organization may never reach.

On May 1, 2023, a small Cessna crashed in the Amazon jungle of Colombia. On board were a pilot, a mother, and four children. On May 16, the search team found the plane and recovered the adult bodies, including the children's mother. The search intensified with hope that the children were somehow still alive. On May 30th, they found footprints, giving them some hope. On June 9, forty days after the crash, a search team found the four children alive. They were members of the indigenous Huitoto people. They had survived by relying on the knowledge passed down in their community. President Gustavo Petro said: "The jungle saved them. They are children of the jungle, and now they are also children of Colombia." In the weeks before my research trip, the message I heard in news stories and conversations was that the children's survival proved the value of preserving local knowledge and traditions. Petro called it a different

path forward for Colombia: "the meeting of knowledge: indigenous and military. This is the true path of peace" (Associated Press, 2023). A powerful story. And a powerful metaphor for a dissertation that has argued, across seven chapters, that the pressure to formalize strips away respect for the local, the organic, the knowledge that grows in the soil rather than arriving from outside. But the story does not end there.

On July 17, 2023, I sat in the airport with Willy waiting to fly to Guapi, on Colombia's Pacific coast, for an Aprender Jugando event. We had not seen each other in person since 2016. As we sat, we caught up. Willy is a storyteller, and he had a story to explain why we were flying to Guapi instead of directly to Timbiquí. A few months earlier, he and two colleagues had been in an airport, headed to conduct an Aprender Jugando training in San José del Guaviare. Before they could board, the pilot told them they could not come. A local guerrilla group had learned of their arrival and threatened the pilot. Willy understood. It was not the first time. He went to tell his colleagues they would be unable to complete their assignment. Then the pilot approached them again: a mother and four children needed to get to San José del Guaviare. Would Willy give them his tickets? He agreed without hesitation.

A few hours later, Willy's phone began ringing. His colleagues from Tiempo de Juego had seen the news. The plane he was supposed to be on had crashed in the Amazon. Willy looked at me with tears in his eyes, exhaled a small laugh, and said, "Esteban told me I had to thank the guerrillas for saving my life." A dark joke, certainly. Just one of the moments I found myself wrestling with the complexity of Colombia. The guerrillas who kept Willy off that plane are part of the same architecture of violence that TdJ's children grow up inside. The armed actors who recruit teenagers in Timbiquí, who enforce curfews in Guapi, who displaced Jasmín's family, who murdered twenty-two young men in Soacha and called them guerrillas to inflate a

body count. The same forces that created the conditions in which Tiempo de Juego became necessary. Violence saved Willy's life. Willy has spent his life building something that makes violence unnecessary.

Peace is a threat to violence. It is why the guerrillas did not want Willy and his colleagues to come to an indigenous community under their control. It is why Willy and the youth leaders in Guapi warned the Save the Children staff not to enter an ELN neighborhood. It is why the work of TdJ is so important. Tiempo de Juego brings the seeds of peace. The children in the Amazon survived because their community had given them the knowledge to survive. Tiempo de Juego did not bring salvation to the children in Cazucá, in Timbiquí, in Ciénaga and Santa Marta, it cultivated something from within: leaders who grew from the community, a methodology that each community reshaped in its own image, a culture of trust built through years of presence. Those youth leaders grew a forest, and through it, not only survived but brought peace and hope.

I am grateful to the people of Tiempo de Juego for letting me tell their story.

Appendix A: Fieldwork Photographs

The following photographs were taken during fieldwork conducted from July 16 through August 19, 2023, across Tiempo de Juego's three regional operations and partner sites. They are organized geographically, following the narrative arc of Chapters 4 and 5.

Soacha

Figure A1. The Cazucá football field in the San Mateo neighborhood, Soacha. The synthetic pitch, known as the Tibanica field, was inaugurated in August 2010 through partnerships with Acción Social, the Bavaria Foundation, Constructora Bolívar, and Seguros Bolívar. (See Chapter 4, Era 2.)

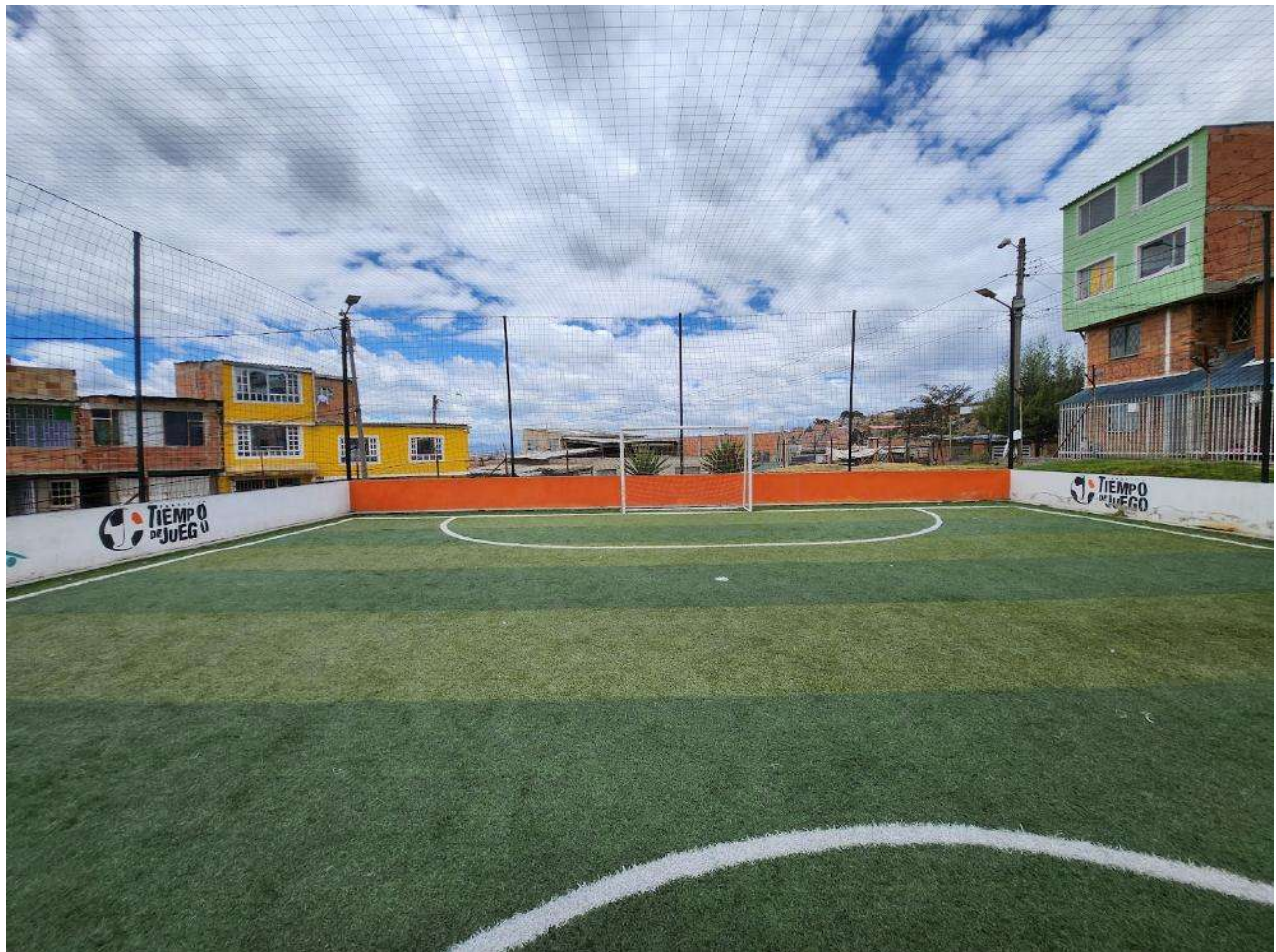


Figure A2. A Leadership School (*Escuela de Liderazgo*) training session on the Cazucá synthetic pitch, August 2023. *Gestores* (community managers/teachers) participate in a hands-on activity as part of a biweekly training session. On this day, the psychosocial coach used *El Mago de Oz* (The Wizard of Oz) to open a discussion about stereotypes and internalized insecurities, followed by an activity in which participants created boxes representing how they see themselves and filled each other's boxes with affirmations. The session closed with a reminder that the *gestores* would carry the activity into their own sessions with children: "You know your group. You know your context. You all have the autonomy to carry out this idea in the way that makes sense for your community." (See Chapter 5, Era 3.)



Pacific Coast: Timbiquí

Figure A3. The ending of a soccer session at the municipal coliseum in Timbiquí, Cauca. (See Chapter 5, Era 3.)



Figure A4. Accommodations for community leaders during monthly training sessions at TdJ's Timbiquí headquarters. Leaders from remote townships, some up to eight hours away by boat, traveled to the municipal center for combined sports training and psychosocial preparation before returning to run sessions in their own communities. (See Chapter 5, Era 3.)



Pacific Coast: Guapi

Figure A5. An Aprender Jugando (Learning by Playing) community event in Guapi, Cauca, led by local youth leaders. Children from local schools form the characteristic circle to establish coexistence agreements before beginning activities. This event, observed in July 2023, is described in Chapter 6, Theme 3.3, where tensions between TdJ's community-designed plans and Save the Children's reporting requirements played out in real time. (See Chapter 5, Era 4; Chapter 6, Theme 3.3.)



Caribbean Coast: Ciénaga

Figure A6. The exterior of El Habitante (The Inhabitant), TdJ's cultural house and hostel in Ciénaga, Magdalena. The mural, created through a partnership with Artolución, a community mural arts organization, reflects TdJ's integration of arts programming into its regional operations. El Habitante served as both a community programming space and a social business generating income through voluntourism. (See Chapter 4, Era 2; Chapter 5, Era 3.)



Figure A7. A hostel room inside El Habitante, Ciénaga. The space hosted international volunteers who contributed both financial resources and knowledge to TdJ's Magdalena operations. The voluntourism model was one of several self-generated income strategies TdJ developed across its regional sites. (See Chapter 5, Era 3; Chapter 6, Theme 3.3.)



Caribbean Coast: Santa Marta

Figure A8. A convivencia (coexistence) session planning board displayed during a music activity at TdJ's Santa Marta site. The board illustrates the three-moment pedagogical structure: the life skill of the session (*Habilidad para la vida: Proyecto de Vida*), convivencia agreements (*Acuerdos convivenciales*: everyone participates, listen, don't leave the room, ask to speak), and technical agreements (*Acuerdos técnicos*: take care of the instruments, keep the room tidy, share the instruments). The field for monitor reads *Todos Juntos* (All Together). (See Chapter 4, Era 2; Chapter 6, Theme 4.1.)

Habilidad para la vida: **Proyecto de VIDA.** **MUSICA** 

Tema técnico:

Acuerdos convivenciales	Acuerdos técnicos
☐ todos participamos	☐ Cuidar los instrumentos.
☐ Escuchar.	☐ Dejar el Salón ordenado
☐ No Salir del Salón.	☐ Compartir los instrumentos.
☐ Respetar la Palabra.	

AGUA 9:20 - 9:25

Monitor/a: **Todos Juntos.**

Retroalimentación:

Figure A9. The entrance to TdJ's Santa Marta headquarters. A mural commemorating November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, reads "Te invito a luchar conmigo" (I invite you to fight alongside me), reflecting the integration of gender programming into TdJ's community spaces. (See Chapter 5, Era 3.)



Figure A10. La Tiendita (The Little Shop), TdJ's community store at the Santa Marta site. Selling donated clothing, books, and household items at symbolic prices, the store is a direct descendant of La Oferta (The Sale), the self-generated income model Andrés began in Cazucá during TdJ's earliest years. (See Chapter 6, Theme 3.3.)

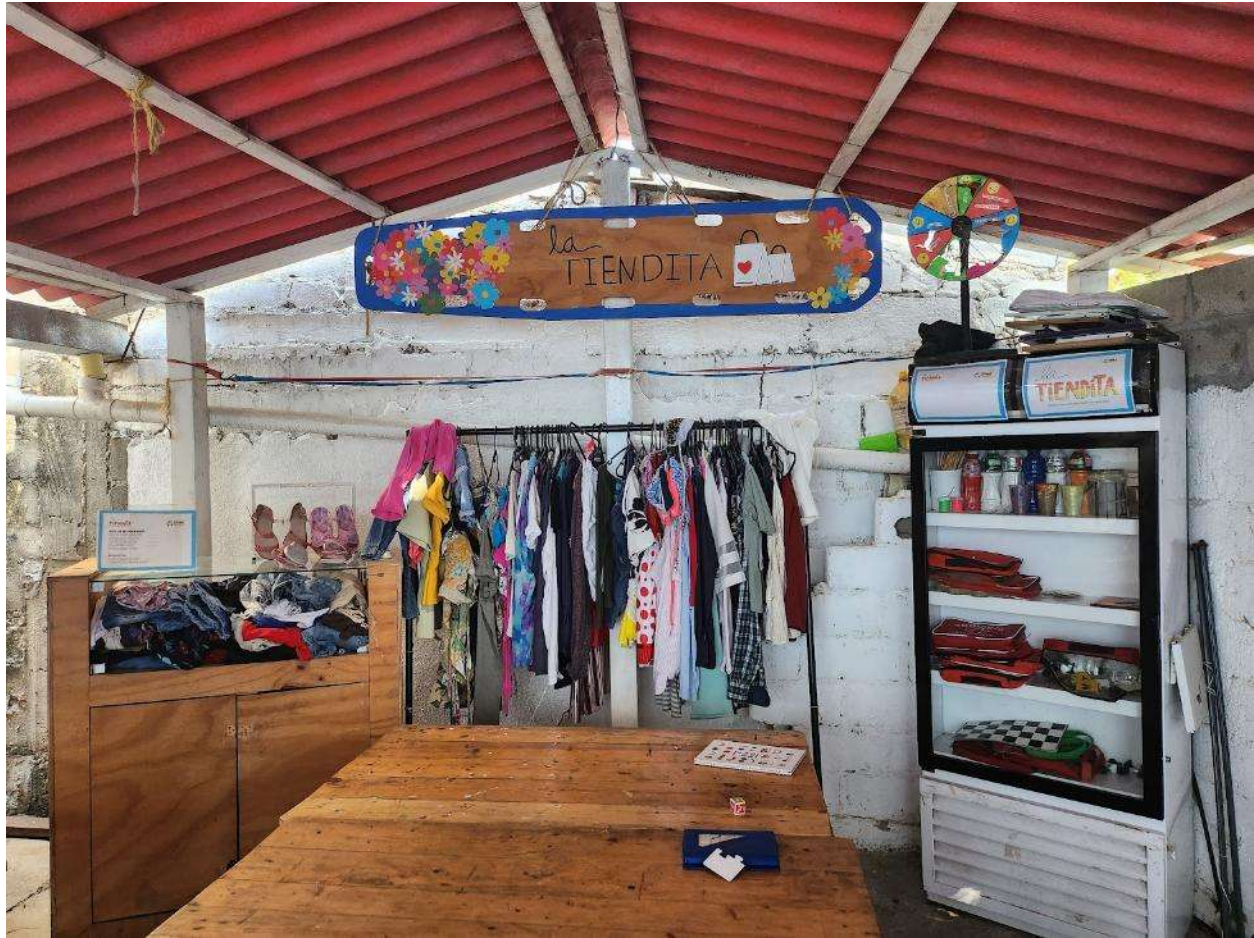
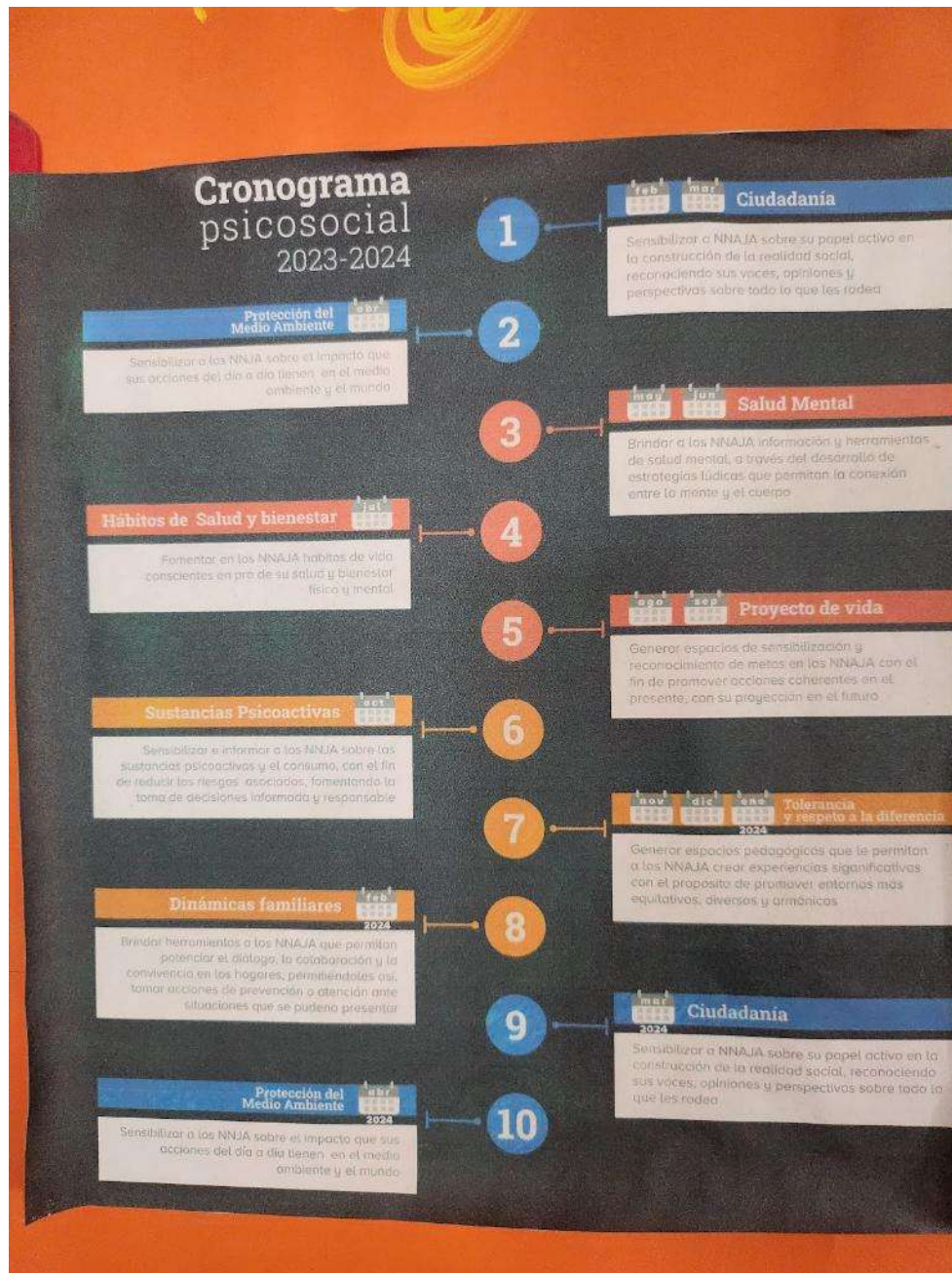


Figure A11. The psychosocial curriculum timeline (*Cronograma Psicosocial*), 2023–2024, displayed at TdJ's Magdalena headquarters. Ten monthly themes cycle through citizenship (*ciudadanía*), environmental protection, mental health (*salud mental*), health and well-being, life projects (*proyecto de vida*), psychoactive substance awareness, tolerance and respect for difference, family dynamics, and citizenship again. (See Chapter 5, Era 4.)



Bogotá

Figure A12. The exterior of IDIPRON UPI La 27, a juvenile protection facility in Bogotá where TdJ conducted a Cambio de Juego (Game Changer) activity in August 2023. (See Chapter 5, Era 3.)



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