



The social protection of children and youth in Colombia: interpretive review

La protección social de la niñez y juventud en Colombia: revisión interpretativa¹

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Recibido: 07 abril de 2021–Aceptado: 06 de septiembre de 2022–Publicado: 04 de julio de 2023

Forma de citar este artículo en APA:

Noreña Herrera, C., & Muñoz Echeverri, I. F. (2023). The social protection of children and youth in Colombia: interpretative review. *Revista Colombiana de Ciencias Sociales*, 14(2), 679-703. <https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.3925>

Abstract

Introduction: The rights of social protection policies for children and youth need to be discussed for their strengthening to guarantee universality or to create new forms of that policies. **Method:** Documentary review supported by content analysis techniques and interpretive analysis of four social protection systems for children and youth: integral social security, family subsidy, social assistance, and the national system of family welfare. For the analysis, theoretical-political references to universal social protection and the doctrine of the protection of the rights of children and young people were considered. **Results:** The social protection systems analyzed are described in terms of implementation mechanisms, participation of children and youth criteria, financing, and rectory. The life course approach and its universality, institutional appropriation, and

¹ This article is derived from the project "La vida digna de las juventudes que vivieron en programas de protección del Estado colombiano, 2022-2023."

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participation of children and young people were discussed. **Conclusion:** The social protection systems analyzed show social protection strategies for children and young people within the framework of the Social Constitutional State, but they are implemented through welfare, compensatory and targeted policies that contrast the perspectives of needs with that of the protection of children's rights, and provide insufficient support for the principles of equality, participation, and universality.

Keywords

Social protection; Child allowances; Adolescents; Colombia.

Resumen

Introducción: Aunque las políticas de protección social para la niñez y la juventud son derechos, se requieren discutir para su fortalecimiento o la creación de nuevas formas que garanticen la universalidad. **Método:** Revisión documental apoyada en técnicas de análisis de contenido y análisis interpretativo de cuatro sistemas de protección social para la niñez y la juventud Colombia: Seguridad Social Integral; Subsidio Familiar; Asistencia Social y el Sistema Nacional de Bienestar Familiar. Para el análisis se tuvieron en cuenta referentes teórico-políticos de la protección social universal y de la doctrina de la protección integral de los derechos de las niñas, los niños y jóvenes. **Resultados:** Se describen los sistemas de protección social analizados en cuanto a mecanismos de implementación, criterios de participación para las niñas, los niños y jóvenes, financiación y rectoría y se discuten con relación al enfoque de curso de vida y su universalidad, apropiación institucional y la participación social de niñas, niños y jóvenes. **Conclusión:** los sistemas de protección social analizados evidencian estrategias de protección social de niñas, niños y jóvenes en el marco del Estado Social de Derechos, pero se implementan a través de políticas asistencialistas, compensatorias y focalizadas que ponen en tensión las perspectivas de necesidades con la de la protección integral de los derechos de la niñez y brindan insuficiente sustrato a los principios de igualdad, de participación y de universalidad.

Palabras clave

Bienestar de la infancia; Seguridad social; Adolescencia; Colombia.

Introduction

Social protection is a human right and one of the national strategies used by modern states to promote human development and political stability (Abramo et al., 2020). Its objectives include the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities and the inclusive and equitable economic growth of the population, including the children and the young people (Ortiz et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2019).

Historically, particularly before the 20th century, children and young people were considered vulnerable populations abandoned by states, society, and families (Bustelo Graffigna, 2005; Casas, 2010; Luciani, 2010). Nonetheless, on a global scale, such scenarios and social representations have made a discursive shift toward the rights perspective, partially due to the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989).

Currently, children and young people have special protection in Colombia since their rights prevail over any governmental decision, and the society, the family and the State are jointly responsible for their care, attention and protection (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 1991; Law 1098, 2006). This shared responsibility is materialized, in part, through social protection, which is defined in Colombia by Law 789, 2002, as the “set of public policies aimed at reducing vulnerability and improving the quality of life of Colombians, especially of the most unprotected, to obtain at least the right to health, pension, and work” (Law 789, 2002, p. 9).

This law establishes two social protection systems that cover directly and indirectly children, young people, and their families. They are: a) the comprehensive social security system for workers who are employees and self-employed, both under an assurance model that includes health, pension and occupational hazards; and b) the social assistance system for the most economically vulnerable population and families without an employment contract. The latter includes national strategies for subsidized health insurance, economic support to poor families and subsistence support, especially for the elderly (Law 789, 2002; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020).

Models and dimensions of child- and youth-sensitive social protection

In accordance with UNICEF’s proposal on *child-sensitive social protection*, this is a state policy shaped by the socio-historical context of each country. It structures a social protection system with laws and policies, frameworks, strategic objectives, coordination mechanisms and funding

possibilities to provide equitable access to the entire population, considering their life course to prevent and protect them against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion with a particular focus on vulnerable groups (UNICEF, 2019).

According to Carter et al. (2019), there are five social protection systems or subsystems that can be combined within states and that broaden the perspective established for Colombia: *a) social assistance*, which includes non-contributive interventions to help individuals, homes and families to face poverty, homelessness and violation of rights, particularly of the most affected populations; *b) care, social attention, and social services*, which do not require any contribution from the beneficiaries and cover comprehensive early childhood development services and psychosocial support services for families associated with situations of domestic violence; *c) social security*, a contributory scheme, mandatory in some cases, funded by people in the labor market and that can be extended to their families. Its purpose is to support contingencies of illness, disability, death, unemployment and aging, and the access to paid leave for family reasons such as maternity and paternity; *d) labor protection through policies and interventions on the labor market*, which develops initiatives for employment generation, and preparation and training to obtain a job. Moreover, it includes mechanisms and regulatory laws of dignified employment and comprehensive protection to young workers; and, *e) traditional social protection*, based on community strategies rooted in solidarity and community support where the cultural beliefs and practices have influence. These can include funerary insurance services, community food banks, financial credit services and groups and even medical insurance.

The aim of his article is to interpret the social protection systems based on the essential characteristics of social protection defined by the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (2019), considering the review of the policy documents of its development. It will answer questions such as: What are the protection systems for children and young people in Colombia? What are the programs and their implementation mechanisms? What criteria are established to include children and young people? What are the financing sources, and which Colombian government entity is in charge? Moreover, this article will consider the characteristics and rights of children and young people with a focus on those who are involved or were involved in an Administrative Process for the Restoration of Rights (PARD) in specialized attention institutions in Colombia.

This work is relevant given the current debates in Latin America and Colombia on universal basic income due to the economic vulnerability that households, families, and people faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mobility restrictions due to mandatory and sectorized quarantines and post-pandemic loss of employment and reduction of income are also considered (Garcia et al., 2020; Lanchimba et al., 2020; Saiz et al., 2020). Considering the impact of the health emergency

on children and youth (United Nations, 2020), it is necessary to discuss and reflect on the existing social protection systems in Colombia in order to seek their strengthening or the creation of new alternatives that allow for the comprehensive protection of their rights on a universal basis.

Method

This is a documentary review (Galeano, 2018) developed in three stages: 1) research design; 2) management and implementation of the search, selection and analysis of the information; and 3) communication of the results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). At the same time, a purposive sampling of the Colombian government web pages related to social policy was carried out. Using the content analysis method, the information from the policy documents on the formulation of the four social protection systems for children and youth previously defined by the researchers is described and presented in tables. This is done according to the typology of social protection systems established by Carter et al. (2019). Based on the information found for each social protection system we describe, in the section of the results, data regarding the purpose of the system/subsystem, the programs or strategies implemented, the target population and the criteria for the participation of children and young people and their families, the implementation mechanisms, the source of financing, and the entity in charge of the system.

Subsequently, an interpretative analysis of the creation of the social protection systems for children and young people in Colombia is developed based on two theoretical-political references determined a priori. The five essential characteristics of social protection established by the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (2019) were addressed in this work. They are: (A) protection throughout the life course, (b) universal coverage, (c) national ownership, (d) sustainable and equitable financing, and (e) participation and social dialog. Additionally, this work considers the doctrine of the comprehensive protection of the rights of children and youth, which establishes the recognition of rights, the guarantee of their exercise, the prevention of threats or violations, and the restoration of dignity and rights in the event of violation or threat (Law 789, 2002; Colombian Government, 2018). The results focus on children and young people involved in Administrative Processes for the Restoration of Rights (PARD) in specialized institutions in Colombia.

Results

The child- and youth-sensitive social protection systems in Colombia

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 describe the characteristics of the four social protection systems that exist in Colombia and include strategies or programs for children and young people aged 0-18 years. First, there is the Comprehensive Social Security System. It was created in 1993 to guarantee the non-renounceable rights of the person and the community to achieve a living quality in under with human dignity through the protection of the contingencies that affect them. It includes the General System of Social Security in Health, which stratifies children and young people into two regimes according to the employment status of their parents or caregivers (Table 1).

Additionally, the Family Subsidy System was created in 1982 to alleviate the economic burden of maintaining a family as the basic nucleus of society, which only fully benefits children and young people with parents who have a formal employment contract (Table 2).

Then, there is the Social Assistance System. Its objective is to decrease vulnerability and improve the life quality of Colombians, particularly that of the least protected, through a set of public policies. Its national programs for children and young people started in 2007. The national programs are Jóvenes en Acción, Familias en Acción, and the Programa de Alimentación Escolar. None is universal and focuses on poor and extremely poor children and young people (Table 3).

Finally, there is the National System of Family Welfare (SNBF). Its purpose is to enforce the compliance of the comprehensive protection of children and young people and family strengthening at the national, departmental, district, and municipal levels under the direction of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF). The ICBF was created in 1968, and it has five programs, two of which are national and cover the entire Colombian territory: The *Programa Nacional de Protección* and the *Programa de Cero a Siempre*, the latter is collectively managed by several ministries and agencies, under the leadership of the Presidential Council for Children and Adolescents (Table 4).

Table 1.

Characteristics of the Comprehensive Social Security System for children and youth

Social protection systems	Subsystem or programs	Implementation mechanisms of the strategies or programs	Participation criteria for children and young people	Financing source	Implementing agency
Comprehensive Social Security System	General System of Social Security in Health	Affiliation to a contributory or subsidized insurance company through insurance that covers the provision of health promotion, disease prevention, and rehabilitation services, and the development of public health interventions.	Children and young people aged 0-18 years. Children of people with employment contracts and contributors to the system receive attention in the contributory regime. Children of people without an employment contract access the subsidized regime.	Contributions from employers, salaried and self-employed workers affiliated with the contributory social security system. The subsidized regime includes a 1% solidarity contribution from the contributory regime and fiscal transfers from the national government to the municipalities, as well as the municipalities' own resources.	Ministry of Health and Social Protection

Source: own elaboration based on the documents of the creation of the system

Table 2.

Characteristics of the Family Subsidy System for children and youth

Social protection systems	Subsystem or programs	Implementation mechanisms of the strategies or programs	Participation criteria for children and young people	Financing source	Implementing agency
Family Subsidy System	Family Subsidy	The family compensation funds provide working parents with an in-kind subsidy for each child and also offer them complementary social services: health, nutrition, housing subsidies, social credit, recreation, and basic and secondary education programs.	Only children and young people whose parents have a formal employment contract or whose parents are pensioners. After the age of 12, young people must prove that they are studying at one of the levels of the national education system.	4% tax on payroll paid by employers, known as parafiscal contributions.	Ministry of Labor

Source: own elaboration based on the documents of the creation of the system

Table 3.

Characteristics of the Social Assistance System for children and youth

Social protection systems	Subsystem or programs	Implementation mechanisms of the strategies or programs	Participation criteria for children and young people	Financing source	Implementing agency
Social Assistance System	Program Jóvenes en Acción	Monthly cash transfers conditional on remaining enrolled in a professional diploma, associate or undergraduate program.	Young people between 14 and 28 years of age in conditions of poverty and vulnerability who are studying in a public higher education institution or in the National Training Service (SENA). It is focused on those registered in the System for the Identification of Potential Social Program Beneficiaries (SISBÉN) with scores under the extreme poverty line. It includes children and young people subject to adoption or criminal responsibility.	Both programs (Jóvenes en acción y Familias en acción) are financed with resources from investments and ordinary transfers from the general budget of the nation. The latter is established in the general system of participation. The nation's external credits such as loans from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank (WB) and international cooperation resources.	Administrative Department for Social Prosperity
	Familias en Acción	Every two months, families receive a cash transfer to complement their income, provided that children in early childhood receive health care and that children between 4 and 20 years of age attend and remain in the education system.	Belonging to a poor or extremely poor family according to the SISBÉN's scores and prioritizing families registered as victims of forced displacement, indigenous families or Afro-descendant families.		Administrative Department for Social Prosperity
	Programa de Alimentación Escolar (PAE)	Social transfer of a demand-side subsidy delivered in the form of alimentary complement in primary and secondary schools.	Children and young people of school age who are enrolled in and attend the public education system. Focused on educational institutions in rural areas, those serving ethnic communities, and those located in rural areas with a high concentration of poor and extremely poor people, according to the SISBÉN's scores.	Budget of the nation with specific resources for the education sector and resources of the departments and municipalities. Other sources can come from the private, cooperative or non-governmental sectors on a national and international level and the family compensation funds.	Ministry of Education

Source: own elaboration based on the documents of the creation of the system

Table 4.

Characteristics of the National System of Family Welfare for children and youth

Social protection systems	Subsystem or programs	Implementation mechanisms of the strategies or programs	Participation criteria for children and young people	Financing source	Implementing agency
National System of Family Welfare	Protection for the restoration of violated rights	Social transfer of a supply-side subsidy to specialized institutions for the comprehensive attention and the implementation of rights restoration measures for a period of up to 18 months in different care modalities.	Children and young people in a situation of threat or violation of rights, to whom a Family Ombudsman or Police Inspector defines any of the following administrative measures: initial placement in a temporary home or emergency center, psychosocial support and family strengthening, placement in a boarding school or foster home, adoption.	The five subsystems or programs of the National System of Family Welfare are financed with parafiscal mandatory contributions for employees and resources of the general budget of the nation.	Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF)
	Comprehensive development of early childhood: De Cero a Siempre	Social transfer of a supply-side subsidy with social professionals to promote the comprehensive development and the initial education of early childhood.	Children and young people aged 0-5 years and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers selected under universality and equity criteria assisted under four modalities: institutional, intercultural, family, community.		Presidential Council for Children and Adolescents
	Childhood: Generaciones Sacúdete	Project with social management professionals who provide psychosocial support to promote the rights of children and young people and prevent violations of these rights	Children between 6 and 13 years of age residing in the municipalities prioritized by the ICBF.		ICBF
	Adolescence and youth: Sacúdete	Project with social management professionals who provide psychosocial support to promote rights, vulnerability prevention, strengthening of abilities, and guidance to access employment, education and entrepreneurship services.	Young people between 14 and 17 years of age residing in the municipalities prioritized by the ICBF.		ICBF
	Care and prevention of child malnutrition	Social transfer of a supply-side subsidy to institutions to provide comprehensive care services for malnutrition of children in early childhood through the extramural modality 1000 Días para Cambiar el Mundo and the intramural Centro de Recuperación Nutricional.	Pregnant women and malnourished children under the age of five years residing in previously identified areas to avoid preventable deaths and deaths associated with acute malnutrition in early childhood.		ICBF

Source: own elaboration based on the documents of the creation of the system

Social protection of children and youth in Colombia throughout the life course

The life course has been defined as one of the approaches to childhood and youth public policies (Colombian Government, 2018). This perspective acknowledges in the different stages of life the trajectories, transitions, cumulative effects, shifts, changes, and windows of opportunity that impact the daily life, living conditions, and human development of children and young people (Colombian Government, 2018).

This approach has been implemented in the field of knowledge of children and youth. Heckman et al. (2013) refer to this in their economic considerations on investment in early childhood and the economic rates of return they generate in adulthood. Similarly, it is present in Bronfenbrenner's (2002) theory on the ecology of human development, and in the empirical evidence, it is associated with the life, health, and sickness conditions of the population (Blanco, 2011; Commissariat et al., 2017; Conklin et al., 2019; Hernández & Alzate, 2016; Jenkins & Woodward, 2016).

Analyzing the social protection systems for children and youth in Colombia in terms of the life course (Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4), the life trajectories such as early childhood, school and work experiences, and even the aging process through the contribution to the pension system in the event that a young person becomes formally integrated to the labor market are recognized. Regarding changes in living conditions, there is the National System of Family Welfare (SNBF), which includes a national program for children and young people in situations of neglect, threat, and violation of rights (Table 4). Similarly, a social assistance system prioritizes those who are victims of forced displacement and live in extreme poverty (Table 3).

A limitation is identified regarding the transitions of children and young people in the SNBF, specifically, the National Protection Program for the Restoration of Rights, since there is a deficient plan for the transition and support upon institutional graduation to continue in the secondary or university education system, to access employment or to benefit from conditional cash transfers in the social assistance subsystem (Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 2017). This is despite the cumulative effects on the integral development of children and young people caused by the violation of their rights, the separation from their families, and the time spent in a protective home (Grinberg, 2016; United Nations, 2009).

It is noticeable that the implementation of social protection systems for children and young people does not follow a life course approach. On the contrary, it maintains a fragmented perspective of the life cycle, which leaves young people unprotected once they reach the age of

majority (18 years old), unless they are studying or under the protection of the State, regarding the restoration of their rights (Law 1098, 2006). This situation may be considered an insufficient capacity of the Colombian State to take co-responsibility for the comprehensive protection of the rights of children and young people.

Social protection of children and youth in Colombia with universal coverage

Universality is a principle of the General System of Social Security in Health since it establishes the protection of all people in all stages of life and the non-discrimination of children and young people under any social, physical or religious condition (Law 100, 1993). Nonetheless, its implementation does not develop this principle, given that the system is fragmented according to socioeconomic status. This is because there is a convergence of a contributory model based on the capacity to pay of individuals with employment contracts and the obligation to be affiliated to it to access the attention and a subsidized model with services from the public sector for poor children and young people (Table 1).

Moreover, in this system, access to the subsidized regime is mediated by a prioritization mechanism based on a socioeconomic survey known as SISBÉN (National Council on Economic and Social Policy, 2006/2016; Law 715, 2001). This focalization mechanism may leave out children and young people who, although they do not live in extreme poverty (levels 1 or 2 of the SISBÉN), have greater social and economic precariousness and vulnerability (Filgueira & Fuentes 1998; Liebel, 2006).

Regarding the SNBF (Table 4), this principle is based on the superior interest of children and adolescents, where the universality, prevalence, and interdependency of their human rights are established. Two national strategies exist within this system that are actually universal and are not exclusive (Law 1098, 2006; United Nations, 1989). First, the state policy of comprehensive early childhood development is known as “De Cero a Siempre.” One of its objectives is to decrease inequality in the long term and stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Law 1804, 2016). Second, the National Protection Program for the Restoration of Rights for children and young people victims of threats and rights violations, within the framework of universal guarantees, is in charge of the restoration of their dignity and rights, incorporating psychosocial care and support as one of its cornerstones (Cecchini, 2019; Law 1098, 2006).

Furthermore, regarding children and young people, the social assistance system lacks universality since it is based on the model of social risk management. The system requires prioritizing the populations in the worst conditions of poverty and vulnerability through the SISBÉN survey under the argument of greater cost efficiency (Correa & Bedoya, 2011; Holzmann & Jorgensen, 2009).

The above suggests that the principle of universality in the social protection of children and young people in Colombia is an ideal that does not materialize in all public policies, programs, and strategies (Abramo et al., 2020; Guerrero et al., 2011). This requires, at the very least, progress in the realization of minimum floors of social protection for this population group and their families during their life course, given that, according to Cecchini et al. (2019), “it is preferred to ensure a minimum for all in the immediate term, rather than high levels for a few and no protection for others” (p. 13).

The social protection of children and youth in Colombia through systems with national appropriation and participation in governmental institutions

The national interest of social protection involves the State having an established common objective and a theoretical and strategic framework that addresses the needs of the population. At the same time, it must be reflected in the laws and national strategic plans that affect all the state institutions and where the beneficiaries of social protection are recognized as rights-holders. Nevertheless, this requires coordination mechanisms among the ministries and social protection programs on a national, regional and subregional scale. Moreover, it is vital for them to have a place in the national budget and that new tributary systems are considered for their financing (Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection, 2019; UNICEF, 2019).

In accordance with the above, Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 show the social protection policies and programs that respond to the country's priorities and circumstances, such as the programs for early childhood; childhood, adolescence, and youth; protection to respond to the different forms of violation of the rights of children and young people; poverty reduction; and health insurance. This reflects the national character of the policies and systems and a willingness and sensitivity to protecting children and young people supported by a wide range of regulations.

Concerning the interinstitutional cooperation among the ministries and intersectoral cooperation at the national level, it is worth mentioning that the protection systems analyzed have a mixed national management system. That is, they have horizontal coordination among ministries, agencies, and state administrative departments; and vertical coordination that can be centralized or decentralized to departments and municipalities.

For example, the social assistance system for the strategies for overcoming extreme poverty (Familias en Acción and Jóvenes en Acción) is a national, interinstitutional and intersectoral initiative coordinated by the Administrative Department for Social Prosperity (DPS). This entity has regional divisions at the territorial level in charge of implementing the policies, plans, and programs in the territories. The Ministry of National Education (MEN), the National Training Service (SENA), the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF), public and private financial entities, departmental governments, municipal mayors' offices, and higher education institutions converge at the national and territorial levels for the strategic articulation of their actions (National Council on Economic and Social Policy, 2006; Law 1948, 2019).

Thus, the appropriation in Colombia of social protection sensitive to children and youth demonstrates responses to a broad spectrum of social and economic vulnerabilities experienced by children, young people and their families through a series of programs that, although fragmented, are supported by national laws that favor the continuity of the programs in the national development plans. There is also evidence of decentralized structures and intersectoral strategies to favor a comprehensive approach to the actions. However, it is necessary to strengthen the systems for some population groups, such as migrants and those leaving the protection system.

Moreover, even though social protection institutions have organizational structures that are divided at different territorial levels and that call for intersectorality, there are many cases of implementation failures due to poor institutional performance that reflect the non-compliance of the guidelines issued by the central level or failures in the interinstitutional coordination (Ceballos, 2016). According to UNICEF (2019), "it is hard to evaluate the efficacy of these coordination mechanisms and the evidence is limited in that regard" (p. 48). Thus, it is necessary to have national studies on the implementation and impact of national social protection systems.

Social protection of children and youth in Colombia with sustainable and equitable financing

There are several financing sources for social protection, including state financing, contributory contributions, and redistributive taxation measures. Additionally, according to Cichon et al. (2006), there are five central issues in terms of the financing of social protection that include political, economic, and operative elements: Who will pay? With what income? What amounts of contributions or taxes should be defined? When to do it? And for whom?

In Colombia, the social protection systems for children and youth presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 are financed with the general budget of the nation under the transfer and investment components, along with resources from international cooperation and support (Law 2063, 2020). In the case of health care, the contributions of the members of the general social security system are added (Law 100, 1993).

For researchers of the Bank of the Republic of Colombia, the transfer and investment resources are rigid and non-flexible, as in the case of pensions and health insurance. This is because the executive branch is limited to programming what is already defined by law, and can marginally incorporate new programs, redefine spending priorities and make adjustments according to the needs of the economic and social policy (Melo Becerra et al., 2022).

UNICEF (2019) argues that the financing of child- and youth-sensitive social protection is insufficient. It notes that the average public expenditure on social protection (without including health) for children aged 0-14 years represents 0.8% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a region where such generation represents 25.8% of the total population. Colombia's investment budget allocated to health and social protection in 2021, without distinction based on age, had a percentage share of 1.4% (Law 2063, 2020).

In that sense, it is necessary to identify mechanisms, resources, and budgets for the social protection of children and young people with the aim to improve the programs and including those who are excluded from the systems and their strategies. This entails making actuarial and cost fiscal analyses that allow supporting redistributive fiscal policies (Cichon et al., 2006; International Labor Organization, 2017). Moreover, the systems and their strategies should be evaluated since the information found could encourage their redesign to reduce fragmentation and administration and operation costs, thus enabling resources to be redirected to more efficient social protection strategies (International Labor Organization, 2017).

Ortiz et al. (2019) argue that Colombia requires fiscal resources to make economic and social investments that allow the country to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the human development of children and young people. These authors, based on the proposals of some international entities, such as the ILO, the UNICEF, and the UN Women, propose eight financing options that can be considered and defined through dialog processes and national agreements: (I) Expanding the coverage of security and contributory earnings, (II) increasing tax revenues, (III) eliminating illicit financial flows, (IV) reallocating expenditures, (V) leveraging fiscal and foreign exchange reserves, (VI) debt management: loans or restructuring, (VII) adopting a more flexible macroeconomic framework, and (VIII) increasing aids and transfers (Ortiz et al., 2019).

Social protection of children and youth in Colombia with social participation and dialog

The participation of the populations, actors, and institutions targeted by social protection policies is essential in democracies, as it strengthens their design, implementation, and evaluation, i.e., in all the cycles of public policy and its governance. Therefore, the participation of children and young people is a principle to be materialized nationally (Law 1098, 2006; Colombian Government, 2018).

Nonetheless, in the documents analyzed, there is limited evidence of their participation processes in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of the social protection policies and programs (Cadavid Ospina et al., 2016; Muñoz et al., 2020). In fact, the presence of children and young people in public events for decorative purposes rather than being the focus of public management is observed with concern. Additionally, their participation is superficial in municipal and national popular consultations as receptors of information, or, at most, validators of the formulation of government development plans, but with little influence on the decisions taken (Hart, 1993).

Discussion and conclusions

The current social protection systems for children and young people are evidence of the implementation of social policies important for Colombia, given the prevailing best interest of the comprehensive protection of the rights of children and young people within the framework of the Social Constitutional State (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 1991; Law 1098, 2006; Statutory Law 1622, 2013).

However, the ideals and equity, participation, and universality discourses embodied in the child and youth policies are just that: ideals with insufficient elements to achieve their goals. We are witnessing and experiencing the implementation of social protection policies with three characteristics: a) compensatory, to compensate for the violation of rights; b) welfarist, in the sense of providing the minimum and considering children and young people as incapable, while denying their capacities and their being and inhabiting the world from their desires and projects for a dignified life; and c) socially targeted, in terms of the segmentation according to the socioeconomic level, the social stigmatization that this generates, and contrary to the universality and equality of the right to social protection (Arrivillaga et al., 2013).

The focus of social protection for children and young people is determined by “needs” and the supply to meet them, not by their “rights.” This element accounts for a welfare liberal regime that minimizes the state, individualizes risks, and promotes solutions based on the market (Cecchini, 2019; Correa Alzate & Bedoya Sierra, 2011; Holzmann & Jorgensen, 2009).

Considering the recent modifications to the National Protection Program for the Restoration of Rights and its model of attention and restoration of rights, it is necessary that the SNBF, in charge of the ICBF, builds integration and coherence possibilities of the social protection systems and the policies with the participation of children and young people (Law 1878, 2018). The purpose of this measure is to allow them to start university life, to start working, and to receive psychosocial support, despite leaving the programs and reaching the legal age of majority (18 years old), which at present, and contrary to the course of life, is a criterion of exclusion or lack of social protection by the State (ICBF, 2017; Hernández & Alzate, 2016).

Furthermore, in the face of social protection that is highly dependent on the labor market, young people may experience fewer possibilities of entering the labor market, especially if they come from protection programs, the adolescent criminal responsibility system, or are young migrants residing in Colombia. However, it is also a window of opportunity for the definition of temporary unemployment insurance and employment policies that provide opportunities to face reality, develop skills and continue with life projects (Filgueira & Fuentes, 1998; Monteiro & Cecchetto, 2006).

The above-mentioned is more complex and reflects three serious problems to be resolved in Colombia in terms of social protection for children and young people: the intragenerational trap, given by social stagnation in poverty without mobility possibilities from their families, the state or the market; the intergenerational trap, which seems to be the accumulation of disadvantages given the social exclusion of their families, and that their children will probably have if they become teenage parents (Saraví, 2009); and catastrophic events, which are forced displacement, migration, violation of rights or entering the adolescent criminal responsibility systems. All these abrupt situations produce a negative social movement affecting their capacity and their families’ capacity to mobilize social and economic assets (Amaral Bahia & Queda de Toledo, 2020; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020; United Nations, 2009; Nussbaum, 2012; United Nations, 2020).

It is worth noting that this analysis is limited since it did not include primary information from the actors and institutions involved in the social protection systems in terms of their design, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Thus, if there are redesign or reformulation proposals, they were not addressed in this article. The paper does not refer to social support provided by the Colombian government during the COVID-19 pandemic for the beneficiaries of the social assistance system program Jóvenes en Acción, who received a one-time additional cash

transfer, and Familias en Acción, where the value of the monthly cash transfer was doubled twice during the period of generalized mandatory isolation that started on March 25, 2020 (Decree 457, 2020; Decree 563, 2020).

Regarding the challenges in terms of social protection, Colombia faces structural challenges that affect children and young people, and that must be considered in the possible national reforms or restructuring of the social protection systems. First, the aging population, which puts pressure on pension systems and states, thus affecting the social investment in other population groups and sectors, and the technological revolution, which gave way, among other things, to automation, eliminated less qualified jobs, and made the hiring practices more precarious, especially for young people, through mobile application platforms and without providing a formal employment contract and therefore without social security contributions.

Second, intra-regional migration, which in Colombia has exceeded the government's capacity to respond, despite the constitutional block on the best interest and prevalence of the rights of children and young people (Fernández & Orozco, 2018; Louidor, 2018; Mejía, 2012). And finally, natural disasters, considering also current and unresolved epidemics and pandemics, such as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that continues to generate vertical transmission of the agent from mothers to children and the current coronavirus pandemic due to COVID-19 (Cecchini, 2019).

Finally, it is necessary to mention that in Colombia, the universal basic income proposal has had little political support on the part of the government despite discussions in Congress in 2020, considering the COVID-19 pandemic as a political window. However, the proposal of some congressmen was a basic emergency income (Gómez, 2020) which does not meet the characteristics of the Basic Income Earth Network: universal, unconditional, individual, periodic, and cash payment (Basic Income Earth Network, 2020). On the other hand, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has also proposed a basic digital basket that includes a laptop computer and an Internet connection for children and young people to enable them to continue their studies virtually, which was not implemented in Colombia either (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020).

To conclude, the social protection of the rights of children and young people in Colombia is mediated by the power relationships that collectivize and homogenize them and consider them poor, vulnerable to rights violations, and minors dependent on their parents, despite the State's apparent greater political will towards early childhood. However, after this life course, there is a bottleneck or funnel in the implementation of social protection for middle childhood, adolescence, and youth since a targeting model based on risks or rights violations prevails, forgetting the minimum conditions and freedoms necessary to do and be what they want within the framework of a dignified life.

Therefore, Colombia and its population are called to overcome the neoliberal model of social protection and welfare based on the labor market and the family, with residual participation of the Colombian State. The objective is to collectively achieve, with the participation of children and young people, a universal social protection that will allow them to enjoy a true social constitutional state that transcends the enunciation and promises towards the fulfillment of the national and global goals outlined in the Colombian constitutional block on the comprehensive protection of the rights of children and young people.

Financing

The Programa Exenciones de Posgrado of Universidad de Antioquia and Sapiencia Fondo de Posgrados Nacionales of the Medellín Mayor's Office financed the research from which this article derives.

Declaration of authorship contribution

Camilo Noreña Herrera participated as principal investigator and Iván Felipe Muñoz Echeverri participated as co-investigator.

Conflict of interest

The authors state that they do not have a conflict of interest with the institution or any commercial association.

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