



“We convinced donors about having a systemic approach to intervene in all the ecosystems, and finance a whole intervention.”

A Conversation with Pedro Fajardo of [Fundación Mi Sangre](#)

Katherine Noble
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Katherine Noble: Could you introduce yourself and tell me about your work?

Pedro Fajardo: My name is Pedro Fajardo. I'm the executive director of Fundación Mi Sangre, a nonprofit organization based in Colombia. We have been in approximately 295 municipalities in 25 states or departments in Colombia. We drive systemic change for a more peaceful, democratic, and regenerative society by intervening in three ecosystems. We intervene in these ecosystems with four strategies. One, strengthening capacities. Two, supporting the incubation of social transformation initiatives. Three, activating ecosystems and weaving relationships within different sectors of society. Four, using communication for changing behaviors, beliefs, and social transformation.

In the first ecosystem, we work within the academic community and educational institutions. We strengthen certain capacities for teachers and adolescents in social skills and social-emotional skills in the whole community, sometimes with families, sometimes with decision-makers in educational institutions. We support them to prioritize social challenges within the schools. We assist the incubation of transformative initiatives to address problems in the schools, for example, strategies or initiatives to address mental health prevention issues, or the prevention of bullying, or educational co-existence. We connect students and teachers with the academic community, with families, with decision-makers, and the public sector, especially those in charge of education issues in each territory.

Katherine Noble: Is it a particular class, teachers, the whole school or a segment?

Pedro Fajardo: It depends on the project. We have the capability with different methodologies to work with boys, girls, and adolescents aged 7 to 14. We have other methodologies for young people aged 14 to 17 in schools, and afterwards through age 28. We are working in 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade. It depends on the project and what our allies want to prioritize. We adapt the methodology to the population we're addressing. It's called *PAZalobien Exploradores*, for adolescents, and *PAZalobien Líderes de cambio*, for younger people. Schools are the first ecosystem where we intervened.

Our second ecosystem is the community ecosystem, with two specific methodologies. One strengthens capacities to young people or communities, not only social-emotional skills, but also capacities for leadership.

Our various leadership programs within Mi Sangre are called 'conscious and weaving leadership'. Conscious, because we promote the consciousness of the relationship within ourselves, with others, and with the environment. With the environment, meaning nature, but we're also talking about the political, economical, socio-cultural environment in a community. Weaving, because we incorporate systemic change to social problems with the leaders we're strengthening so they can address causes, not symptoms, of social problems. We also amplify a network where leaders we're working with can expand their impact, making or promoting alliances with the private sector, the public sector, universities, or media to increase their impact.

We are not only strengthening social-emotional skills, but also capacities for leadership. We also do a scan of the community to prioritize problems or challenges affecting the community. We assisted the incubation of transformative initiatives in this ecosystem with two methodologies. One is a strategy of risk and violence prevention, because we're working with vulnerable populations to transform them into agents of change. These are people who are not usually on a leadership trajectory, they're only trying to build their lives. We strengthen these capacities of leadership and social-emotional skills by promoting or assisting social initiatives related to gender equality, for example, or recycling in rural communities that don't have access to garbage services.

Katherine Noble: The young people you're working with in these contexts are at risk. You're helping them shift from seeing themselves in that way, to seeing themselves acting as leaders in the community to solve these problems.

Pedro Fajardo: Exactly. We connect our emerging leaders with different initiatives around the territory, with the public sector, private sector, and universities. It depends on the territory. We create communication strategies or campaigns to transform mind shifts in some paradigms that don't allow social transformation. Our second focus in the community ecosystem is what we call "consolidated leaders" who already have a trajectory in social leadership and social transformation.

The capacities we're strengthening are not only social-emotional skills for the 'conscious and weaving leadership' that we promote, but also capacities in advocacy and mobilization, and in writing proposals and grants with technical skills to strengthen the impact. We normally assist initiatives that are more robust in terms of advocacy. We usually see initiatives to change a local law, for example, or to put some topics on the public agenda that are not being addressed. Also, we assist social entrepreneurship initiatives. We connect our consolidated leaders in a more robust and impactful network with different sectors of society. We normally divide society into five sectors, more for pragmatic reasons than anything else, the public sector, the private sector, the universities, media, and grassroots organizations and NGOs.

Last, a very important sector for us is media, not to communicate what we do, but to start transforming narratives and mind shifts through media. We amplify a more impactful network for our leaders with a 'weaving' approach to promote collaboration through social entrepreneurship and advocacy initiatives to change local laws, for example, and also with strategies to put topics into the public agenda that are not being addressed. We usually accompany that with communication strategies to shift paradigms and behaviors on different topics.

Lastly, we intervene in another ecosystem we call the multi-stakeholder ecosystem. Here, we work not with leaders, but with actors or organizations that are normally decision-makers from the different sectors of society.

Katherine Noble: Can you give an example? In a particular community, are these different ecosystems in one place or different locations? Do some communities have the four different ecosystems all in proximity to each other? Does that help with this 'weaving' approach?

Pedro Fajardo: The five sectors I described start playing a more important role because we have another methodology called *Unir Para Construir* or Unite To Build. What we do there is promote or inspire a program that first creates trust building within sectors. We understand in Fundación Mi Sangre that trust is a very important capacity. We don't see it only as a value for democratic, inclusive, or more peaceful societies. Recognizing we have challenges with trust within some sectors, we look at trust in a different way.

Traditionally, university research studies center trust around whether citizens trust organizations, the government or the private sector, but we have learned that's only one part of trust. We address other parts that, for us, are fundamental for building trust, for example, trust with neighbors. When organizations or sectors trust citizens, this allows us to understand more deeply, for example, the detentions you see, especially in Colombia, but not only in Colombia. The tensions we see between young people and

the police force, for example, is not only because young people don't trust the police, but also because some police have trust issues with certain populations like young people, and also some historically excluded populations like Afro-Colombians or indigenous people.

For us, it's important to build that type of trust, but another part of trust that's important for us is trust between sectors, whether the public sector trusts the private sector or the media. What we do in this methodology when we intervene in this ecosystem is first to build that trust centering on the person representing the organization. Then, after we start building that type of trust, we promote difficult conversations with a systemic-based approach that allows collaboration to happen afterwards.

We promote or assist the incubation of collaborative multi-stakeholder initiatives on certain topics in order to have more robust social transformations in a territory. Normally, we have done this type of intervention around gender violence prevention in rural areas, for example, where we have had solutions or initiatives that include, for example, moto taxis, a traditional type of taxi in the northern part of Colombian coast, as strategic ambassadors to give rural woman information on how they can interact with the public sector when they are victims of gender violence. This concept came through difficult conversations between social leaders and the public sector, when the public sector recognized they didn't have enough money to do a communication strategy to address gender violence in rural areas of small municipalities on the coast of Colombia. In these difficult conversations, there was an opportunity to fill that gap temporarily by creating an alliance with a sector that's traditionally not included in this topic. They move through the territory because that's their function, they are taxis.

Those types of solutions are the ones that assist the incubation of social transformations within the multi-stakeholder ecosystem. We do these interventions in different ecosystems in four relevant topics that, for us, are a priority in order to achieve more peaceful, inclusive, democratic, and regenerative societies. The first topic we address is peace, security, and coexistence. We work to prevent recruitment of young people for armed forces, for criminal armed forces, to prevent the consumption of drugs, and prevent violence, for example. Peace, security, and coexistence are very important topics in doing these interventions.

The other prioritized topic is inclusion and diversity. We have important programs that address gender equality and new ideas of masculinity, for example. We also work with migration, especially Venezuelan migration in Colombia, and Colombian communities who are receiving migrants in order to reduce xenophobia. Our third most important topic is mental health strategies, for example, social strengthening, social-emotional skills, and building community resilience strategies to address mental health and

collective trauma. Our last topic is a new one we included last year after our last strategic planning, which is the relationship between humans and nature. We're working with food chains and food systems to help them be more inclusive and resilient to climate change, for example. We have a project related to climate and conservation with a more ecocentric view of the world.

Katherine Noble: How much interaction is there between these different ecosystems? Do mentors go from one group to another? Do the leaders you're supporting with practical skills such as grant writing sometimes interact with the youth in schools, or are they separate entities?

Pedro Fajardo: Our ideal model is to take this complete intervention to a territory. We've done this in a lot of places. Usually what happens is that we work with associations and alliances with international aid, local foundations, or the private sector in Colombia. How we intervene depends on who finances us, its approach and its agenda. Sometimes we only work with one ecosystem because the donor is only interested in one ecosystem and one topic. More frequently, we intervene in some ecosystems without our complete model.

We have done a very important job in not only convincing donors about the importance of having a systemic approach to intervene in all the ecosystems, but also in convincing donors of the importance of financing a whole intervention. We have done this in different territories of Colombia, on the coast, in the north, in a rural area that was very affected by violence, Montes de Maria, and where the majority of the banana plantations are, in Urabá, which was also very affected by violence and the armed conflict of Colombia. Usually, we dress up the model with one of the topics. For example, in Montes de Maria, our intervention was based in gender equality. They started using our methodologies in schools with a gender approach for men, for women, and how they mixed also in the community ecosystem in this way, also with the consolidated leaders and in the multi-stakeholder approach. In Urabá, for example, we dressed up the model of the need of strengthening environments for children and young people, because we understand domestic violence is very harsh in Urabá. There are a lot of risks and violence associated with armed conflict and armed groups in Urabá. There we work to strengthen safe environments for children, working with families, schools, the community, and decision-makers in order to articulate a full intervention.

Katherine Noble: How does this translate into greater success when using a more integrative approach? Can you give me an example of what impacts or measurements showed that this holistic intervention was working?

Pedro Fajardo: First, one thing that facilitates the intervention is coherence because, normally, what we see in Colombia are a lot of these unarticulated programs with

different logos. Communities are not only confused but also exhausted by this lack of articulation of programs. Having these ecosystems starts building trust because of logo fatigue, but the impact is very important. When we're working in schools, for example, teachers highlight how conflicts within the classrooms start going down. These are some perceptions from our focus groups and different evaluations. We have seen this pattern of reduction with our methodologies, by giving tools for creative solutions for conflict or addressing conflict within the classrooms. We also started escalating this. For example, kids in the school ecosystem started going to the community ecosystem, and some emerging leaders started to become consolidated leaders with important positions in decision-making within the multi-stakeholder ecosystem. It communicates the intervention where all the different ecosystems start. I don't know how to say this in English, but in Spanish, we call it *sistemas anidados*, i.e. 'nested systems' that are all connected and have the same direction or horizon we want to achieve.

It's very interesting how sectors usually don't talk to each other within the school, but usually it's because the school doesn't go out to the community, and communities usually don't speak with all sectors of society, only with the public sector, for example. It's a very coherent way of intervening that starts to accelerate change within the territories when we use the complete model, but we also have a lot of challenges to achieve interventions as a whole. We also see impact when we are intervening in only one ecosystem in some territory. We also see some very important impacts when one of our strategies is activating the ecosystem itself. We always try to connect with different sectors, and with different actors and organizations in order to amplify what we are trying to do in a territory.

Katherine Noble: Any insights that surprised you when comparing those two scenarios, i.e. when you use the holistic approach versus when you can't? Anything you're definitely going to replicate, or not going to do again next time?

Pedro Fajardo: Yes. The intervention has more possibilities of being sustainable when we take the full model to a territory. This model has also an important characteristic because normally, it's multi-annual. When you have a multi-annual program versus a project that's financed only for eight months, for example, which happens a lot, impacts start being more sustainable in all ways. You start seeing, for example, youth initiatives turning into legal NGOs or grassroots organizations that receive financial resources with public and private sector alliances. Even things you think might not be that easy to sell, for example, urban art and youth-led organizations of graffiti, are financed by private sector alliances to intervene in public spaces, for example, hip-hop schools for marketing brands, or big brands of food in the cities. It's also a way of capacity building in the territories after we are not there with the project. That's how to achieve the most

impacts, by letting an ecosystem you've activated continue with collaborations that keep achieving change over time.

Katherine Noble: What type of support did you receive? Did you have an unrestricted grant? What kind of funding did you get from Rippleworks?

Pedro Fajardo: No, we didn't have funding with Rippleworks, what we had was a technical consultancy. That was really important for us because it came at a time when synchronicity is everything. Last year, we started and finished a very important program with USAID. That was an interesting approach with USAID, to strengthen civil society organizations so USAID could start its localizations and not pass resources to local NGOs through the traditional big NGOs such as Chemonics, TETRAEPIK, or ACDI/VOCA, but instead to have a direct relationship with USAID. This is not happening now, but it was a program that strengthened the priorities of an organization through a grant that you could prioritize for different issues by contracting your preferred consultants. For this, we prioritized three big topics, especially diversification of resources and financial resources. We were seeing three years ago that international aid in Colombia was getting limited. We wanted to reduce the financial dependency on international aid by strengthening the diversification of resources. This is one of the topics we addressed last year.

The other one was an upgrading in our evaluation system to reflect that this is always a challenge for social organizations around the world. The third one was to have a learning system to adjust our methodologies and processes to improve as an organization and to be more efficient, more impactful. Those were our three topics, and in the diversification of resources, we had two strategies. One was to create a consultancy service brochure that allowed us to communicate to the private sector things we know were useful for them, not as donations but as services. We created a service portfolio with four strategic lines that we're now selling to diversify some resources, and guarantee our financial and sustainability through the years. That's why I'm talking about synchronicity. We were starting to create a technological methodology to facilitate and empower people in their transition to retirement. We recognized a very important opportunity and challenge in that population age group. When we were building this product, Rippleworks started a consultancy or technical support for us on how to build a business model for this technological solution.

Katherine Noble: Regarding the synchronicity in timing, were you thinking about engaging with that population, and then you got capacity-building support from Rippleworks that allowed you to do that?

Pedro Fajardo: Yes. It was synchronicity because of the timing. It's a positive thing that Rippleworks does, and what USAID did, in co-creating the strengthening of the

organization. They asked, what are your priorities? What do you need? What do you want? In conversations with Rippleworks, we prioritized the specialized consultancy we needed for the product we were creating.

Katherine Noble: Had you been thinking about working with that population, and then this support from Rippleworks provided an opportunity to test it out?

Pedro Fajardo: Yes. We closed our strategic planning in 2023, and started creating our strategic planning through 2027, and we changed some things. The first thing we changed was, even though in our hearts our main population focus is still young people, we understood we had to work with all generations. That was our first change. Our second change is we were concentrating on peacebuilding, but we wanted to address other issues that are starting to be important in Colombia, as well as the world. For example, the legitimacy of democracy. We are not only concentrating on peacebuilding by promoting more peaceful societies, but by incorporating democracy and inclusion. We were seeing, and now it's materializing a lot, the sanitization of inclusion and equity in the woke and anti-woke movement, and also regeneration in our relationship with nature to address climate change. That was our second change in strategic planning. Changing the population focus and the challenges we were addressing gave us the opportunity to start working with this age group because demographic numbers show that Colombia is getting older and is going to have some challenges with this population.

Katherine Noble: How important is trust between you and your funders? Do you feel it's reciprocal between you and your funders, and Rippleworks in particular?

Pedro Fajardo: Particularly with Rippleworks, because this was technical support, which is a very bilateral trust-based relationship. In our experience in philanthropy and international aid, we have started to embark on an advocacy strategy to promote trust-based philanthropy. How can we apply for more trust-based philanthropy, because we see some very rigid donors that normally do not operate in a bilateral trusting way, but in a way of making a very harsh, difficult way to operate a project. We also see others that are not only flexible but understand the necessities and the priorities of organizations. Those are the ones that co-create the agenda with you, the program, the problems we must address, and the territory, for example, and are also flexible in the management of financial resources. Those are the ones that, for example, understand that overhead is a way of facilitating the financial sustainability of a social-based organization, and not a way to keep money that should go to communities.

If the social fabric is solid, the impact on communities is going to be better. We have learned a lot in the Colombian armed conflict about how social fabric can allow resistance to violence of criminal gangs and criminal organizations all around Colombia.

Those funders are the ones that are coherent in recognizing local knowledge, the ones that allow intellectual property to be kept in communities and not to go to the donors or financial supporters of the strategies. We have seen both types of donors. We have started a conversation with some donors on the importance of incorporating trust-based philanthropy principles. We know this is a time of transition. All donors are capable, but some don't have the will to go with this type of philanthropy. There's a crisis in the social sector in Colombia because 76% of international aid in Colombia came from the US and USAID. We have started to participate in different conversations to create a safer and better environment for civil society organizations in Colombia.

This matter arises especially in difficult conversations when making agreements with the national government, because a lot is required to have collaborations with the state. For example, the organization must put 30% liquid financial resources into the project. In a crisis like this, it's impossible, so can we advocate to change that law? There's also a difficult conversation in Colombia with taxes. Universities in Colombia are tax-exempt not just for formal education but also for operating projects or social projects in communities, but the NGOs are not tax-exempt. That creates a very difficult competition between universities and the social sector.

Another big conversation is how UN agencies are becoming competitors of local or civil society organizations because they are operating programs directly with national resources and international aid as agencies. There's a lot of open conversations around this, and we're starting to do a lot of advocacy on these types of issues. The other big risk is the woke, anti-woke discussion that also starts to put in danger organizations that traditionally worked with gender equality issues. It's very important because of the numbers of gender violence and gender inequality. If you want a society based on equality and opportunities, some populations need a little bit of a push to compete equally in society. That's another risk we're seeing today around the world, but we are trying to surf with the flow.

Katherine Noble: There's so many challenges right now with what's happening with USAID and all the issues you mentioned. What are the top three things that would unlock your ability to scale and sustain your work and to have more opportunities to do the full integrated approach in different communities?

Pedro Fajardo: One is to think outside the box on financial topics. We started with the diversification of opportunities and alliances that are working. We are not as impacted or as damaged as we could be, thanks to that strategy, because of what happened not only with USAID but what's happening around the world. It's very important to understand that you must transform yourself and diversify your portfolio. Only certain types of organizations can achieve that. We're also starting to see a debate where a

majority of sectors say that NGOs and the civil society sector should always try to build business models to guarantee sustainability. That's partly true. But we are concerned for organizations that focus on humanitarian issues, defense, and human right guarantees. Those are almost impossible to make sustainable.

Now, organizations like us that work in prevention have processes of non-formal education, and we're seeing we can't succeed like that. When you put humanitarian NGOs in the same package with the ones defending human rights and say, create business models or you're going to disappear, that's a very dangerous discourse because it eliminates a very important role of NGOs to build a safe environment for the whole society. The second thing is to have the flexibility and capacity to adapt to a new geopolitical environment where you have to build a narrative and be clear what we want to defend, how to discuss it in a different way in order to keep doing our work, and how to talk about our impact without putting our financing at risk. The third thing is building evaluation models that are more economical in measuring impact for our organizations. Everybody knows that doing an impact evaluation with a third party is really expensive. How can we progress and upgrade to a better evaluation system for social organizations to attract other types of donors and other types of opportunities all around the world?

Katherine Noble: You had capacity building technology-focused support from Rippleworks. Is that kind of funding hard to get?

Pedro Fajardo: Yes, especially as we had it with USAID grants. We prioritized USAID, and they always assisted us, but you can have your priorities, you can decide what to put resources into. Also, you can bring on organizations and consultancies that you already know or that you want to work with. That's really difficult to find for capacity building in the funding world. It's co-creating and recognizing the priorities of the organization you're going to strengthen. Also, in capacity building, there has to be another way of addressing what's happening now. It's not the same. I can say this for Colombia, but I think I can say for other parts of the world, it's not the same.

The ecosystem we were seeing last November compared to what we're seeing today because of the anti-woke discourse, that's getting a lot bigger all around the world. Also, because of the impact of different financing strategies, not only USAID. Some companies from the private sector eliminated parts of daily programs and other enterprises, and also other international aid agencies are saying they are going to change their priorities now. There has to be a way for the next one or two years for capacity building to have some emergency funds. There are a lot of organizations that are not going to make it until May, June, even April. It's really difficult. Capacity building can't only be understood as technical support, because maybe capacity building is

giving an organization money so they can have a grant writer for the next one or two years, for example. It's not only technical support. It's really important to start to think of ways to strengthen the civil society organization space that's shrinking all around the world.

Katherine Noble: How different would our conversation be today if we were having it four months ago before all the cutbacks at USAID? How different is the feeling on the ground in Colombia?

Pedro Fajardo: It's different because we're seeing a lot of confusion today. We're not clear where we're going or where we're going to end up. Four months ago, we were still working with things that you thought could be permanent. The conversation is different in two ways. First, in what you're seeing in the civil society ecosystem, not just Mi Sangre. A lot of organizations have a financial crisis, especially in Colombia where 76% of international aid came from USAID. A lot of programs were already getting implemented, but that didn't happen to us because we had signed a contract agreement with USAID eight days before the freeze. We didn't use even \$1 of our own resources. A lot of organizations were implementing \$100,000 or \$200,000 from their own money, to be repaid afterwards. There's where we're seeing a large crisis that's very difficult to address as a collective.

The conversation is different from what we're seeing outside the organization. It's a collective panic and financial crisis in the sector. The other issue is the turbulent discourse we are trying to understand. It's not clear enough today. Human rights, development goals, everything is woke. But what are the different movements, different tiers, different challenges? It's a little bit confusing and stressful to understand what is happening in this generalization of essential humanitarian agreements. Even democracy, the separation of powers, and checks and balances, that's something we're not understanding in the discourse, and we are going to have a challenge in adapting, resisting, and defending those basic essential humanitarian agreements without starting a fight that can make us lose focus. Those two things are the two issues that will make this conversation four months from now different from yesterday.

We're also trying to address a strategy of internationalization by transferring the model to other countries, to expand a way of addressing social challenges today. That's what we want to do. We did it in 2014 with South Africa. That's also another intention we have in our strategic planning, to achieve an international methodology model transfer to other NGOs, especially in the Americas for now.

Katherine Noble: Does your founder talk about your work a lot?

Pedro Fajardo: Yes. Juanes is very special because he's a very sensitive social person who understands the challenges in Colombia and has used his music to put difficult issues on the agenda. He has songs about, for example, *minas antipersonales*, that is, antipersonnel landmines. We started as an organization working for that cause 19 years ago, for preventing and eliminating landmines as arms of war, and we've been working with victims of landmines all around Colombia. He has invited other singers to change hatred into love and peace, for example, doing concerts for Venezuela for example. He was in Cuba also for a peace concert. He is a very socially engaged artist. He not only amplifies what the foundation wants to say, but as a person, as an artist, he has made a very important promise to build better societies around the world. That has made him stand with the UN as an ambassador for different causes. He's very engaged.

Katherine Noble: Anything else you'd like to say?

Pedro Fajardo: I would like to say our two mantras for Fundación Mi Sangre. They are in Spanish, but I think I can say it in English. One is that "in times of crisis, hope is a duty." The other is that we believe "change is possible and achieving it is in our hands, in your hands, in my hands, in everybody's hands." That's why we try to strengthen and connect leaders for social transformation and systemic change.

Katherine Noble: Thank you very much.

Katherine Noble directs editorial partnerships at Sentient, including syndication, co-publishing, co-reporting, collaboratives, and special projects. Before joining Sentient in 2024, she worked for eight years to spread the practice of solutions journalism through the Solutions Journalism Network. As a reporter, she specialized in water issues, particularly in the western United States, and she also covered philanthropy, health, religion, education, and crime for daily, weekly, and monthly print publications. She has a graduate degree in history from Duke University and in business from University of Redlands. Her undergraduate degree is in political science from UC Berkeley.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*