

Civic initiatives

A regional peace experience

the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme

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Since 1995, a process has been developing in one region of Colombia, which hopes to transform the armed conflict into an opportunity for sustainable human development and peaceful coexistence. It attempts to face down the scepticism and disenchantment that many Colombians feel about peace and the discourse that surrounds it.

The Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme (PDPMM) is based on a consideration of peace as a product of two related efforts: a regional socio-economic development process, involving and positively impacting the life of the poorest people, and a process of rebuilding and recovering collective assets, starting with access to the state as an institution, education, health, the environment and cultural heritage.

Since the passing of UN Resolution 41/128/1986, it is recognized that the human person is the central axis of development and for that reason any development policy or project should ensure the participation of the person, not simply as a beneficiary but as a protagonist. In this way development is defined as an economic, social, political, and cultural process, geared to the well-being of the population. It is based on the voluntary participation of individuals in a community, respect for the environment and gender equity. The PDPMM takes those elements and tries to put them into practice creatively in an area which has for decades been wracked by war and abandoned by the state.

The Magdalena Medio region

The Magdalena Medio in the northwest of Colombia is 30,000 square km, crossed from north to south by 300 km of the Magdalena River. The area covered by the PDPMM is made up of 850,000 people, living in 29 predominantly rural municipalities, except for the two urban centres, Barrancabermeja and Aguachica. These municipalities, despite comprising a geographic region, are politically administered by four different departments (Santander, Bolívar, Cesar and Antioquia).

The region is geo-strategically important, owing to its privileged location and its natural and human resource wealth. It is the convergence point between the interior of the country (the most populated part where industry and commerce is concentrated) and the Atlantic coast, an essential node for exports, and between the Pacific region and Venezuela (Colombia's second biggest trading partner). The city of Barrancabermeja also hosts the country's principal petrochemical refinery.

An enclave economy was established in Magdalena Medio in the 19th Century, exploiting raw materials destined for export to the world market, such as *quina*,



tobacco, and wood. This tendency deepened throughout the 20th century with oil, palm oil, soy bean, and cotton. The consequence of this economic model is a resource-rich region which contributes significantly to GDP, but which has municipalities where 90 per cent of the population have unmet basic needs.

The concentration of land ownership is another dimension of poverty and the struggle for ownership, one of the causes of the social conflicts. This phenomenon has dramatically increased since 1980 due to the drugs trade and paramilitarism. As an area of internal colonization, its processes of population settlement were never accompanied by a solid state presence. Throughout its history the region has seen the arrival and growth of armed groups. Between 1960 and 1998, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) ran the area. After 1998, using violence and indiscriminate terror, the paramilitary group Central Bolívar Bloc provoked the withdrawal of the guerrilla groups to the mountainous and inaccessible zones, and now dominates the 29 town centres in the area covered by the PDPMM.

The consolidation of paramilitary domination of the region has been achieved at a high social cost. The homicide rates between 1998 and 2002 were higher than 250 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, at least 40,000 people were displaced and the social and

organizational fabric of the region was affected by threats, selective assassinations of leaders, and the paramilitaries' association of any social demands with guerrilla sympathies. The context of poverty and violence has been fed over the last five years by the expansion of coca cultivation, a source of finances for the war.

The PDPMM: a proposal for regional development and coexistence

The PDPMM started in 1995 and arose through the converging interests of the State Oil Company ECOPETROL and the Oil Worker's Union USO around the defence of human rights and the proper use of state oil profits; the existence of a strong and active social movement; and the presence of a credible actor with operational capacity in the local catholic church. It also had sustained government support.

The PDPMM defines itself through its efforts to build a model of development in the midst of conflict, with the active participation of men and women, through creating and accumulating social capacities and physical and communication infrastructure. It is a programme committed simultaneously to emergency responses and to rehabilitation, reconciliation and development processes.

The PDPMM works through setting up economic and social development projects that respond to inhabitants' needs and hopes, and the promotion of consensus-building between the inhabitants themselves and between them and the local, regional and national state authorities. The projects cover areas such as rural development (e.g. planting or extending crops, productivity improvement), development of urban production, commercialization of agricultural and manufactured products, housing, education, public service provision, fishing, and environmental and institutional development. Around 300 initiatives have been financed so far, including: 5,000 hectares of African Palm; renovation and production improvement of 8,000 hectares of cocoa; aqueduct construction; building or renovating over 30 rural schools; and the creation, training and consolidation of Municipal Planning Councils.

Life above all: principles and collective action in PDPMM

The first meeting of the Magdalena Medio inhabitants highlighted the need to tackle the polarized atmosphere and existing stigmatization between various social, political and economic sectors that were impeding the implementation of any accord. Efforts were made to collectively formulate working principles that would be simple, easily understood, and shared widely.

Building a region for life together: The different forms of conflict and exclusion have left deep wounds, making it difficult to start communal projects. The participation of all social and political actors is necessary to achieve the development and integration of the region. For the PDPMM development must include everyone or there is no development. Putting this principle into practice implies offering a broad invitation, to which only a few actors initially respond, until progressively more become interested and join in greater numbers. Care must be taken not to close the door on nor disqualify any actor.

Each municipality created a *municipal nucleus* for participation, comprising existing local social organizations. Their tasks include the design of a local development strategy (the Municipal Development and Peace Proposal), allocation of resources and execution of projects. In each municipality, development planning processes, project management training, participation and political consensus-building and involvement in local, regional and national markets are established.

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation: the PDPMM believes peace will be built as a result of a long and patient process. Alongside negotiations with the armed actors, the country needs reconstruction: not just

the infrastructure to guarantee the economic context for sustainable development, but a collective project involving the whole country. Peace is understood as a process that transcends negotiations, ceasefires and demobilization, requiring the transformation of the violence in social, economic and political conflicts, by searching for a way to develop peaceful solutions, starting from recognition of the other and dialogue. Increasing local capacities for transforming conflicts is a priority for the PDPMM. A methodology has been established which works from where people are at the moment. The capacity of community organizations is built upwards from this base, so that they can become the subjects of their own development.

The local dimension: an environment for peacebuilding and development. In the political negotiation processes between the state and the armed actors, just as in the public policymaking for regional and national development, local actors are largely absent. For the national government, the political class, the guerrilla groups and the paramilitaries, the micro-dimensions of the conflicts do not count or are hidden. Yet in Colombia, an understanding of the configuration of the whole context in a place like Magdalena Medio is essential to generate opportunities for development and coexistence.

The PDPMM is not a protagonist in the negotiations between the state and combatant groups, but instead dedicates its energy to promoting dialogue and understanding between the social and political actors at local and regional levels, regardless of their political ideology, party affiliation or religious belief. The PDPMM recognizes that the development of the region and the exercise of political participation depends on pluralism, diversity and tolerance. This does not mean the PDPMM is a political-electoral movement that will supplant the state in its functions or convert into a political party to contest and win local authority.

The project is a means not an end: a means to break the phenomenon of exclusion of the poorest from development projects. The PDPMM promotes project formulation through participation, which allows for progressive growth, so that community organizations achieve concrete results, measurable in the short-term, and can then set more ambitious objectives. The starting point is the ideas the people have for resolving their own problems. These become an 'Initiative' and with technical, financial and administrative support from the PDPMM, in a specified time-frame and in accordance with the characteristics of the organization and its problems, becomes a 'Project' which can more easily attract resources. This methodology takes groups of participating inhabitants in their current state of

development, and seeks to increase the capacity of the involved group to be able to form projects.

Local authorities, political parties and armed actors tend to be suspicious and jealous of processes that the PDPMM generates because they break with the dominant clientelist political culture. The Programme is therefore constantly facing tensions and difficulties, converted into opportunities to spread its principles and seek consensus amongst diverse interests.

Funding the PDPMM

Between 1995 and 2002, 80 per cent of the funding for the PDPMM came through the Colombian state, US\$3 million from the Colombian State Oil Company (ECOPETROL), and two Innovation and Learning Loans from the World Bank to the national government of US\$10 million. The remaining 20 per cent has come from the UN system (UNDP, UNFP, etc) and grants from some European NGOs (Caritas France, etc) and governments (Sweden, Switzerland, etc). Since 2002, the PDPMM has received funds from the European Union through the Magdalena Medio Peace Laboratory project, an investment of 34m euros over 8 years, to which matching funds from the national government will be added.

Most important features and results

The most important characteristics of the PDPMM are that it is a process built from below, with broad participation by inhabitants, founded on simple, concrete and easily shared ideas. With approximately 15,000 people working with the same principles and objectives, it has an efficient communication process from and to the population, and from the PDPMM to national and international institutions. Crucially, it is administered by an organization that defines itself as a peace promoter, with a time-limited existence, with no pretensions to be a political party, and without creating assets nor a structure that is heavy to sustain. It is also built from the accumulated history of social organizations in the region, with the participation of credible actors (especially the Catholic Church and some of its institutions) able to form alliances and attract national and international public and private entities. The most important achievements include the fact that the poorest communities in the region have developed more than 300 projects. They argue with pride that this is the first time that they have been consulted and given responsibility. Further, a methodological model has been constructed, adjusted to the cultural, social and political conditions of the region, rapidly assimilated, simply and economically applied, and accepted without reserve by public and private financiers. Finally, the creation of the Programme has been a stimulus to regional civil society

initiatives with similar objectives to the PDPMM and now 15 of them have formed a Network of Development and Peace Programmes (REDPRODEPAZ).

Challenges and difficulties

The key challenges confronting this experience today are:

(a) consolidating the move from micro-realization and pilot projects to macro-realization as a strategy of real development for urban communities and the rural poor;

(b) building a regional development strategy, as a public policy and a collective proposition, that goes beyond the existence of local projects financed by the PDPMM;

(c) developing an administrative, technical and operational structure that will maintain participation and opportunities, and continue to be credible in responding efficiently and effectively to commitments made to inhabitants and to funding bodies;

(d) making the process sustainable and showing its positive and durable impact in improving living conditions for its participants.

The chances of success for a regional development proposal that implies structural change, dialogue and reconciliation are limited in the current Colombian context, characterized as it is by the determination of the state to defeat the guerrillas militarily, by the polarization of society and by the deepening of the neo-liberal economic model. But the PDPMM is committed to the long-term, because it represents a contribution to the transformation of the political culture and toward a future constructed participatively, through promoting opportunities for public and democratic decision-making, freeing the discussion from the confines of party politics and groups, and forcing a change in the mentality of administrators and citizens about their role in the construction of a regional future. It is also an attempt to draw up a new social contract in which the Colombian state will be the guarantor of the general interest, a legitimate structure which regulates conflicts, a valid instrument of social cohesion capable of uniting Colombians, and promoting real economic and social development for all, with emphasis on the poorest.

It is vital that the PDPMM does not end up being co-opted and forming part of a process of legitimization of the authoritarian and exclusive model that the paramilitaries want to impose on the Magdalena Medio region. It is essential that the dynamic of collective participation and consensus-building begins to introduce change in local power relations, capable of defending a democratic and pluralist social order.