Colombia: challenges and dilemmas in the search for peace

Mauricio García-Durán

Colombians have suffered a long conflict that has taken a horrific toll on the civilian population and devastated an otherwise beautiful and vibrant country. The geographic coverage of the conflict and the number of lives affected have reached levels close to or even above those of countries experiencing full-blown civil war. Efforts to find a negotiated solution have been equally long-lived, spanning nearly 25 years and leading in some instances to partial peace agreements. The wealth, scale and diversity of social mobilization for peace and against violence is also of great significance. Nevertheless, all this accumulated experience has not enabled the country to find the way out of this labyrinth of violence and social fragmentation.

In searching for alternatives to the violence, there have been numerous efforts to analyse the conflict and develop strategies that might lead to peace. This Accord issue hopes to make a further contribution to this task. In a context where there are too few publications that collect and synthesize the lessons emerging from previous experiences, this 100-page publication attempts to present an overview of the last twenty-five years of peace initiatives. It brings together the voices of a diverse group of Colombians who have attempted to evaluate these efforts and initiatives. Their articles confirm that the non-violent transformation of the conflict is possible and that Colombian society possesses tremendous potential, dynamism and experience to bring to this task. Furthermore, the publication contains useful analysis regarding the obstacles faced in peace initiatives and negotiations, as well as suggestions as to how these can be overcome in the future.

The conclusion that emerges is that there can be a peaceful resolution of the Colombian conflict and that this process must be negotiated, integral and participatory.

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Understanding the conflict

The shocking reality of violence in Colombia provokes important questions regarding the nature of the conflict. By international standards, the magnitude of the confrontation could be described as a war. The diversity of the factors and actors involved in the conflict could indicate a situation of multi-polar violence. The degradation of the conflict could signify a war against society. The influence of the United States and the focus of its foreign policy after 11 September 2001 suggest an anti-terrorist war. The Colombian conflict would appear to have a little of all these elements.

There is an immense amount of literature about violence in Colombia. Some academics and critics even believe that the country has been over-diagnosed. However, it is questionable whether all the existing studies provide the clarity necessary to define the strategies needed for peace. Fernán González introduces us to the debate on political violence in Colombia, highlighting some of the points of consensus reached through these efforts to understand the reality of the conflict. His analysis invites us to adopt a complex approach to the conflict, taking into account the multiplicity of factors that underlie the political violence in Colombia and which must always be implicit in the alternatives and strategies for action.

Firstly, the dynamics of current violence combine structural factors rooted in the long history of the construction of present-day Colombia, and medium-term or contemporary factors that create significant variations in the magnitude and characteristics of the conflict. The process of settlement of the country and the conflictual dynamic of the construction of the state influenced the manner in which structures of political power have developed in institutions, political parties and local elites. In the medium term, the difficulties the political system faced in responding to social demands and conflicts created by this situation led to the appearance of the guerrilla groups in the 1960s and early 1970s. The penetration of drug trafficking led to a deepening of this political crisis, which reforms implemented through the new Constitution in 1991 were unable to resolve. Resources from the drug trade provided income for the guerrillas and the paramilitaries and led to further escalations of violence. In understanding the conflict, González points out that it is also necessary to examine its magnitude and coverage. He highlights the diverse geographical dynamics of the conflict as they are
connected to the different patterns of territorial expansion of the armed actors, stemming in turn from the two models of development of the rural economy that they defend.

Reviewing civic peace initiatives

Just as the violence has temporal and geographic roots, civic peace initiatives have developed across the country over recent years in reaction to the dynamics of the violent conflict. Fernández, García and Sarmiento present an historic overview of peace mobilization in the last 25 years, categorizing four different phases: the background to mobilization within the framework of the struggle for human rights (1978–85); the initiation of mobilization in the midst of the peace processes and the Constituent Assembly (1986–92); the organizational stage with mass mobilizations for peace (1993–99); and finally the stage of crisis within the national coordination structures coupled with the growth of local and regional initiatives (2000 onwards).

Within these phases, there have been successes, tensions and dilemmas, both within the movement and its organizations as well as in the relationship between the movement and society. On one hand, there are undeniable achievements, such as the ability to mobilize millions of people and create an organizational infrastructure for peace. This infrastructure has demonstrated significant capacity and results both on its own terms within Colombia and by comparison with other similar efforts elsewhere in the world. On the other hand, there are four crucial weaknesses in the relationship between the movement and society: a lack of consensus and poor discursive clarity on the use of violence; the media’s treatment of peace and the resulting invisibility of the movement; the ambiguous relationship with the political sphere and the state; and the challenges presented by relationships with international actors.

It should also be noted that peace initiatives have been concentrated primarily in areas with high levels of conflict and yet there has not necessarily been a significant reduction in levels of violence. Despite this, a careful review of the diversity of the experiences reveals that they are generating significant social processes for the construction of a sustainable peace. The majority are experiences of social significance, born out of the population’s capacity for collective and voluntary action, which leads to the withdrawal of support, explicitly or implicitly, for the warring parties.

In the local sphere, there are a number of grassroots peacebuilding initiatives which have grown significantly in recent years and which embody the civilian population’s efforts to resist violence and fight for life. In her article, Esperanza Hernández presents a typology that helps us to classify these initiatives. She distinguishes between three types of grassroots peace initiatives: those which emphasize the deepening of democracy at a local level; those that focus on civil resistance to the armed conflict, and those that resist the armed conflict, structural violence and the neo-liberal economic model.

At the regional level, the Peace and Development programmes clearly stand out. Among these fifteen initiatives throughout the country, the pioneer was the Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio (PDPMM), which has received national acclaim (the National Peace Award 2001) as well as international recognition in the form of political and financial support. The PDPMM was established as a project for regional development and peaceful coexistence that seeks to construct an alternative in the midst of the conflict. It works to increase the capacity of local actors, in particular the poorest communities, to reverse the dynamics of exclusion and integrate themselves into processes that defend life, facilitate the transformation of conflicts and open up the communities to a civic construction of peace.

At a national level the massive peace demonstrations and initiatives of recent years are prominent, as illustrated in Jorge Rojas’ article. He argues that one of the obvious challenges for civil society peacebuilding is to undertake this not solely from an ethical perspective but above all to stimulate a genuinely political project. From the experiences of processes such as the Citizen’s Mandate for Peace, the Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace, the Network of Initiatives for Peace and Against War (REDEPAZ), and Paz Colombia, amongst others, the need for the peace movement to gain power at the various levels of national politics is understood. This power must be used for the construction of a peace that genuinely transforms the roots of the protracted conflict.

The tapestry created by combining these three levels of initiatives encourages an optimistic perspective despite the critical nature of the Colombian conflict. These civil society efforts are not only the melting pot in which the country’s opportunities for peace are being moulded, but are also the means to guarantee a sustainable peace. Without a strong and organized civil society it will be difficult to advance the construction of a new country capable of living creatively and positively with the conflicts that define it. Therefore efforts are needed to connect the immense wealth of peace initiatives and mechanisms at local, regional and national levels, linking them effectively to the processes of consultation, agenda formation and decision-making that will be required in any future peace process with the armed actors.
Learning from 20 years of peace processes

At the formal level, there have been various approaches to the challenge of reaching a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the different armed groups. Daniel García-Peña offers an analytical perspective that helps to shed light on models used so far. The early governments of this 25-year period implemented two genuinely different and novel models: Betancur launched talks with the guerrillas based on a 'broad' agenda (political and social reforms) but within a process framework that was insufficiently institutionalized or supported by society; in contrast, Barco pursued a model of dialogue with the guerrillas with a 'limited' agenda centred on demobilization in exchange for the creation a legal political party, a clearly institutionalized peace policy directed by the government and social and political reforms independent of the peace process. Subsequent governments have limited themselves to combining the principal components developed in these two 'models' to different degrees, Gaviria used the Barco model to negotiate the demobilization of the smaller guerrilla groups, and expanded the model in the direction of the 'Betancur model' in his efforts with the Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordination body (CGSB); Samper, working unsuccessfully from the perspective of the 'Betancur model', granted civil society a greater role and pursued the ratification of the Second Protocol of the Geneva Conventions; Pastrana, in an attempt to implement the broad agenda of the Betancur model, created spaces for greater public and international participation; and most recently, Uribe, returning to a limited agenda even more restricted than the Barco model, has focused on the demobilization and reintegration of combatants, in particular paramilitaries.

The authors of the section on 'formal peace processes' present a cross-cutting perspective on these dynamics, considering the processes developed with each group.

As a protagonist of the process with the guerrilla group 19 April Movement (M-19), Vera Grabe allows us some vivid insights into the 1990–94 peace processes, which saw the application of the model developed during the Barco administration. We see the significance of a political option and the M-19's decision to disarm for the process (despite the government's failure to implement agreed measures), and how this and the peace processes with other smaller guerrilla groups found a privileged institutional channel in the form of the National Constituent Assembly in 1991. The M-19 was astute in taking advantage of the invaluable opportunity and found a clear echo in the positive attitude of the government's team, particularly the then Peace Commissioner Rafael Pardo. Although the model included a 'limited' agenda as well as very few opportunities for broader public participation in the process, it opened the doors to changes in the political system that can still be felt today. In this sense it was a process with a mixed legacy: it included constitutional reform, a milestone in the political history of the country, but at the same time it only achieved partial success in terms of genuinely opening and transforming the exclusionary political system.

Of all the guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have the longest history of engaging in talks and negotiations. Camilo González Posso presents the diversity of the last 20 years of negotiation efforts (1982–87, 1991–92 and 1998–2002, and the humanitarian accord of 1997) as well as the corresponding failures, with all that these have meant for the deepening of the violence, entrenchment of distrust between the parties and the difficulty of restarting a new process. González Posso also draws our attention to the various negotiation models used with the FARC and suggests the need for a new 'national constituent pact' model that overcomes the limitations of the previous ones. Despite the skill demonstrated by the FARC in the negotiations, it is not clear if the organization has genuinely appreciated the political opportunities it has been presented with, particularly during the Pastrana administration. For their part, the different governments made insufficient efforts to learn from previous experiences, repeating procedural mistakes on problematic issues from the first process, such as verification mechanisms. Furthermore, a future peace process will have to find a way to address the economic and political interests that obstruct the realization of a peace agreement. There will also need to be a substantial effort to define what the majority of the Colombian population feel is negotiable with the largest of the guerrilla groups.

Alejo Vargas presents a complete overview of negotiation efforts with the National Liberation Army (ELN), from its participation in the talks with the CGSB in Caracas and Tlaxcala up to the efforts during the Pastrana administration. The proposal for a National Convention, first made in 1996, is the best indication of the ELN's interest in a peace process that is genuinely connected to civil society, and has given impetus to civilian bodies to promote the start of a process. The various governments, but in particular the Pastrana administration, have failed to fully appreciate the political opportunity represented by advancing a process with the ELN. This was illustrated by the limited political support for the creation of a demilitarized zone needed to convene the National Convention and advance negotiations during the Pastrana years. The process has been further complicated because neither the government nor the guerrilla group know what can viably be substantively negotiated given the parallel process with the FARC.
ACUERDOS DE PAZ

Las jóvenes del barrio VillaTEMA, vamos a firmar el siguiente acuerdo, para dar ejemplo de resistencia y compromiso con la paz del barrio.

1. Nos comprometemos a no utilizar la violencia ni física, contra ninguna persona del barrio.

2. En caso de presentarse algún problema en el futuro, nos comprometemos a dialogar para resolverlo. En ningún caso utilizaremos la violencia para encubrir los conflictos que podamos tener en este proceso de paz.

3. Cada uno de los grupos que firme este acuerdo, nombrará una persona, que será la encargada de resolver los problemas que cualquiera de los miembros del grupo pueda tener y que de pronto, puedan dañar este proceso.

The present administration of President Uribe has brought about a significant shift in the government’s willingness to negotiate with the insurgency. Not only has its position on an eventual negotiation process hardened, but it has also placed a great deal of confidence in the possibility of a military solution to the armed conflict. While leaving the door to a negotiation process open, it has indicated that the only issues to be discussed would be the demobilization and reintegration into civilian life of the armed actors, be they guerrilla members or paramilitaries. Mauricio Romero describes the ongoing process with the paramilitaries, which raises many questions and concerns about its potential to deepen rather than counter the violence. Although there is a risk that it may lead to nationally and internationally unacceptable levels of impunity, the process, if appropriately managed, could also potentially lead to the removal of one of the principal obstacles to negotiations with the guerrillas.

Lessons for future peace processes

One of the most important challenges the country faces in the search for peace is to learn from its own long history of peacemaking experience. It is crucial to gather some of the lessons offered by the previous processes in order to formulate a viable model for a future process.

a) It is necessary to broaden participation in the negotiation process that will allow not just the parties but also those accompanying the process to contribute their experience. This implies including mechanisms that permit more third parties, both national and international, to provide technical support to the process. Their perspectives will be of great value in finding options to tackle the most controversial and unresolved issues (such as ceasefires, humanitarian accords, demilitarized zones, military participation at the negotiating table, confidentiality and/or the transparency of the process, procedures and decision-making). Furthermore, on these issues it is appropriate to learn from other countries’ peace processes.

b) It is necessary to formulate a more decentralized public peace policy that promotes real spaces for participation in the processes of political dialogue as well as in the wider peacebuilding process. Despite the wealth of autonomous initiatives in Colombia, civil society participation in the formal processes has been minimal. A new model could learn from and draw on current civic initiatives, as well as ongoing proposals such as the national convention and past mechanisms for participation (the constituent assembly, public audiences, thematic committees, and the national peace commission). It would need to identify and involve traditionally excluded groups such as the
indigenous communities and women. To facilitate broader participation in and ownership of all stages of a peacebuilding process, there would need to be sustained social preparation and clear communication strategies, involving the active and constructive participation of the media. Such an approach could also engender the 'democratization' of the peace process itself, a key contribution to the renewal of political life and institutions in the country.

Additionally, it is important not to lose sight of the central role that actors such as churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have played and will play in the future. The Catholic Church has not only provided good offices and undertaken mediation roles in a number of the processes, but has used its national presence to its advantage in playing a key role in responding to the needs of displaced persons, and could play a crucial role in helping achieve the changes and reconciliation the country will need after the signing of any peace accords.

c) The appropriate participation of the international community is another of the key ingredients of a successful future peace process. In the Colombian context both the government and the FARC have been fairly reluctant to accept greater social and international participation in the process, while the ELN has appeared more amenable. As Augusto Ramírez Ocampo illustrates in his article, it is necessary to recall the significant impact that international participation has had until now (the UN, the Friends of the Process, neighbouring countries, etc.). However, as Winifred Tate warns, it is equally important to recognize and mitigate the negative impact of the United States' foreign policy, particularly as it would be very difficult for Colombia to embark on any peace process without the approval of the US government.

d) There needs to be greater clarity regarding the fundamental question of what is and what is not negotiable in a future process, in other words, how far Colombians are willing to go to make peaceful coexistence possible. There is currently no consensus on this issue. Some actors believe that profound social and political reforms are needed for a sustainable peace agreement, as Carlos Lozano advocates in his article. Others believe that it is not appropriate to adopt a maximalist concept of peace, but necessary instead to emphasize the provision of electoral advantage for demobilized guerrillas and the subsequent enactment of reforms, as suggested by Rodrigo Gutiérrez. Although it is vital to build consensus on the type of agenda possible, it is equally important not to adopt an agenda as extensive as suggested in some public debates. A realistic agenda is needed that will allow the parties the necessary flexibility to engage in a process that will be inherently complex and conflictual.

e) The periods of stagnation and the breakdowns of the previous processes are suggestive not only of the need for genuine political will and the appropriate use of basic negotiation techniques, but above all of the importance of power relations within the process. In addition to the use of mechanisms that help create trust and fluid interaction between the parties, it is crucial to build broader support and commitment to the process amongst those groups who are most difficult and most likely to prevent progress. Such 'spoilers' might include those who are profiting from the conflict, the military hardliners in the insurgencies and also the right-wing elites. Political commitment also means bilateral (or multilateral) commitments by the parties themselves, as recommended in the report of the Comisión de Personalidades during the Pastrana process.

f) Given the degradation of the Colombian conflict, humanitarian accords between the parties must be urgently established in order to protect the population. In addition to humanizing the ongoing conflict, the model for a future peace process should enhance a culture of accountability rather than impunity. A balance will need to be struck between mechanisms for forgiveness and forgetting and the need to safeguard the victims' rights not only to the truth but also to justice and reparation.

The challenges ahead are daunting. But twenty-five years of conflict and peacemaking have also left a vital legacy of experience. They have brought significant advances and agreements, as well as tremendous innovations to inspire peacemakers elsewhere in the world. They have also brought bitter failures. Such experience represents a solid foundation for ongoing efforts to build peace in Colombia and provides a rich source of learning for all those involved. The articles in this Accord issue make a contribution to this process.