



Reclaimed Territory: Civil society against the Colombian war

SARA CAMERON
AND MARINA
CURTIS-EVANS¹

ABSTRACT *Sara Cameron and Marina Curtis-Evans look at the role civil society has played in Colombia to confront the long-term guerrilla war fed by drug and criminal activities. They argue that without civil society groups' efforts, particularly children, the peace process would never have reached the level it has today.*

KEYWORDS *children's movement; cocaine; guerrilla; paramilitary; peace march; Vaccination against Violence*

Introduction

Colombia's guerrilla war did not turn criminal until the early 1980s, when it began to expand on revenue derived from taxation of the incipient cocaine industry. Contributions from coca growers helped the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) to triple the number of 'fronts' they were fighting between 1979 and 1983 (Pearce, 1990). In traditional FARC-held territories, farmers had apparently given willing support to the guerrillas in exchange for protection and policing services. As the guerrilla organization expanded, they moved into areas where farmers were not accustomed to contributing to 'the cause' and felt less need for these 'services'. Coercion became more common and demands for protection money grew closer to extortion. Kidnapping, mostly for ransom, also escalated, from almost 550 kidnappings in the 1970s, to just over 3000 in the 1980s and more than 16,000 during the 1990s (Pais Libre, <<http://www.paislibre.org.co>>). By then, guerrilla forces were effectively controlling 40 percent of the country.

As the economic foundation of the guerrillas became criminalized, so rapid expansion of their forces meant that fewer rank and file guerrillas were politicized. The ideology behind the war became diluted, and abuses more likely to happen. The FARC's 11th front, which operated in the Magdalena Medio region, gained special notoriety for extortion and kidnapping and the area became a breeding ground for the extreme right.

The rise of the 'narco-gentry'

In 1982, the mayor of Puerto Boyacá, a municipality in the Magdalena Medio, called a meeting of local politicians, business people and ranchers. They decided it was necessary to not only defend themselves from the guerrillas, but to 'cleanse' the area of subversives. They agreed to gather guns, clothing, food and funds to pay young men to fight on their behalf. The Colombian military offered tactical support and training for the paramilitary group which became known as *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS or Death to Kidnappers), the same as another paramilitary organization formed by drug traffickers in the city of Cali.² It was the involvement of drug traffickers that transformed paramilitaries into a deadly force. The cocaine boom took off in the 1980s and by the end of the decade drug traffickers had purchased an estimated one million hectares of land in Antioquia, Córdoba, Meta and other departments. Land purchases by drug traffickers around Puerto Boyacá, for instance, helped to drive up prices in that area from about US\$100,000 per hectare in the early 1980s to US\$1 million per hectare in 1989 (Clawson and Lee, 1998). By 1998, drug traffickers were estimated to own between 11 and 14 percent of all agricultural land in Colombia.³ The new 'narco-gentry' were subject to the same pressures of extortion and kidnapping from the guerrillas as other land owners but they could afford more aggressive and better equipped counter-insurgency forces. Some even established training centres for their private armies with foreign instructors from Israel and Britain.

Shutting down 'civil' society

For decades there had been paramilitary units connected with the Colombian military, but during the 1980s and 1990s civilian armies that drew funding from the illegal drug industry became much stronger and still sometimes cooperated with the military (Human Rights Watch, 1996, 2000). Chief among these was the Peasant Self-Defense Force of Córdoba and Urubá (known by their Spanish acronym, ACCU). The ACCU strategy was to combat the guerrillas by eliminating or

terrorizing anyone suspected of lending them support. This came to include shopkeepers and farmers who sold or gave supplies to the guerrillas (often under duress) as well as community leaders, teachers, doctors, lawyers, priests or trade unionists who worked with the poor or talked about the protection of human rights. Many of these people became targets for assassination or received threats that forced them to flee the country. Meanwhile, between 1985 and 1999, two million Colombians (about one in 20) abandoned their homes because of fear or intimidation (CODHES, 2000).

Gradually, the war appropriated Colombian society. It became difficult for anyone to do anything positive that was not interpreted as an act of aggression or subversion. Simply stated, those who acted in favour of social justice, in support of the community, became known, per se, as guerrilla sympathizers. Those acting in support of personal justice, such as farmers and business people who joined together to protect their property and families from extortion and kidnapping, were inevitably associated with paramilitaries.

Two major failures of the state lay behind this growing crisis. There was a real breakdown in the legal system, reflected in high levels of corruption and impunity – for example, out of 3600 murders in Bogotá in 1996, fewer than 100 people were arrested (Bogotá Police Department, 1997) – and a failure to protect those who tried to uphold the law. And, despite the apparent continuation of multi-party politics, there was a failure of democracy – reflected in the gross inequalities in Colombian society, and the intransigence of a government that over the years had preferred suppression to negotiation. Sections of the Colombian army that supported the paramilitaries were part of the force that was gradually stifling Colombian society. Efforts to make peace, such as that of President Betancur in the mid-1980s, fell apart because the base on which it was built was too narrow. The war was so deeply embedded in the society that the peace could not be made simply through talks around a table. Finally, in the 1990s, civil society reacted en masse, trying to push back the war and reclaiming the space to make peace.

The unifying power of symbolic action

In December 1995, 35 university students walked from Medellín to Apartadó, a distance of 337 kilometers, through some of the most violent territories in the world. The march came on the heels of a terrible massacre at Belo del Oso in Apartadó in which 25 people had been taken from a bus and slaughtered, apparently by the FARC. Shocked by the massacre and the complacency of many other young people, the students used the march to draw attention to escalating violence in the northern region of Urabá. They covered an average of 16 kilometres per day and were greeted exuberantly in many of the villages en route. On 23 December they reached their destination and celebrated Christmas with towns people in Apartadó. Only 25 young men and 10 young women took part in the march, but it drew on the support of many NGOs and municipal authorities. It was a small but significant step forward.

A few months later, the Catholic Church transformed the *Viacrucis* or Way of the Cross ritual, which is a traditional part of Holy Week observances, into a *Viacrucis por la Paz* (*Viacrucis* for Peace). All prayers and rituals associated with the *Viacrucis* adopted themes of reconciliation and forgiveness. A new cross was designed for the event. About 15 feet tall, the cross had outstretched and welcoming 'arms' and was coloured in red to signify the blood of Christ and the war. It was mounted on a pick-up truck and driven through towns and villages from Turbo in the north, through Apartadó and Medellín and onto Bogotá. Thousands of people thronged to prayers around the cross wherever it went.

In Medellín, some of the peace marchers went to the large square of San Antonio in the city centre where three works by the famous Colombian sculptor, Botero, had been installed. One of them was a giant metal sculpture of a peace dove that had been dynamited some years earlier by one of the urban militias, but its twisted form had been left in place. The peace-makers symbolically 'bandaged' the wounds of Botero's dove.

Vaccination against Violence

Around the same time, the first Vaccination against Violence was launched in Bogotá by the mayor's office, local NGOs and health workers. During the three days in 1996, more than 40,000 people, mostly women and children, lined up outside 20 sites in Bogotá to receive their 'vaccinations'. Accompanied by trained counsellors, participants passed through a series of rooms, representing various stages in their renunciation of violence. In the first room after describing an incident that had left them angry and vengeful, they vented their feelings on a doll made of balloons. In the second room, they were invited to express their feelings in writing and to pin this 'leaf' to a 'tree' of similar messages. The majority of participants wrote about their desire for peace and an end to the war. In the final room was an enormous web of string. Each participant took two loose ends and tied them in a knot, so joining themselves to a web of Colombians who had committed themselves to peace.

An evaluation of the Vaccination against Violence rated it highly for giving people the opportunity to express feelings and shed some of their anger, although clearly more sessions were needed. Other Vaccinations against Violence have since been staged by communities and several municipalities, including Montería, Cali and Apartadó – but a major drawback emerged. After two days or more acting as recipients of so many horrific stories of violence, the counsellors themselves were in need of counselling. It became clear that opportunities for people to unload their suffering had to be spread over a much longer time frame. Plans were developed (though not yet implemented) to institutionalize the Vaccination against Violence by making it available in health centres.

By the mid-1990s, projects aimed at reducing the appalling level of violence in the city of Medellín were also gaining ground. In the previous decade, the homicide rate in the city had soared along with suicides among young people, making it one of the deadliest cities in the world for anyone under 25. Gangs ruled the streets. Some of these were urban militias, originally set up by the guerrillas, but which now survived through extortion and violence. Children were used by these gangs as

lookouts, drug mules and to deliver letters of extortion. Massacres of young people in acts of so-called 'social cleansing' were also common. It became a tradition to mark their deaths with small black crosses embedded in the sidewalk at the spot where the children were slain.

Following the 'execution' of the infamous drug baron, Pablo Escobar, the peace movement in the city gained momentum. In 1995, the Catholic Church launched its *semilleros* or 'seedlings' project – actually prompted by the single action of an eight-year-old girl who wrote a letter to her brother asking him to stop being a *sicario*, an assassin. The brother did as she asked. Children in the most deprived and violent neighbourhoods were able to find a safe-haven at '*semillero* centres' where they could play games, become involved in creative arts, study in the library and learn about their rights in a Christian context.

Mass mobilization for peace

The largely symbolic protests of the peace movement were successful because they helped people make public demands for peace in ways that felt safe and non-threatening. Yet the peace movement remained fragmented. In 1993, the Network for Peace Initiatives (*Redepaz*) had brought together over 400 small organizations and groups into an umbrella organization dedicated to peace-making, but they had very little power or influence. The anti-kidnapping group, *Pais Libre* (Free Country), had managed to get protest marches going in several cities but there was no context for unified, mass action. Many of those who made a public stand in favour of peace or human rights were isolated, exposed and extremely vulnerable to threats and assassination.

In this context, the emergence of the Children's Movement for Peace was timely, catalytic and unifying. In October 1996, nearly three million children took part in a special election in which they voted for 'life' and 'peace' as their most important rights (Cameron, 2000). The Children's Mandate had a powerful impact partly because of its enormous symbolism. Here were society's most defenceless citizens calling for their right to survive. Here were children seriously going to the polls to vote for

their rights, and turning out in extraordinarily high numbers (in many municipalities over 90 percent of children voted). Here were kids, who were by definition neutral in the war, asking for their right to peace.

The Children's Movement went far beyond symbolism. It dramatically expanded the scope for collaboration between the isolated organizations and individuals who had been working for peace. It provided practical experience in mass mobilization. In a hundred municipalities, *cabildos abiertos* (town meetings) were held for children to express their ideas on the war and peace. These *cabildos* had been a part of Colombian society for over a hundred years but had fallen into disuse. The children revitalized that democratic forum which then became more frequently used by adults. Such experiences laid the groundwork for the Citizens Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty, which was held a year later and won the support of over ten million Colombian voters. The Citizens Mandate made peace the central issue of the campaign for the presidency in May 1998, and gave the victor, Andres Pastrana, the mandate for his presidency. The two mandates also sent clear messages to the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, that no matter what or whom they claimed to represent, they did not represent the mass of the Colombian people unless they were talking about peace.

Communities of peace

In February 1997, members of the ACCU paramilitary group arrived in San José de Apartadó, a small village located in the northern region of Urabá. They accused villagers of providing food and other supplies to the guerrillas, dragged four local leaders from their homes, killed them, and ordered everyone to leave the settlement. On 23 March, Palm Sunday, after high mass, the inhabitants of San José declared themselves to be a *Comunidad de Paz*, a Peace Community, and proclaimed their right to neutrality in the war. In this heavily contested zone both the paramilitaries and the guerrillas objected. Since then over 40 members of the community have been murdered, yet San José residents have held onto their pledge (<<http://www.igc.org/csn/sanjose/index.html>>). Dozens

of communities in war-zones have taken similar and extraordinarily courageous stands against the war. The view of the Peace Communities and their supporters, including the Church and a wide range of local and international organizations, is that without the support of local people – without food supplies and recruits – the war cannot possibly continue. Community by community, they believe they have the power to push back the frontiers of war.

Following the two mandates, hundreds of schools, offices and institutions in towns and cities across the country posted signboards announcing their status as *Territorios de Paz* (Peace Territories). While the Peace Communities stood against the war, the Peace Territories represent a stand against the atrocious violence of the wider society. The designation signified that a code of behaviour would be observed that overtly protects and promotes human rights, tolerance, cooperation and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Changing behaviour

The Peace Territories provide a context for changing behaviour, which many Colombians see as the key to a lasting peace and is the primary focus for many organizations working with children and adolescents. The work of the Children's Movement for Peace, for example, focuses on four main areas: on reducing family violence by making children and parents more aware of child rights; on improving conflict resolution skills among children through training and workshops; on helping to relieve the suffering of other children affected by war and violence through play therapy; and on improving the quality of life in communities through environmental and other activities. About 100,000 young people have become engaged in these projects through a wide range of civil society organizations including the Church, the Scouts and the Colombian Red Cross, as well as schools. New programmes, like *Manos por la Paz* (Hands for Peace), which is backed by civil society, government and United Nations agencies, train adolescents to work with younger children in conflict resolution. If the programme is fully funded, up to 10,000 adolescents will soon be working with 100,000

children in 100 of the most violent municipalities in the country.⁴ It will be some time before the impact of these efforts can be measured, but the influence on young people engaged in peace-making is already evident. It shows in their perception of themselves and is often most dramatically reflected in their own homes.

'I have changed my mother's perception about child abuse', said Mayerly Araq, a Red Cross volunteer, now aged 18. 'I told her she should talk to us kids and not hit us. My father used to come home drunk and hit her but I put a stop to that. In that way I have made a difference to the whole family . . . I used to think I had to suffer and would continue to do so and now I know there has to be dialogue and sincerity.' Such comments are by no means unique. Many other young people in the movement describe the transformation of their self-image, of positive changes in the way they relate to siblings and school friends, of conscious efforts to modify their behaviour, of much greater awareness of events in their country and of increased feelings of responsibility. It all adds up to a genuine sense of empowerment and a belief in their own capacity to make change happen.

Civil society and Colombian peace-building

The Colombian government and the FARC finally began peace talks in January 1999 which have proceeded fitfully ever since. The smaller National Liberation Army (known as the ELN) at first adopted a strategy of negotiating only with civil society groups. Conferences were held in Germany but were mainly unsuccessful. Among other pledges, the ELN agreed to suspend kidnapping, but not long afterwards they abducted all the passengers on an internal Avianca flight and an entire congregation during mass in the city of Cali.

It was in reaction to the Cali abductions that the mass movement *No Mas!* (No More) was born. *No Mas!* demonstrations brought nearly two million people onto the streets between June and August 1999. Then, on 24 October, over 13 million Colombians marched for peace, and were joined by supporters in over 30 cities in Europe and the Americas. On 23 January 2000, an estimated 18

million Colombians (judged from the drop in electricity use) turned out their lights for two minutes in a call for peace. Such massive demonstrations are important reminders of the tremendous popular support for peace – but the war is far from over. The peace talks sometimes seem to be going

well, but the massacres, mutilations, disappearances, kidnappings and threats continue. The violence of the war feeds the even greater violence of the society as a whole, and thousands of Colombians are fleeing their native land. In this context, civil society in Colombia continues to

make a courageous stand, trying to reclaim the nation and demand the right to peace. Without that effort, by children and adults alike, the peace process would never have come this far. Without that continuing effort, peace can never come.

Notes

- 1 This article derives from research supported by UNICEF in connection with Sara Cameron's forthcoming book *Peace Children*. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of UNICEF.
- 2 The original MAS in Cali was formed in retaliation for the kidnapping of a member of the Ochoa family, who were among the leading drug traffickers in the city.
- 3 Estimates of the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform and the Colombian Farmers' Association quoted in Clawson and Lee, 1998, p. 167.
- 4 As of Spring 2000, the programme had obtained

US\$60,000 out of the US\$140,000 needed.

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