Alternatives for peace

the business community's perspective

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Business organizations are responsible for the production and distribution of almost all the goods and services that satisfy human needs, and are therefore the wealth-creators and key protagonists of economic, social and cultural development of nations. The men and women who run businesses, as many experiences demonstrate, therefore become essential actors in the prevention of violence and the resolution of social, economic and political conflicts.

Because of the prominent role that society assigns to it, the private business sector has an inescapable social responsibility to protect the security of the communities it serves, not only because of ethical imperatives but because it needs propitious and stable conditions to do its job effectively.

The business sector and peace

Colombian business leaders are increasingly aware of the role they should play in the search for a resolution to our armed conflict and the consolidation of a durable peace. This can be seen in their personal, active and direct participation in negotiation, demobilization and reconciliation processes from 1982 to the present.

The Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP) is an expression of this commitment to the country, created and backed by a group of well-known and progressive leaders of important companies. Since the end of 1999 this centre of ideas and action has been contributing to the solution of the prolonged internal conflict and its deleterious impact on Colombia's political, social and economic institutions.

The FIP's input into President Pastrana's peace initiative, and now into that of President Uribe, is derived from work undertaken in three areas of activity. Firstly, the FIP informs national and international public opinion about the causes and impact of the conflict and alternatives for its resolution. Secondly, it offers critical evaluation of the talks and negotiation processes to the government, Colombian civil society and other friendly countries. Finally, the Foundation proposes post-agreement projects which include the rehabilitation of victims, reconstruction, institutional development, the reintegration of ex-combatants and income generation.

The views of the business sector

The FIP expresses and embodies the prevalent position of the most progressive and responsible section of the business community on how to achieve peace. It believes that the speediest, most desirable and least onerous option in terms of human and material cost is a politically negotiated solution. It rejects the use of violence as a political weapon and condemns human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law. The business sector believes that the democratic principles which inspire our institutionality are valid and effective for building a just society together, and recognizes that additional institutional reforms are necessary in order to achieve it, some of which are already included in draft legislation and others are being studied and prepared. Only through strengthening our democratic institutions can we ensure viable governance, and ensure the full and essential application of basic liberties, human rights, and respect for the principles of equality and tolerance which make peaceful coexistence possible. The FIP disseminates and promotes these ideas widely through different media. In particular, it aims to engage with the rest of the national business community, who have as yet only limited awareness about social responsibility and their role in achieving peace.

Future perspectives

It will take time for peace talks with the guerrillas to be reactivated, given the precedents of the last attempt. For this to happen, some conditions need to be in place. The first is a change in the correlation of forces and military resources of the parties in conflict in favour of the state. The state is constitutionally obliged to impose law and order in the whole country, and has to commit itself wholeheartedly to stopping the violence of all illegal actors using all the legitimate methods at its disposal. We know that the probability of a conflict being solved increases substantially when one of the parties perceives that it is militarily weaker and that it could be advisable to negotiate. Another condition is that the insurgency understands they do not have the support of the population that they claim to represent, nor the support of external allies. An entire population united around a state policy which rejects the use of violence and terror as a political weapon should induce the insurgency to negotiate. A third condition is the intervention of a neutral third party in the form of a person or entity with sufficient influence and moral stature, initially to bring the parties together and develop contacts through discreet channels, and later to mediate in a negotiation process.

To achieve progress in future talks the actual definition of peace needs to be a starting point. The maximalist version adopted during the last failed talks was unhelpful because it defined an unrealistic design for a new country. The aim should be an end to hostilities and the reintegration of the demobilized fighters into the democratic system and a normal life. This should follow accords that include 'political favourability', finally allowing the reintegrated members to gain access to the various arenas of political representation.

Other factors and circumstances can influence the achievement of a politically negotiated solution. The state has the constitutional duty to improve the capacity of the military forces to protect civilians and fight violence from illegal armed groups across the whole country. International pressure, in the current context of zero tolerance of violence and terror as political instruments, needs to continue. The sources of financial support for violence must be blocked.

On the guerrillas' side, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's (FARC) lack of capacity to convert its military power into political advances is evident, as is its failure to shift from a guerrilla war to the more advanced stage of a war of movements. Desertions are increasing, and every day there are more obvious signs of fatigue, demoralization and logistical difficulties within the guerrilla groups. This should also lead them to negotiate.

Talks on the demobilization of the self-defence groups have begun, without first offering them political recognition, which would have been impossible. The process will be slow and full of hurdles, originating from their long history of serious human rights violations and crimes. Achieving real disarmament and reintegration, while complying with principles of truth, justice, and reparations, will be a positive step towards peace.

The business community will contribute effectively to the achievement of peace in multiple ways. It will support the necessary institutional reforms to attack exclusion, poverty and inequality, and to guarantee human rights and coexistence. It will offer solutions to post-conflict problems and inspire society to make peace the great national project.