

Civic initiatives

Compelled to act

grassroots peace initiatives

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"During all these years of violence, in the midst of this abandoned, forgotten land, just as a flower blooms in the desert, we have been tending the shoots of hope. Our birth and growth is an expression of the power of the people, power to rescue the beauty of life from such horror, and to recover our speech as the best tool for the resolution of conflicts."

— Participants' statement during the 'First Meeting of the Experiences of Peace Communities and Territories in Colombia', Bogotá, November 1999

There are many reasons why grassroots peace initiatives have special relevance in Colombia. These experiences show us other realities in a country scarred by persistent violence. They indicate possible new dimensions of peacebuilding, with visions of peace that go beyond the absence of war or the silence of guns. Through organizational processes at the community level, they aim to build new social relations on the basis of solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity. They work to deepen participative democratic processes and to enable forms of development that meet basic community needs. Many of them attempt to recuperate and protect their cultures.

Typology of grassroots peace initiatives

Grassroots peace initiatives emerged in Colombia in the 1980s. Amid their diversity, many share common traits. They are processes with origins in social sectors that have traditionally been excluded from full participation in the political life and economic wealth of the country, such as the indigenous peoples, the Afro-Colombians, the *campesinos* and women. They are often groups directly affected by the impact of war, structural violence, or both. They often benefit from the active support of the Catholic Church and the international community.

It is possible to suggest three broad types of grassroots initiatives as indicative of some important dynamics within the spectrum of peacebuilding activity at this level: a) those with an emphasis on deepening democracy; b) those with an emphasis on civil resistance to the armed conflict; and c) those with an emphasis on civil resistance to structural violence, the armed conflict and the neo-liberal model of economic development. This article will offer a glimpse of one example of each type of initiative, offering descriptions of their emergence and approaches, and some assessment of their outcomes.

Initiatives with an emphasis on deepening democracy

In recent years, Colombia has witnessed a number of localized efforts to transform democratic politics at the local level. These initiatives include the 'Municipal Constituent Assembly' of Mogotes, originating in the Santander region in 1997; the Pensilvania Living Community initiated in Caldas (Manizález region) in 2001 and the 'Municipal Constituent Assembly of Tarso (Antioquia) in the same year.



These experiences, perhaps the most developed examples of many similar efforts, aim to create participative processes for local problem-solving, planning of development projects and renewed democratic political culture that tackles clientelism and corruption. They also tend to appear in regions which are either corridors for the armed actors or have traditionally been dominated by a single armed actor, as well as in those localities where there is considerable structural violence, expressed in exclusion, inadequate mechanisms for civic participation and corruption.

Municipal Constituent Assembly of Tarso

"We, the representatives of the different political, social and administrative groupings, agreed to meet together here for the first time in local history, to evaluate the past, reconstruct the present and define the future."

Tarso is a municipality in southwest Antioquia, with approximately 7,000 inhabitants. Local income is primarily derived from coffee production. The region exhibits traditional patterns of land ownership, with most land concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy families. The municipality has not been the scene of high levels of violence, functioning primarily as a corridor for the armed actors, traditionally the National Liberation Army (ELN)

and since 2000 the paramilitary group United Self-Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU).

The region's social history includes the emergence of an important church-supported *campesino* movement during the 1970–80s. When economic crisis hit Tarso in 1999, Alirio Arroyave, one of the social leaders educated in this movement, took the lead. With the municipality threatened with bankruptcy, Arroyave proposed an Initiation Committee that would generate a broad process of education and consultation amongst residents. This process lasted for just over a year and led to a decision by the local population to form a Municipal Constituent Assembly in January 2001. The assembly comprised 150 delegates representing large landowners, trade associations, traditional political parties, *campesinos*, teachers, the church and the municipal government. With the overarching strategies of promoting sustainable development and peaceful coexistence, the primary function of the Assembly was to develop a Municipal Development Plan. This was facilitated by the formation of six thematic working groups, open to the participation of all interested parties. An elected seven-person Council supervises the working groups and convenes the Assembly for plenary sessions.

In its two years of existence, the process has enabled the municipality to overcome its immediate financial crisis and to generate a development plan through an inclusive process of consultation and direct participation. The local population has elected a mayoral candidate who is committed to respecting the process and enabling the Constituent Assembly, the Mayor's office and the municipal council to interact. It has achieved regional, national and international recognition and support. However, much work still needs to be done to consolidate the process, strengthen commitment and improve communication mechanisms.

Experiences of civil resistance to the armed conflict

Civil resistance in the Colombian context is characterized as an active non-violent response to the impact of the escalating armed conflict on the civilian population. Initiatives typically emerge in contexts with high levels of violence, in areas where the insurgent movements have consolidated their presence and where paramilitaries have subsequently made incursions. Barbaric attacks on the civilian population have taken place and local residents and observers allege the active or passive collaboration of government security forces.

Civil resistance initiatives seek to protect the communities' autonomy and their members' rights to life. The exercise of non-violent resistance to all armed actors, including the security forces, is developed as a protection strategy for community members. Through active non-violence, residents also aim to rebuild the social fabric through solidarity, participation, collective work and life in community.

Colombia is home to a number of such peacebuilding experiences, including the Peasant Workers' Association of Carare, the Active Neutrality of the Antioquia Organization, the Peace Community of San Francisco de Asís in the Lower Atrato region of Chocó and the Communities of Self-Determination, Life and Dignity based in Cacarica, Chocó.

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó

"We declared ourselves a Peace Community... as the only alternative we had to survive in this war. Some of us have been able to return to our lands after three years... We still live in fear, but with all of us united together in work and resistance... We want the community to continue, united and resisting, and demanding the violent actors respect our norms and our rights."

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó is a ward of the Apartadó municipality in Urabá, Antioquia. It is a strategic target for armed actors, because of its proximity to the hill of Serranía of Abibe, a strategic corridor connecting three departments.

The armed conflict is intense, and the civilian population has suffered from the active presence of and clashes between all the armed actors.

Local residents report that in 1996, a group of paramilitaries entered the ward with the collaboration of the Security forces, to wrest control of the region away from the insurgencies. There were massacres, selective assassinations and for nine months a paramilitary regime prevented the entry of food and medicines. The armed actors presented local residents with stark choices: to join, leave the area, or die. With the support of the Catholic Church and some Colombian NGOs, the population decided to resist these options by creating a neutral zone and refusing to collaborate with any of the armed actors. The idea was developed through workshops where the concept and practice of active neutrality was defined. Each resident then had a free choice as to whether to assume this position.

In March 1997, the population held a ceremony to declare themselves a 'Peace Community' in the hope that the armed actors would respect them and allow them to continue living on their lands. The community subsequently benefited from the active accompaniment and assistance of a local NGO, the Inter-congregational Commission for Justice and Peace, as well as a number of foreign NGOs. It organizes itself through three different structures: work groups (currently 31 men's work groups and 11 women's work groups); committees on health, education, women's issues, sport, etc.; and an elected council, which coordinates all activities and resolves conflicts through internal dialogue and regulation processes.

Residents describe a high social cost resulting from the establishment of the Peace Community, including the deaths of a number of community leaders, as well as victimization by all the armed actors, and particularly by the paramilitaries acting with support from the security forces. Yet the population remains committed to the practice of active non-violence. It continues to receive national and international support, primarily from NGOs, although international lobbying has led to the decree of protection measures in their favour by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Initiatives with an emphasis on civil resistance to structural violence, the armed conflict and the neo-liberal economic model

These experiences, such as the 'Indigenous Community Resistance' of Cauca, the 'Embera Wounan Organization' and the Afro-Colombian 'Integrated Campesino Association of Atrato' in Middle Atrato, Chocó, have typically emerged in the context of structural violence, characterized by political, social and economic

exclusion. More recently, many of these contexts have also experienced the escalation of the armed conflict and have had to develop processes amid high levels of violence.

These initiatives have their origin in the need to defend and recuperate culture, autonomy and territory. With the escalation and impact of the armed conflict, they have incorporated civil resistance to the armed conflict into their traditional resistance. Recently a few of these initiatives have approved decisions in their assemblies to develop civil resistance to the neo-liberal model of economic development, which they consider a threat to their cultures and livelihood.

Nasa project

"The Nasa project came about not as a struggle but as a proposal for social, economic, political and cultural development with an eye on the future. . . the process has got stronger and improved and I would say that it is now a legal process. What our elders had to do secretly, we can now do in full public view. . . when we train ourselves, we raise our awareness and everyone struggles to work together from our different points of view."

Toribio is a municipality and an indigenous reserve, located in the north of the Cauca region. Its population of approximately 30,500 residents belong almost exclusively to the Nasa indigenous people. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) has traditionally been present in this region, and recently conflict has escalated between the guerrillas and the paramilitary and state security forces.

Recent experiences of indigenous self-organization date back over twenty years. The Nasa project emerged in 1980, grounded in the teachings of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) that founded the indigenous movement. It had its origins in the initiative of a local indigenous priest, Alvaro Ulcúe and the decision of the indigenous communities of the Toribío, San Francisco and Tacueyó reserves to try to recover dispossessed territories, protect their culture and gain respect for their traditional lifestyles. The process was initiated through a Community Assembly of the People in Toribío in September 1980.

The original aims of the Nasa project were to unify the indigenous communities, enable participation and strengthen the *cabildos* (indigenous councils). The project sought to improve the indigenous population's quality of life, enhance education and enable culturally appropriate development processes. As the armed conflict intensified, the population also began to develop active forms of civil resistance to defend the autonomy of their communities. These included the 'Resistance Assembly' in which they develop collective, non-violent responses to the armed conflict in their territory.

The Nasa project has had many achievements, and has existed for more than two decades. It has enabled the Nasa people to recover over 140,000 hectares of land. It has also developed important income-generating projects such as fishing and the production of dairy products and fruit juices. The civic movement has enabled the local population to elect a mayor who represents their interests. Locally developed participation processes have enabled mechanisms for broad-based decision-making on issues related to the indigenous movement, the municipality and the content of the Nasa project itself. Such processes do not come without a cost. The population has experienced violence, displacement and loss of life as a result of actions by the armed actors. However, through dialogue and active resistance, the community has managed to retain its autonomy from the armed groups. Its successes have influenced many other such initiatives in the north Cauca region.

Conclusion

These brief examples provide some moving illustrations of the diversity and importance of civic peacebuilding efforts in Colombia. They affirm that peace is not only built or provided by the State but also developed at the grassroots. In the context of tremendous difficulties, the significance of their achievements merits special attention and national and international protection.

Local peacebuilding efforts develop their own, locally appropriate understandings of peace. They also identify the need to address and transform structural violence, through processes of social inclusion, democratic participation, development and reconciliation.

Some of these initiatives show that local and regional processes of non-violence, dialogue and decision-making can protect the lives and integrity of communities and assist in reducing the intensity of the armed conflict. They can stimulate and consolidate economic development processes and social cohesion. Yet the difficulties and obstacles encountered within all experiences are also indicative of the risks involved and the very real dangers posed by armed actors demanding territorial control at any human cost.

The conflict in Colombia is experienced at the grassroots and waged within communities. Efforts to resolve the conflict must deal with this painful and complex reality. These initiatives show that peacebuilding in Colombia has to be seen as more than the signing of peace accords, but as social inclusion and citizen participation at the community level.

CIVIC PEACE INITIATIVES

Categories	National initiatives	Regional initiatives	Local initiatives
Protection, defence and resistance to violence	Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty; The "No Más" Movement; Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres; Conscientious Objector's Group	Bajo Atrato Peace Communities; 'Nasa' project	San Jose de Apartado Peace Community; Self-Determination, Life and Dignity Communities of Cacarica (CAVIDA); Women in Black; Murindo Committee of All United for Life and Peace; Public Consultation of Aguachica
Peace education	Children's Movement for Peace; Media for Peace; Peace Week; National Pilgrimage for Life, Justice and Peace; Movement for Non-Violence in Colombia;	School of Peace and Cohabitation; Montes de María Communications Collective; Network for Community Justice and Treatment of Conflicts;	
Deepening democracy	Strengthening of Marginalized Sectors (Planeta Paz); Initiative for the Monitoring of Plan Colombia (Paz Colombia); Citizens's Working Groups for an Agenda for Peace; School for the Development of Democratic Leadership (Viva la Ciudadania) ; Initiative of Colombian Women for Peace; National Network of Women for Peace	Antioquia Constituent Assembly; Govenors of the South of the Country; Peace Laboratory of Eastern Antioquia;	Mogotes Constituent Assembly, Santander; Tarso Constituent Assembly, Antioquia; Micoahumano Constituent Assembly, Bolívar; Carare-Opón Campesinos Association; Municipality of Argelia Community Peace Assembly (ACPM); Municipal Council of Conciliation and Social Development of San Luis, Antioquia
Dialogue and negotiation	National Conciliation Commission; National Peace Council; National Network of Mayors for Peace; Civilian Facilitation Commission (ELN process)	Association of Municipalities of Alto Ariari (Ama); Departmental Councils for Peace	Municipal Peace Councils
Peace and development		Implementation Group for the Sustainable Development of Casanare; the 15 Peace and Development Programmes	
Organization and Implementation	REDEPAZ; Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace; National Alliance of Women Against War and for Peace; University Network for Peace; Businessmen for Peace	Departmental Working Groups for Peace; National Solidarity Network (Pueblos Hermanos Lazos Visibles);	100 Peace Municipalities and Territories

Selection and design by Carlos Fernández, Mauricio García-Durán and Fernando Sarmiento. A full list of Spanish names is available in the Spanish version of this publication (see www.c-r.org)

Regional peace initiatives

