

# Political peacebuilding

a challenge for civil society

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Colombia has suffered from an irregular war for the last four decades. It is a war prolonged by unresolved structural causes that cannot be won militarily, but has not been resolved by political dialogue either. This stalemate continues in the midst of a serious humanitarian and human rights situation, a dangerous social crisis, a growing process of fragmentation and polarization in Colombian society and an international environment that favours the use of force.

We need to look beyond the demonstrated incapacity of the state and the insurgency to reach agreements, and beyond their decision to prolong hostilities, and highlight the role of Colombian society and civilian peace initiatives in the failed efforts at negotiation. Given the way the state and the insurgency use authoritarian methods to drag the whole of society into their war logic, we need to find political responses that advocate democracy, diversity and pluralism.

The dramatic changes in the national and international situation demand that social movements refocus their strategies, methodologies, and forms of communication. We need to look at how to transform the hard reality of war into an opportunity for democratic peacebuilding. We therefore need to review the path taken thus far, assessing the attempts at coordination, consensus, lobbying and international dialogue as well as the breakdowns and internal contradictions.

This exercise is especially important in the current political context. The election of President Uribe followed the ineffective peace talks pursued by former President Pastrana's administration with the left-wing guerrillas. The public lost trust in the peace processes as they did not offer answers to the profound social and economic crisis, reduce the intensity of the conflict, or allow democratic participation in their design, follow-up, or evaluation. In 2002, the electorate chose to back an experiment based on critical scepticism regarding the lack of results, instead



of attempting to find other peaceful ways to resolve the Colombian crisis. In 2003 Uribe launched a national and international campaign against NGOs, peace initiatives and social movements under the generic accusation that they are 'politically motivated, working in the service of terrorism, and human rights traffickers'. These accusations restrict the space of the civil peace movements, and put the lives of leaders and social activists in danger.

At the same time, this analysis of the role of social peace movements comes at a time when the political map of Colombia is changing after the elections of October 2003. These have ruptured the concept of unanimous support for war, and allowed candidates advocating a political solution to the armed conflict to win.

### Experiences of civil participation in peacebuilding

In the 1970s and 1980s the union and agrarian movements led the mobilizations, and the principal emphasis was on social struggles for rights. In the 1980s human rights NGOs emerged in force. Yet maybe the most momentous phenomenon during this period was the elimination of the *campesino* leadership in the 1980s, continuing in the 1990s through the systematic persecution of union leaders and leaders of the left

during the 'dirty war' waged by the paramilitaries. The result of this violent exclusion has been the dismantling of social and political organizations, the dispersion and disappearance of leadership and the imposition of hegemonic models of control over the population through anti-democratic practices and violence. Citizens' peace initiatives emerged at the national level at the end of the 1990s, as a reaction to the dirty war, to demand a political solution to the conflict.

The Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty was the most formidable expression of this. It was preceded by the Children's Mandate for Peace in 1996 in which 2.7 million children in 300 municipalities voted the 'right to life' and the 'right to peace' as the most popular rights in a ballot of 12 rights. The event was organized by the Network of Initiatives for Peace and against War (REDEPAZ), UNICEF and the National Civil Registry Office.

The following year, the Citizen's Mandate was launched. It was a product of a broad agreement between sectors of society, involving peace initiatives, the business community, churches and the social movement, who were enthusiastic about the possibility of a new peace process with a new government. It was coordinated by REDEPAZ and the *Fundación País Libre*, which had risen to prominence organizing marches against kidnappings

by the guerrillas. Just under 10 million people voted in a 'peace ballot', conducted by local authorities on the same day as local and departmental elections on 26 October 1997. A country tired of war opted in desperation for peace, and a citizens' proposal caught the political opportunity. The public voted in favour of a politically negotiated solution to the armed conflict and full respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. So many people voted that there were insufficient ballot papers, and so people improvised by marking campaign leaflets, which were accepted as surrogate ballot papers. The number of votes was about three times that received by all presidential candidates the following year.

Additionally, a very varied group of social sectors have assembled since 1998 in the Permanent Civil Society Assembly for Peace, another form of coordination and action in favour of a politically negotiated solution to the conflict. The assembly's first convention took place in July 1998, attracting 3,000-4,000 participants from a broad range of sectors. It declared that peace is a process in which a diverse civil society should be the principle protagonist, and it sought to both promote negotiations and develop a civil society agenda for peace agreements. Meetings have been held every year since.

The installation of the Dialogue and Negotiation Table between the government and the FARC, and the announcement of talks with the ELN at the beginning of the Pastrana administration magnified public enthusiasm for peace. For three years civilian peace initiatives promoted support for the peace processes, contributed to democratic participation (despite the exclusive model of negotiations), and, during the most difficult times, defended the process with marches and statements. But such almost unconditional support failed to take into account the need for a strategic proposal should the talks break down, and underestimated the population's weariness with the lack of tangible results.

The process was a response to the clamour for peace from citizens, but it was also a political act, with electoral objectives, by the then presidential candidate Andrés Pastrana. It was never really clear if his commitment to peace was real, nor did he clearly represent the Establishment's position on negotiating a peace accord. The FARC took advantage of the circumstances to talk but not negotiate a peace deal, and left the country and the world with the feeling that they had used the demilitarized zone to strengthen themselves militarily. This stalemate in the peace talks and the emergence of Plan Colombia created a new scenario that forced civil organizations to modify their agenda and adopt new methods. Human rights NGOs who questioned Plan Colombia from its inception as a dangerous obstacle to the negotiations, joined forces

with peace initiatives and social movements in a civil coalition called Paz Colombia. This was an important step for the human rights NGOs, who went beyond their work on the consequences of the conflict, and developed a political position designed to transform its causes. Its main achievement was the organization of an International Conference for Peace, Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), in San José, Costa Rica in October 2000. Delegates from 32 governments attended, along with a sector of the insurgency, and broad representation from sectors of Colombian society.

With similar intent and in the midst of the breakdown of the talks between the government and the FARC (February 2002) and the presidential elections (May 2002), the National Congress for Peace and Country was organized. This was a last desperate attempt by civilians to get dialogue and negotiations restarted, and to create a joint platform for a social and political response to stop a candidate successfully campaigning for total war.

Two developing experiences are part of more recent peace efforts by civil society: women's peace initiatives and the civil resistance to the conflict grounded in the spiritual worldview of the indigenous peoples. Diverse alliances and coalitions of women's organizations are using a new language to try and mobilize a country tired by the war but sceptical about peace to persist in the search for a political solution. Significant expressions include the *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres por la Paz* (the Peaceful Route of Women for Peace) and the National Network of Women, who organized a large mobilization of women against the war on 25 July 2002 and organize annual marches to conflict-stricken areas to show solidarity with the population.

The indigenous people have succeeded in presenting to the country and the world their logic of resistance to the war, the defence of their territory and culture. Examples of this have been the declaration of neutrality of the indigenous people of Antioquia in 1997 and the multiple expressions of resistance to the guerrillas and the paramilitaries in Cauca in the last three years. All these expressions convert themselves into a display of autonomy by civil society as a means of initiating possible scenarios for peace.

## Tensions and difficulties in building a peace movement

These examples of civilian action for peace in Colombia have a common agenda: a politically negotiated solution to the armed conflict, full respect for human rights and IHL, political and social changes in favour of equity and inclusion, international aid for peace and the democratic participation of society in voting on eventual accords.

However, there are tensions and difficulties that weaken capacities and affect credibility. The most fundamental difference may be between those who justify and those who reject the armed struggle of the insurgency. There are also many deficits in understanding, especially on issues such as: the representativity and the legitimacy of organizations involved in civil peace coalitions; the political changes occurring around the armed conflict; the role of the international community, the logic of their action and their contradictions and differences; and the role of specific social sectors and of the regions (with regard to centralism and exclusion). Finally, there are deficits in coordination, such as the absence of alliances with diverse sectors of Colombian society, and a lack of a national and international communication strategy in a country at war.

## Lessons from a failure

It is evident that we need to look critically at the role of 'civil society' and its responsibility in the failed process of 1998–2002. Six of the most important lessons to be learned are:

- (1) A social movement for peace cannot run on voluntarism. It needs more political content to its actions, and it cannot leave the direction of the process solely in the hands of the warring parties. Political participation mechanisms are needed that go beyond protests and demands for labour rights and become events and opportunities for exercising local, regional and national power, with the capacity to effect real change;
- (2) A peace movement should alert the country to the potential risks of a process that is not irreversible, and needs to create the conditions for a structural rather than improvised response to an eventual breakdown;
- (3) A peace movement cannot simply be critical, it needs to create proposals for the negotiation table, have lobbying capacity and should define strategic alliances within the international community;
- (4) A civil peace movement must create a communications strategy to prevent the manipulation of information and build public opinion before and during an eventual process;
- (5) The most important lesson from the failure of the process is the need to develop the notion of *democratic peacebuilding*, as a space for capacity-building and inclusive, participatory action that can develop even during times of armed conflict;
- (6) A citizens' mandate at the ballot box is not enough. The civilian leadership of the peace movement needs

to gain power at the mayoral level, in local governments, the congress and other electoral spaces in order to make political participation real.

## Peace building: ethical obligation, political responsibility

Colombian society will not support an endless war, and it will need to continue to develop its capacity to demand and prepare for a democratic peace. Support is needed for all forms of social expression, mobilization and political participation. There are many examples: the public demonstrations against the war by the women's movement, with their immense ethical and political capital; the resistance of the indigenous peoples, who are neither impartial nor indifferent but who disagree with violence; the governors in the south of the country, who try to balance central authoritarian power with democracy; the community councils in the Afro-Colombian communities who resist the war; the civil peace initiatives and human rights organizations, who insist on a politically negotiated solution to this conflict; the huge consensus around active abstention on the referendum. The best antidote to the war is democracy and this is the exercise of a right that helps us even in the difficult times we are living through.

However, the prolonged armed conflict, which creates scepticism about social peace action, demands a substantial change in the peace, human rights and social equality movements. It is a change that has to be realized through politics and based on a social commitment to peace. It is urgent and necessary to move from having a chance to influence the resolution of the conflict, to having a chance to transform the causes of the conflict using the state. This does not necessarily mean the creation of a political party for peace, but it does mean creating a political strategy for peace, so that peace becomes the central axis in the coordination of political movements that assume responsibility for transforming a country rebelling against the war. The change in the peace movements should be understood as a way to offer the whole of Colombian society a political proposal for democratic peacebuilding.

A political agreement should establish the obligations of social sectors with different opinions, tendencies and interests, based on an ethical concept of the peaceful solution to conflicts. Political actions, with a strategic vision for peace, should commit interested sectors to participating not just in peace mobilization, but in democratic processes using the state. The movement will be transformed through the process of deciding on its political participation.