

Accord 14

Policy briefing

Alternatives to war: Colombia's peace processes

CR is a leading NGO with ten years experience in applied international conflict resolution work. In partnership with CINEP, one of Colombia's foremost NGOs, CR's Accord programme is collaborating on a joint project to analyse and communicate lessons from 25 years of Colombia's peace initiatives.

For over 20 years efforts have been made to find a settlement of Colombia's protracted and bloody conflict. While a comprehensive peace agreement remains elusive there is a tremendous legacy of experience to inform policy and practice. This experience exists at both the formal levels, through advances, setbacks and partial agreements in past negotiations, as well as at the civic level, where the scale and diversity of social mobilization for peace in Colombia is unrivalled in the world.

Where much attention has been paid to analysing the violence in Colombia, Accord's **Alternatives to war: Colombia's peace processes** analyses and draws lessons from nearly 25 years of peace initiatives presented by individuals with a range of political perspectives (including negotiators, academics, former politicians and guerrillas, and peace activists).

This publication confirms that the non-violent transformation of the conflict is both possible and essential. In the context of a devastating humanitarian crisis, it argues that all parties must return to the negotiating table. It demonstrates the tremendous potential, dynamism and experience that Colombian society can contribute to a process which must be negotiated, integrated and participatory.

This brief sets out some of the lessons learned and offered by the various Colombian authors of Accord's **Alternatives to war: Colombia's peace processes**. It is intended to accompany the publication as a useful guide to inform future peacemaking efforts and assist the international community to better understand and respond to the challenges of reaching a sustainable settlement of Colombia's conflict.

Lessons learned

- **Enable broad-based public participation.** Ownership of the peace process must be promoted at all levels. Past bilateral negotiation models have been inadequate in a context of multiple armed actors and complex patterns of violence. A new conflict resolution model could learn from current initiatives as well as past mechanisms and facilitate effective public participation at all stages of the process. This would enable the democratization of the peace process, creating an opportunity for real change in Colombia's political culture and institutions.
- **Connect national initiatives with local peace practice.** A national level process of resolving the conflict should aim to connect with and draw upon the wealth of local and regional mechanisms and initiatives for consultation, agenda building and decision-making. Greater support should be offered to community-based alternative development models, which strengthen local democracy and help to create the conditions for sustainable conflict transformation.
- **Build on past peacemaking efforts.** It is vital that future peace processes learn from previous experiences and in particular from the strengths and weaknesses of the various negotiation models used. Attention must also be given to the continued value of important initiatives and advances such as the National Constituent Assembly, the National Convention proposal, the Common Agenda and the report of the Commission of Distinguished Citizens (Comisión de Notables).
- **Ensure involvement and political commitment of all the parties** in order to create and sustain support for a peace process. This can be generated through confidence building measures, strategic consultation and opportunities for participation amongst those with most to lose, including hardline members of the armed groups and the military. The entrenched economic interests of certain parties needs to be taken into account and thought given to innovative, just and sustainable solutions.
- **Building a broad social consensus on peace** would underpin efforts at the negotiating table, helping to identify an acceptable negotiating agenda and the outline of future agreements. This would include the stimulation of genuine and inclusive public debate and dialogue on appropriate responses to the armed conflict.
- **International alliances and support for peace negotiations are important** for the construction of a political context favourable to negotiations and to revitalize the peace process. The international

community needs to engage in response to requests from Colombians and to take care that their efforts do not displace local initiatives or undermine local capacity to build peace.

- **Application of humanitarian law and full respect for human rights** are critical. All parties are urged to respect the lives and rights of the civilian population. Any future settlements must enhance a culture of accountability rather than impunity and must include planning for the sustainable demobilization of ex-combatants from all armed groups.
- **Learn from other peace processes around the world.** This would be particularly helpful when dealing with contentious issues such as ceasefire and verification mechanisms, the development of agreed negotiation agendas and techniques, demobilization and reintegration of armed groups and issues of transitional justice.

Considerations for:

Negotiating with armed groups

“Transparency and sincerity were vital for keeping the process moving forward, as was the will to deal with obstacles instead of using them as an argument for mutual recriminations and impeding the process.” M-19 peace negotiations, Accord, Vera Grabe.

- All the armed actors must immediately halt the unacceptable attacks on and harassment of the civilian population and take steps to comply with international humanitarian law.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that progress in negotiations with one armed group enhances, rather than harms, the prospects of peace talks with other armed groups. Where possible, efforts should be made to enable a coordinated negotiation process, involving either single or parallel tracks with agreed rules.
- The armed groups must clearly demonstrate openness to changing their conduct, to build confidence in negotiations.
- The leadership of the armed insurgencies should build shared political understanding among their membership, in preparation for an agreed negotiating position in future talks.
- Mechanisms need to be established that verify the fulfilment of negotiation conditions. Verification processes from elsewhere in the world could be useful experiences to draw upon, such as those in Bougainville–Papua New Guinea, Mindanao–Philippines, Kosovo–Yugoslavia and South Africa. (See www.c-r.org)

- Incentives need to be developed that inspire confidence in possible demobilization by the insurgencies. Without a security strategy for former combatants it will be hard to motivate a commitment to a peace process that brings considerable risks.

Government of the Republic of Colombia

“By tackling one of the most difficult issues of the armed conflict President Uribe has demonstrated that he likes tough games. However, the negotiation could become a minefield, creating the conditions for new cycles of revenge... . It can also be a first step on the road to peace. For this to happen President Uribe needs to behave like a peace and nation builder..” Accord, Mauricio Romero

- Current Government policy – and particularly the insistence on a very restricted negotiation model – is curtailing opportunities for renewed negotiations with the armed insurgencies. Such negotiations are not only the most likely way of reaching a sustainable resolution of a devastating conflict; they also create opportunities for broadly owned processes of change to improve the lives of Colombia’s poorest people.
- The reactivation of the National Peace Council to develop and coordinate State peace policy would be a welcome development in resolving Colombia’s conflict.
- Security guarantees for civil society actors, peace and human rights advocates are required to support the important work of autonomous peace and development initiatives.
- A greater understanding of the way the environment of peacebuilding and development is operating at a micro-level is essential to generate opportunities for development and co-existence.
- It is critical that human rights violations are not met with impunity to ensure that serious crimes do not go unpunished.

Colombian civil society

“Civil society is not only the melting pot in which the country’s opportunities for peace are being moulded they are also the means to guarantee a sustainable peace”. Accord, Mauricio Garcia-Duran.

- Participation of and consensus building among all social and political actors is necessary for equitable and durable socio-economic development in regions of conflict.
- The absence of certain social groups, especially women, young people,

indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and those in the rural areas, in peace processes and public policy making must be addressed.

- Increased clarity is required within the peace movement to deal with the lack of consensus around the use of violence. The 'invisibility' of the peace movements due to the poor coverage of peace initiatives by the media is a problem. Other challenges include addressing civil society's ambivalence towards the political system that some view as illegitimate and successfully engaging with the international community.
- A peace movement should alert the country to the potential risks of a process that is not irreversible and needs to create conditions for structural responses to an eventual breakdown of negotiations.
- Civil society needs to play a proactive role in developing public consensus on responses to the conflict, presenting ideas for an agenda and the content of agreements and holding parties to account.
- Communication strategies need to be developed to build public opinion before and during a process.

International community

"...participation (of the international community) is necessary in each of the distinct phases of a peace process, from the early contacts between the parties to create necessary conditions for dialogue, to meeting the parties during the negotiations, witnessing the signing of accords, verifying their implementation and accompanying the national reconstruction and consolidation phase." Accord, Augusto Ramirez Ocampo.

- Many Colombians would welcome active international accompaniment to safeguard the continuity and development of a future process supporting a political solution to the conflict.
- The international community can learn lessons from previous peace processes in Colombia and elsewhere and work with interested parties to develop new mechanisms of international support.
- Continued and sustained assistance is needed by the international donor community to support civil society-led peace initiatives and processes.
- The continuation of multilateral initiatives to fight the drugs-trade and cut off sources of finance for war related activities from the guerrillas and paramilitaries is essential. Efforts to eradicate coca production should be developed in collaboration with rural communities, so as to create sustainable models of alternative development. Greater effort must be made outside Colombia to reduce levels of consumption, end the trade and halt money-laundering activities.
- The United States' focus on the 'war on terror' and its approach to

combating the drugs-trade in Colombia is not conducive to a sustainable peace process. Governments need to ensure that their foreign policy interventions do not undermine or negate peace efforts.

- The United Nations work in Colombia and its office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights must be supported by the international community, as recommended in the 'London declaration' of July 2003.

Conclusion

Whilst the conflict in Colombia continues to claim civilian lives, much can be done to prepare a favourable climate to a negotiated settlement. The many tasks including the democratic development of civil society, social preparation, strategic thinking and planning on realistic post-conflict public policy as well as building international networks for peace.

One of the most important challenges facing the country in the search for peace is to learn from its own long history of peacemaking experience.