

LSE Global South Unit Policy Brief Series

Policy Brief No.1/2015.

What next for the peace negotiation
between the Colombian government and the FARC?

By Sophie Haspeslagh.

INTRODUCTION.

The peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC) officially started in October 2012. The negotiations are being held in Havana, Cuba and followed a pre-negotiation phase, which included a year and a half of discreet contacts and confidence building measures as well as six months of secret exploratory talks. The negotiations have already led to three substantive agreements on land reform, political participation and the illegal drugs trade. Three agenda points remain on the rights of the victims of the conflict, the end of the conflict (cease-fire and disarmament) and the implementation of all the agreed points.

The ongoing peace negotiation in Colombia is already informing other processes around the globe. The agenda is clear, the rules of the game explicit and the political will apparent. It is evident that the current negotiations have been well prepared during a two-year process of pre-negotiation. There have also been a number of innovative mechanisms put in place such as the historical Commission, the victims' delegations and the gender sub-commission. But, as with any peace negotiations, substantial challenges lie ahead. Based on interviews in Bogotá and Havana and experience working on other peace processes here are a few reflections on five key challenges that lie ahead:

FROM GUARANTORS TO FACILITATORS

A key strength of the process has been the fact that it is completely led by the country itself. This should guarantee that Colombia will “own” any peace agreement. The guarantors (Cuba and Norway) have played a positive role, particularly during moments of crisis in the talks. As guarantors they ensure that the parties comply with what has been agreed, but also act as observers to the negotiations. However, it is clear that today we are in a different and crucial phase of the process. It will be much harder to achieve partial accords because the topics that remain are deeply intertwined. The issue of what punishment should be given for the worst human rights violators is intrinsically linked to negotiating the end of the conflict and the disarmament of the FARC, for example. They are also topics on which finding consensus between the parties is becoming increasingly challenging. In this context one could think of changing the methodology. Third parties that facilitate rather than just guarantee could take on a more dynamic role. A facilitator does not provide the negotiating parties with a solution but helps them to find one using the right techniques. Facilitators can develop proposals

between the parties on sequencing and formulation, bringing oxygen with new ideas. It is also a good way for proposals to avoid being seen as originating from either party.

INVEST IN SHIFTING PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion in Colombia is still deeply divided when it comes to these peace negotiations with the FARC. In this context, the role played by the mainstream media, which continues to use the word ‘terrorist’, is not helpful. There is a high risk of spoilers prevailing, and ways need to be found to co-opt them. Colombia has a long experience in undertaking communication campaigns at the global level; for example, the campaign headlined by the slogan ‘Colombia, the risk is that you will want to stay’ has had much success. It is crucial that substantial resources are invested in a communications strategy to support peace in Colombia. It is important to involve the business sector and other actors who could demystify prejudices against the process. The Colombian Office of the High Commissioner for Peace is already leading valuable work on peace pedagogy, but there is a need for more proactivity and outreach to arenas of public opinion that are set against the process, which could have a ‘multiplier effect’. One group that should be particularly targeted are young people who have not had the experience of previous peace processes with the guerrillas. It is also important to continue the efforts to humanise the FARC.

BILATERAL CEASE-FIRE AS A WAY OF BUILDING TRUST

The recent agreement on de-escalating the conflict is a welcome step in the right direction. The process has achieved a level of maturity that should allow for a clear plan to get to a bilateral cease-fire. The Colombian population needs to feel some tangible and significant peace dividends from the negotiations. A bilateral cease-fire could be established through steps previously agreed between the parties to consolidate what has already been achieved with the unilateral cease-fires on the part of the FARC and the pause in the bombardments of the FARC by the government in order to establish the basis for definitive accords.

REDUCE THE FARC’S ISOLATION

It is understandable that the negotiations are taking place outside Colombia so as to guarantee confidentiality and security and to ensure that the dynamics are considerably different from the Caguán negotiations. Nevertheless, one of the negative side effects of the location is that the FARC continue to be largely isolated from Colombian reality, which may

prevent them making the necessary concessions or taking the steps expected by many Colombians, particularly in the areas of justice and forgiveness. The victim delegations that have travelled to Havana have had a deep impact on all negotiating parties, including the FARC. But the FARC do not have other pathways of reconciliation with Colombian society or much access to different and challenging perspectives at the moment. There are few people travelling to Havana; Colombian nationals still require permits from the Colombian Office of the High Commissioner for Peace. It is important to think of models for generating spaces to allow the FARC to reconnect with contemporary Colombian society.

RESOLVE THE FARC'S SECURITY DILEMMA IN THE POST-CONFLICT SETTING

The existing Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) model in Colombia is based on recent demobilisations that have been individually focussed, almost exclusively urban in scope, and where the political dimension of reintegration has been set aside. In the case of the FARC, this model needs to be adapted to the whole group's characteristics and past experience. It looks like the FARC is considering a collective demobilisation model more focused on rural areas. Maintaining the organisation's structures in a post-conflict environment, however, can have both positive and negative effects. From the point of view of the government, there is the worry that demobilised groups will retain their power and carry on involvement in violent or criminal activities. There are examples in Colombia itself when this was the case; for example, with the paramilitary demobilisation in Medellín. However, if you look at it from the perspective of the future demobilised actors themselves, a collective demobilisation can diminish risk and uncertainty, which is prevalent during intense transitions. By maintaining the structure of the organisation itself, the consequent reduction in uncertainty can help reduce the attractiveness for the rank and file of reverting to arms or getting involved in criminal activities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

SOPHIE HASPELAGH.

PhD Candidate.

Department of International Relations.

London School of Economics.

S.M.Haspe slagh@lse.ac.uk