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Chapter

A Different Approach to the Reincorporation of Ex-Combatants: The Case of PASO Colombia

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Abstract

The process of reincorporation of ex combatants of the former FARC EP guerrilla adopted a collective approach, different from the one applied since 2006 by the Government of Colombia which was mainly individualistic and urban. The new approach however was jeopardized by extreme centralization and bureaucracy, making the finance and execution of productive projects of former combatants slow and in many cases unsuccessful. In this context, PASO Colombia program of the One Earth Future Foundation developed an alternative model of collective reincorporation adaptable to the specific necessities of each territory incorporating to this model of work important social, economic, educational and governance features. This article analyzes this experience and narrates the strategies undertaken in order to assure appropriate adaptation to different scenarios. The article also addresses the main components of the model as well as the outcomes it has generated in terms of creating dialog and conflict resolution spaces where common goals are developed ex coms and communities working together. Finally this experience of collective reincorporation is made available to new peace initiatives underway in Colombia and, hopefully in the world.

Keywords: peace-building, economic reincorporation, Colombia, collective reincorporation

1. Introduction

Reincorporation of ex-combatants into Colombian society was conceived as a process where an individual, former guerrilla or paramilitary would walk along a path that should take over six years to cross, provided by the State with key stations: psychosocial counseling, technical training, family reunion, and economic reincorporation. Upon completion of each station, the individual would receive an incentive mostly pecuniary and during the duration of the process the Agency for Reintegration would monitor the conduct of this individual in terms of compliance with the law. The path to reincorporation, as well as the messages in their communication campaigns, evidence the role of former combatants in terms of being passive receivers of reincorporation services, especially training, provided by the State offices in cities.

The Colombian Agency for Reincorporation saw this as the “transition of demobilized persons to civilian life with an emphasis on access to jobs and legal incomes”.

With the Havana Peace Agreement between the State of Colombia and the then Colombian Revolutionary Armed Force FARC EP, the Colombian Agency for Reintegration ACR, became the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization ARN, modifying many of its functions in order to assist the process of reincorporation of FARC EP’s former members. This transformation included a collective approach and a new concept called “Reincorporation”. This turn was key in the application of lessons learned in the former processes with other demobilized armed groups and the incorporation of new elements that appeared in the Havana Agreement like community involvement in the construction of peace. In the new vision not only transformations are expected of excoms but of all other related stakeholders.

The call to civil society and other institutions to transform to accompany differently the implementation phase of the Agreement inspired the program, Sustainable Peace for Colombia, PASO Colombia of the One Earth Future Foundation to design and implement a peace-building and rural development model that incorporated the collective approach to productive and commercial projects that combined excoms community participation and economic opportunity and commercialization associated to each territory. PASO understood the “Collective” concept as something that goes beyond the interest of excoms and creates a network of trust and collaboration with the local communities and stakeholders.

This model, with proven adaptability to different geographic contexts, is at the base of successful productive projects, stronger local organizations, and a broad participation of local communities and businesses and is being applied in the development of alternative economies to coca and in the integration of migrants to Colombia’s agricultural value chains. By the same token, the positive outcomes of the model are inspiring dialogs and conflict resolution initiatives that help the current peace processes underway in Colombia.

2. Methodology

Since 2016, Sustainable Peace for Colombia, PASO Colombia that peace is not only the responsibility of the negotiating parties but comes as a result of collaboration of vast sectors of society willing to turn the page on decades of armed conflict.

PASO started its work through dialogs with former combatants at the middle and low ranks of their former armed organizations in order to understand their existing individual and collective capacities; PASO also connected with government institutions and the private sector and realized that creating a common vision among these actors required a space. The program named that space ERA, or Alternative Rural School, to harness collaborative projects where former combatants and local farmers would partner around the development of common projects.

Throughout these years of implementation of Alternative Rural Schools, PASO has performed annual independent surveys about the perception and satisfaction levels of excoms and farmers. These studies were conducted by the Company Cifras y Conceptos specialized in opinion polls. Information about financial, management, and sustainability variables have been collected since the beginning of the program by the Impact, Learning and Accountability (ILA) team at the One Earth Future Foundation.

The data collected has enabled the PASO program to monitor the impact of the ERA model from the point of view of (a) social and territorial Integration, (b) business creation and capital formation, (c) resilience, and (d) perspectives about the process of reincorporation process. The results were analyzed and yearly comparisons were made. The findings have been contrasted with other studies like the ones performed by the Observatorio de la Democracia at Los Andes University [1] and studies by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) [2].

In this paper, I will try to make the following point. Collective reincorporation is the act of allowing groups and organizations of excoms to be part of the economic and social tissue of their surrounding communities [3]. The contention is that collective reincorporation in Colombia is not the result of a plan but of a living plan that engages excoms collectively as partners in the process.

3. The concept of reincorporation in the Havana Agreement

Only three pages of the Havana Agreement were dedicated to reincorporation [3]. The main instrument for reincorporation would be a cooperative called ECOMUN that excoms would adhere to voluntarily. The government would be responsible for facilitating its creation and would provide the necessary technical and legal assistance for its rapid creation. ECOMUN was finally created 9 months after the Agreement to End the conflict was signed (and it can be argued that today six years into the agreement the organization does not have a classic strategic plan).

The idea is for ECOMUN to be a very large, nationwide cooperative, the center of all productive collective projects. Since all projects had to be approved by the National Council for Reincorporation [4], the sum of ex-FARC party power and influence, the collaboration of the middle-rank guerrillas and the authority to approve projects would at least in principle guarantee that FARC would maintain control of its own reincorporation project. Was to maintain the unity of the extinct FARC members controlling the approval of the productive projects presented by excoms. All projects, individual as well as collective would need to require the approval of the National Council of Reincorporation, composed of two members of FARC and two members of the Government.

The Government of Colombia had been addressing reincorporation as something controlled by the State and the style of reincorporation being individual and not collective reincorporation, since the Ralito negotiations ended in July 2003. The then-called Colombian Agency for Reintegration [5], designed a model of individual reincorporation, containing eight elements: CODA certification (a military certificate assigned to demobilized people), Health, Psychological Attention, Education, Training for Work, Economic Reintegration, Social Service, and Legal Assistance (**Figure 1**) [6].

Each of these components is comparable to stations where the excom receives a given amount of services such as tuition, workshop, personalized psychological attention, etc. As the Peresson reaches the so-called limestones within the program, he/she receives a stipend from the Government.

It is easy to imagine an individual going on a path, being considered by the state “like a newborn to society” and along the path having received a series of services that over a process of six and half years turn a person into a citizen. This is like the image of an individual going through an assembly: imagine a very industrial, and little by little the person becomes equipped little by little, that person is equipped with social, psychological and income competencies to live as a “normal human being” in society.



Figure 1. Colombian Agency for Reintegration. The route of reintegration.

FARC-EP was against that form of reincorporation because it was considered an instrument that was used against it to get at the time of war by the Colombian army as a source of intelligence, and could be used during the post-agreement to create division between excoms and FARC leadership.

The resources allocated to each ex-combatant to start a productive project was COP 8 million, USD 2540. I imagined that ECOMUN would start with a capital of COP 100 billion ie. USD 31.7 million. ECOMUN would set up a fund with the approval of the National Council of Reincorporation. The transfer of the funds would be made once after the feasibility analysis of the project. During that time the money would be kept by the Government.

The resources of the international community would add to the existing resources.

Excoms would receive for a period of 24 months a stipend equivalent to 90 percent of the minimum wage and have access to health insurance, paid by the State. In addition, the State would provide educational and training programs for housing, environmental protection, psychological assistance, etc.

Examining the text, it is possible to see that collective reincorporation as it is implied in the context of the Havana Agreement is crucially associated to:

- ECOMUN working correctly, and in the context of the agreement it implies that it manages the support of the state for its creation and technical assistance;
- Approval process and coordination between FARC and the State operating;
- If the projects presented to the Government pass a feasibility test,
- If what excoms want is identifies with a survey;
- If the Government provides the resources.

With resources from the state and the international community, the first projects that followed closely this model all went bankrupt:

- The pineapple project of Romana, people realized these pineapples needed markets when the pineapples were ripe,

- The red pepper project in Guaviare, tons of peppers come out of the greenhouse and the distribution channel was a few motorbikes to go around and sell them.

Today we know that: stipend to excoms, and the health insurance component were extended from two to seven additional years. In fact, two years into the process it was evident that thousands of excoms had not found a stable and an independent source of income.

The initial results regarding implementation of the agreement were disappointing and peace was losing space. On the side of the Government, important supporters of Santos like his former Vice President German Vargas and his Ambassador Juan Carlos Pinzon were becoming more distant from the Agreement. Government spent the final year of the administration making sure Congress would vote for the Agreement to have a near Constitutional status. For the rest, new challenges such as the wave of Venezuelan migration and the fall in oil prices became more urgent matters.

In the FARC ranks conflicts also broke out. A group of excoms, especially those who were closer to Ivan Marquez and Jesus Santrich defected from the peace process and created the Nueva Marquetalia [7]. In 2019 the board of directors of ECOMUN was changed, in some kind of a hostile takeover, and an important fraction of FARC leaders separated from the authority to Rodrigo Timoshenko.

In spite of the original model devised in Havana not working, today it is acknowledged by the Kroc Institute that probably among the achievements of the accords, reincorporation and transitional justice components have been successful [8]. What happened?

- The Havana Agreement was not working: The growing feeling that neither the government nor the newly created institutions to support the agreement would successfully carry out the agreement in the expected time and quality.
- Pessimism was rampant among excoms: poor living conditions in the territorial spaces, overcrowding, rudimentary sanitation systems, lack of privacy, among others associated with the construction materials with which the rooms in these spaces had been built.
- Limited options for excoms at ETCRs, lack of land and a minimum of cash liquidity to start any work, like no land and capital to start up productive projects. Excoms were leaving the encampment zones and becoming dispersed.

The lack of resources for ex-combatants, delays in the disbursement of resources, and the absence of a road map for reincorporation inspired our program, PASO Colombia, on a very original way of working.

We started at the last mile and we began to work in a jazz orchestra. We started partnering directly in the field with excoms associations and local organizations based in the territories. As in a jazz orchestra, one of us would start a tune, like, us providing some capital, then another organization would provide the land, then excoms would contribute labor and a local organization would provide technical assistance in agriculture.

Teamwork and a practical problem solving approach allowed us to co-design in the field common plans. The process was facilitated by spaces where people could spend time and work together. We called these spaces ERAs (Rural Alternative Schools). This strategy made a difference between PASO Colombia's capacity to get things done

at the local level vis a vis other organizations that came first to the territories but had great difficulties delivering benefits to the communities.

What made the difference between PASO's coming into the territories is that we were not seeking information we were seeking relationships [9]. In fact, the field was crowded with universities, international institutions, and government agencies. However, most of them were only asking questions but had no money or a mentality to establish productive projects in the territories. They would introduce themselves by saying: I am (name) but please do not make any expectations about our visit. "We have this amazing back office in our institution and we will not be ready to do anything in the territories before six months when we will have selected our suppliers and will have most of our procedures in place."

4. Key pieces for a user-friendly peace

In PASO we thought peace has to be user-friendly to the excom. The main guiding question was, how can we make the everyday life of the excom different?

1. The excom needed to be able to work, to rise from his or her bed and have somewhere to go in order to have something different than his/her current condition of uncertainty.
2. Excoms felt that all the courses they were being offered were only theoretical and boring. A waste of time (interesting that the census) did not ask how they felt about the future.
3. Excoms want to feel that they are reincorporating themselves. They are not looking for charity, they want partners.

Then the question became very simple: what needs to happen so that the day of the ex-combatant is different and meaningful?

4.1 Land

Without land, there is no paradise. "This conflict that began 50 years ago over land will end over land." Excoms believed reincorporation and peace were haunted by the land problem. For the Colombian government, it was a matter of principle not to provide land to the FARC: they were seen as one of the biggest landowners in Colombia. Only four years into the agreement, did the Government find a way to provide land to excoms.

Regarding land, PASO Colombia varied its approach from a maximalist (ownership) to a possibilist approach (access). We suggested ex-combatants to be the ones searching for the land, because they knew the zone better and the neighboring farmers would probably provide, lease, or sell the land to them at a lower price. Finally, one community of farmers in Miranda, State of North Cauca, ASPROZONAC, provided the first plot of 5 hectares, for a period of seven years.

Access to land meant excoms had a place to go and work, have the expectation of an income, learn new things, and meet other people. The following elements of a classical reincorporation program were addressed simultaneously by simply having a space to work.

- Education
- Incomes
- Community
- Well being

This shows the power of collective reincorporation: with one single action the most needed expectations of excoms and surrounding communities could be addressed. In addition, it was more fun, open-air, and spontaneous. It was at a fraction of the price and it added economic value to the land, and allowed the surrounding community to prosper.

The first test of the relational model came when excom cooperatives in the West of the country partnered with Illy Caffè [10]. The illy cafe deal was an agreement between Illy Cafe and the former FARC cooperatives for USD 11.6 million for the cooperatives to sell Illy 5 million kilograms of coffee for a period of five years. This provided us with a new definition of peace: peace is about doing the things you did not do because you were at war, including partnering with old rivals, like the Federation of Coffee Growers. This model can be as successful in dealing with production as with activities of conservation and ecotourism and communication.

By the end of the Santos Administration, the Government of Colombia had approved only two collective productive projects while PASO was already working on 42 such projects. Within a year it had opened 9 ERAs and the year after it was working in 17 places throughout the country. In addition, the Illy Caffè agreement amounted to one-third of the total funding assigned to excoms. We were over one-third of the total amount of money that excoms should receive from the establishment of productive projects.

4.2 Capital

There was much talk about money but excoms were not seeing any and large organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Verification Mission, the International Office for Migration, and Mondragón have impossible back and middle offices (planning, selection of local suppliers, contracts and legal, etc).

PASO was agile in starting productive projects through a team of regional coordinators and extension workers. Most of the help allowed excoms and communities to have tools, tractor time, meals and logistics.

We also learned that the second thing about capital is that in the countryside, depending on the technology in use, investments can be very expensive or not expensive at all. Because capital was the scarcest resource, we learned to work at a fraction of the price of any other organization in the field.

Capital was attracted to success: Paradoxically the more successful undertakings in the field, like the fisheries in Mutata or coffee in Ituango, attracted greater help from international organizations than more precarious ones.

4.3 Labor

Top, middle rank and base excoms would have to learn many skills from scratch. Being part of a new activity sends the excom a tremendous psychological signal that his/her life is changing. Middle ranked commanders were proud of the cooperatives

they had helped create and were now managing. “I am the Vice President of Cooperative,” many of them would proudly say: problems were changing and so were the solutions, and they were proud to participate actively in those solutions.

Labor was the most important part of the production costs but excoms were happy to provide their time and effort because they knew they were investing in an activity that would strengthen their income. They could do this because of the Government stipend that gave them the possibility to find additional income sources and not have even greater income pressure. Labor was used for the construction of warehouses and storage centers, work stations, cleaning of the fields to adapt them to the crops, etc. People have remained motivated even today five years into the establishment of the first productive units.

Productive projects allowed excoms to autonomously figure out paths towards their own reincorporation. Productive activities increase cognitive and relational abilities creating harmony between excoms and the surrounding social and natural environment. Such projects accelerated the narrowing of the gap in knowledge, income and social capital that had been created between the ex-combatants and the community over the years during the armed conflict. It also improved trust between excoms and communities (**Figure 2**).

Communities of excoms with capable leaders flourished. Good leaders inspired and guided the work and enthusiasm of ex-combatants. Collective reincorporation allowed for greater interaction among old partners and that constitutes an advantage. It is also an opportunity to discover new entrepreneurs that will play an important role in rural development of their territories.

4.4 Knowledge

PASO concentrated on providing a better understanding of the following key components of sustainable agriculture:

- Water, Soil, Forest, Seeds

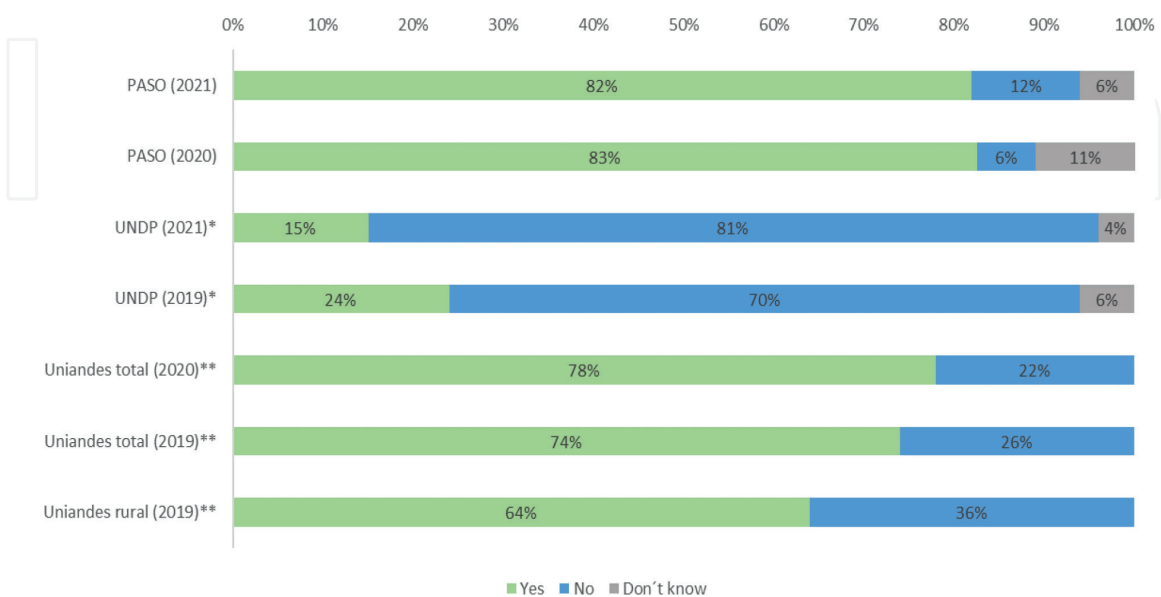


Figure 2.

Do you feel comfortable having an excom as your neighbor? Figure Source: Impact, Learning & Accountability (ILA) department of One Earth Future Foundation [11].

- Plants
- Animals
- Processing and technologies
- Market making

Collective reincorporation enhances the capacity to discover technologies in the social as well as the productive domains that are more successful than existing ones. They are also a reminder that peace is an opportunity to develop new forms of Governance.

We can never forget that society as a whole is the main beneficiary of peace. Collective reincorporation is about turning the page of violence and about addressing its structural causes. Thus developing core competencies that are applicable to rural development is necessary for peace. What we learned about collective reincorporation was an aspiration to address challenges in other programs, especially in the field of coca substitution [12]. Coca can be peacefully substituted so long as we manage to develop a common vision with coca farmers, and we manage to increase incomes from the legal crops, by either going into niche markets or by adding greater value to existing ones (**Figure 3**).

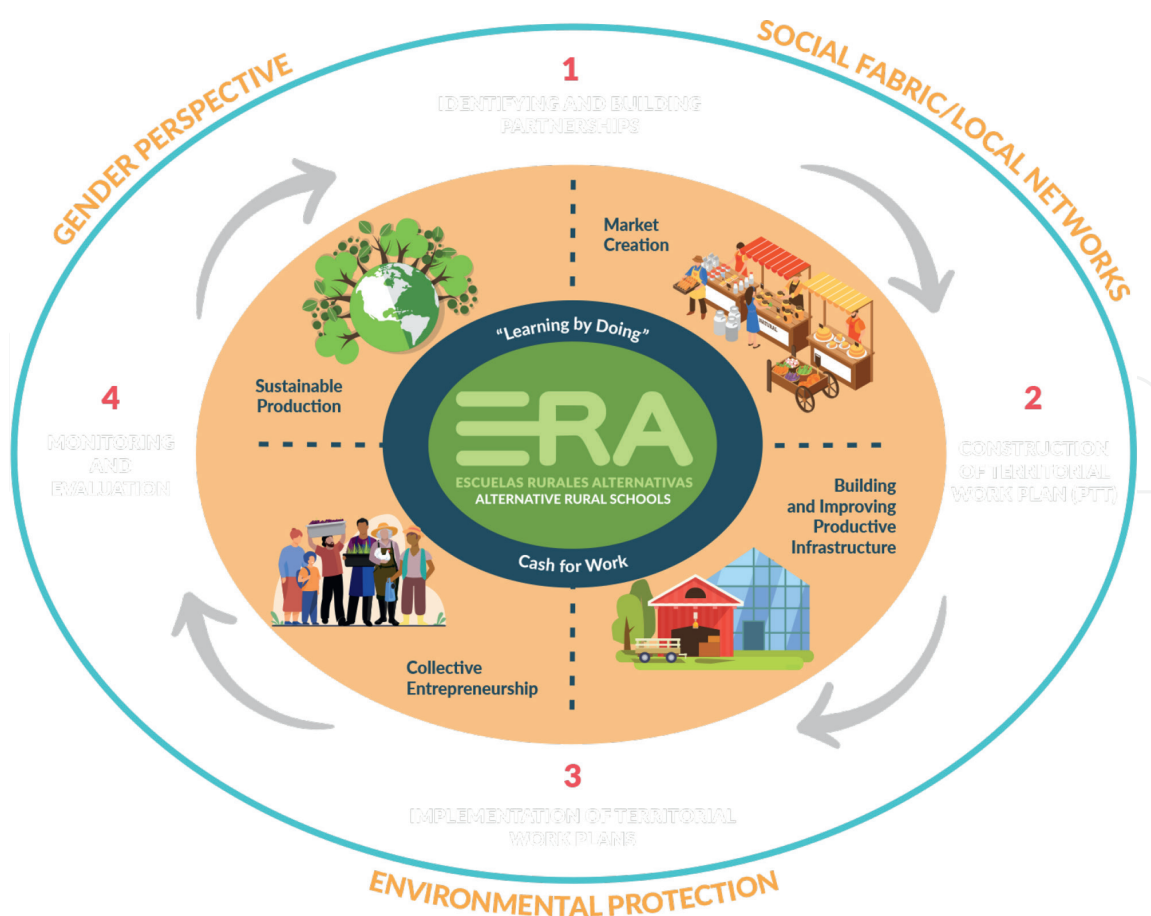


Figure 3. Elements of a new vision. Figure Source: PASO Colombia, a program of One Earth Future Foundation.

Beyond learning by doing and the challenge of “situational intelligence”. How can we know that excoms are developing the skills not only to do better in their productive projects but to have a better understanding of the many challenges they have as excoms, in particular the problems associated to security and the relationship with the community- To know how to be and to know how to do, given that excoms could sometimes be at an advantage vis a vis some of their neighboring farmers.

In collective productive environments, we saw that the relational experience not only allowed people to learn empirically about production, organization and management issues, among others. This intelligence also generated a peripheral awareness of what was happening in the community and the services it could provide, such as access to fertilizers and more knowledge about agriculture (**Figure 4**).

Teamwork and the relationship with the communities stimulate by themselves skills that are different from production.

4.5 Market creation

There is a misleading element behind the studies of the theory of competitive advantage. When we reviewed the studies provided by the local governments about competitive advancement, they all mentioned cattle, cacao, coffee, and tourism. That does not necessarily reflect a true competitive advantage or things that are attractive to the youth. For instance, young entrepreneurs are experimenting with Amazonian fruits. These products are at a disadvantage vis a vis the studies because these products are new and have no data.

The necessity to open up new spaces so that people with very low incomes can significantly increase their income requires a process of market discovery or market creation. Colombia has the potential to develop high-value products like biofuels, medicinal products and create a strong incentive to grow products that compete in terms of the economic, environmental and social value vis a vis coca. We need to find valued products that beat the limitations of transport and other costs as coca does.

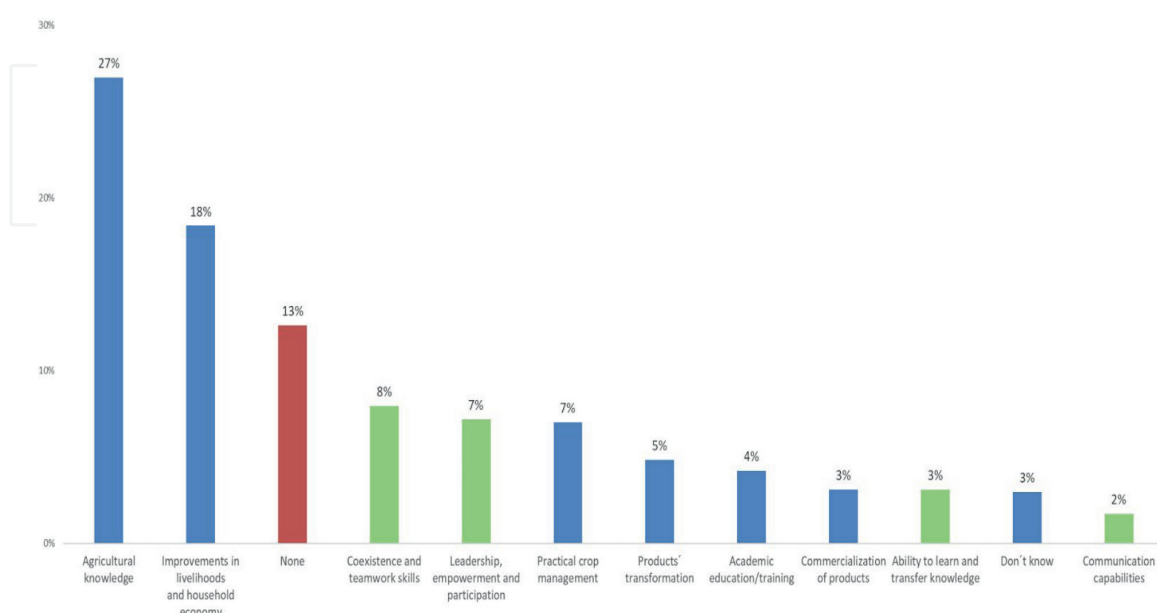


Figure 4. What capabilities have you developed through ERA processes? Source: Impact, Learning & Accountability (ILA) department of One Earth Future Foundation [11].

5. Conclusions

5.1 Lessons for Paz Total (Total Peace)

Community involvement is critical to the success of Total Peace. PASO Colombia has developed strategies that increase ex-combatants and community participation and at the same time strengthen incomes, knowledge, collective infrastructures and investment in territories. Important stakeholders in Total Peace, including ELN, see the participation of the entire society as a necessary condition for the negotiation with the government. The agenda designed with the ELN at the end of the Santos administration has important elements for which the experience of collective reincorporation led by base ex-combatants and communities is applicable [13].

Not only is it important to allow civil society to participate, but to apply successful models of community participation like the one developed by PASO Colombia. These models can help address many of the present expectations about Paz Total:

1. Participation of the civil society in the peace negotiation: The spaces created where communities gather together to develop productive projects reduce existing tensions, and allow communities to appropriate new productive techniques and access markets, which in turn furthers relationship building.
2. Democracy for peace: Strengthening local organizations, including productive organizations, are conducted not only to improve political awareness but to raise the standard of living in rural areas by increasing the productivity of agriculture and market access for existing and new products and services.
3. Transformations necessary for peace: The experience with ERAs shows that is not sufficient to consider land, but the input mex, which includes, capital, labor, knowledge and market access.

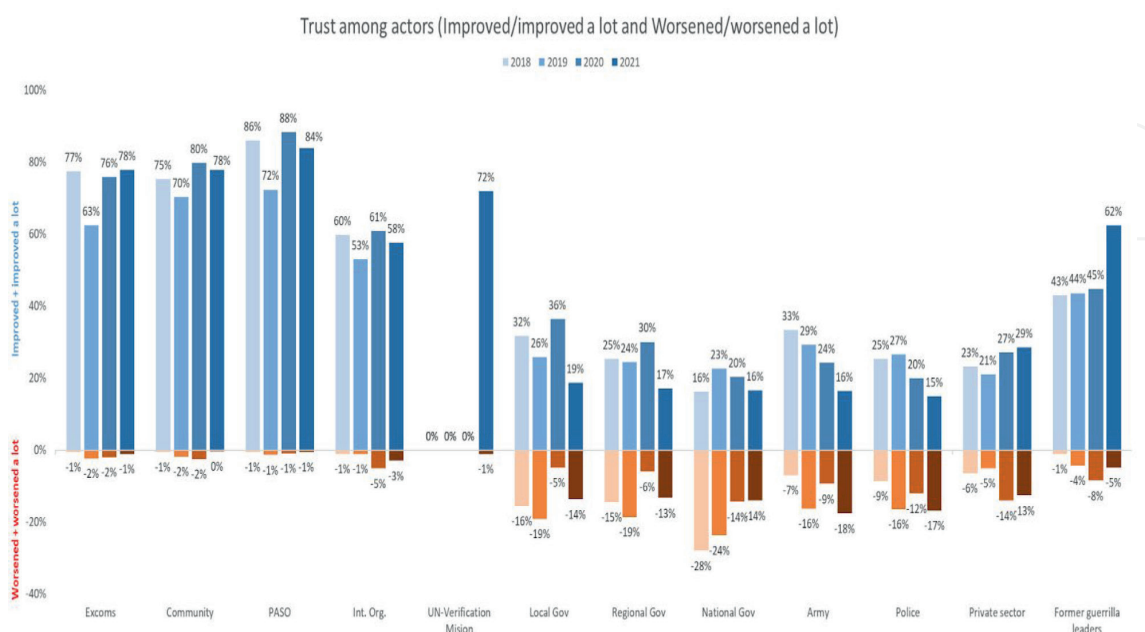


Figure 5. Trust levels among ex-combatants. Source: Impact, Learning & Accountability (ILA) department of One Earth Future Foundation [11].

4. Victims: To listen to the rights of the victims, by also creating scenarios where victims, former combatants and other members of society can work together.
5. The end of the armed conflict is a transition stage that will be strengthened by a successful process of reincorporation and rural development (**Figure 5**).

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