

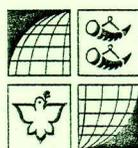
**PEACE STUDIES PAPERS**

**THIRD SERIES**

**Peace Building from 'Below'  
Challenging the Limitations of Conflict Resolution in  
El Salvador and Colombia?**

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**July 1997**



UNIVERSITY OF  
BRADFORD

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DEPARTMENT OF PEACE STUDIES

# Contents

## **Part 1 The Theory Explored**

1.1	The Limits Of Elite-Led Negotiations as a Means of Peacebuilding .....	1
1.2	Limitations to Negotiations in El Salvador and Colombia .....	2
1.3	Limitations of Conflict Resolution Theory .....	4
1.4	Empowerment as a Means to Individual and Structural Change .....	6
1.5	Structural Development from the Grassroots as a Peacebuilding Strategy .....	8

## **Part 2 The Theory Grounded**

2.1	The Experience of the ATCC: Local Development Becomes a Threat to Structures of Power .....	9
2.2	The Medellín Militias: Empowerment Through Local-Level Negotiations? .....	12

<b>Conclusion</b> .....	16
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<b>Bibliography</b> .....	21
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## **Part 1 - The Theory Explored**

### **1.1 The Limits of Elite-Led Negotiations as a Means of Peacebuilding**

Recently there has been an upsurge of interest in conflict resolution theory in Latin America and what it has to offer protracted social conflicts, particularly those involving guerrilla insurgency as has been the case in El Salvador and Colombia. El Salvador was the scene of a bloody civil war from 1980-1992. After an elite-led negotiations process, accords were signed between the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Salvadorean government in January 1992, which means that El Salvador is now considered to be in a 'post-conflict' period. In Colombia, although the internal conflict is not technically termed 'civil war', there has been fighting between diverse guerrilla groups and the Colombian armed forces since the mid-1960s. A series of elite-led negotiations for peace began in the mid-1980s, which led to negotiations being signed with several smaller groups.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the two largest guerrilla groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) remain in arms.

The focus of interest in conflict resolution theory in Latin America has revolved around how third parties can most usefully intervene in elite-led negotiation processes, between the leadership of warring factions.<sup>2</sup> However, the limitations to both the Salvadorean and Colombian negotiations and accords which have taken place up until now, show that peace does *not* miraculously evolve from accords, nor can it be imposed from the top down. The implications of this for peacebuilding are that elite-led negotiations are only one, albeit necessary, element in the construction of peace, but that more substantive work may have to take place alongside and as an extension to these negotiations.

This paper uses El Salvador and Colombia to help explore the limitations of conflict resolution theory for resource-based conflicts. It is research in progress, part of a wider doctoral project. The purpose of the paper is therefore to explore theoretical ideas and their application to the Salvadorean and Colombian contexts, and to generate debate, not to present any definitive answers. It is argued that conflict resolution theory needs to alter the balance of focusing around elite-led negotiations, and that if we are ever to transform violent manifestations of conflict we must broaden the focus of conflict resolution work to the largely ignored links between conflict, peace and development. It is suggested that in order to do this we need to look towards development, empowerment and peacebuilding work as necessary adjuncts to negotiations at all stages of a conflict process. The second part of the paper grounds these theoretical ideas in reality and,

using specific examples from rural and urban Colombia, assesses the extent to which development, empowerment and peacebuilding from 'below' are useful concepts and practices.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Limitations to Negotiations in El Salvador and Colombia

Experiences in both El Salvador and Colombia show that what can be achieved in elite-led negotiating processes has been very limited. The peace process in El Salvador has been considered a successful example of how negotiations can bring an end to violence in a country besieged by 12 years of civil war. Indeed, aspects of the Salvadorean experience are being used as a model for how peace processes should be conducted in other parts of the world. However, what most people consider as the *peace process* was actually only a limited, elite-led *negotiating process*. Whilst the Peace Accords which arose from negotiations in El Salvador have undoubtedly brought significant changes to the country in terms of military, political and judicial reform, unjust socio-economic structures have remained intact. These have contributed to instability which means that resorting to violence, although not in the structured form of war, is still part of Salvadorean reality. Elite-led negotiations are necessary, since without agreement at this level work undertaken at other levels would also prove futile. Nevertheless, they have clearly proven to be an insufficient means of fostering more peaceful relations.

Similarly, in Colombia, accords reached in earlier elite-led negotiating processes have proven to be very limited. They have failed to tackle fundamental issues such as judicial reform, the purging of the armed forces and the guaranteeing of human rights. Political reform has largely been restricted to providing spaces for a nominal participation of former insurgent leaders in both the Constituent Assembly (*Asamblea Constituyente*) and in the House of Representatives (*Camera de Representantes*). Socio-economic issues have largely been confined to the provision of sums of money to each individual guerrilla, usually used to set up small businesses.

Both the Salvadorean and the Colombian experiences suggest that in order for agreements to be reached in elite-led discussions, sacrifices had to be made. These sacrifices related both to negotiating agendas and to the degree of participation which was possible from civil sectors outside the elite in the negotiating process.<sup>4</sup> In El Salvador social sectors from the left had difficulties participating in negotiations due to the vertical structures between the FMLN hierarchy and its support base made up of civilians. In Colombia, civilian participation has been limited, partly due to the lack of an environment in which human rights are respected and political spaces for participation can be guaranteed.<sup>5</sup> Civil sectors in both countries remain disarticulated, which is partly a reflection of their lack of ability to impact on elite-led negotiations.

Care must be taken to be realistic about what can be achieved through elite-led negotiations. The prevailing global economic system has contributed to pressure on government negotiating teams to yield little in terms of socio-economic change which might deviate from planned economic programmes. This is particularly true with the homogenisation of neoliberal economic programmes. With reference to conflicts which have an element of (or are entirely) resource-based, unjust socio-economic structures which are exacerbated by neoliberal policies are unlikely to be addressed fully in negotiations. In El Salvador the fact that the World Bank and IMF were concerned with ensuring economic stabilisation through structural adjustment contributed to the exclusion of the government's economic programme from the negotiating agenda.<sup>6</sup>

This is a crucial lesson to be learnt for the Colombian process since much attention there continues to focus on how to bring civilian sectors into negotiations so as to broaden the agenda of discussion to socio-economic issues. This is a hindrance rather than a help to achieving accords, and creates unrealistic expectations of what is achievable even if there *is* broad-based participation. The same international forces calling for structural adjustment pressurise the Colombian government, and similarly it is unlikely to yield much in terms of socio-economic concessions during negotiations. Those who have analysed events in El Salvador and Colombia widely consider the FMLN to be a much more legitimate force than the Colombian guerrillas. The FMLN had arisen with support from broad sectors of the population, evidenced by the mass-based fronts which were the support base for the corresponding guerrilla groups which composed the FMLN.<sup>7</sup> The Colombian guerrillas, on the other hand, never had a broad degree of support from the population in general, except perhaps briefly during the 1970s with the arrival of the M-19 urban guerrillas who engaged in daring stunts to engage the interest of the population in general.<sup>8</sup> In more recent years the legitimacy of the Colombian guerrillas has been damaged by their means of raising money for the armed struggle - drugs production, kidnapping and extortion.

Even taking into consideration the wider legitimacy of the Salvadorean guerrillas, through elite-led negotiations the FMLN was only able to establish the rules of engagement for democratic practice and discussion of socio-economic issues in the future. Since the Colombian guerrillas are considered a less legitimate force, it is unlikely that they will be able to achieve more.<sup>9</sup> If it can be accepted that elite-led negotiations *will* be of a limited nature, then energy which would have been channelled into these negotiations will be released. This energy could then be channelled into the search for alternative ways to contribute to peacebuilding.

### 1.3 Limitations of Conflict Resolution Theory

Conflict resolution theory was born in the context of the ending of the Second World War. At this point maintaining degrees of security between nation states, reflected by attempts to bring nations together under the banner of the United Nations, was a priority. This contributed to the focus of one stream of the theory around elite-led negotiations, the purpose of which has been to bring an end to war and violence in the context of the international system. This approach takes a realist perspective to conflict resolution. Third party intervention is employed to help (or coerce) parties to move towards a negotiated settlement, usually of a bellicose stage of conflict. Those working with this viewpoint are termed the settlement school (Bloomfield 1995).

The other stream of conflict resolution takes the viewpoint that settlement is not enough, and that one needs to get to the underlying causes and issues in a conflict situation in order to *resolve* it. Third parties in this case are employed to facilitate understanding and communication; the assumption being that once psychological obstacles to resolution are removed, parties will be able to come to some mutually agreed outcomes which address their needs and the conflict issues. This is the resolution school of conflict resolution. Bloomfield (1995) has highlighted the dichotomy in the conflict resolution literature between these two perspectives, but argues that there is no need for them to be mutually exclusive.

This paper argues that neither the settlement nor the resolution approach is adequate for the types of conflict we see emerging in the post-cold war period. It is no longer so easy to distinguish two well-defined actors with whom one can work to try and facilitate communication and understanding.<sup>10</sup> Colombia, where there are multiple violent actors, is a classic case in point, and there, as elsewhere, it is generally the case that the voice of those most affected by the violence is the least heard in any considerations of how to bring about 'peace'. Whilst the case for a multi-dimensional approach to peacebuilding has been made in the conflict resolution literature, little attention has been given to structural factors which can inhibit the effectiveness of such approaches.<sup>11</sup> Whilst I am not arguing that conflict resolution should, or indeed has the capacity to 'take on' all of the structural factors which contribute to the emergence of violent conflict, I do believe that conflict resolution work at all levels of society should keep awareness high of the structural causes which contribute to the conditions in which many people live in southern countries.

This is important for at least four reasons. First, as the social, economic and political dynamics of societies change, so too will the issues, actors and interests in conflict situations (Vayrynen 1991). If conflict resolution operates with no regard for these changing dynamics it will be

unlikely to have the desired effect, whether at a national or local level. Conversely, maintaining awareness of surrounding contexts will help keep aims of what can be achieved realistic. Second, ignoring structure presents the danger that conflict resolution training at a local level will exclusively focus on giving people the capacity to deal with violence only insofar as it directly affects them. Doing this, with no exploration of where the violence came from, is but one step away from blaming these people for the violence, structural and otherwise, which surrounds them. Third, if conflict resolution aims merely at *controlling* violence, without taking into consideration the context in which that violence occurs, there is a danger that it will have the effect of reinforcing unjust social, economic and political structures which have contributed to violent conflict arising in the first place. There is a danger, then, that conflict resolution work will be merely palliative, or indeed that it will be co-opted into unjust systems. Many communities in Colombia are suspicious of a Community Justice Programme implemented by the government for precisely this reason. They believe that the government is trying to *control* levels of community violence whilst doing little to address the underlying causes which led to violence in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

Prioritising agency to the detriment of structure in conflict resolution literature has been explored by Jabri. She points to the orthodoxy in conflict resolution literature which regards the individual decision-maker as the primary unit of analysis, where this individual is 'a purposive agent capable of making choices according to rationalist criteria' (Jabri 1995: 56). Jabri believes that a focus solely on agency is insufficient, and that:

the resolution of any conflict, whether it be intercommunal or international conflict, must be analyzed as a situated process located within the structural properties of patterned social systems. (Jabri 1995: 53)

Jabri is particularly concerned with power and the effect asymmetrical power relations have on possibilities for conflict resolution. This brings us to a fourth reason for keeping awareness of context high in conflict resolution work. Where unequal power relations exist, conflict resolution techniques leading towards negotiations are unlikely to be of much use. If we reconsider the main argument here, that elite-led negotiations are limited in what they can achieve, negotiations of an elite nature are hardly an appropriate place for low-power groups to try and change the structural conditions in which they live. In these cases empowerment for low-power groups is likely to be a necessary precondition to meaningful negotiations.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, approaching conflict resolution with an understanding of structure will also aid understanding of why and how asymmetrical power relations have emerged.

## 1.4 Empowerment as a Means to Individual and Structural Change

If it is accepted that elite-led negotiations are limited, then we must look elsewhere for approaches which can contribute to the wider process of peacebuilding. It is suggested here that there is value in exploring the notion of empowerment work and its significance for peacebuilding. How is empowerment to occur and what does it really mean?

Rowlands (1995) points out that the meaning of empowerment relates to the model of power being assumed by the user. The most common models used to explore power are 'power over', 'power to' and power as discourse or 'de-centred power'. The first of these interprets power as something finite, it is about one individual or group exercising domination over another, a zero sum approach. 'Power to' is more concerned with power as generative and dependant on relationships, something which can stimulate others into action, which can persuade and open up new possibilities. This is closest to Foucault's (1980) idea of power as diffuse, limitless and plural, as opposed to zero sum. Nelson and Wright point to how Ferguson followed Foucault to evolve the 'de-centred' model of power. With this model, 'power is not a substance possessed and exercised by any person or institution conceived of as a 'powerful' subject. Power is subjectless and is an apparatus consisting of discourse, institutions, actors and a flow of events.' (Nelson and Wright 1995: 9-10)<sup>14</sup>

Rowlands points to the 'slippery' feel of Foucault's perception of power:

If power is everywhere, if every individual capable of acting upon the actions of others (including when resisting) has power, it becomes quite difficult to account for the imbalances of power relations between particular groups of people (Rowlands 1995: 20).

I would agree with Rowland's analysis and argue that it is most useful to think of power as consisting of a mixture of the existing power models. In order to access decision-making, individuals need to be psychologically aware of their capacity to take more control over their lives, and they need to realise that power can be found at all levels of social interaction, even in the smallest ways. But this is not enough. Once action has been generated, a degree of control, or 'power over' is necessary, if access to political decision-making is to be assured.

Why is access to political decision-making important for peacebuilding? If conflict resolution work has kept awareness of surrounding context high, as suggested earlier, then low-power groups will often become aware of the need to challenge those structures if the quality of their lives is to improve. According to Adam Curle (1981), awareness is at the root of all change, and is indeed the very source of peace. In Latin America much of the thinking about awareness has

sprung from Freire's (1972) idea of *conscientisation*. With reference to his work with illiterate adults in the North East of Brazil, Freire believed that literacy programmes ought additionally to increase awareness and lead the participants to question their oppression. Once people became fully aware of their reality through the consciousness-raising which could be implemented in literacy programmes, they would act upon that awareness and challenge existing power arrangements.

John Paul Lederach is one author in the conflict resolution field who has already explored the implications of empowerment for peacebuilding. Lederach (1992) neatly draws attention to how the Spanish language gives us insight into empowerment. In searching for a title to a year long series of workshops in Costa Rica, the best Lederach and his co-workers could come up with was *Capacitación Social*, or Social Training. However, as Lederach points out, the word 'training' hardly encapsulates everything that was going on in the workshop situation. *Capacitación* has its roots in *capaz*, to be capable, or able, *soy capaz*, and *puedo* are two ways of saying "I can." *Puedo* is conjugated from the verb *poder*, which in its noun form means power. Lederach concludes that their workshop ought to have been called "Social Empowerment."

However, in the Costa Rican context, empowerment went far beyond individuals moving from 'I can't' to 'I can.' There, the people felt it was also very closely tied up with *confianza* or trust, and that 'empowerment of self was intimately wrapped up with empowerment of others through creating community.' Moreover, 'empowerment involves mutual dependence. 'I can' is only fully accomplished with 'I need you' (1992: 11). Lederach draws from this example to argue that peacemaking must value both the individual empowerment process, but also that which feeds back into the community. It is the latter which then allows us to address systemic change.

I would join with Lederach in arguing that internal, personal awareness and empowerment have to lead to community awareness and empowerment if the challenging of structures is to be possible. If peacebuilding is to be concerned with challenging structures, it requires empowerment of both the individual and the community. Work to raise people's consciousness must be followed by training in, and support for, ways to become more self-reliant and have more control over local development. If empowerment is limited to the self, there will be no structure on which to build the political participation which is necessary to confront structural inequalities, whether as means to change those structures, or merely to forge open more spaces in which to make a minimal difference.

## 1.5 Structural Development from the Grassroots as a Peacebuilding Strategy

The experiences of El Salvador and Colombia suggest that issues pertaining to structural development need to be addressed in spheres outside elite-led negotiations. The relationship between conflict resolution and sustainable peacebuilding through development work has remained largely un-addressed in the conflict literature. Burton's human needs theory certainly draws attention to developmental needs, but the idea of how to address them within conflict resolution is still limited to the assumption that once a negotiating stage has been reached (through official or non-official channels), it will be possible to bring these needs onto the agenda, and indeed 'resolve' them.

Edward Azar (1990) provides the exception to the rule when he argues forcibly that any conflict resolution strategy must be one which addresses processes of underdevelopment. Azar focuses on the need for development diplomacy and external assistance at the international level. The limitations of relying on external forces to foster internal change are that certainly at the state level, intervention, diplomacy and development aid can be so highly politically skewed. States, and development agencies working under the auspices of states, usually intervene to serve their own interests which may well be incongruent with those of ordinary people in the recipient country.

Alger (1987) sees new creative methods of contributing to peacebuilding emerging from the grassroots, in both the 'third world' and in pockets of poverty in industrialised countries. He argues that these movements are challenging the meaning of development, a development which for them has much more to do with self-determination, although not in the sense of state-building. Crucial to this type of development is the idea that the starting point for strategies ought to be the context in which the development is to take place. These strategies ought to seek solutions *in* the setting and not *outside* it, and should use resources available at the local level. Alger argues that inherent in this new kind of development is the capacity to mobilise new potential for solving the problems of violent conflict. Part 2 of this paper evaluates to what extent Alger's optimism regarding the potential peacebuilding capacity of grassroots development is reflected through rural and urban peace-building processes in Colombia.

## Part 2 - The Theory Grounded

### 2.1 The Experience of the ATCC: Local Development Becomes a Threat to Structures of Power

A much admired experience of peacebuilding in Colombia is that of a community called La India in the Magdalena Medio, one of the most violent zones in the country.<sup>15</sup> La India is composed of peasant colonisers who came to the region, pushing back the agricultural frontier, and hoping to eke out a living on the fertile land surrounding the River Carare. Typical of such zones in Colombia is a lack of state presence and the area surrounding La India is no exception. In the mid-1960s the FARC guerrillas arrived and from then on violence became a significant part of the community's everyday existence. The violence grew in intensity through the 1980s, culminating with the army's promotion of paramilitary groups (originally peasant self-defence groups) from the mid-1980s onwards.

The initial spark which persuaded the community of La India to confront the surrounding violence was the attempt by a paramilitary group to create a so-called 'self-defence' organisation within the community itself. As told by one of the peasants from the community:

Paramilitary groups forced us to attend meetings and gave us four choices: either we join the guerrillas, we unite with them in their struggle against the guerrillas, we leave the area or we die (Oswaldo Perón, author's interview)

Instead of opting for one of these choices, the peasants decided to confront all of the violent forces and initiated a series of meetings with them. During the meetings the peasants put forward their own demands. In the first one with the guerrillas the following demands were made:

1. Not one more peasant would be shot by the guerrillas
2. Not one more service would be provided for the guerrillas - no more food, favours or transport
3. No more orders or conditions would be accepted from the guerrillas
4. There would be no more guerrilla visits to the peasants' houses, nor any more political meetings (Sanz de Santamaria 1990: 2)

With these meetings the ATCC (Association of Peasants and Workers of the Carare Region) was born. The courage of the peasants in confronting the guerrillas, army and paramilitaries was acknowledged on all sides. Against all odds and expectations these violent forces were persuaded to stop targeting civilians in the area. The ATCC grew in strength and number from 1987-1990. It maintained a constant dialogue process with all of the violent actors, mediated internal conflicts

which arose in the community, and travelled up and down the river Carare to outlying settlements, promoting the ideals of the organisation and ensuring that the violent actors kept their promises throughout the zone which came under La India's influence.<sup>16</sup>

What are the key factors which explain the success of the ATCC in reducing the levels of violence in and around about the community of La India? One of the predominant factors which the people of the community identify is the fact that solutions were sought by those who experienced the violence, not by outsiders sweeping in to prescribe remedies:

You know that illness which is not treated at its roots never goes away. What you have to do is work from the very bottom where the roots of a problem are found, there is no point in starting from above then working down... It is not the same me having lived 30 or 40 years in this land trying to work out how to approach the question of peace, to you or any other person coming in from outside to talk of peace.... This is probably what has helped us begin to approach peace here - the fact that we, the people affected by the violence, got involved in trying to find a solution (Manuel Serna, author's interview)<sup>17</sup>

The ATCC's vision of peace seems absolutely crucial. For them, peace was much more than the absence of violence, and included well-articulated ideas on socio-economic development.<sup>18</sup> The ATCC trusted in non-violent methods of action, and believed whole-heartedly in the power of dialogue. This dialogue was based on acknowledgement of their adversaries, and forgiveness rather than revenge. Furthermore, the community was convinced of the need to encourage non-violent means of dealing with conflict from the earliest possible point, and was dedicated to the elaboration of education programmes to encourage this, and also to encourage students to remain in the countryside.

Based only on this description, the experience of the ATCC would seem to fully endorse the idea that development and peacebuilding work *can* be highly effective if promoted from 'below'. However, what subsequently happened to the peacebuilding process which they initiated suggests that, just as for elite-led negotiations, care must be taken not to overestimate what can be achieved at this level.

One of the great paradoxes of the experience of the ATCC is the fact that the comprehensive nature of its vision of peace probably contributed to its downfall. When the alternative socio-economic development schemes began to show that they could be viable, make a profit, and empower the community economically, the whole process became a threat to the local systems of power. The clientelist system endemic in the Colombian countryside, whereby economic or other favours are offered to 'clients' in exchange for votes, could not be reconciled with peasants gaining control over their own future. On the 26th February 1990, the three leaders of the ATCC

were murdered (along with a journalist investigating the role of the ATCC in promoting peace). Whilst there have been many differing interpretations of the reasons for the murders, including speculation that the leaders of the ATCC were about to broadcast names of paramilitaries who had committed atrocities in the past, this author believes that peasant empowerment becoming a threat to the entrenched system must be a part of the explanation.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the problems in which the ATCC became embroiled subsequent to the murders of the three original leaders are common to many popular organisations in Colombia and elsewhere. The ATCC began to lose clarity of aims and objectives. Protagonistic tendencies began to exclude people and the degree of unity which had existed between the Association and the population in general dramatically declined.<sup>20</sup> Some people close to the process believe it lost the original aim of public order and became more like a business. International attention, including international prizes which the ATCC won, may have brought prestige, but it also encouraged the leadership of the association to believe that they were the exclusive 'owners' of the peace process, reducing their willingness to coordinate work with others.<sup>21</sup> There were no evaluatory mechanisms built into the organisation's structure and limited means of assessing the relative success or failure of different ways of working. This was partly due to a lack of willingness to undergo any kind of self-criticism.

If we measure the success of such a process entirely on the variable of a reduction in levels of direct violence, then the work of the ATCC has undoubtedly been a great success and has provided a unique illustration of what can be achieved from 'below' in the midst of great adversity. Nevertheless, whilst violence is not immediately apparent, certainly on a surface level, undercurrents can definitely be felt in the area. Community members have been threatened again. Those in outlying areas who used to trust in the ATCC to provide them with security are now once again forming allegiances with different violent groups which they felt gave them security in the past. The alternative economic programmes have stagnated over the past five years, and although the ATCC still has a mandate to employ teachers in the zone, little work is going into forms of non-violent education.

The process of deterioration of the ATCC's work is not irreversible. Much of what was originally achieved rested on the clarity of vision and dynamism of the ATCC's first president, Josué Vargas. If someone can be found now, with similar qualities, then there is a chance that some of the success of the past can be recaptured. Nevertheless, cynics might suggest that the reason the ATCC has been left alone, and violence has not returned in its most acute form, is precisely because it has been ineffectual in promoting the conditions for the implementation of a broader

definition of peace. Such conditions would include empowering forms of socio-economic development. Key questions remain: can local forms of promoting dialogue and peace work in the context of continuing surrounding violent realities? If the ATCC does manage to promote alternative, autonomous forms of development again, will it be left alone to pursue those goals? Can empowerment be significant even if it does not manage to challenge pervading structural realities?

## 2.2 The Medellín Militias: Empowerment through Local-Level Negotiations?

If organisation of the peasants of the ATCC was partly a response to an absence of state presence in the Colombian countryside, the vigilante groups or *milicias* of Medellín arose partly in response to the absence of state presence in the poor urban districts of the city. In a study of the militias, Jaramillo (1994) points out that this absence was most deeply felt with respect to the rule of law. The police were corrupt and ineffectual and no state entity was capable of mediating conflicts and disputes in the poor districts. The violence grew particularly acute with the arrival of drugs on the scene in the 1980s. *Sicarios* or contract killers hired from gangs roaming the poorest districts became the predominant means to eliminate the enemy. Jaramillo argues that the *sicario* and gang phenomenon contributed to the breakdown of kinship and other ties which were predominant among neighbours in the poor districts before the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

Initially the work of the militias revolved around clearing the poor neighbourhoods of the worst perpetrators of gang violence, predominantly those who targeted people within the communities in which they lived. According to the testimony of one of the militia leaders, they grew to be like a state within a state:

We were the ones who regulated commerce in the poor districts. We regulated the transport. We mediated disputes. Those between neighbours, those to do with tenants and landlords. We fulfilled a function that really belonged to the state. But the state never had any kind of presence in these zones. We came to be the only force that had any legitimacy (James Urrego, author's interview, 1995).<sup>23</sup>

Towards the end of 1993, in an attempt to generate alternative means of ensuring security for their communities, some of the militia groups decided to enter into negotiations with the government. Partly, this was a result of fragmentation within the militia. The members had little political formation and often a lack of ideological direction. There was internal fighting and some had turned to criminality to raise funds for their operations. In so doing, they became involved in the very acts which they purported to eradicate. The militias themselves recognised the problems they had in graduating from being concerned exclusively with the elimination of

gangs and public security, to having the capacity to both organise and politicise the communities and attend to their social and economic needs. James Urrego:

A moment arrived in which we had to generate cohesive proposals before the communities and really, at that moment in time, we didn't have them... The primary objective of the negotiations with the government was to achieve social investment in the communities (author's interview, 1995).

The negotiating processes of the Medellín militias have useful lessons to teach us about how development and empowerment can most effectively be approached through local-level negotiations. There were two distinct negotiating processes, one with the Independent Militias of the Aburrá Valley (MPVA), the other with a group called the Popular Militias of and for the People (MPP), which negotiated along with two smaller groups, the Independent Militias (MI) and the Metropolitan Militias (MM).

The negotiations involving the MPVA militias had a good deal of support and participation from the community in which the militias operated. A working group was established and the community was consulted when important decisions had to be made. The agreements reached from the negotiations included plans for local development, for the consolidation of community organisations and for *gestores de paz*, or peace promoters, which were both ex-militias and community members. Subsequent to the accords a local conflict resolution centre was established in the district of Moravia / El Bosque, where community leaders and a handful of ex-militias now mediate conflicts. The centre has been a success and has provided the blueprint for a similar centre in another district, Andalucía.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, the negotiations with the MPP, MI and MM focused around the creation of a security cooperative, Coosercom. The idea behind Coosercom was that the militias would keep their arms and continue to provide security for their districts, but would become a legal entity. A support group of community members was also formed for this process. Nevertheless, within this support group, a number of people still wished the militias to perform a vigilante role in the community. This impeded the development of the support group and it disintegrated (Arias & Medina 1995).

There are a number of fundamental flaws behind the creation of Coosercom which have contributed to the problems experienced. First, there is the underlying assumption that private security is an acceptable substitute for state security in some of the most abandoned areas in both rural and urban Colombia.<sup>25</sup> Whilst Coosercom has not taken on the characteristics of paramilitary groups, it has, in some of the areas in which it operates, become a law unto itself. Community

members have complained of revenge killings and reprisals as a result of conflicts dating from before the militias became a legal entity.<sup>26</sup>

Second, there is the ill-conceived idea that peace and security will be engendered through the use of arms by a group of poorly-trained youngsters who have a reputation for resorting to arms to solve all problems. Initially conceived as a small force carefully monitored by the community, in the end result Coosercom was composed of 350 members which represented ten per cent of the police force in the city. In contrast to the ten months training in a police academy for the normal police force, the Coosercom members received only emergency training, and a third of the salary.<sup>27</sup> The lack of training and follow-up procedures by the government make the cooperative's internal problems hardly surprising. James Urrego:

We had some difficulties to do with the change in mentality of some of our members. They had been working at the margins of the law and suddenly had to adapt to working within the legitimate Constitution. This is not something that can be achieved overnight. It is something which requires education and a new kind of formation, one which could change the presiding mentality that conflicts ought to be resolved through the use of arms (author's interview, 1995).

The problems experienced by Coosercom were also due to the fact that the number of ex-militias to benefit from the Accords had been artificially inflated. On the one hand, the militias believed that with higher numbers they would have more strength in the negotiating process, on the other, members of ordinary criminal gangs wanted to benefit from the financial and legal elements of the Accords. According to a former leader of Coosercom who participated in the negotiations, the number of genuine ex-militias did not reach more than 120. Within two years of its inauguration at least one third of Coosercom members were dead or in jail as a result of internal struggles for power, position, and control of territory and arms (Costello 1996).

It is difficult not to adhere to the idea that in Coosercom the state saw a cheap option to provide security for the most violent parts of the most violent city in the country. The negotiating process was hurried through with little time for proper consideration of the demands of such a project. Alonso Salazar, a respected social scientist from Medellín argues:

This government believes that peace processes finish with the signing of accords. It seems to me that this is the moment when the real process begins. The government has left its peace process with the militias unprotected in the sense that it hasn't developed accompanying strategies to assist the process of bringing the militias back into civilian life, in economic, social and human terms. We all know that this was a particularly important part of this process, especially for the militias who were involved. These were a group of, for the most part, adolescent boys, with low academic

ability and low political formation, who were brought up in extremely confrontational environments (Alonso Salazar, quoted in Costello & Bonilla 1995a).

In view of Coosercom's failure to provide security - and the fact that the organisation itself had become part of the problem - in 1996 a process of disarming Coosercom members began. However, members are afraid that if they give up all of their arms they will be left in a highly vulnerable position. These fears seem justified in light of past experience and the fact that Coosercom's leader, James Urrego, was murdered in October 1996.

The key differences between the negotiating experiences of the militias of Medellín are that in the case of the MPVA militias the community was involved, and together the militias and community began to look for alternative means of solving conflicts. In the case of the MPP, MI and MM, violence and the use of arms continued to be seen as an appropriate response to conflict. The degree of success of the strategies can be seen by the fact that, in the latter case, social investment in certain communities increased, but the levels of violence were hardly affected. In the case of the MPVA militias, on the other hand, social investment ran into problems and was practically insignificant in the end, but attitudes towards conflict and violence have at least been addressed and, according to some estimates, criminality and violence actually decreased by 80 per cent (Costello 1995).

The lessons from these experiences suggest that one of the keys to peacebuilding from 'below' must be education to change norms of violence in communities.<sup>28</sup> An education that encourages people to talk through their differences and better understand each other's point of view, rather than to use violence as an immediate response to problems, would seem to be a crucial means of increasing tolerance and contributing to a more peaceful environment. The success of the work in the conflict resolution centre in Moravia / El Bosque would support this view. There is therefore a decisive role for conflict resolution training and techniques at this local level.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, such an approach will not work if the state and other powerful entities continue to promote solutions which utilise arms and violence to deal with conflict.

We are left with the question of whether the negotiating processes with the Medellín militias could be considered 'empowering' from the militias' and the communities' point of view. In one sense the experience of Coosercom may have been empowering for the communities in which it operated, because community 'representatives' gained legal control of public security. However, this was a very fragile empowerment which was unable to maintain spaces from which the community could build its own political participation. The limited empowerment of certain individuals did not feed back into the community and therefore the entire Coosercom process

was unable to address systemic change. In contrast, the MPVA negotiations which enhanced the role of *peace promoters* were more successful in forging open a minimal space in which the community could have more control over its own future development.

## Conclusion

Whilst recognising the limitations to elite-led, track-one level negotiations, care must be taken not to assume that peacebuilding efforts and negotiations undertaken at other levels will necessarily be more effective. The experiences of the ATCC and the militias in Medellín show that structural conditions surrounding peacebuilding still affect what can be achieved at the local level. The ATCC arose in response to co-optation by military forces, repression and human rights abuse perpetrated by these forces, clientelism and political manipulation. Whilst successful for a time in staving off these coercive elements there is a very real danger that they will return to completely erode the ATCC's autonomy and peacebuilding capacity. The militias arose as a means not only to reduce violence in the poor districts in Medellín, but also to try to forge open spaces so that the communities could participate in political, economic and social life. Whilst limited achievements have been made, such as a reduction in the violence in the community where the MPVA negotiated, it is hard to see how these can survive in the long-term. States which insist on maintaining exclusionary political and economic strategies, such as the criminalisation of social protest and neoliberal policies which erode the capacity of the base of society to participate in economic life, make it difficult to be optimistic for long-term success.<sup>30</sup>

We are left with the question: are development, empowerment and peace-building from 'below' useful and relevant concepts? One of the crucial elements in the local-level negotiations of the ATCC and the MPVA militias in Medellín was the fact that the communities began to feel that collectively they could contribute to, and help determine, the shape of their surroundings in the future. The communities felt empowered through organisational processes which made them feel that they had more control over their own lives, but that does not necessarily mean that they gained something in terms of a possession. Viewing empowerment in this way, as *process*, gets us away from trying to measure it in relation to something else, for example, in relation to state power. Empowerment as an end in itself can therefore be seen as a meaningful objective, as indeed can the process of striving *towards* peace. Whilst it may seem that the extent to which development, empowerment and peacebuilding from 'below' can impact on structures is very limited, particularly in the long-term, viewing these variables in terms of *process* makes them meaningful in themselves. If we prioritise the process of struggling *towards* a goal, we are more

likely to maintain long-term commitment to that goal. This is because we do not so easily become disillusioned the longer the process takes to achieve results.

Over a year of fieldwork in El Salvador and Colombia I was consistently amazed by the tenacity and optimism of people struggling to maintain meaningful peacebuilding processes in the midst of extremely violent circumstances. Their determination never to lose sight of the validity of *process* has much to teach academics and those most involved with generating theory, who tend to become frustrated the longer *process* takes to achieve concrete results. As indicated by Sanz de Santamaría (1990), we have much to learn from ordinary communities which do not separate the generation of theory from practice. Rather, through interactive processes of reflection and action, they respond to violence in ways which they feel most appropriate. They are therefore recognising that their own form of knowledge generation is valid, which is a crucial step towards persuading others that it is valid.<sup>31</sup>

Indigenous, grassroots responses to violence may not always achieve the desirable results, but they are likely to be more suitable than responses generated from 'above'. After all, these people have to live with the consequences of their actions. In 1987 the peasants of the ATCC saw a means to confront their reality in a way in which no academic or politician would have considered possible. We must have the courage to let go of pre-conceived ideas of what the nature of peacebuilding should be, and learn what we can from experiences of peacebuilding from 'below'. In so doing we may be able to play a useful role in disseminating information and contributing to the formation of relevant strategies and responses for other grassroots organisations confronted with challenges similar to those of the ATCC and the communities of Medellín.

## Notes

1. Accords in Colombia have been signed between the government and the April 19 Movement (M-19), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the Ernesto Rojas Commands (CER), the Worker's Revolutionary Party (PRT), the Movement of Socialist Renovation (CRS- dissident ELN guerrillas); the Quintín Lame indigenous group, the Francisco Garnica Front and the militias (vigilante groups) of Medellín.
2. In the conflict resolution literature elite-led negotiations are often called track one negotiations.  
  
Peacebuilding from 'below' is both a practice and a perspective. In practice it means peacebuilding engaged in at the local level by those who live in the midst of violent realities. The perspective presents the idea that those most affected by violence, who understand it and have to live with its consequences, will be best placed to find appropriate solutions to it. Outsiders engaged in peacebuilding endeavours may enter regions of conflict and propose ideas to help deal with its violent manifestations. Nevertheless, they must be sensitive to resources available at the local level, particularly the wealth of experience and knowledge of people living in the area.
4. Civil here is used to mean actors which operate nominally outside the state, although they may bear influence on state actors and vice versa. It also means *non-military* actors. In Colombia it is not universally accepted that 'civil' means 'non-military'. Some argue that armed actors such as paramilitary groups and the guerrillas are in fact armed expressions of 'civil society' (García Durán 1995, García Peña 1995, author's interview). Whilst accepting that violent methods may well be supported and encouraged financially and in other ways by civil sectors, this argument distorts the essentially non-military character of what is termed 'civil'. It also fails to acknowledge the choice that certain civil sectors have taken to fight in a non-violent, non-military fashion.
5. There is no space in this paper to explore fully the failure of attempts to foster civilian participation in negotiating processes in Colombia and El Salvador. These are examined in separate chapters in my forthcoming PhD Thesis, 'Peacebuilding from 'Below': A Comparative Analysis of El Salvador and Colombia.'
6. De Soto and del Castillo (1994) point to the lack of transparency in the Salvadorean negotiations between the UN on the one hand and the Bretton Woods institutions on the other. Whilst the latter were more concerned with insuring economic stabilisation through structural adjustment, the UN was most concerned with the form and detail of the peace accords. The lack of transparency between the institutions meant that little attention was paid to the dichotomy between the finance needed for the full implementation of the peace accords and the constraints of structural adjustment policies which limited domestic funds.
7. The mass-based fronts were the United Popular Action Front (FAPU), the Popular Revolutionary Block (BPR) and the Popular Leagues-28 (LP-28). These brought together rural and urban expressions of discontent, trade unions, student and peasant organisations. In 1980 the fronts came together to form the Revolutionary Coordinator of Masses (CRM). The five component parts of the FMLN were the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN), the Communist Party (PC) and the Central American Revolutionary Worker's Party (PRTC).
8. One such stunt was the theft of Simón Bolívar's sword from a museum in Bogotá. Bolívar liberated Colombia from the Spanish in the 18th century and therefore has a great significance in national history.
9. The guerrilla groups which remain in arms in Colombia - the FARC, ELN and dissident EPL guerrillas - argue that the limited negotiating agendas of the past are due to the lack of military and political power of the previous groups negotiating. They believe themselves to be in a much stronger position and so demand negotiations with a broader agenda and scope, including discussion about socio-economic issues. The government believes the guerrillas overestimate their strength and what they will be able to bring into negotiations. Civilian sectors feel that they have a right to be included in negotiations because of the low degree of legitimacy of the Colombian guerrillas.
10. Rupesinghe (1994) has identified the nature of some of these multiple characters: state-sponsored or state-condoned death squads; vigilante committees; insurgents; mercenaries and/or criminals; wealthy, well-armed and well-organised drug syndicates which also act as arms merchants, selling weapons to all sides.

11. Fisher and Keashly (1991) in their contingency model suggest that different kinds of third party intervention ought to be used at different stages in a conflict's progression or escalation. These range from conciliation to mediation, mediation with muscle, consultation, arbitration and peacekeeping. These ought to be seen as complementary rather than competing or contradictory, and the stage of escalation of the conflict is the determining factor on which method(s) ought to be used at any particular time.
12. The idea behind the Community Justice Programme was to move away from criminalising certain lesser crimes, decongest the justice system, and give communities more autonomy in dealing with their own conflicts. Instead of recurring to the state justice system, people were encouraged to take their conflicts to extra-judicial conciliators and *peace judges* who would use alternative conflict resolution techniques such as mediation, conciliation, and in the case of the judges, arbitration to try and reach a satisfactory conclusion for all sides. However, the fact that the state still sponsored the Community Justice Programme meant that people remained sceptical of its worth. Given the fact that Colombian citizens have become accustomed to a 97 per cent impunity rate for crimes in general, this is hardly surprising. The Conflict Resolution Centre in a district in Medellín which is examined later in this paper used some of the principals of the Community Justice Programme. Nevertheless, the key difference is that it is the community itself which controls the Conflict Resolution Centre, and not a state regulatory body.
13. A number of other authors in the conflict resolution field have similarly argued that in order for negotiations to be viable, and any agreements reached lasting, there needs to be power balance between adversaries (Curle 1970, Wallensteen 1988, Zartman 1989 & 1995, Van der Merwe et al 1990, Licklider 1990, Stedman 1991). Jabri takes this argument one step further to suggest that the mechanisms for dealing with power asymmetries within conflict resolution remain inadequate see Jabri 1995 and author's PhD Thesis, chapter one.
14. Nelson and Wright refer to Ferguson J., *The Anti-Politics Machine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
15. The Association of the community of La India, the ATCC (Association of Workers and Peasants of El Carare), won the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 and the United Nation's 'We the People' award in 1995.
16. La India is a *corregimiento*, which means a group of settlements which, although geographically far apart, are considered an administrative unit. The main settlement of the *corregimiento* is also called La India.
17. Manuel Serna is the current President of the ATCC.
18. In the ATCC's 'Great Dialogue for Peace' held in 1990 detailed plans for the socio-economic development of the community were elaborated. These included plans for agrarian reform, for technical assistance for agriculture, for mechanisation of the land, for agro-fishing diversification, for the commercialisation and marketing of produce and for erosion and pest control. CEDE (Centro de Estudios Sobre Desarrollo Económico Facultad de Economía, Universidad de los Andes), *Informe Final Los Procesos de Paz y Desarrollo en El Corregimiento de La India: Período Junio de 1989 a Febrero de 1990, Anexo CEDE*, March 1990
19. This analysis is shared by interviewees who prefer to remain anonymous.
20. This was particularly true when the ATCC stopped travelling to other settlements within La India's catchment area. When the population in these communities began to feel that the ATCC could no longer guarantee their security, it encouraged them to resort to old allegiances with other groups, such as the guerrillas. In the elections for the board of the ATCC in 1995, approximately 250 people voted, in 1990 this figure had been around the 2,000 mark.
21. The Catholic Church is just one organisation which had difficulties implementing programmes in the region.
22. The gang culture in Medellín was exacerbated by the so-called 'Peace Camps' of the M-19 guerrillas. The camps were created as a result of the 1984 Peace Agreements between President Betancur and the M-19 and were supposed to provide both military and political training. The emphasis was always on the former. When the camps closed with the breakdown of the Peace Accords, a lot of youths who had been trained in military techniques were left. Some chose to join the guerrillas in the countryside, some chose to study, others formed gangs in the popular districts of the city (Arias & Medina 1995).
23. James Urrego was from the Popular Militias of and for the People (MPP) and was one of the leaders of the security cooperative, Coosercom, which is examined later. He was murdered in October 1996.

24. Community members have considered the Moravia / El Bosque Conflict Resolution Centre a great success. In a survey, 96 per cent of people who had used it found solutions to their problems and everyone surveyed said they would use the centre again (Roldán 1996).
25. Private justice takes various forms in Colombia - so-called 'self-defence' groups, paramilitaries and security cooperatives like Coosercom. The guerrillas also have their own forms of implementing private justice. The relationships which each of these have with the state, the army, the police and drugs traffickers differ depending on the region in which they operate. Paramilitary groups were made illegal by President Barco in 1989, but a new form of rural security cooperative (self-defence group) called *Convivir* are now legal and collaborate with illegal paramilitary groups.
26. This problem is partly due to the fact that whilst Coosercom was initially supposed to keep to the areas in which its members previously had support, its area of action was expanded to other zones where rival gangs still operated.
27. Statistics from Costello Paolo & Bonilla Wilfer, *Coosercom Cooperativa, o Ejército?*, El Colombiano, 26th May, 1995: 7B
28. An anecdote from José Luciano Sanín of the Popular Training Institute (IPC), an NGO in Medellín which supported the negotiating process with the MPVA militias, illustrates the continuing challenge for the future. Just before the opening of the Moravia / El Bosque Conflict Resolution Centre the light bulbs were stolen. The community was asked: 'How should we respond to these thieves so that they don't come in and steal from us again?' The community response was 'Shoot them'.
29. Those who work in the Conflict Resolution Centre in Moravia / El Bosque have been trained in conflict resolution techniques by the IPC and by the Colombian Ministry of Justice.
30. By the criminalisation of social protest it is meant that all acts of protest are increasingly considered a criminal offence. There is a tendency towards this in Colombia. An anti-terrorist statute introduced by President Barco broadened the definition of terrorism so that ordinary acts of civil disobedience can now be classified as 'terrorist'. The Statute for the Defence of Order, a permanent fixture of Colombia's justice system since 1992, means that all those accused of being 'terrorists' can be tried under a system of secret justice whereby the identity of the judge, the prosecution's evidence, witnesses and their testimony are all kept confidential and inaccessible to the defendant and his/her lawyer.
31. In my forthcoming thesis, I argue that the question of who has power over the process of knowledge generation is fundamental to the quest of empowerment. I highlight the usefulness of viewing empowerment from the perspective of the research technique Participatory Action Research. (PAR). Empowerment from a PAR perspective is not only concerned with the *provision* of knowledge, but is additionally concerned with recognising the value of indigenous knowledge *production*.

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