

# W: WAR, CO-OPERATIVES AND POST-CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

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## Introduction

The relationship between war, the aftermath of conflict, and the co-operative sector is not well-known worldwide. This chapter presents the case of Colombia which, we believe, provides lessons for other countries too.

Colombia is living through a crucial moment in its history. This is characterized by a new attempt to reach a peace agreement with the historical guerrillas and to disarm other groups in order to start recovering from the political and social conflict which has burdened the country for more than half a century. In this context, this article aims to elucidate the possibilities that co-operativism offers the country to return to peaceful civil life. Besides analysing some aspects of the internal conflict and how it is expressed in rural areas, this article reflects on the historical conditions of co-operativism in Colombia and its role in society. It also considers the conditions needed so that, once a relatively peaceful scenario is achieved in the country, the social economy and solidarity movement can adjust and gradually adapt strategies and actions.

## The internal conflict in Colombia

What is now known as the Colombian internal conflict covers a period that started with the '*Frente Nacional*' in 1958, which was an agreement between the two traditional parties to govern the country alternately in order to overcome the civil war at that time. The opposition movements were excluded from political participation in this pact. That was one of the reasons for the birth of the left-wing Guerrillas, including the '*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*' (FARC-EP), '*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*' (ELN) and '*Ejército Popular de Liberación Nacional*' (EPL), influenced by the Cuban and Chinese revolutions. The '*Movimiento 19 de Abril*' (M19) emerged some time later.

In the 1970s and '80s, illegal crops, drug trafficking, and right-wing paramilitary groups emerged. In 1985, during peace talks between the government and guerrillas, the national Courthouse was occupied by the M19



guerrilla group and retaken violently by the military forces. The conflict reached new dimensions, leading to high levels of destruction, which ended in the massacre of more than 3000 members of the 'Unión Patriótica', the murder of three left-wing and opposition presidential candidates, and the death of thousands of civilians and soldiers through narco-terrorist actions. As a result of an agreement between the Conservative and Liberal parties, and the left-wing Guerrillas M19 and EPL (who had already been given an amnesty and joined the civil society), the constitution of 1991 was issued.

Meanwhile, the fight between guerrillas and drug traffickers reached a peak, directly affecting civilians. This confrontation, with the participation of public forces, was one of the reasons for the massive internal forced migration which to this day has involved 7 million people. Conflict radicalization, a lack of political will to implement democratic reforms, and US interventionism led to the drastic failure of the new peace negotiation in 2002. From this year, the country was governed by president Alvaro Uribe, who maintained a close relationship with the US president George W. Bush. His basic premise was to deny that there was any civil war and his strategy was to fight against terrorism, paying little attention to human rights.

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos came to the presidency. Committed to achieving peace, he passed a law to compensate the victims and reconstructed relationships with neighbouring countries. Currently, peace negotiations are proceeding amidst all the difficulties of a long conflict and with strong opposition from the 'Centro Democrático' party, yet with the support of important sectors which will be expected to open new modes of reconciliation and transformation for the country<sup>1</sup>.

## Co-operativism and association in Colombia

Co-operativism was introduced in Colombia in 1930 in a context of the capitalistic modernization of the country, based on the Western

<sup>1</sup> There are two official documents on the history of this conflict. The first document is the report '*Informe General de Memoria y Conflicto: ¡Basta Ya! Memorias de guerra y dignidad*', requested by the Government of Álvaro Uribe and presented by president Santos in July 2013. This report describes the national tragedy that occurred between 1958 and 2012 and mentions a total of 220.000 victims, among which 80% were civilians. If we add to this number the victims of the '*La Violencia*' period from 1948, the total number of victims of the conflict rises to 500.000. The second document is the report '*Informe de la Comisión Histórica del Conflicto y sus Víctimas: Contribución al entendimiento del conflicto armado en Colombia*', presented during the La Habana peace conference in February 2015 and edited by ten specialists.



model of credit, consumption, and saving-co-operatives. In its first phase, the co-operatives were mainly urban, but later they were also introduced in the agriculture sector as a mechanism used by the big land owners to obtain public resources. For half a century, governments promoted the creation of co-operatives, syndicates, peasant associations, and Community Action Boards, with the purpose of justifying the system, but excluding the marginalized sectors of real representation outside the official parties (García, 1976a).

Meanwhile, in Latin America, there was a clear confrontation between the two main approaches: the first one was an eminently pragmatic view in which co-operativism was limited to being a complementary element of private economy, serving to attenuate the social conflict or as an instrument of modernization of the capitalistic system. The second approach conceived co-operativism as an essential part of a strategy for the economic, political, and social development of backward countries (García, 1976b: 9).

The sociologist Orlando Fals Borda expresses his doubts about the top-down association model in a context of deep disputes associated with the Cold War and extreme land-distribution inequality. In his view, co-operatives served sometimes 'to spread modern technologies, get better social and financial services, as well as to improve rural production and the quality of life. But when they lacked the means needed to exert greater influence on collective action, the co-operatives turned into mechanisms for the adjustment of social orders, which demanded a more radical change (Fals Borda, 1971: 109, quoted in Sánchez, 2015: 82).

On the other hand, it is important to point out that, although the internal conflict faced by Colombia for over half a century is a national issue, it has occurred predominantly in certain regions. Fernán González attempts to explain the historical concentration of violence looking back at the years of the Spanish colonial domination. Since then, in certain regions, participation and internal social cohesion were stronger, contrary to the rural Andean highlands. In the 20th century, this population was to be the social base of more modern forms of social relations, which were reflected in party affiliation, either to the traditional parties or their opponents, such as the socialists and communists, or to the new movements and the guerrillas in the second half of the century (González, 1994).

Recently, there have been valuable contributions to the subject. Juan Fernando Álvarez introduces a territorial perspective to the analysis, pointing out how despite market inefficiencies and the lack of institutional incentives, solidarity organizations have contributed historically to the organization or legalization of production and extraction activities, and have



combined a 'demand for goods and services which boost the local markets, thereby generating a major retention of resources in the territories' (2015b: 299). 'Combined' required a 'with' following it.

On the other hand, César Sánchez (2015) offers a reflection focused on explaining the evolution of economic and political institutions in Colombia during the 20th century, such as the Solidarity Economy, and on elucidating why and how co-operativism has survived and flourished for 80 years in a country facing on-going conflict and radical change. He points out the role therein of three social institutions: land ownership, two traditional political parties, and processes of economic openness.

When analysing the quantitative evolution of co-operativism in Colombia, we can identify two stages: the first between 1930 and 1989, with a more or less regular growth, and the second, from 1989 until the present. In the first one, two phenomena stand out: on the one hand, the fall in the 1950s when the country was struggling during the civil war between the liberal and the conservative parties and, on the other hand, the rapid increase between 1960 and 1965, related to the '*Alianza para el Progreso*' Program implemented by the US in this country. In the second cycle, a first wave takes form which follows the growth and crisis of financial co-operativism, namely, the open co-operatives and the co-operative banks. A second wave shows the expansion and crisis of financial co-operatives, followed by the huge expansion and crisis of work co-operatives specialized in work intermediation ('outsourcing' of workforce to capitalist enterprises). This latest crisis was caused by the controls imposed by the government. It is easy to establish that the instability of the sector in this second stage is related to the model of economic openness, deregulation, and free market which has been imposed for the last 25 years in Colombia.

The relationship between civil war and false co-operatives is amply documented through the experience of the so-called '*cooperativas de vigilancia y seguridad privada*' (CONVIVIR) (Private security and surveillance co-operatives), authorized by a presidential ordinance in 1994. In 1997, the constitutional court applied a correction since these groups were not authorized to exert certain functions and only public forces were allowed to carry arms. In this year the Colombian Co-operatives Confederation also rejected the use of the term co-operative to 'legalize war instruments, such as the wrongly called Security Co-operatives Convivir' (El Tiempo, 1997). In addition, in 2007, the parliamentarian Gustavo Petro argued in his research that the CONVIVIR groups were the origins of paramilitarism in Colombia (*Revista Semana*, 2015).



## Solidarity sector and the aftermath of war

In a recent study of the economy, violence, and solidarity organizations, Diana Jeanneth del Pilar Rodríguez (2015) established the relationship between violence and absence of socio-economic development in some regions in Colombia and suggested strategies for solving poverty, environmental damage, and violence in some of these areas.

### Organizaciones Solidarias y Desplazados por Expulsión. 2002 -2012

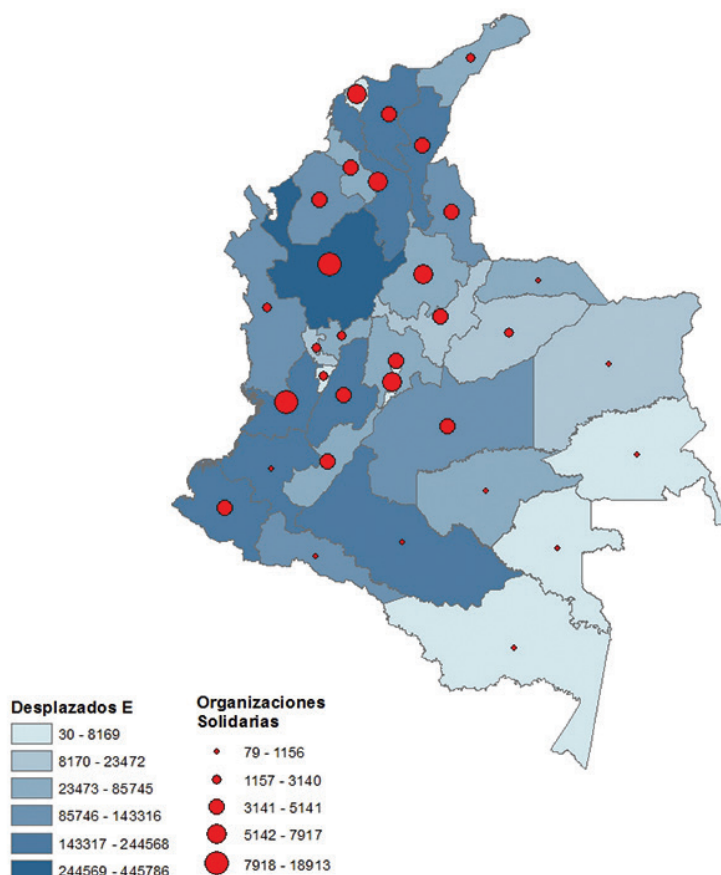


Fig. 1 – forced internal migrants (desplazados) in the areas of conflict and social economy organizations (organizaciones solidarias). Source: Rodríguez, 2015



With regard to the contribution of solidarity organizations to peace, the study (del Pilar Rodríguez, 2015) points out their strong potential since they already have the legal and social structures needed for a peaceful coexistence. However, this study does not observe any positive or negative correlation between association and violence since co-operativism is essentially an urban phenomenon, whereas violence is more common in the countryside.

What is clear is the existence of emblematic cases of co-operative experiences in the zones of greatest conflict. One of them is Coogranada, in south-eastern Antioquia, which was the scene of a terrible massacre in the 1990s and was identified by the directive of the Confederación de Cooperativas de Colombia CONFECOOP (Colombian Co-operatives Confederation) as a successful case in this territory where associativity 'acted as a barrier stopping the conflict from spreading [...]' (Castillo, 2015). Another case is the '*Cooperativa La Granja*' in the region known as '*Magdalena Medio*', which was created in 1974 with the support of the Diocese in a high-conflict zone and was declared a peace area in 1997, an experience which was well documented by Ricardo Dávila (2012). In addition to these experiences, there are other associations of co-operatives in conflict zones, such as the '*Utopía*' project in the Orinoquía region. This is a project of alternative solidarity development which involves young people affected by violence (Álvarez, 2015c). On an institutional level, the relevance of the partnership between the '*Oficina de Restitución de Tierras*' (Land Restitution Office) and the '*Departamento Administrativo Nacional de la Economía Solidaria*' (DANSOCIAL) (National Administrative Department of Solidarity Economy) is worthy of note.

On the other hand, there are organizations such as the '*Confederación Agrosolidaria de Colombia*' which are part of the '*Red Colombia Verde*' and the '*Movimiento Latinoamericano de Agroecología*', present in several regions in the country; and ongoing projects such as the 16 female-coffee-producer associations in Cauca, a region in the southern part of Colombia, an area of armed conflict, which is seeking integration within a solidarity scheme.

It is opportune to recall the reflection of Juan Fernando Álvarez on the potential contribution of the solidarity organizations to peace, according to whom it depends on the social context and the articulation of public and private efforts; therefore, even though solidarity organizations have favorable characteristics for promoting a peaceful coexistence, this 'requires the concatenation of certain conditions, in whose absence it can generate the opposite effect' (2015a: 35). Solidarity organizations are not,



then, the panacea 'for solving all problems in a region in which conflict, violence, and illegality are the cause and effect of an unfavourable historic, economic, social, civic, cultural, and political conditions to meet the ends of general interest'.

## Conclusions

The economic, social, and political transformations which may arise after a peace agreement with the guerrillas in Habana, Cuba, will have to focus on rural zones. Its results will depend on the development of a new institutionalism in line with new realities and public policies, one able to represent the demands of the population and promote its active participation. In this context, co-operativism and other associative forms will be able to play a critical role as long as the government grants them proper participatory powers and respects their autonomy, and the sector strengthens itself following the principles and organizational forms that are fundamental to co-operativism.

Given the loss of trust between individuals and between individuals and institutions as a result of the long conflict, the solidarity sector has two main tasks according to the Official Directive: first, the generation of public goods, such as participatory democracy and its implementation within the co-operative government; and second, a contribution to the construction of a social and economic inclusion model. Meanwhile, the solidarity sector claims:

Now the sector makes a request to the government that it should recognize its importance as an entrepreneurial model. The development of a new country in peace requires a solidarity economy and co-operative model, especially on the rural theme, because associative work functions as an engine of development and employment (CONFECOOP-Valle, 2015).

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