



SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN POST-CONFLICT COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: As an independent writer, the author of this paper shares the vision of Colombian citizens about the history that caused the conflict between the Colombian State and extreme illegal left-wing groups, Colombians' efforts to build a better country through peace, and how the different economic actors could contribute to the sustainability of this social project that has a transversal relationship with all the characters and institutions in this South American country.

Approach: The research is focused on the compilation of historical and economic data about the Colombian Conflict, and the recent advances in the consolidation of a sustainable peace in Colombia. The research is based on official information and other journalist sources.

Findings: The paper suggests an analysis of the history of the Colombian conflict, its economic implications for the local people, and the main strategies implemented by the government to promote the inversion of the private sector and their more active participation in the post-conflict scenario.

Practical implications: This publication shares an independent view of past and current Colombian facts, its hard and long process to obtain

peace and equitable life conditions for its people, and future perspectives with the international community. Among others, it considers that international support and recognition of the accomplished purposes, in the prospect of a peaceful country for the construction of a sustainable peace, are fundamental for the promotion of enterprise and growth of foreign investment in Colombia.

Originality/value: The paper offers a fresh and easy content, and gives the reader a real perspective of the peace process in Colombia, linking the historical, economic and social facts that contributed to the beginning and end of a conflict that impacted the lives of more than three generations. This paper is dedicated to all who want to learn more about Colombian history, and who want to work in the project of a more equitable Colombia.

Keywords: Colombia; post-Conflict; peace; economic sustainability; proColombia; coffee

INTRODUCTION

The contribution that private enterprises and the government make in the economical dynamisation of the most devastated regions as result of the war between the Colombian State and illegal armed groups, will be translated into the construction of a durable and sustainable peace, in which the agricultural sector will be the main driving force.

It is important to consider the efforts that organisations such as ProColombia are investing in the promotion of exports of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), as a basis of the country's economic growth. That economic strength will ensure the continuity of the recently signed peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas, and the opportunities to establish peace negotiations with other illegal groups.

Contributing to the sustainable construction of the post-conflict economy, with projects such as coffee bean production for exports sales, will be the best way of attracting the community's interest in a peaceful coexistence in the post-conflict scenario.

Colombian people have learnt their lesson. For decades our people have lived in fear, wondering whether the next bomb would explode near their home. Living in a province like Tolima meant living in fear, especially during the years 1994–2012; this chaos caused an innumerable number of problems. Among others, the concentration of displaced people from the mountains and farms to the cities, and the unemployment as a result: insecurity began to increase. However, at the same time, Government efforts were canalised to attack the enemy. That enemy did not come from outside; war is always war from wherever the enemy comes.

When your "enemy" is your own compatriot, things are different. The fight is not because of aims to expand territory, as happens in the majority of wars between one country and another; here the fight was among brothers, born in the same land, blood from the same body.

When the different actors of the conflict realised this, they gave themselves the chance of being close to one another, to stop the sound of guns and begin to hear the “enemy’s” arguments. Instead of killing them before they spoke, they turned into a more developed society, still under construction, but with the aim of growing in the values of peace and equity.

This work presents a brief history of the Colombian conflict to the international community, the origins of the actual peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrillas, and finally offers some insights about the importance of the socio-economic strategy development in the agreements as key factors to ensure a stable and durable peace.

THE HISTORY OF THE COLOMBIAN WAR AND THE ORIGIN OF THE FINAL PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE FARC-EP

“All the historic facts of the colonial period came from this referenced essay: Colombia as country began its history as independent country around the year 1819 with the victory of the Bridge of Boyacá on 7th August of that year, when the liberators General Simón Bolivar and General Francisco de Paula Santander settled the route up to the foundation of a Democratic Republic of the New Colombia as was known until then. As consequence of its colonial origin, the country carried the scarf of innumerable social problems that involved some of the following actors: african slaves, indigenous and a growing population of mixed native-spanish people known as “criollos”, whom were the protagonist characters in the declaration of independence from the Spanish Crown in the middle of XIX century (Colombia hoy – Etapas y sentido de la historia de Colombia, 1996).

We could affirm that the origin of the Colombian conflict comes from its foundation itself. To be exact, however, this was around 60 years ago, when a group of farmers, most of them analphabetic and underestimated by the central national government, “armed with their ideals of an equitable distribution of land, better life quality, education and access to basic services, or at least there were their fundamentals at the beginning of 1960’s when under the command of alias Manuel Marulanda Vélez and not more than 50 members the FARC-EP (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces – People’s Army) was founded in the region of Marquetalia South of Tolima Department”. The concept came from the lecture of the FARC EP website sección quiénes somos.

Before and after that moment, the conflict against the State by the extreme left guerrillas and paramilitary groups was always a part of Colombian reality. The conflicts were occasioned by intolerance among right and left political positions that caused suffering among the civilians who were in the middle of the war.

In the last decades of the FARC-EP, its participation in drug trafficking activities increased. This meant that the real purpose of its fight, i.e., its political stance and the repression of the State, was lost. The State was then looking to put an end to the influence of the ‘narco-guerrilla’ by systematically eliminating the principal war leaders of this group; they were supported by the government of the United States of America with programmes such as Plan Colombia (signed in 2000 under Bill Clinton’s presidency).

Peace negotiations were until the consolidation of this final peace agreement chaotic and failed. There were about seven attempts for a peace agreement since 1982, most of them promoted by civilians, victims, the Catholic Church and the Colombian Government itself (López Montaña Cecilia, Cueter Nicolás. “¿Por qué Santos sí pudo dialogar con las Farc?”, 2016).

One of the most remembered peace negotiations was during President Andrés Pastrana’s administration from 1998 to 2002. Under a model of distension areas, the FARC-EP guerrillas had time and space to become strong enough to kidnap a commercial aeroplane and make it land on a rural runway. They released most of the passengers, but kept a Senator called Jorge Eduardo Gechem. That was the end of the peace attempt, but also the beginning of one of the hardest armed campaigns during which the Government consolidated its forces, breaking the guerrilla structure and bringing them to the recent peace dialogues established in 2012. This was carried out with the cooperation of foreign governments such as Cuba and Norway.

The negotiations for signing the present agreement were developed under war conditions; there was a good result, at least for the people who inhabit rural areas. In the cities life continues almost the same; this is because the war was concentrated in the mountains and hard to access territories. Only occasionally were the principal cities such as Bogotá and Cali under attack during the worst periods of the war.

During the post-conflict period, the members of the oldest communist guerrilla unit in the world began their new lives as a political party and as civil citizens. They tried to compensate their victims, perhaps not always in the way society expected, but definitely far from the violent trajectory they followed during their illegal existence.

It is possible that, in the future, other illegal groups will follow the same road to peace negotiations as the EPL (Popular Liberation Army), which closely observed the process with the FARC-EP. With the integration of the FARC into civil life, its first steps towards the consolidation of a political party, founded under the communist ideologies in a clearly conservative and electoral traditional country as Colombia, are the ingredients of the new political perspective that common Colombians are experiencing for the first time in many years.

The last attempt of such a change was in the 1980s, when the negotiations between President Belisario Betancourt and the FARC-EP guerrillas resulted in the instauration of a political party for this communist group called “Patriotic Union (UP)” in 1984. Unfortunately, this all turned into chaos, when the government lost its ability to

provide accurate protection to the leaders of the party. As a result, about 3,000 militants were illegally executed, including two presidential candidates from this party.

Despite the negativism of past events, Colombians still believe that a peaceful co-existence could be a reality in the country, jointly working for the same purpose – to become a more equitable society with the same opportunities for each individual.

Implications of War on the Rural Economy

As a result of the violent actions, thousands of families had to leave their productive lands traveling principally to the main cities of Bogotá, Cali and Medellín where, day-by-day, the unemployment rates got higher. This is because most of them were there working under informal conditions, earning less than required to feed their families; this still happens in Colombia.

As a result of the forced mobilisation of those families, land productivity decreased and the prices of food and primary raw materials for industrial production were higher than expected.

Entrepreneurs located in areas such as Tolima, Cauca, and Guaviare were forced, against their will, to periodically pay the guerrillas to finance the war. Obviously if they did not pay they would have to suffer the consequences; these consequences included murders and terrorist acts such as bombs in the commercial areas, all under the law of silence.

Even companies located in the cities had problems to provide their products to remote areas of the country, because the guerrillas also forced them to pay for the right to distribute their merchandise in the regions.

The costs of transportation were also a problem in these areas, because of the low presence of the State infrastructure inversions. This was especially true after 2002, when the National Armed Forces fought harder against the illegal groups. Again the people in the middle just had to run away.

Figures for this period are overwhelming. There were six million deaths during the approximately 55 year war, millions of displaced civilians were forced to live in cities with no land to work, most of them were within the misery belts of cities as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.

Private Enterprise and Government Roles in Post-Conflict Colombia

The peace agreement includes specific strategies to facilitate the process of economic reactivation of the demobilised people, securing their integration into the economic system and return to civil life. In consequence, the inversions in the rural

economy are the way by which new economic players can successfully contribute to the sustainable construction of the post-conflict economy and the peaceful coexistence among the protagonists and their victims.

The main participants of this economic project are the groups of reinserted people, now with civilian status, but knowing almost nothing about how they should begin to build their new life. As stated by the Conpes document to the Social Reintegration (Política Nacional de Reintegración Social y Económica para personas y grupos armados ilegales Documento Conpes 3454, 2008), reintegration is defined as the process throughout the demobilised people acquire the civil status, get an employment and, as one of the main objectives of the National Social and Economic Reintegration Policy contribute to the development of skills and abilities that allow the successful insertion to the labour market for the generation of their own incomes, as part of the Colombian National Development. It demonstrates the importance of private enterprises in the post-conflict scenario as generators of employment.

According to the Final Agreement itself (Síntesis de los Acuerdos Alcanzados, 2016) and other legal mechanisms (Decreto 454 Ministerio del Trabajo República de Colombia, 2017) the reintegrated people will have the financial support to begin their new life including inversions for entrepreneurial projects and a high attention to rural initiatives with the purpose to increment the production of food and the eradication of the illegal crops. This new Small and Medium Enterprises are now the opportunity to save lives and strengthen the micro and macroeconomic Colombian future.

Reintegration processes had been developed during the last fourteen years for the National Agency for the Reintegration and Normalisation of the Colombian Government, as reported by them (La Reintegración, hechos y estadísticas – Datos a Junio de, 2017) 18.129 ex-combatants from different illegal organisations voluntary entered to the program 70% of them are employed by 650 local companies. One of the most relevant figures is the comparison between the expenses of having a prisoner and a reintegrated. The cost of maintain a prisoner is about COP 17.000.000 (aprox. USD5.800) the same concept is reduced to COP 5.700.000 by offering to reinserted people minimal conditions of life.

Just with that inversion, an average 76% of the participants in the reintegration process retain lawful behaviour, reducing the proportion of deaths to a third of demobilised people that did not join the reintegration programme. The participants of the reintegration programme also say they feel an increase of 90% in their quality of life. Another important fact to consider is that 90% of the programme's participants arrived with psychosocial diseases, but after finishing the programme, 93% had overcome that situation.

One of the regions where coffee has had a long history with people's lives is the South of Tolima, the place where it all began. Today Tolima is offering an exemplary lesson of perseverance, showing how different associations of coffee bean producers had worked hard in the performance of high quality coffee to export to the rest

of the world. Processed or as raw material, coffee is once again the key to opening Colombians' doors to the rest of the world. With towns as Planadas, Gaitania and Chaparral, Tolima are pioneers in the region with different brands of their special manufactured coffee.

Meanwhile, organisations such as ProColombia, the Exports and Tourism Investment Country Brand, are promoting the products of Colombian entrepreneurs worldwide. Investments in coffee projects have become signs in the most affected territories of Colombia in overcoming poverty, including vulnerable communities, protagonists and their victims jointly working for the same purposes.

According with this organisation (Análisis de las Exportaciones Colombianas, informe enero – octubre de 2016), during the year 2016 (jan–oct), the coffee exports sales were US\$1.779 million it represented 15% of the non-mining and energy exports of the country followed by other products as fresh flowers (9.6%) and bananas US\$734 million (6.4%). The United States, with a participation of 27.3%, was the principal commercial destination, followed by Ecuador, Perú and Mexico. These figures show that there is still a lot of work to do in economic terms, but it has to be seen as an opportunity to grow instead of as a weakness.

Some of the activities that ProColombia have developed to contribute to the economic sustainability of exports involve the promotion of Colombian products in foreign countries, support for entrepreneurs participating in issues such as international trade, and offering services such as business meetings and opening spaces for networking between buyers and sellers, and entrepreneurial consultancy.

CONCLUSIONS

Colombia is a country with several times more geographical and environmental advantages than other nations in the region. Even with a prolonged war, Colombia is one of the most solid democracies in the whole of South America, with an economic structure that made it an attractive place to the foreign inversion in diverse industries. This is not just in agriculture but also in medicine and the services industry. The culture of hard work and immense internal force pushes the Colombian people to become a more profitable society.

The signature of the peace agreement was a question of time. Perhaps from a short term view the war probably would not have ended, but analysing the length of the country's history, we can see that the efforts to find common points were stronger than the aim of a long illogical fight.

The problem of Colombia as stated by Francisco de Roux in the article “La paz llama a la equidad” (Peace calls to equity), is not a problem of poverty, but is a problem of lack of consciousness for the compatriots needs, to become closer to the suffering of others and begin to work together to find a collective solution.

Now it is time for private enterprises, civil society and even the international community to turn to see the side where the most vulnerable of us live, to know their problems and to contribute directly or indirectly to the construction of a more equal social web, where all points of view can be heard and respected.

That is the only manner through which a prolonged conflict can be prevented. It is true that there are still many problems, including (among others) the drugs traffic, corruption and slavery, but as a society it is important to understand that every single step in the right direction counts towards reaching the common objectives.

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BIOGRAPHY

Vilma D. Bedoya is an International Business Professional from the University of Tolima. During her bachelor studies, Vilma was actively involved in projects directed to student welfare, with the objective of decreasing their leaving rate. Activities included cultural events and systems to ensure access to feeding services.

Currently Ms Bedoya is a student of the Specialisation in Project Management of the Open and Distance National University of Colombia, and employee of one of the most relevant industrial producers of edible oils and fats in her country.

Since 2014, she has developed volunteer activities related to export councillorship to agricultural producers in the region of South Tolima Colombia, especially with coffee farmers. As a member of the DAAD Alumni Network, Bedoya has participated in several initiatives such as virtual international projects. She has also attended national and international seminars and conferences related to the entrepreneurial promotion of exports from the agro-industrial sector.

From her position at Lloreda S.A. in Colombia, her work has been highlighted in projects that improved the company's profits rate, in relation to the national sales to industrial exporters of their consume products to the rest of the world.

Vilma is also applying this year to the M.A. in Development Management at Bochum University, Germany for the intake 2018.

Ms. Bedoya speaks fluently English and her native Spanish language.