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Abstract

This paper is a summary of a thesis submitted to the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Development Studies. The paper reflects on the topic of the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in peacebuilding in Colombia, where for decades there has been politically motivated conflict.

Arising from research undertaken in Colombia, the paper identifies the roles that NGOs in Colombia are currently playing and the challenges they are facing. NGOs play a vital role in peacebuilding, and form part of civil society together with other actors such as churches, the business sector, trade unions, community-based organisations, grassroots organisations, media and political parties. Despite this, primary research suggested that there was insufficient cohesion and coordination among NGOs in order to allow them to actively participate in peace negotiations or dialogue with a united peace agenda. This research concludes that by building greater cohesion among civil society sectors NGOs can play a leading role in constructing a common peacebuilding agenda for Colombian civil society, helping to break social divisions, creating a culture for peace, and fostering inclusion.

1. Outline of the Topic

This paper focuses on the role of NGOs in Peacebuilding in Colombia. It argues that despite the vital role NGOs play in peacebuilding, they have not been able to participate meaningfully in peace processes or negotiations, nor have they been influential enough to articulate a common peace agenda jointly with other sectors of civil society. Finally, it suggests that the process needed for effective action and significant engagement in peacebuilding should focus on building greater cohesion among civil society sectors towards having a common peace agenda, whereby NGOs can play a dynamic role influencing other sectors and helping to break divisions in society. By doing this, civil society will be in a much stronger position to participate meaningfully in future peace processes, negotiations or dialogue.

1.1 The Context

Colombia is a South American country "rich in natural assets and human capital [which] enjoys a generally favourable economic outlook" (Amis, Hodges and Jeffery 2006, p.5). However, it is considered one of the most violent countries in the world (ABColombia 2005, Sheet 1a). For over forty years Colombia has been living in armed conflict with the presence of guerrilla, paramilitary groups and armed forces spread all over the country in 27 of the 32 departments (Fernández et al. 2007).

According to ABColombia (2005, fact sheet 2),
>   the Colombian conflict has been characterised by extreme levels of social and political violence and massive human rights violations. All sides of the conflict have been instrumentalised, and manipulated and targeted the civilian population as a tactic to expand their military and economic control.

As a result, millions of Colombians have been displaced; thousands have been killed or have suffered serious human rights violations, including many women who have been subjects of gender-based violence. Patterns of violence, exclusion, inequality and systematic human rights abuses have been associated with the root causes of the conflict together with the authoritarian and elitist power structures that prevail in the country.

Despite the fact that there have been peace negotiations and dialogue between the government and armed groups in Colombia for twenty-five years (Garcia 2004), these processes have not been successful in achieving peace.

Profound social and economic inequalities explain the Colombian conflict that goes back for generations in the history of the Colombian people (ABColombia 2005; Fernández et al. 2006). The contrast between rich and poor, the unmet social needs, the culture of violence (ABColombia 2005, Sheet 1a; Hylton 2006, p. 8) and the expansion of the drugs trade are key features of some of the factors that contribute to the conflict (ABColombia 2005, Sheet 1a). Related issues are the structure of land tenure, the historical patterns of land concentration and the lack of rural reform, as in other countries in Latin America (González 2004, p. 10).

Colombia has vibrant and dynamic national and international NGOs, and they are considered to be a part of civil society (Fernández et al 2006). Studies show how they have carried out a significant amount of work with grassroots and social movements on what has being called "building peace from below" (McDonald 1997, p.28; García 2004; Rettberg 2006). This work was aimed at promoting the realisation amongst government and other sections of Colombian society that lasting peace is dependent on more than the signing of peace accords or negotiations between the government and the armed groups. Literature suggests that a successful and viable model for building peace needs to be constructed using peaceful means and with the participation of other actors at national and international level (García 2004), including businesspeople, media, the churches, the armed groups themselves, and those who have been historically excluded from decision-making processes such as women, the Afro-Colombian communities and indigenous peoples (Rettberg 2006).

1.2 Understanding the Concept of Peacebuilding

A critical point highlighted in relation to 'peacebuilding' is the level of confusion about the concept. On the one hand, Haugerudbraaten (1998, p.2) emphasizes the lack of clarity of the term peacebuilding when it was first introduced by the UN in its Agenda for Peace in 1992 (Paris, in Haugerudbraaten 1998, p.2). Lewer (1999, p.12) acknowledges the "problematic" nature of the concept because it encompasses "a myriad of activities".

Kilmurray (2006, p.3) defines peacebuilding as the opening of opportunities and spaces, which support all members of society to:
- discuss and address the causes of conflict
- contribute to influence and benefit from social, political, economic and cultural life.
- develop a sense of self-worth and common belonging based on shared values of justice, equity and interdependence.

- develop a positive and creative respect for diversity through mutual trust, tolerance and acceptance.

Referring to peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, peacemaking, according to Boutros Ghali is the "action to bring parties to agreement, essentially through peaceful means" (in Attack 2004, p.18). Peacekeeping has been conventionally associated with UN interventions in armed conflicts. It involves the impartial imposition of the armed forces of uninvolved countries between warring or conflicting groups in order to preserve or protect whatever peace agreements or political settlements these groups have been able to achieve (Attack 2004, p.19). The concept of peacebuilding is multi-dimensional. It is a complex concept and process-based. It involves a variety of actors and has a political nature. It includes indigenous and international actors and emphasises the need to address the root causes of the conflict and the type of interventions needed.

The definitions outlined above bring to the fore the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict rather than just the symptoms or more immediate manifestations of it. They also give an emphasis to the power component of peacebuilding and to indigenous capacity. The power component refers to the need to build the capacity of indigenous actors and to involve in-country social actors so that peacebuilding processes are sustainable.

1.3 Peacebuilding Frameworks and Approaches

Lederach (2005) introduces various frameworks, which attempt to address conflict and provide guidelines for peacebuilding. Firstly, he suggests that to move forward towards significant solutions, there is a need for designing a strategy. Therefore, he proposes a framework that takes into consideration the root causes of a conflict. By addressing these, and implementing preventive measures, he argues that it is possible to attain transformation. His framework combines the relationship between the issues that motivated the conflict and the systemic and sub-systemic aspects of it. Finally, it integrates an analysis of the time element involved in peacebuilding starting from immediate events, moving towards preparatory stages and the design of social change to a final desired future generation (Lederach 2005, p. 138 and 139)

Secondly, Lederach proposes a pyramid that shows "three distinct levels to describe leadership and approaches to peacebuilding" (2005, p.78). The top of the pyramid represents the sector, which exercises leadership in society, and also it is the one where there are fewer people. The base

of the pyramid denotes the largest number of people who are usually those most affected by conflict. In the middle of the pyramid, there is a sector that does not have a specific name. This category of people moves from the base to the top with certain autonomy. It is also able to create the dynamics that could support or create connections with the other levels (ibid.). Looking at the pyramid in a horizontal manner, Lederach acknowledges the "relationships among people and groups that cut across the identity divisions that may exist in a given location, be those ethnic, religious, racial or linguistic" (ibid. p.79). He believes that those sectors located in the middle of the pyramid can or already have access to the top and lower levels of it. He believes that an influencing and/or facilitating role of those sectors in the middle is important in a peacebuilding strategy. Finally with this approach, he suggests that participation of all sectors is essential to move towards building lasting peace.

Lederach's framework provides useful tools to understand violent conflict and more importantly to design a peacebuilding strategy. It highlights the need for addressing the root causes of conflict and the inclusion of all actors in society to participate in building lasting peace.

2. Research Undertaken

This research I undertook in Colombia in 2007 was based on the perceptions of representatives of fourteen NGOs located in six geographical areas of Colombia: Bogotá, Barrancabermeja, Cartagena, Medellín, Caquetá and Bucaramanga. All of these organisations participate in the Colombia Programme developed by Trócaire, the Irish Catholic Development Agency[1]. Representatives of five of the most relevant peacebuilding networks at national level were among the participants.

In order to identify organisations and research participants, purposive (or non probability) sampling (Arber in Gilbert 1993, p.71) was used, taking into account that it is the most appropriate for non-positivistic approaches and qualitative research. All of the interviewees were working in the NGO sector; however, the sample chosen was a small one and therefore did not constitute a representative sample of the NGO sector in Colombia. Nevertheless an effort was made to select organisations that carry out relevant work on the topic nationwide.

There is a high level of reflection and involvement of NGOs in development and peace initiatives in Colombia. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to use methodologies that follow the flow of participation and reflection that the interviewees use as part of their work, which would help to enhance what they are already doing. These methodologies were emancipatory, participatory action research and case studies. Findings were gathered through semi-structured interviews and a Participatory Action Research (PAR) workshop. PAR was chosen as a methodology because it "is participatory and collaborative" (Martin et al. 2006, p.179). It involves "understanding, planning, acting and reflecting, each stage informed by theory" and "it is vital for there to be a critical awareness of the discourses informing the process" (ibid).

1   While undertaking the research, I was working as a Colombia Programme Officer for Trócaire in Ireland. A research assistant was hired to support me in data collection.

3. Summary of Findings and Analysis

3.1 Perceptions on the Understanding of Peacebuilding

In the research I conducted there was agreement among the NGO participants that peacebuilding is a complex concept. NGO respondents said that peacebuilding is not only about just ending the violence but also addressing the root causes of the conflict (Lederach 2005, Goodhand 2006). As one interviewee affirmed, it is about the *"elimination of structural causes of the conflict".*

In Colombia, the NGO representatives participating in this research believed that peace needs to be constructed using peaceful means instead of using heavily militarised strategies mainly associated with US foreign policies and with the current government of President Uribe Velez. This confirms Fernández et al's view (2006) on the need for a negotiated solution to the conflict.

For research participants, peacebuilding was associated with the end of violence and war, including violence against women, and the need for a change in the way of resolving conflicts without using violence. It was also connected to the concept of sustainable development where economic, social, political and cultural transformations are needed in order to be able to fulfil basic needs and achieve a dignified life. Some linked it to the exercise of the right to participation in a democratic society where the rule of law is respected, whereas others saw it as an autonomous concept that includes truth, justice, reparation and inclusion of the most oppressed sectors of society.

3.2. The Role of NGOs in Peacebuilding in Colombia

3.2.1 Liaising and Networking

In my research, liaising and networking were considered very important roles that NGOs play. One respondent affirmed that *"liaising and networking were useful to create more alternatives, to achieve agreements, to have more strength".* Other responses highlighted the importance of building up common agendas on human rights and peace including social, economic and environmental aspects, and working towards a minimum level of consensus on what conflict is, in order to be able to design strategies to address and solve it.

3.2.2 Lobbying and Advocacy

In the research, lobbying and advocacy were widely recognised as a key area of work for NGOs in Colombia, as a way to put pressure on the Colombian government to solve the conflict in a peaceful manner. The inclusion of the human rights dimension in peacebuilding work, at

national and international levels, was seen as an important component in the exercise of citizenship rights and participation.

According to interviewees, actions in these two fields have been focused on: demanding the full respect of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) standards, and denouncing serious human rights abuses, including those against women, and those committed by the various armed actors. Actions include NGOs working for the defence of women's rights, whose role is seen as: *"essential to fight against war and build peace. We participate as critical actors and actively contribute to new initiatives"*. Their work consists of *"promoting and advocating for women's rights; for example gender based violence and its implications, violations of women's rights and not only sexual or domestic violence"*. Their view was that *"NGOs provide added value to the peacebuilding initiatives by introducing the women's agenda in them"*. However it was felt that *"the women's agenda has never been part of peace negotiations. It is a political duty to include them as part of a new gender and social contract"*.

Calling for a political negotiated solution and for lasting peace, instead of a military solution, have been key points of their agenda. By highlighting these issues, NGOs have alerted the attention of the international community and international decision-making bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), to the conflict in Colombia.

3.2.3 Capacity Building and Accompaniment

Capacity building is a further area where NGOs have demonstrated a vital role at local, regional and national levels. For example one respondent said that "*civil society has found support in the NGOs to resist the two wars in Colombia: the war of bullets and the war of hunger*". Capacity building covers a range of activities, including accompaniment and mediation/facilitation.

Accompaniment provided by NGOs plays an important role especially in supporting civil resistance initiatives and peace mobilisations. To illustrate this point, one interviewee highlighted that the role of NGOs is *"to accompany vulnerable groups to minimise the effects of the conflict so they can live with dignity"* and "*to work with people affected by the conflict through social, economic and development projects, emergency assistance and advocacy on local policies*". Finally one respondent considered that NGOs could also be *"a moral authority against armed groups, being mediators, facilitators, being in dialogue with all armed groups in a legal or illegal capacity, being intermediaries"*.

3.2.4 Mediation and Facilitation

Another important role in peacebuilding is the need to support dialogue and negotiation processes, encouraging international diplomacy for peace. One interviewee declared that efforts have been made *"to convince combatants and the government to negotiate humanitarian agreements as a starting point"*. Some NGOs have also played an active role in peace dialogues such as the Casa de Paz (or Peace House between ELN and the government) [2] and bringing forward proposals to resolve the conflict. It is worth mentioning the efforts of the Catholic Church through their Bishops' Conference in facilitating dialogue with armed groups on issues related to the liberation of hostages kidnapped or retained by armed groups.

3.2.5 Weaknesses in relation to the Role of NGOs in Peacebuilding

However, despite the display of initiatives, a question needs to be raised about the impact of these activities at a larger scale in the overall evolution of the conflict. According to Garcia (2004) and Rettberg (2006), despite the successes, the problems with NGO involvement in peacebuilding lie with the lack of cohesion or integration among the NGOs.

NGOs in Colombia have not been able to develop joint and lasting strategies and to reach consensus on political definitions and joint actions on human rights, conflict and peace. An example of this is the view of one of the NGOs interviewed when he said: *"Everybody says it: the government, the guerrilla, the paramilitaries... Diffusion is our weakness, we have scattered positions, and we do not coordinate /liaise enough in order to have an impact in favour of peace"*.

3.3 Participation of the Various Sectors of Civil Society in Peacebuilding

Opinions showed that the perception of NGOs interviewed is that their role in peacebuilding is not recognised nor accepted, as one person said:

> *Colombian civil society is racked with divisions, antagonisms, dissents, struggle for power, and struggles for representation. These divisions impede political action. In this context, NGOs are not the voice of those who have no voice. NGOs strive for the participation of civil society in the solution of the conflict.*

Another interviewee affirmed that NGOs should not assume representation for anybody.

2   At the time of carrying out this research, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the second most important guerrilla group, had entered into dialogue with the government in an attempt to achieve a peaceful resolution to the activities of this group particularly in the Northeast of the country. La Casa de Paz or Peace House was located in Medellin and was the actual place where negotiations were held. These negotiations did not succeed.

Taking Lederach's pyramid of peacebuilding approaches (2005, p.79) (as outlined in section 1.3) and the research findings, in Colombia there has not been much interaction among the various parts of the pyramid. The top section of the pyramid represents the elite: business people, cattle ranchers and political parties, among others. At the bottom, the grassroots organisations and other vulnerable sectors are located. On the right and left parts of the pyramid, the various divisions, sectors and ideologies or political positions are represented. In the middle, the dynamics of the conflict have promoted a large number of activities among the NGOs, their target groups and the platforms of which they are part. In some cases other sectors of civil society have participated such as churches, media, trade unions and social movements, etc.

However, there is still huge potential to develop further interaction with the other influential sectors of Colombian society (decision-making bodies, business sector, etc), which is characterised by being authoritarian and elitist, and which has suffered decades of violence and systematic human rights abuses. The need for interaction among the various sectors of civil society is a key ingredient to successful and fruitful peacebuilding initiatives.

This interaction has not been effective enough to influence higher levels of decision making bodies and leaders of armed groups. The fact that dialogue between civil society actors (including NGOs) and illegal armed groups is penalised by Colombian law may play an important part in this.

3.4 Peacebuilding: Challenges that face NGOs in Colombia

The research showed that the major challenge for NGOs in Colombia is to address the lack of cohesion and integration among civil society sectors, including NGOs, in order to participate actively in peacebuilding processes.

Four interviewees acknowledged this situation when they mentioned that the major challenge is to come together on a peace and non violent strategy or a common peace agenda that strives for a radical turn in the actual course of the war, violence and humanitarian crisis. One of them highlighted the importance of breaking the existing social fragmentation and promoting processes which are linked to local, regional and national experiences of civil resistance for peace which are based on memory, truth, justice and reparation.

A further challenge is to overcome the stigmatisation, threats and intimidation of the government towards NGOs. Interviewees felt that they have been discredited and negatively labelled by the government and armed actors. This refers to accusations made by the government when on several occasions it has associated NGOs with illegal armed groups. Two responses give account of this finding:

• "The government has stigmatised some NGOs and their actions";
• "We have been persecuted and received false accusations".

3.4.1 Peacebuilding: Challenges to Participation in Dialogue

This research suggests that peacebuilding has been very much understood as negotiations or dialogue between the government and the armed actors, not including civil society as a political actor. This has contributed to the lack of participation of NGOs in these processes. According to interviewees, one of the reasons that explain this situation is the lack of interest of the sectors involved in peace negotiations.

A second factor is the lack of influence of NGOs, as part of civil society, to participate in the wider arena of negotiations and dialogue. This was mentioned to be a result of the weakness of civil society to have a united voice, especially those sectors which have been historically excluded (ABColombia Group 2005), e.g., social movements have not been able to come together to agree on a common agenda. Nevertheless, NGOs do play a role in building or strengthening the capacity of the weakest sectors of society, and consequently those most exposed to the conflict. NGOs feel they have no influence or control of the negotiation process. Neither are they considered a party in them, and the perception is that formal negotiations are the only way to participate.

Regarding the role of representation, in some cases it was felt by research participants that NGOs do or should represent other sectors of civil society. In other cases, this role is not recognised or accepted. Two responses demonstrate this view:
"Negotiations don't depend on us (NGOs)";
"If there are no talks, our role is very limited, because the models of negotiation only include the government and the armed actor involved in that particular negotiation".

However, an explanation for the contradictions in the responses might be the diversity of NGOs, their various types and sizes and the places where they operate. For example, lay NGOs tend to operate with a low profile so that they would not be associated with any of the armed actors. In these cases it is difficult for them to play a representation role.

In other cases, church–related NGOs might be in a better position to advocate or play a representation role on behalf of their target groups in areas of ongoing conflict. This issue needs further research in order to address these complexities.

3. 5 Summary of Findings and Analysis

As outlined earlier there are different views on whether peacebuilding is a process (Lederach 1996 and Haugerudbraaten 1998), or more of a set of efforts (Goodhand 2006, p.12). There is evidence which shows that NGOs in Colombia have engaged in a large number of peace initiatives. However, these initiatives have not been relevant enough to influence the bigger agenda and to change the dynamics of the conflict. In line with Goodhand's analysis, it was found in this research that NGOs played a vital role in conflict settings at local level (2006, p.123), but that they were not playing a leading edge role in moving the peace agenda or consolidating peace at a national level in Colombia. They had not managed to agree on a common vision and a common peace agenda. Therefore, the peace initiatives carried out did not have the desired impact because they were seen as just a set of efforts. They were not part of a process with a designed strategy and a vision towards transformation of the context of violence and conflict, as suggested by the Lederach model (2005, p. 139).

On the other hand, the findings highlighted the wide range of roles currently played by Colombian NGOs. Advocacy and lobbying, liaising and networking come at the top of the list. NGOs have played a key role in assisting, protecting and accompanying victims of the conflict, defending human rights, creating awareness among the most excluded sectors and strengthening their capacity. In this way, grassroots organisations (e.g. women, indigenous peoples) are becoming more vocal and more empowered.

It was found that women's NGOs have been very proactive and very much at the forefront of the peacebuilding initiatives. They have highlighted the need for defending and protecting their rights, urging the armed actors to stop committing serious human rights violations against them. NGOs have played a very important role advocating and lobbying the international community on the Colombian context, emphasising the need for a negotiated peaceful solution of the conflict, and arguing for the full compliance of human rights and IHL standards as key components of peacebuilding.

Colombia is a culturally diverse society where many groups have systematically suffered the effects of extreme poverty and exclusion for decades; and where women have been seriously affected by the

armed conflict. In addition to this, the weakness of democracy and the persistence of an authoritarian culture have had an impact on the Colombian situation. In this context, it is important to highlight both the essential role of NGOs in supporting and strengthening the capacity of the most vulnerable sectors of Colombian society, and the need to create awareness on gender and cultural sensitivity. Both of these strategies could contribute to reversing the patterns of violence and creating a culture of peace by helping the most vulnerable sectors to be in a better position to make their voices heard and to play an active role in peacebuilding processes and negotiations.

4. Recommendations

Taking into consideration the current role of NGOs in peacebuilding in Colombia, and the challenges identified to achieve lasting peace, this research highlights the importance for Colombian civil society, including NGOs, of having a meaningful engagement (either as direct participants or facilitators) in formal peace processes, dialogue or negotiations with the participation of government representatives and armed groups.

As NGOs are part of civil society, it is imperative to work towards greater cohesion among the various sectors, playing an active role in constructing a common peacebuilding agenda for civil society.

The following are recommendations for NGOs, which arise from this research, and that could help to address the challenges highlighted:

4.1 Promote inclusion and full participation by:

- Involving all sectors of Colombian society in peacebuilding processes, bringing in those outside of the NGO sector, and especially the most marginalised groups. Focus on working towards a common peace agenda.
- Consolidating alliances and networking, considering the possibility of bringing together the human rights and the peacebuilding platforms.
- Identifying other possible allies from other civil society sectors. Be strategic, avoid activism.
- Working with a gender and cultural sensitivity approach to ensure the full and active participation of all sectors in society.
- Learning from other peace processes or peacebuilding experiences worldwide (e.g. Guatemala, Ireland, South Africa, and Angola among others).

4.2 Strengthen international lobbying and advocacy by:

- Identifying vital allies; getting the support of international agencies to back up the proposed joint peacebuilding agenda.
- Ensuring that political and financial support for emergency relief, development and peacebuilding work is provided on a long-term basis.
- Moving towards policy influencing in areas such as security, governance, development, human rights and reconciliation in order to address the root causes of the conflict.

4.3 Enhance the capacity of Grassroots Organisations engaged in peacebuilding.

To do this it is necessary to:
• Recreate alternative ways of resistance in order to guarantee sustainable livelihoods.
• Accompany people and support experiences of non-violent conflict resolution.
• Assist victims of human rights abuses and human rights defenders.

4.4 Create a culture of peace by:

• Promoting the use of mechanisms to solve conflict in a peaceful manner, such as mediation skills or other alternative methods.
• Building up the capacity of the most vulnerable sectors of society at local, regional and national level to negotiate among themselves and with other sectors of civil society.

5. Conclusion

As outlined in this paper, the research undertaken by me in Colombia in 2007 confirms that NGOs play a role in peacebuilding in Colombia. Their interventions have aimed at addressing the root causes of the conflict, and challenging the current power relations. Their efforts have focused on the need to construct a new power structure and a peace culture, breaking the patterns of violence, exclusion and authoritarian power relations. In this sense, national and international NGOs working in peacebuilding in Colombia have attempted to address the need for a democratic society with effective mechanisms for equal participation of citizens in public affairs. Likewise, they see the need for a justice system that guarantees respect for the constitution, the rule of law and consequently the full compliance of human rights, including women's rights and IHL. However there is still a lack of clarity about the representation role that NGOs play and whether they should be third actors in formal peace dialogue. Finally, the research stresses the need for NGOs to use their influence, expertise and dynamism to play a leading role in creating a culture of peace, working with other sectors of civil society towards a common peacebuilding agenda, helping to break divisions in society, and allowing full participation of civil society in peace processes, dialogue, and negotiations.

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