

POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE

On a Peak in Darien: Community Peace Initiatives in Urabá, Colombia

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Abstract

All over the world, rural and minority communities are vulnerable to human rights violations, often due to larger economic interests in their land. This policy and practice note argues that it is important to recognize community initiatives that denounce and resist such risks as acts of autonomous human rights defence. To illustrate this, it looks at two experiences of community organization and resistance in Urabá, Colombia: the organization CAVIDA and their Humanitarian Zones in Cacarica, and the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. The paper examines the context in which these experiences have emerged, how the communities were displaced off their land, and how they developed strategies for returning, despite ongoing conflict. It looks at the risks they face and the combination of complementary protection mechanisms they use in order to remain on their land. While being context specific, these experiences also have wider resonance for community human rights defence and protection strategies, especially against violations linked to economic interests and interests in maintaining impunity, and for pioneering the right to non-participation in armed conflict.

Keywords: Colombia; humanitarian zones; international accompaniment; peace communities; Urabá

1. Introduction

All over the world, rural and minority communities are vulnerable to human rights abuses, often because their land has value to larger economic interests, whether for exploitation or for control of territory, especially in conflict situations. When we think of human rights defenders (HRDs), we often think of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers, journalists, and other professionals. But the UN Declaration on human rights defenders¹ reminds us

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1 Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 53/144, 9 December 1998, A/RES/53/144.

that they are a broad and diverse group, and that it is the ‘human rights character’ of their work that defines them (OHCHR, 2004: 6).

This policy and practice note looks at two community initiatives in Urabá, Colombia involved in resistance to oppression due to such interests in their land, and illustrates by these examples why it is important to recognize peaceful community initiatives as autonomous acts of human rights defence. It explains the context in which these two initiatives developed, the risks they face and the different protection strategies they employ. It will become evident from looking at these initiatives that what allows them to continue their struggle is the combination of these strategies. In conclusion, the paper looks at differences and similarities between these initiatives, and argues that these communities, engaged in context-specific struggles for their own rights, are also modelling community human rights defence strategies that have global resonance, and protection mechanisms that could be applicable in other contexts.

2. Urabá: paramilitarism and peace initiatives

Urabá is one of the epicentres of the Colombian conflict. It was one of the areas where paramilitarism emerged, and where today it still continues its reign of terror, social control and land acquisition under the post-demobilization armed groups, which still largely maintain their paramilitary structures and links to the armed forces and authorities. But it is also a centre of community resistance to the conflict and of initiatives that try to break the cycle of violence with peaceful alternatives, such as Humanitarian Zones, peace communities, and sustainable living.

Urabá, known as ‘the best corner of the Americas’, is one of the most geographically strategic locations in the world. The Darién Gap, close to the border with Panama, is where North joins South. It is the only fragment of the Pan-American Highway that is not joined up: if it were not for southern Panama and Urabá, you could drive from Alaska to the southern tip of Chile. The Gulf of Urabá is where everything that goes in to South America can arrive (including arms shipments) and everything that goes out of South America can depart (including cocaine). Therefore there is a lot to be gained by controlling the two major ways of reaching the Gulf—the Road to the Sea (La Vía al Mar) from Medellín, and the Atrato, the long river which comes up through the Chocó Department like a vein.

Urabá is extremely fertile, and has been subject to settlement and expansion for agro-industrial exploitation since the 1940s, stimulated by multinational fruit companies and the Colombian government. Today, most of its land is given over to extensive cattle farming and the production of banana, plantain, oil palm, yucca and pineapple, but Colombia has big plans for Urabá. There are massive development projects, including the mining of coal, minerals, oil, and gold; single-crop farming; hydroelectric dams; tourism; a Free Trade Zone (already under construction); and other infrastructure projects,

including the Pan-American Highway (*Gobernación de Antioquia, 2011*). The area is also an important transport thoroughfare for illegal exports—both the Road to the Sea and the Atrato river are important drug trafficking corridors, and therefore subject to territorial conflict between the guerrilla and paramilitaries.

Most of its population is rural, including indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, populations recognized by the 1991 Colombian Constitution as part of the valuable ethnic multiplicity of Colombia. The Afro-descendant communities are descended from slaves brought by the Spanish to work in mines and farms from the end of the seventeenth century, and settled largely in rural areas, especially in the Chocó Department. In 1993, the Colombian Constitutional Court passed Law 70 granting the Afro-descendant population the right to collective title to territory. Similar in a legal sense to indigenous collectively-owned reserves, this is based on the idea that these communities have traditional methods of subsistence farming that preserve the environment, a special relationship to land, and a concept of collective living.

In the 1990s Urabá suffered a wave of violence under the expansion of paramilitary control, encouraged by Colombian military policy and in collaboration with the armed forces. The military – paramilitary objective was to take control of this fertile region in order to exploit it for business interests. Paramilitary leader Vicente Castaño admitted to actively recruiting palm oil businesses to move on to stolen land in Urabá (*Semana, 2005*). In 2005–6 the paramilitary groups were officially demobilized, but many organizations document the power that these groups continue to hold, and the violations they continue to commit (e.g. Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (*Development and Peace Studies Institute, Indepaz, 2011*; *Human Rights Watch, 2010*). Between 2006 and 2011, over 150 congressmen, 25 governors and 60 mayors were investigated for links to paramilitary groups (*Verdad Abierta, 2012*), indicating the level to which Colombian politics at all levels is permeated by corruption and violence.

1997 was the year of Operation Genesis, a conjoined military and paramilitary operation carried out by the 17th Brigade of the army, under General Rito Alejo del Río, and the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia). Allegedly it was an operation to combat the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), but in reality it seems to have aimed for the displacement of thousands of *campesinos*² from their land. Colombia has the highest number of internally displaced people in the world, estimated at

2 *Campesinos* may be workers on the farms of others, or may own their land as is the case in the two communities which are the subject of this paper. The term *campesino* can be translated as peasant or rural farmer, but the author dislikes these options, firstly because they sound potentially derogatory, and secondly because *campesino* is a whole cultural category in Colombia and other parts of Latin America that is not accurately conveyed by these translations.

between 4.9 and 5.5 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2013).

Operation Genesis involved indiscriminate bombings of the mountain and forest area close to the Panama border, and multiple acts of extreme cruelty as a measure of social control, causing fear and displacement. This followed an announcement by the government reviving the idea of the construction of an inter-oceanic canal to join the Pacific to the Caribbean Sea. In 1997, 695,864 hectares of state land were titled to Afro-descendant communities in the Department of Chocó, a larger amount than had been granted in the period since Law 70 was passed. When Operation Genesis took place, communities in the area were formally receiving or about to receive these collective titles. In this context, the military – paramilitary offensive may have been motivated by attempts to block community efforts to secure land tenure (Amnesty International, 2000: 21).

In August 2012 Rito Alejo del Río was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for indirect perpetration of the murder of Marino López, an Afro-descendant *campesino* from the Cacarica river basin, during the Operation (*El Tiempo*, 2012). The paramilitaries had cut off Marino López's head and played football with it in front of his community. He had nothing to do with the FARC. This is an emblematic case which echoes the experiences of hundreds of Afro-descendant *campesinos* from Cacarica, and indicates the systematic nature of the forced displacement carried out by the paramilitaries in coordination with the army. A case in connection with Operation Genesis is currently before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, with a judgment expected in the latter part of 2013.

Many displaced people from Cacarica in 1997 went to the port town of Turbo, on the Gulf of Urabá, and hundreds of families set up refugee camps where they stayed in horrific conditions for four years. There were other cases of displacement across the whole region, mostly of poor *campesino* populations.

The displaced populations developed their own organizational processes. The idea began to spread that communities could return to their land and live by working it, in the midst of the continuing conflict, without being forced by any of the parties to become involved in the conflict. This is not easy—returning is not a single act, but a permanent struggle to remain in places where the conflict still continues, and where there are vested economic interests against the civilian population, due to the mining and agriculture possibilities.

Over the late 1990s and early 2000s, different forms of peaceful resistance emerged in order to resist being involved in the conflict. These processes also claim justice, and denounce violations and corruption, aiming to transform the conflict and strengthen the peasant communities. The other side of the coin of the suffering they have lived through is the strength that they have found in the collective (their only chance of survival and resistance is as a community), and they have discovered that working together makes them stronger

than before, as in Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's resonant image of the vase of history: 'Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole' (Walcott, 1974).

The ideas born in Urabá, of neutral communities living in conflict zones but refusing to bow to the logic of war, have spread all over Colombia. Different forms have emerged: peace communities, humanitarian zones, *campesino* reserve zones, and biodiversity zones. These initiatives also have the effect of joining the communities together, with disparate peoples discovering that their struggles have similarities, and they can be stronger by speaking with one voice.

3. The rest of the Cacarica story

Many of the families from Cacarica, holed up in the refugee camps for four years, organized themselves under the name of CAVIDA (Comunidad de Auto-determinación, Vida y Dignidad, Community of Self-determination, Life and Dignity). Their goal was to find a way to return to their land. However, returning was risky—the Cacarica river basin is forest and swamp, with FARC and paramilitary presence, and combat between the FARC and the army was frequent. This was the same 17th Brigade responsible for labelling them as guerrilla sympathizers and, in collaboration with paramilitaries, persecuting them brutally in 1997.

To return to their land but protect themselves from the surrounding conflict, they decided to form Humanitarian Zones, the first in Colombia, in 2001. A Humanitarian Zone is a creative use of international humanitarian law—it is based on the principle of distinction between combatants and civilians, a key theoretical tenet of international humanitarian law, which aims to protect civilians in conflict zones from becoming casualties of war. The idea is to demarcate a space designated solely for the civilian population—similar to the Red Cross sign on a hospital. CAVIDA created two Humanitarian Zones in the Cacarica river basin. The idea was to use these demarcated settlements as refuge spaces for when fighting occurred, and then go back and live in their surrounding farms. But this has not yet been possible, as there are too many threats against them, and many inhabitants have not yet been back to their individual farms, but live permanently in settlements within the Humanitarian Zones, which have become an essential protection mechanism.

The Humanitarian Zones are surrounded by wire, and have large signs proclaiming their existence, insisting that no armed actors enter. Such a concept depends largely on perceived legitimacy, which is something that CAVIDA, as an organization, has developed over time. An important mechanism that lends legitimacy is the Inter-American human rights system. CAVIDA was granted precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission on

Human Rights (IACHR) in 1997.³ This is written on the same signs, acting as a reminder to the armed actors that there is a regional body that follows what happens to this community. It is not a perfect system—sometimes armed actors do try to enter—but CAVIDA holds firm principles insisting on their right to not be involved in the conflict. They tell the armed actors to leave using a rights-based discourse, citing the international humanitarian law that is the basis of their Humanitarian Zones and explaining that the armed actors' presence makes them a target, and also citing the IACHR protection measures which require the Colombian state to protect this vulnerable population (see e.g. CIJP, 2012).

CAVIDA receives accompaniment from the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, CIJP), a Colombian NGO which accompanies communities living in areas of conflict.⁴ Part of CIJP's work with CAVIDA is legal work—the Operation Genesis case before the Inter-American Court is carried out by their lawyers, as was the case against Rito Alejo del Río in the Colombian Supreme Court. They also have a field team living permanently in Cacarica, which enables them to stay informed of everything that goes on.

One of CAVIDA's most important strategies is regular communiqués denouncing violations and threats. These are issued by CIJP to their wide national and international support network and to the Colombian government. CAVIDA is already at risk for returning to a land with business interests in it, and these communiqués increase their profile and may heighten their risk, and expose them to reprisals from those being denounced. However they also increase their visibility, and thereby the political cost of actions carried out against them. CIJP likewise runs risks in denouncing the violations, although their presence in the field also has some deterrent effect, as perpetrators know that anything happening to CIJP will be exposed. To increase this deterrence, the CIJP team in Cacarica receive protective international accompaniment from Peace Brigades International (PBI), which also works as an umbrella protective tool to CAVIDA.

PBI is an organization that for over 30 years has been providing protective international accompaniment to HRDs at risk, and has had a team in Urabá since 1997. PBI provides protection based on the physical presence of international teams of unarmed volunteers in the field, backed by a large international political support network. The fieldworkers' presence creates a deterrent effect on those threatening HRDs; they know the international community is watching, and that these communities have international backing. PBI accompaniment also has a legitimizing effect; essential in a country where

3 IACHR, 'Medidas Cautelares 1997' <http://www.cidh.oas.org/medidas/1997.sp.htm>.

4 Sadly, due to space constraints, it would be impossible to give a full overview of CIJP's work; the author limits the details to their work with the communities presented in this paper. For more information on their work see <http://justiciaypazcolombia.com>.

stigmatization of HRDs has been rife. If anything happens, PBI activates its support network, calling on civil and military authorities at regional and national levels, and the diplomatic corps both in Colombia and abroad, and orchestrates a concentrated emergency response. PBI is also a reference point for other NGOs who inform the international community on human rights issues but do not maintain a field presence.⁵

One of the risks faced by CAVIDA is paramilitaries along the river. They put up illegal checkpoints (often close to military units), threaten CAVIDA members with death if they continue denouncing the paramilitary actions, and impose blockades on food, fuel, and other essential goods (see e.g. CIJP, 2013a). The threats increased while the Operation Genesis case advanced in the Inter-American Court, and in one instance paramilitaries offered large sums of money for fake witnesses to go and testify against CAVIDA (CIJP, 2013b). The interests in maintaining impunity for this case, which clearly shows the relationship between the paramilitaries and the army, are huge. PBI accompanies CAVIDA and CIJP members during their movements on the river, for example when witnesses travelled to the Inter-American Court in Costa Rica to give their testimony in this case. PBI maintains a periodic presence in the Humanitarian Zones in order to demonstrate international concern for the CIJP workers and the members of CAVIDA, and in their meetings with civil and military authorities they talk about CAVIDA's security situation and request that the state addresses their protection needs. Thus, even while there are no PBI personnel in the community, potential aggressors know that CIJP and CAVIDA are supported by PBI, its support network, and an extended network of NGOs at an international level, and that therefore any actions taking against them will have political consequences.

The Humanitarian Zones, the physical and juridical accompaniment by CIJP, IACHR precautionary measures, the communiqués, PBI's presence, the support networks of CIJP, PBI, and other NGOs that follow CAVIDA's situation, and CAVIDA's own firmness in maintaining their principles, are strategies that together allow the community to stay on their land and continue to model a way of returning, resisting in their territory, and combating impunity.

The idea of Humanitarian Zones in particular has been an inspiration to many communities, including those of the communities displaced in the same wave of violence in 1996–8 from the river basins of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó in Urabá, who also returned to their land with the support of CIJP by forming Humanitarian Zones, being granted precautionary measures under the Inter-American system, and having juridical and physical accompaniment from CIJP, and PBI presence, as well as a large support network of other NGOs.⁶

5 For more on international accompaniment as a protection mechanism, see Mahoney and Eguren (1997). See also PBI International and PBI Colombia websites: <http://www.peacebrigades.org> and <http://www.pbi-colombia.org>.

6 Due to space constraints I cannot address Curvaradó here. See ABColombia (2012) for case study.

4. The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó⁷

Throughout the 1990s, the *campesinos* of San José de Apartadó also suffered multiple violations which led to them becoming displaced. They had suffered for years in the midst of the conflict, being pressured by all three armed actors—the FARC, the paramilitaries, and the Colombian army—as San José de Apartadó is an important strategic location in the struggle for control of territory. It is a corridor for drug trafficking, so the armed actors fight to control that route, which goes over the Abibe mountain range to the Gulf of Urabá. On one side is the city of Apartadó, an important centre for money laundering, and on the other is the Nudo de Paramillo national park, stronghold of the FARC. Another factor in the struggle for control of territory is the fact that this region is very resource-rich and there are many multinational economic interests in the land—oil, coal, minerals, water, and agro-industrial interests, including banana, plantain, and extensive cattle farming.

In 1997, the Peace Community was founded, a neutral community living in the midst of a conflict. The Community holds a firm ethical stance to not participate directly or indirectly in the conflict that surrounds them: not to give information to any of the three armed groups in their territory, and not to allow armed actors inside their living areas. Implementing this principle has allowed them to return to many of their settlements, but has also made them a target, and continues to attract threats against them, because of their determination to remain on land which belongs to them, despite the multiple economic interests present there. The community has denounced alleged meetings between local authorities, interested mining parties, and paramilitaries, plotting to displace the community off the land and exploit it (San José Peace Community, 2012). Their determination to challenge corruption and combat impunity also brings threats—as do their regular public communiqués denouncing violations against their members and other civilians living in the area.

The Peace Community is in ‘rupture’ with the government because a large percentage of the violations against them have been carried out at the hands of the state. This ‘rupture’ is part of a profound, grassroots, all-or-nothing ethical stance, for the Peace Community is not just about civilian protection in the midst of a war zone. It has become the expression of an alternative life project, a refusal to participate in the capitalist system which contributes to the violence in Colombia. This ‘rupture’ means that they refuse to have any relationship with the state until problems of impunity and protection are addressed.

The risk they face has been recognized by the Inter-American Court, which has granted the Community interim measures on several occasions.⁸ These legal mechanisms are useful in legitimizing a Community that has been

7 See <http://www.cdpsanjose.org>.

8 For the most recent resolution, 30 August 2010, see http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/apartado_se_09.doc.

heavily stigmatized, including by ex-President Álvaro Uribe (see Giraldo, 2012). The Community also receives international accompaniment from PBI, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR),⁹ and Operazione Colomba.¹⁰ The presence of internationals, all of whom have political backing due to the meetings their organizations carry out, deters aggressors. The Community also has a large support network internationally and among Colombian NGOs who lobby on their behalf, and there are pending legal cases at national and international levels against violations that have been committed against them.

They export fair trade organic cocoa to Europe. On one hand, this sends a political message about the Peace Community to foreign consumers, and creates a more conscious, critically-minded market. On the other hand, it supports their own organization and other farmers in the region—they offer a higher price for cocoa than the local intermediaries who sell to big companies. This is a highly political act—a community of displaced farmers able to buy cocoa at a higher price than the local (and global) system of exploitation of small-scale producers for the benefit of the capitalist market. It also means sustainability of their project, which is a form of protection.

5. Conclusion: the importance of speaking out

Urabá is the ancient Darién, a name which caught the imagination of the poet John Keats. In ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ (Keats, 1816) he describes literary exploration in terms of the Spanish explorations into South America—which of course resulted in conquest and takeover. Communities in Urabá today have a choice: either risk keeping active and continuing to campaign for justice, or running the perhaps greater risk of staying silent, and allowing impunity and oppression to rule. These two community processes were born out of parallel waves of violence that forced them off their land, in large part due to economic and military interests. Against all odds, they have developed modes of peaceful resistance, and illustrate different ways of creating space for peace, meaning not simply the absence of war, but ‘the creation of a positive foundation for social, political, and economic growth, based on respect for fundamental human rights’ (International Human Rights Law Institute, 2007: 11).

There are similarities in terms of their protection strategies, and neither relies on any one mechanism for their security, but rather on a number of complementary mechanisms. Both employ the basic idea of visibility to increase the political cost of violations. Both denounce threats and violations in public communiqués sent to the Colombian government and made public on websites for their national and international support networks, thus systematically documenting their situation.

9 See <http://forusa.org>.

10 See http://www.operazionecolomba.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=704.

For CAVIDA, CIJP accompaniment has enabled them to bring high-level court cases to challenge impunity, and has assisted in the development of Humanitarian Zones as a strategy for returning in the midst of armed conflict, as well as maintaining a permanent field presence to assist the communities in their organizational processes and to record abuses. This ‘national’ accompaniment is complemented by international accompaniment by PBI. The San José Peace Community uses international accompaniment by PBI, FOR and Operazione Colomba.

Both communities are emblematic, in Colombia and internationally, as models for how to return to land still in conflict, and for how communities can demand their right to non-involvement in the conflict, and their right to claim justice. The Peace Community arguably makes an even stronger case for being seen as a model for community human rights defence, by their alternative way of living, in direct contradiction to a system they see as corrupt. They discovered that the way to return in the midst of conflict was by exercising their right to non-participation in the conflict. By analysing the structural socio-economic causes of the conflict, they found that this was inseparable from the capitalist system, and therefore strive to not participate in that either.

Both are involved in showing the systematic nature of violations against them, mostly due to economic interests and interests in maintaining impunity. These are national, even global, battles, which these communities fight at a local level. The different protection strategies they employ allow them to keep alive a struggle for possibility and life.

It is of utmost importance, not just to communities of the region but to all those across Colombia and the world who look to these pioneers for inspiration and precedents, that those who care about human rights here speak out; and do not remain, as in the last line of Keats’ poem, ‘Silent, on a peak in Darien’ (Keats, 1816).

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