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■ AQ FEATURE

Constructing Peace: How the Private Sector Can Help

BY [Alejandro Eder Garcés](#)

What the last 10 years of disarmament have taught policymakers.

Colombia finds itself at a watershed in the country's history. With the possible end to over half a century of violence, a new peaceful future beckons. But Colombia's much-desired peace will not just fall from the sky. It will have to be built by all Colombians through an arduous, perhaps decades-long process.

We have come a long way. Colombia has already developed some of the mechanisms needed for credible peace-building. That includes processes to deal with victims of violence, child combatants, violations of women's rights, land restitution, objective accounting of responsibility, and even the reintegration of ex-combatants from various illegal armed groups. This experience, however, is only the beginning of constructing a broad, national and sustainable peace for all.

The agency that I direct, the *Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración* (Colombian Agency for Reintegration—ACR), under the auspices of the president's office, is currently leading an 11-year policy to reintegrate more than 57,000 people who have voluntarily left the country's illegal organizations to enter society; 30,000 of them are still going through the process of reintegration. We rehabilitate ex-members of paramilitary groups and demobilized guerrillas, primarily from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Army—ELN).

Through our Reintegration Program, demobilized persons are not only offered education, work training and psychosocial counseling; they also receive assistance to develop professional careers or businesses and become legal citizens. We work through a multi-dimensional approach that is focused on each individual. Furthermore, peaceful social, economic and political integration requires building partnerships with stakeholders such as local businesses and activists to develop the civic and entrepreneurial skills that will revive communities hardest hit by violence.

Time Is on Our Side

The Colombian government's coordinated reintegration program began in 2003 with the goal of easing the transition back to civilian life of two populations of former combatants: those who had collectively demobilized as a result of the 2003–2006 peace agreements between the government and the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia—AUC); and those who individually demobilized by abandoning illegal armed groups such as the FARC and the ELN.

The lessons learned from these efforts are particularly relevant to the larger challenge ahead, should the current peace negotiations succeed.



A flicker of hope: Supporters of Juan Manuel Santos form the Spanish word for "peace" using candles, in Bogotá before his recent re-election. Photo: DIANA SANCHEZ/AFP/GETTY

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Be Patient. Reintegration is a lengthy process. The wounds of conflict do not heal quickly, and an individual who has been engaged in a life of violence—and often only knows that life—cannot readjust easily to civilian society. There are no shortcuts on this journey. Our experience has demonstrated that it takes, on average, six and a half years to successfully reintegrate former combatants into civilian life.

Co-Responsibility among All Stakeholders. Without the support of public, private and international partners, reintegration cannot be successful. For example, a broad range of state institutions needs to be involved and coordinated, including those working in the areas of education, health care, reconciliation, and justice, among others. In the case of Colombia, it is also important to work with non-traditional institutions, state and non-state organizations that have emerged as a result of Colombia's longstanding conflict, including those that work on reparation of victims of violence, land restitution, collective memory and truth, and others.

In the case of the private sector, our first approach is to create awareness about the reintegration program and how it works. Our main goal is to achieve acceptance of the demobilized community not as an act of pity because they are ex-combatants, but as a recognition of the efforts they make to earn a place in normal society.

Aim for Reconciliation. It is crucial to reconnect the ex-combatant to his or her community, including the victims of conflict. We have learned the importance of having a complex and careful process that reinforces the social, economic and cultural base of the communities that receive the demobilized population. It is unfortunate that the difference between victims and victimizers has been

politicized and many seek to work with one while ignoring the other. But modern day peacebuilders cannot forget that in protracted conflict situations victims and victimizers are both sides of a single coin. Sustainable reconciliation is impossible if you do not work with both.

Guarantee Security. National authorities and individual communities must create safe environments to facilitate the reintegration and peace-building processes at large. That involves developing specific mechanisms for protecting the demobilized population from retribution. Peaceful reintegration can only occur in an environment of personal security.

Judicial Stability Is a Must. A transparent, objective and stable judicial framework is critical for reintegrating former combatants, as well as supporting victims' (and relatives') desire for accountability, justice and, if necessary, reparations. This must be accompanied by a permanent renunciation of violence by combatants. This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges in post-conflict countries. For many, the perceived injustice of reintegration programs lies in the sense that it rewards ex-combatants with social and economic rehabilitation programs when they are the guilty parties. But critics must recognize that the main beneficiary of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program is society at large, not just the ex-combatants. Peace has a steep price, and DDR is a key part of it.

Build Strong Institutions. Credible governmental peace-building institutions that can design, implement and supervise reintegration are essential. Furthermore, since DDR requires various state agencies and ministries to work together, such institutions need to have the political clout to be able to coordinate their activities. Colombia found the solution in the ACR, which is a presidential agency attached to the executive branch of government and serves as our country's main facilitator—but it's not the only agency involved in the reintegration policy.

Foster Understanding. The stigma attached to ex-combatants is a primary challenge to the reintegration process. This adversely affects both their social and economic reintegration. Victims and community members don't trust them, and the private sector often wants nothing to do with them. The truth in many cases, however, is that former fighters are what we call complex victims. That is, victims who were unwittingly turned into victimizers. For example, 47 percent of demobilized former combatants who have passed through our reintegration programs were recruited as children. A significant number of them—possibly over 20 percent—were displaced and forcibly drafted by one group or another. Practically all of them want nothing to do with illegal armed groups or illegal activities once they enter our program. An internal poll from September 2013 found that 91 percent of persons currently going through the reintegration program said that they and their families were better off today than when they were members of an illegal group. That alone is reason enough for us to continue this tremendously hard work.

The Private Sector's Role in Constructing Peace

The business community has always had a fundamental role in post-conflict situations across the globe, and the Colombian case is no exception. Through a variety of individual and collective corporate initiatives, Colombian industry has contributed to the empowerment of vulnerable populations so that they can fully and actively exercise their rights and participate as citizens.

Specifically, in our reintegration program, the private sector has taken on the responsibility of working

with government offices and the community in the re-socialization of demobilized people through mechanisms such as creating employment, financing productive endeavors and job training. In providing a path to a productive and legal economic life, businesses reduce the likelihood that ex-combatants will return to their past lives of crime and violence. There are five formal mechanisms that are offered to external actors so that they can participate in the reintegration process. The first is through employment. This can be as simple as a company developing a non-discrimination policy that guarantees the right of the demobilized person to be hired if he or she represents the best candidate.

The second mechanism is through internships that can serve as a means of recruiting permanent employees, and also offer a great opportunity to the demobilized to acquire experience. The third mechanism is through corporate volunteer programs in which the private sector donates time, knowledge and resources to strengthen entrepreneurs' projects. The fourth mechanism is the inclusion of these projects and small businesses in the supply chains of larger industries and services. Lastly, the private sector can participate through the enforcement and strengthening of reconciliation initiatives.

Many private sector enterprises operate in regions historically affected by Colombia's internal armed conflict. As a result, they have developed on-the-ground capacity and a network to foment economic growth and development in the affected communities in ways that can help populations make the transition from a war-based economy, which benefits a narrow segment of the community, to a more socially inclusive peace-based economy.

In Colombia's case, businesses such as Coca-Cola FEMSA, Grupo Éxito and Sodexo, among others, have contributed to the process of reintegration by offering the demobilized population direct employment, capacity-building through volunteers who help train such groups, and by including them in their supply chain for inputs to final products. These businesses also form bonds by offering local internship opportunities, financing projects that create opportunities for exchange and reconciliation, and supporting social service efforts.

In this way, progressive, socially committed Colombian and international corporations are supporting the peace-building process by helping to wean one person at a time away from the armed conflict.

With the goal of linking private businesses to this important task, ACR has sponsored more than 100 productive endeavors, educated and brought 115 businesses to our reintegration program, trained more than 17,000 demobilized people for employment, and created settings for incorporating nearly 9,000 people into the formal economy. Although we have already seen some fruits of the ACR and the private sector's joint labor, we must strive to include all of Colombia's businesses.

The ACR has learned a great deal from its decade of work. But perhaps the most important lesson is the need to change our mentality. Instead of branding demobilized populations by what they used to be —“ex-guerrillas,” “ex-paramilitaries” —we need to recognize that we are all Colombians and that reconciliation with former enemies is the first step on the road to peace.

This is the responsibility of every Colombian—not just government authorities and NGOs. Reintegrating former combatants is no less important to the process of reconciliation than reparations to victims. Perhaps the toughest part of that process is granting a second chance to those who show a real desire and willingness to become part of our larger Colombian society again. Unless we can get

beyond our bitterness and fear, it will be impossible to build the peaceful country we all want.

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