Why did the Colombia Peace Process Fail?

Camilo Azcarate

Introduction

On February 20, 2002 Colombian President Andres Pastrana appeared on national television to share his decision to end the peace process with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest guerrilla group in the country. Already in a deep image crisis and with a disenchanted public demanding results from the 3-year-old process, Pastrana gave up on the possibilities of finding a negotiated solution with the ruthless guerrillas. This is the third time in 20 years that a peace process between a Colombian government and the FARC faltered among mutual recriminations. The other two unsuccessful attempts occurred between 1982 and '85 and between 1990 and '92.

A Pattern of Failure

A thorough analysis of these processes shows a clear pattern of failure. In 1998 I wrote a paper titled "Psycho-social Dynamics of the Armed Conflict in Colombia," later published in *OJPCR: The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution* (March, 1999). In this paper I identify several "design flaws" of the first two peace processes. Unfortunately, such flaws were not corrected in the last process, which may explain why it showed similar symptoms and eventually failed in a fashion similar to its predecessors. Could it be that Colombians have been making the same costly mistakes over and over, framing themselves for failure? I believe so. The most important characteristics of this pattern of failure are:

- *Deficient diagnosis***:** Despite ideological differences, both parties came to the table with a similar, but incomplete, diagnosis of the conflict. The fact that such a diagnosis stresses the role of the mediated objective factors and completely ignores the centrality of subjective dynamics means the parties are oblivious to the latest information, and thus to their harmful effects.
- *Inadequate procedure***:** In effect, the conflict resolution model used in these processes calls for direct, official negotiations between the parties, without the assistance of third parties at the negotiation table and lack of inclusion of constituencies.
- *Preventable manipulation***:** Once the process started, the parties used the continuation of the process itself as a pressure tactic with the objective of extracting concessions from the other.
- *Unnecessary vulnerability to events away from the table***:**
  - Swings of public opinion (pendulum effect), created by a mistaken but widespread perception of peacebuilding efforts.
  - Actions by parties' factions designed specifically to disrupt negotiations that should be incorporated into the design of the process.

In this paper I will analyze this pattern and propose design and implementation measures for any future peacebuilding effort in Colombia to avoid these flaws. I will start by reviewing the shared diagnosis of the conflict made by the parties and move into best practice alternatives that would address the other characteristics.

Deficient Diagnosis

During my 1998 research, I conducted interviews, completed a survey, and examined literature produced by the different actors of the conflict. I found that most of them attribute the causes of the war almost entirely to objective conditions, ignoring the subjective dynamics that were also measured during the research. These subjective dynamics create the more immediate conditions for the conflict.

Objective Factors

Among the objective causes mentioned by the parties are structural, political, social, and economic factors. The popularity of these explanations is understandable, since they are easy to observe and measure. It simply requires a visit to the slums of any city in Colombia to conclude that extreme conditions of economic inequality are a cruel reality. Other causes mentioned by respondents include weakness of the state, inefficiency of the justice system, elite politics, interventionism, and the lucrative businesses of kidnapping and drug dealing. In many cases, the respondents framed their historical explanations within the context of the prevalent conflict paradigm. Thus, the war is commonly explained as a product of the Cold War (1960s through 1980s), the Drug War (1980s and 1990s), and lately even as part of the War on Terrorism.

Undoubtedly, objective factors play a central role in the war in Colombia. In particular, the drug trade has become, in the last 15 years, an important source of income for both the guerrillas (FARC) and the Paramilitaries (AUC) fighting them. The resources produced by the drug trade, including control over growing, processing, and transporting areas, have become an important cause-effect of the war Another important cause-effect of the conflict is the weakness of the Colombian state. Nevertheless, these objective factors do not give us a complete picture of the problem. A more complete analysis includes the effects of other factors found in the research, which I call "subjective dynamics."

Subjective Dynamics

Subjective dynamics are closer to the parties themselves. In more than 40 years of war these dynamics have become a part of the way the parties think and feel about themselves, about the other, and about the best way to interact with each other. These subjective dynamics are created by the negative attitudes and perceptions in which the parties see each other as deficient in moral virtue, selfish, inhumane, and untrustworthy, and themselves as more moral and trustworthy than the other.[1] Such attitudes and perceptions

---

[1] Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim , 1994, *Social Conflict*

become "mirror images"[2] that guide the day-to-day interaction between the parties, inside and outside the negotiations. During my 1998 research I identified such factors in the participants' responses. Some classic examples of these subjective dynamics are the following statements by representatives of the parties:

> "The guerrillas are a bunch of bandits and narco-traffickers. You cannot trust them. They are not interested in peace." (Army Official)

> "The Oligarchs of Colombia only understand the reason of force. They are not really interested in peace, just the rendition of our people." (Guerrilla)

The immense power of these dynamics is the fact that, for the parties, these are absolute truths about the other and therefore they should be used as the main decisionmaking principle of both their long-term strategy and day-to-day interaction. These mirror images set the stage for an endless spiral of escalation in several ways.

First, they make it easier to blame the other for the failure of the process and/or the escalation of the conflict. Regardless of the objective circumstances, the parties will ultimately see themselves as the victims and the other as the aggressor. A typical aggressor-defender model is established. Some examples of this dynamic are:

> "We are not in favor of the war, we have not selected the war as a path to defend ourselves from injustice; the war has been imposed on us as the only possible way to defend our rights." (Guerrilla Chief Leader)

> "We only exist because the guerrilla is out there. They have been attacking us and we are just defending ourselves." (Paramilitary Chief Leader)

> "The guerrillas say they want to help the people. In fact they are the ones attacking towns and destroying infrastructure. They are the aggressors, we are only defending Colombia from them." (Army Official)

Second, they facilitate the creation of escalating self-fulfilling prophecies due to the fact that the parties will interpret the actions of the other in the worst light possible and behave accordingly, which in turn escalates the conflict. The latest example of self-fulfilling prophecy is the reaction of the guerrillas to the "Plan Colombia," a US- and EU-backed plan that includes arms and training for the government troops. Already involved in a security dilemma, the parties will try to outspend the other in this new escalation.

Third, the psychological distance created by these attitudes and perceptions interferes with meaningful communication at the negotiation table. In other words, the subjective dynamics make the parties read the other's actions and communication (even conciliatory or neutral moves) in the worst light possible.

---

[2] Bronferbrenner, 1961; Frank, 1982; White, 1984

Fourth, these dynamics foster zero-sum thinking and reduce creativity. The parties extremely negative attitudes and perceptions of the other means that the parties are unable to imagine scenarios of integration. Either/or mentality is prevalent. An example of this zero-sum thinking is the insistence of the government on the guerrillas disarmament and incorporation to civil life as the ultimate goal of the process.

Finally, the constant reinforcement of these attitudes and perceptions creates the image of the "diabolical enemy," a way of dehumanizing the other that ultimately leads to the justification of kidnappings, massacres, torture, and cold-blooded assassination. Name calling is normal in the parties interactions ("butchers," "blood-thirsty assassins," and the like).

Inadequate Procedure

The lack of recognition of these powerful subjective dynamics leads to a second important design flaw of peace processes in Colombia. This flaw is the use of direct, official negotiations unassisted by third parties and with the exclusion of key constituencies. In a protracted conflict such as the Colombian war, the restrictions imposed by the subjective dynamics are such that direct official negotiations between the parties are unproductive in the best of cases and sometimes counterproductive. Thus, the risk of causing more harm than good is evident and the parties under such conditions of mistrust and escalation should not attempt it.

The alternative to direct negotiations is a multi-track approach prior to any attempt to negotiate directly between the parties. Such an approach should include the use of interactive problem-solving workshops at several levels, the use of international facilitators, a strict set of previously agreed ground rules, and the inclusion of both internal and external constituencies.

Interactive Problem-Solving Workshops

This method involves bringing together in a confidential and academic environment nonofficial but influential representatives of the parties (level one) or simple representatives of different perspectives of the conflict (level two) under the guidance of a panel of social scientists. The goal of these workshops is not to resolve the conflict but to jointly analyze its causes and the basic needs underlying it. This special form of controlled interaction has the potential to promote "change in individuals – through face to face interaction in small groups – as a vehicle for change in larger social systems: in national policy, in the conflict system at large"[3]

Interactive Conflict Resolution Workshops have been developed and used by John Burton, Herbert Kelman, Edward Azar, Chris Mitchell, Harold Saunders, and Nadim Rouhana – among other scholars and institutions – in conflicts as varied as Ireland, Cyprus,

---

[3] Kelman, H. (2002) Unpublished paper

Somalia, Sri-Lanka, Lebanon, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[4] It has proven to be a useful tool of peacemaking that reduces the negative effects of the subjective factors of the conflict in a way that allows other third-party interventions to be more effective in addressing substantive elements of the conflict. These workshops can take place prior to, during, or even after any official process.

Use of International Facilitators

In the event of a first-track peace process, the model to use is that of international facilitators or mediators in a neutral setting outside Colombia. The potential involvement of international figures is appealing from a public relations standpoint, but it cannot be expected that these figures will commit the amount of time and effort required to act as mediators of the conflict. The use of low-profile, nonofficial, external mediators can be more fruitful and contribute effectively to the process. These individuals can be essential for the success of a peace process. They can complement both the internal parties and the international personalities. But their work must be tactful and confidential. They must be respected by both parties and have some form of influence over them.

Preventable Manipulation: Need for Appropriate Ground Rules

The use of interactive conflict resolution and international facilitators needs to be supported by a clear, previously agreed upon set of ground rules that fits the characteristics of the conflict and the parties involved. Ground rules are the rules of conduct for a conflict resolution process. They make explicit expectations over the disputant and third-party behaviors and roles, the character of the process, and the level of communication. Ground rules can prevent the manipulation and exploitation of the process by the parties, a repeated problem in peace processes mentioned before. For example, one indispensable ground rule should be that the existence of the process cannot be a token of negotiation. In other words 'freezing' or threatening to walk away from the process to get a concession from the other is unacceptable and should mean the termination of the process.

Another series of ground rules needs to address the effect of violent events away from the table. I noted before that all three peace processes in Colombia ended after a violent event by one of the parties (or one of its factions) away from the table. In 1987 then President Barco declared broken the truce agreed to by his predecessor after a FARC ambush killed 26 soldiers in Caqueta. In the second attempt, between 1991 and 1992, negotiations between the guerrillas and the Gaviria government broke on multiple occasions due to similar incidents: an attack on the President of the Senate and later the kidnapping and killing of an ex-cabinet member. In the latest attempt negotiations broke after the kidnapping of a Colombian Senator by the FARC proved too much for the patience of President Pastrana.

Therefore, one or several ground rules must address this problem. The reason for this provision is that allowing outside events to have a direct and immediate impact on the peace

---

[4] For additional information in Interactive Conflict Resolution see Fisher, R. *"Interactive Conflict Resolution"* (1997) Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y.

process means all the violent actors and factions within the parties have the power to stop the process by escalating the conflict.

Confidentiality should also be considered as an important ground rule for the proceedings, at least in the first stages.

Lack of Inclusion of Internal and External Constituencies

The active participation of internal and external constituencies within the facilitated process is important. These constituencies should be considered parties to the process and have an active role at the table. It is notable that most peace processes have started as initiatives of internal constituencies (institutions such as the church, civic movements, and the like) that later have been largely excluded from the table. Moreover, the only two peace initiatives in Colombia that showed some tangible results had an active participation by these internal constituencies. This was the case in the 1989 agreement with the M-19, EPL, and other groups. That was also true for the Viana agreements with the ELN in 1998.
    On the other hand, the immense value of creation and direct participation of an external constituency was clearly demonstrated in the later stages of the last process. It remains one of its partial achievements and should be replicated in any future proceeding.

Unnecessary Vulnerability: Addressing the "Pendulum Effect"

One final design consideration should address the public opinion "pendulum effect," which I described in the 1998 article.

> When the conflict increases in violence and for a moment the institutional structure totters, frantic calls for peace can be heard. But the widespread view of peace efforts as a meeting between the heads of the parties talking things over in an inspired moment of brotherhood is a fallacy and when this idyllic perception of the process is challenged by reality, the horrors of the war and persistent dynamics of the conflict, the general reaction is hopelessness. This eventually undermines the political support for the process, opening the door to the escalation of the conflict [5]

I would add the disruption of negotiations now as well.
    The latest peace process in Colombia, like others before it, was severely weakened by this effect. How can this problem be addressed? One way is to educate members of the community with influence on public opinion about the real nature of a peace process. The problem-solving workshops proposed above can achieve such an education goal. Public education campaigns should also be considered to educate the larger public about the real long-term nature of any peace process. Another alternative is to lower the profile of the process, even considering a confidentiality ground rule.
    In this paper, I have analyzed the recurring patterns of failure of the peace processes in Colombia, proposing that such patterns are created by an inadequate diagnosis of the

---

[5] Azcarate C. 1998, Ibid page 55

immediate causes of the conflict, which have been reflected in several design flaws and shortcomings. I also propose changes in the design and implementation of future peacebuilding efforts that avoid such problems

Bibliography

Azcarate, C. (1999). "Psychosocial Dynamics of the Armed Conflict in Colombia." On-line *Journal of Peace and Dispute Resolution.* March 1999 2.1 (http://www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/2_1columbia.htm)

Bercovitch, J. Ed. (1995). *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*. London: Lynne Reinnier Publishers.

Burton, J. (1995). "Conflict Prevention as a Political System." In Vazquez, Johnson, Jaffe, Stamato (Eds). *Beyond Confrontation*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Deutsch, M. (1973). *The Resolution of Conflict. Constructive and Destructive Processes.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Fisher, R. (1997). *Interactive Conflict Resolution*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Fisher R. (1997). *Peacemaking in International Conflicts*. In Zartmann, W.I. & L.J. Rasmussen (Eds.) Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace.

Kelman, H.C. (1982). "Creating the Conditions for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Vol. 26, pp. 39-75.

_____ (1992). "Informal Mediation by the Scholar/Practitioner." In Bercovitch, J & J. Rubin (Eds.). *Mediation in International Relations: Multiple Approaches to Conflict Management* (pp. 64-96). New York: St. Martin's Press.

_____ (1997). "Social Psychological Dimensions of InternationalConflict." In Zartman, W.I. & L.J. Rasmussen (Eds.) *Peacemaking in International Conflict*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

Mitchell, C & Banks, M. (1996). *Handbook of Conflict Resolution.* London: Pinter Press.

Rubin, J.Z., Pruitt, D.G. & Kim, S.H. (1994). *Social Conflict*. New York: MacGraw-Hill.

Opotow, S. (1995). "Drawing the Line: Social Categorization, Moral Exclusion and the Scope of Justice." In *Conflict, Cooperation and Justice* by Bunker, B. & Rubin, J. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Camilo Azcarate is an affiliate of Harvard's Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution (PICAR) working as CRI Director, Ombudsperson and professor at Florida Gulf Coast University. He is also a practitioner mediator, facilitator and trainer with over a decade of experience in Alternative Dispute Resolution. A native of Colombia, Mr. Azcarate holds a JD from Xaverian University and a Master in Dispute Resolution from the University

of Massachusetts. He has received several awards for his work in dispute resolution, including the "Award for Outstanding Achievement in dispute resolution" and the "Don Paulson Award for excellence in dispute resolution".