

---

# Transitional Subjects: The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia<sup>1</sup>

---

Kimberly Theidon\*

## Abstract

A key component of peace processes and postconflict reconstruction is the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants. DDR programs imply multiple transitions: from the combatants who lay down their weapons, to the governments that seek an end to armed conflict, to the communities that receive – or reject – these demobilized fighters. At each level, these transitions imply a complex and dynamic equation between the demands of peace and the clamor for justice. And yet, traditional approaches to DDR have focused almost exclusively on military and security objectives, which in turn has resulted in these programs being developed in relative isolation from the growing field of transitional justice and its concerns with historical clarification, justice, reparations and reconciliation. The author draws upon research in Colombia, a case of great interest because the government is attempting to implement mechanisms of reparations and reconciliation in a ‘pre-postconflict’ context, and to implement DDR on the terrain of transitional justice.

## Introduction

*Unlike disarmament and demobilization, reintegration cannot be imposed or centralized. It is a slow and complex process, involving various stakeholders. For this reason, it is usually the weakest link in the DDR chain.<sup>2</sup>*

A key component of peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction is the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants. DDR

\* Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, USA. E-mail: ktheidon@wjh.harvard.edu

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard, and the International Center for Transitional Justice for the support that has made her research in Colombia possible. For conversations on the themes addressed in this article, the author thanks Lisa J. Laplante, Eduardo Gonzalez, Gonzalo Sanchez, Carlos Iván Degregori, Mauricio Romero, Catalina Diaz, Eric Lair, Adam Isacson and Winifred Tate. The author thanks three anonymous reviewers for their astute suggestions. Finally, thanks go to Paola Andrea Betancourt for her research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Sami Faltas, *DDR without Camps: The Need for Decentralized Approaches: Topical Chapter for the Conversion Survey* (Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2005), 2, available at <http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/06/54/02/5d16fcf2.pdf>.

programs imply multiple transitions: from the combatants who lay down their weapons, to the governments that seek an end to armed conflict, to the communities that receive – or reject – these demobilized fighters. At each level, these transitions imply a complex and dynamic equation between the demands of peace and the clamor for justice. And yet, traditional approaches to DDR have focused almost exclusively on military and security objectives, which in turn has resulted in these programs being developed in relative isolation from the growing field of transitional justice and its concerns with historical clarification, justice, reparations and reconciliation. Similarly, evaluations of DDR programs have tended to be technocratic exercises concerned with tallying the number of weapons collected and combatants enrolled.<sup>3</sup> By reducing DDR to ‘dismantling the machinery of war,’ these programs have failed to adequately consider how to move beyond demobilizing combatants to facilitating social reconstruction and coexistence.<sup>4</sup>

The growing literature on transitional justice has tended to focus on the international and national levels; in truth however, transitional justice is not the monopoly of international tribunals nor of nation-states. Indeed, a politics of scale indicates a need for understanding ‘transitional justice from below’; that is, for exploring how neighborhoods and communities also mobilize the ritual and symbolic elements of transitional justice to deal with the deep cleavages left – or accentuated – by civil conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I draw upon my research on individual and collective demobilization efforts in Colombia to argue for merging DDR and transitional justice processes more closely. In squarely locating DDR within a transitional justice framework, policymakers and practitioners may help to strengthen that phase which has been the ‘weakest link in the DDR chain’ – the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. By incorporating local-level transitional justice initiatives into DDR programs – and by expanding our unit of analysis and intervention beyond the individual combatant to include the neighborhoods and communities to which these warriors return – I believe we can reintegrate demobilized fighters into civilian life in a way which respects both the needs of these former combatants as well as those of the broader society.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Knight and Alpaslan Ozerdem, ‘Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace,’ *Journal of Peace Research* (2004): 499.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, ‘The Paramilitaries in Medellín: Demobilization or Legalization?’ AI Index: AMR 23/019/2005, September 2005, 2.

<sup>5</sup> For the centrality of performative aspects of transitional justice, see John Borneman, *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997); Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002). For an analysis of transitional justice at the local level, see Kimberly Theidon, *Entre Prójimos: El Conflicto Armado Interno y la Política de la Reconciliación en el Perú* (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2004); and ‘Justice in Transition: The Micropolitics of Reconciliation in Postwar Peru,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50 (June 2006): 1-25.

## Colombia, A Country at War

Colombia's civil war is the lengthiest armed conflict in the western hemisphere. What began 42 years ago as a war waged by Marxist revolutionaries against an exclusive political system has devolved into a bloody struggle over resources: military, paramilitary, guerrillas, domestic elites and multinational actors vie for control of this resource-rich country. In the struggle, all groups have committed serious human rights violations, and Amnesty International estimates that 70,000 people have been killed in the past 20 years alone.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of the war casualties are unarmed civilians, and the escalating violence and fear for one's life have prompted massive internal and cross-border displacement.<sup>7</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that almost three million people have been internally displaced.<sup>8</sup> In addition, thousands more have been kidnapped, disappeared, tortured and forcibly recruited by illegally armed groups, among other grave violations of fundamental rights.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the war in Colombia has resulted in a humanitarian crisis provoking international concern, as various armed groups commit serious human rights violations and demonstrate their disregard for international humanitarian law.<sup>10</sup> Among the armed groups that are of particular interest to our discussion of demobilization processes are the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Auto-Defensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), commonly referred to as the paramilitaries.

The FARC is Colombia's oldest and largest guerrilla group. Established in 1966, it has its roots in the rural self-defense groups that were organized during *La Violencia*.<sup>11</sup> From its beginnings as a primarily rural-based guerrilla movement, the FARC grew in both size and influence. With time, the Marxist ideology that had been a key component of its foundation ceded to a desire for territorial control and wealth. In the struggle for control of this resource-rich country, the FARC has become – in the eyes of their many critics – one more violent armed actor.<sup>12</sup> The group has financed itself through kidnappings, extortion, drug trafficking

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, *supra* n 4 at 2.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda and Gonzálo Sanchez, ed., *Violence in Colombia, 1990-2001: Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, *Colombia Situation Map* (January 2006), <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ/opendoc.pdf?tbl=PUBL&id=44103c150>.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, *supra* n 4 at 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *La Violencia* refers to the period from 1948-1953 when violent confrontations between the Conservative and Liberal political parties resulted in 200,000 people dead and more than a billion dollars in property damage. For a detailed study of this period, see Germán Guzmán, Orlando Fals Borda and Eduardo Umaña, *La Violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Taurus, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> See the Washington Office on Latin America ([www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org)); the Center for International Policy ([www.ciponline.org](http://www.ciponline.org)) for their ongoing position papers and blogs on US policy in the region; Robin Kirk, *More Terrible than Death: Drugs and America's War in Colombia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003).

and drug trade protection. It is estimated that the FARC generates between \$600 million and \$1 billion annually from these illegal activities.<sup>13</sup>

The second largest guerrilla movement is the ELN, which began operations in 1964. Unlike the rural FARC, the ELN was mostly an outgrowth of university unrest. The ELN's ideology, which has traditionally been considered a mixture of Cuban revolutionary theory with extreme liberation theology, began by calling for a Christian and Communist solution to the problems of poverty, political exclusion and corruption. However, discourse and action again diverged, as the ELN lost its focus and began engaging in illegal activities to finance its actions. At present the ELN has an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 combatants<sup>14</sup> and since July 2004, has been in sporadic peace negotiations with the Colombian government.<sup>15</sup> The ELN claims to observe international humanitarian law, and has called for a 'humanization of the conflict.'<sup>16</sup> However, as with the FARC, the ELN appears on the US list of terrorist organizations. And there is another group that was placed on that same list in September 2001: the paramilitaries.

The terms 'paramilitary organization' and 'self-defense group' have been used to describe a variety of armed groups over the past several decades. As Tate notes:

paramilitary organizations have evolved considerably since the 1960s, when US military advisors first recommended the organization of 'indigenous irregulars' as a fundamental component of the Colombian counter-insurgency strategy, then aimed at defeating leftist guerrilla movements.<sup>17</sup>

Thus began the complicated relationship between the Colombian state, the US government and the alternately legal and illegal armed groups known collectively as the paramilitaries.<sup>18</sup> Although promoted as 'self-defense committees' founded to protect local communities against the guerrillas, they came to assume greater responsibility in state-organized 'search and destroy' operations seeking to quash the guerrillas.<sup>19</sup> The use of paramilitaries as auxiliary forces assumed a central place in the government's counterinsurgency plan. Additionally, paramilitary groups would become the regional elites' preferred option for protecting their interests and quashing social protests.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hans R. Blumenthal, 'Uniendo Esfuerzos por Colombia,' in *Papeles de Cuestiones Internacionales* 80 (Winter 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International, *supra* n 4 at 2.

<sup>15</sup> See Centre for International Policy, *supra* n 12.

<sup>16</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Third Report of the Human Rights Situation in Colombia* (1999), OEA/Ser.L/V/II.102.

<sup>17</sup> Winifred Tate, 'Paramilitaries in Colombia,' *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 163 No 8 (2001-2002): 164.

<sup>18</sup> The legal sponsorship for these groups was emergency Decree 3398 in 1965, subsequently transformed into Law 48 and approved by the Colombian Congress in 1968. This law allowed the government to 'mobilize the population in activities and tasks to restore public order and contain the insurgent threat.' In 1989, the paramilitaries were made illegal by President Barco who suspended Decree 3398 and outlawed the use of armed civilians in army operations. See Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y Autodefensas: 1982-2003* (Bogota: IEPRI 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International, *supra* n 4 at 2.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Jaramillo García-Peña, 'La relación del estado colombiano con el fenómeno paramilitar: por el esclarecimiento histórico,' *Análisis Político*, 52 (2005) [Author's translation].

The 1970s and 1980s were decades in which the drug trade grew in Colombia, first with marijuana and then with cocaine. This was the oddly fabled era of the Medellín and Cali cartels, personified by Pablo Escobar and his nouveau riche excesses.<sup>21</sup> These cartels provided a perverse but lucrative twist on the concept of family-owned businesses; within a few years, these family-based cartels controlled a billion dollar cocaine industry and ‘[...] invested millions of dollars to purchase more than 2.5 million acres of land in Colombia between 1983 and 1985, amounting to more than one-twelfth of Colombia’s productive farmland.’<sup>22</sup> This land grab has been referred to as a ‘counter-agrarian reform,’ as paramilitaries were called upon to sweep through desirable lands and forcibly displace hundreds of thousands of peasants.<sup>23</sup>

It was the fusion of paramilitary organizations and drug trafficking that gave rise to the phenomenon known as ‘*paramilitarismo*’ – the transformation of paramilitary groups into an economic, social and political force that has infiltrated Colombian society. Beyond the individual combatants that collectively organize into armed and lethal groups, *paramilitarismo* has become a corrosive and insidious institution. Additionally, there is the complicated and ambiguous relationship these groups have with the state. As García-Peña notes:

A principal characteristic of *paramilitarismo* is its relationship with the state. For some, *paramilitarismo* is a policy of state terrorism, while for others it is the response of desperate citizens confronted with guerrilla abuses due to an absent state: curiously, for both sides the state’s responsibility is central, either by action or omission.<sup>24</sup>

## Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Colombia’s Serial Search for Peace

During Colombia’s 42-year internal armed conflict, each successive president has attempted some sort of military victory or, in the face of that impossibility, peace negotiations. While it is beyond the scope of this article to present an exhaustive review of these previous efforts, there are certain key features that warrant our attention and allow us to understand both the great challenges and the possibilities that the current paramilitary demobilization process poses.

In the glossary of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding three terms are ubiquitous: disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.<sup>25</sup> As the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO) defines it, in the

<sup>21</sup> See Kirk, *supra* n 12; and Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (New York: Routledge, 2003) for excellent analyses of these issues.

<sup>22</sup> Tate, *supra* n 17 at 165.

<sup>23</sup> See Fernando Cubides, *El Poder Paramilitar*, [www.seguridadydemocracia.org/essay\\_prod\\_list.asp](http://www.seguridadydemocracia.org/essay_prod_list.asp) (2005). For a discussion of internal forced displacement, see Alfredo Molano, *The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> García-Peña, *supra* n 20 at 59 [Author’s translation].

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in a Peacekeeping Environment: Principles and Guidelines* (1999).

context of peace processes, disarmament consists of the collection, control and elimination of small arms, ammunition, explosives, and light and heavy weapons from the combatants and, depending upon the circumstances, the civilian population. Demobilization is the process in which armed organizations (which may consist of government or opposition forces, or simply armed factions) decrease in size or are dismantled as one component of a broad transformation from a state of war to a state of peace. Generally, demobilization involves the concentration, quartering, disarming, management and licensing of former combatants, who may receive some form of compensation or other assistance to motivate them to lay down their weapons and re-enter civilian life. Finally, reinsertion or reintegration consists of those measures directed toward ex-combatants that seek to strengthen the capacity of these individuals and their families to achieve social and economic reintegration in society. The reinsertion programs may include economic assistance or some other form of monetary compensation, as well as technical or professional training or instruction in other productive activities.

As I have suggested, in its traditional formulation – and implementation – DDR was squarely located within a military or security framework.<sup>26</sup> This focus failed to give sufficient consideration to the host communities, and to the need to consider local, cultural or gendered conceptions of what constitutes the rehabilitation and resocialization of ex-combatants. As Colletta, Kostner et al. have argued in their evaluation of DDR programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, ‘Long-term integration is ultimately the yardstick by which the success of the DDR programme is measured,’ and the widespread agreement that reintegration is the weakest phase of the DDR process has prompted demands for reform.<sup>27</sup> In the newly released United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (UNIDDRS), the UN underscores the deficiency of reintegration efforts and insists on:

the need for measures to be conducted in consultation and collaboration with all members of the community and stakeholders engaged in the community, and that [DDR programs] make use of locally appropriate development incentives.<sup>28</sup>

A brief overview of past DDR efforts in Colombia provides ample evidence of each of the above weaknesses in the DDR framework. Previous efforts to demobilize the guerrillas can best be summarized by the name of one of the laws that governed the demobilization process under the Betancur administration (1982–1986). Law 35 was the ‘Law of Unconditional Amnesty in Favor of Peace,’ reflecting a legal environment in which blanket amnesties were offered in exchange for ‘peace and stability.’ In addition to this trade-off, the government failed to consider what would happen to those guerrilla combatants who demobilized. For example, Law 35 formed the basis for the La Uribe Contract of 1984 in

<sup>26</sup> Faltas, *supra* n 2. See also, Knight & Ozerdem, *supra* n 3.

<sup>27</sup> Pat Colletta, Markus Kostner, et al., *The Transition from War to Peace in Sub-saharan Africa* (World Bank, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (2006), II.2.4.

which the FARC agreed to a ceasefire and announced the foundation of a political party, the *Unión Patriótica*.<sup>29</sup> However, following their demobilization and reconstitution as a legitimate political party, some 3,000 members of the *Unión Patriótica* were assassinated by the paramilitaries. The government proved to be incapable of guaranteeing the security of the ex-combatants; and this previous experience of demobilization – and subsequent slaughter – hovers over any negotiations with the guerrilla groups today. Additionally, the legal treatment of the ex-combatants was ‘solved’ with an approach described as *olvido y perdón en pro de la paz* (forgetting and pardon in favor of peace), a broad statement that left much room for interpretation – and for manipulation. In practice, the ex-combatants enjoyed complete amnesty.

By the presidential elections of 2002, an increasing number of Colombians demanded peace. The debacle of past peace processes readied many sectors of Colombian society for someone who would take a ‘heavy-handed’ approach to the violence. Alvaro Uribe promised to be that man. President Uribe was not inclined to attempt dialogue with the FARC, whom he considered a ‘terrorist threat.’ Rather, Uribe cautiously explored the possibility of negotiating with the paramilitaries, while simultaneously promising to rein in the guerrillas. There is a certain irony to these negotiations: in part the paramilitary demobilization is an attempt to ‘deparamilitarize’ the Colombian state. Clearly, earlier government initiatives to fill its absence with civilian defense committees went beyond the state’s control. Thus at some juncture the government was destined to find itself negotiating peace not only with the guerrillas but with the paramilitaries as well. As García Peña observes:

The most innovative ingredient in the current administration’s peace policy is the negotiations with the AUC, which break the stance maintained by every government since 1989 when President Barco declared the self-defense groups illegal. With this, the analytical frame changes radically: it was always thought that the paramilitary demobilization would be the result of peace with the insurgency – either simultaneously or subsequently – because the paramilitaries themselves claim to be a consequence of the guerrillas.<sup>30</sup>

Thus in August 2002, the government began negotiations with the paramilitaries. The Uribe government promoted the demobilization of individual combatants from all armed groups, and began negotiations for the collective demobilization of the AUC.<sup>31</sup> The government named Luis Carlos Restrepo as the High Commissioner for Peace, and gave him the task of negotiating peace. The signing of the *Santa Fe de Ralito I* agreement on 15 July 2003 marked the beginning of formal talks between the AUC-linked paramilitary groups and the government. The terms of the agreement included the demobilization of all combatants by the end

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent discussion of the *Unión Patriótica*, see Dudley, *supra* n 21.

<sup>30</sup> García-Peña, *supra* n 20 at 66.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed analysis of the legal framework for this process and the ensuing debates, see Lisa J. Laplante and Kimberly Theidon, ‘Transitional Justice in Times of Conflict: Colombia’s Ley de Justicia y Paz,’ *Michigan Journal of International Law* (Forthcoming).

of 2005, concentrating its leadership and troops in specified locations. The negotiations also obligated the AUC to suspend its lethal activities and maintain the unilateral ceasefire, as well as aid the government in its anti-drug-trafficking efforts.<sup>32</sup>

The *Sante Fe de Ralito II* agreement, signed on 13 May 2004, set up a 368 km<sup>2</sup> ‘concentration zone’ (*zona de ubicación*) in Tierralta, Córdoba.<sup>33</sup> The Resolution had the effect of suspending the arrest warrants for the members of the AUC who were within the perimeters of this zone during the period it was in effect. It was created to facilitate and consolidate the process between the government and the AUC, to improve verification of the ceasefire, and to establish a timetable for the demobilization process.

The accords also established the Mission in Support of the Peace Process of the Organization of American States (MAPP-OEA), which was placed in charge of the verification process in regards to the disarmament and demobilization of combatants. Since 2002, 30,151 AUC combatants have collectively demobilized, and almost 10,000 combatants from the FARC, ELN and certain paramilitary blocs have individually demobilized.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the above initiatives, on 22 July 2005, President Uribe signed Law 975, the Justice and Peace Law. The law embodies the competing tensions of peace and justice, and victim-survivor organizations succeeded in challenging certain key aspects of the law on the grounds that it failed to provide sufficient assurance of their right to truth, justice and reparations.<sup>35</sup> Under pressure from victim-survivor’s organizations and domestic and international human rights organizations, the Colombian government was forced to modify the law; although still imperfect when measured by absolute human rights standards, the Colombian Constitutional Court ruling of May 2006 did serve to strengthen the law in response to these challenges. If at one time states wielded their sovereign prerogative to issue amnesties in the name of political expediency, stability and peace – prerogatives that characterized past demobilization efforts in Colombia – changes in international norms increasingly place limits on the granting of leniency to perpetrators, forcing governments to address transitional justice issues of truth, justice and redress. Thus the Uribe administration has been forced to implement DDR on the terrain of transitional justice, which presents both opportunities and challenges. I turn next to my research with demobilized combatants to explore how DDR and transitional justice may work synergistically, ultimately affording policymakers and practitioners the means to strengthen ‘the weakest link.’

<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International, *supra* n 4 at 8.

<sup>33</sup> Implemented through Resolution 092 of 2004.

<sup>34</sup> See Ministry of the Interior, *Programa de Ayuda Humanitaria el Desmovilizado*, Colombia, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> See Laplante and Theidon, *supra* n 31, for a detailed discussion of the challenges to the law.



## Transitional Subjects

I began by insisting that transitions must occur at multiple levels, one of which is the former combatants themselves. Indeed, DDR programs are predicated upon assisting these individuals in transitioning from military to civilian life. I am committed to researching the impact of the paramilitary demobilization process 'on the ground' – that is, committed to conducting qualitative research that allows me to test the validity of these different debates with the goal of generating recommendations on how future conflict and post-conflict countries might benefit from the merging of DDR and transitional justice.

I draw upon research I have been conducting since January 2005 on the individual and collective demobilization programs being conducted in Colombia.<sup>36</sup> The first stage of the project included 112 in-depth interviews with demobilized combatants in order to determine where to focus my case studies. The analysis of these interviews led me to select three likely sites for capturing regional dynamics: the shelters and '*fincas*' (farms) in Bogotá and on the outskirts of the city; the Reference and Opportunity Centers (CRO) in Bogotá and Medellín and two barrios in Medellín; and the CRO in Turbo as well as three development projects in Turbo-Apartadó.<sup>37</sup>

I am working with demobilized and reinserted ex-combatants, with representatives of state entities and NGOs, with representatives of the military and the intelligence service, the Catholic and Evangelical churches, as well as with various sectors of the host communities. Clearly the unit of analysis and intervention must extend beyond the former combatants to include their social environment. Only then can we think of how to articulate national processes and policies with local and regional initiatives.

In methodological terms, I believe the utility of questionnaires is limited when studying sensitive topics and subjective processes in a climate of great distrust. I have opted to complement semi-structured interviews with a sustained presence – a minimum of two months in each site – and to converse and observe rather than limit myself to formal interviews. I have used an ethnographic approach in the hope of moving beyond the black and white of statistics to explore the grey zone that characterizes the complex realities of a fratricidal war.

Among the questions guiding my research are the following: How might the government and NGOs benefit from the fact that the majority of these demobilized combatants do not wish to return to the war? How might concerned third parties support the majority of these ex-combatants in their desire to change their lives and rejoin civilian life? How can we strengthen local and regional initiatives

<sup>36</sup> Although the individual and collective demobilization processes vary in detail, I have interviewed former combatants in both programs because I am interested in the reintegration phase and the experiences of both these demobilized combatants as well as their families and host communities.

<sup>37</sup> The Referral and Opportunities Centers (CRO) are administered by the Ministry of the Interior, and provide the demobilized with orientation, caseworkers, social support and other forms of assistance.

in order to elaborate alternatives to violence even in the midst of war? Finally, what role should the Colombian state – and international actors – play with regards to the demobilization process and the challenges of truth, justice, reparations and reconciliation?

I begin by stressing the need to disaggregate the monolithic figures of the ‘paramilitary’ or the ‘guerrilla’ in order to capture the great variations that exist in each group with regard to rank, motivations, life projects and experiences of the war. It is clear that we cannot make general recommendations based on the shelter or halfway house model used in Bogotá. Nor can one assume that the reality of an urban mafia in Medellín means the entire process is a mere facade. Nor do we want to fall into a romanticized reading of local processes as though the local is an intrinsically harmonious or democratic space. Rather, I insist upon researching regional distinctions that might assist in the development of programs and policies that take seriously the fact that in Colombia there is not one war but several.

### In Search of Respect<sup>38</sup>

In the first stage of the project, my research assistant and I spoke with 112 ex-combatants; 64 were from the guerrilla (ELN or FARC) and 48 from the AUC. Of the 112, 14 were women, all of whom were ex-guerrillas. The primary reasons given for joining the guerrilla were: via an acquaintance who convinced the person to join (21%); because they lived in a zone controlled by an armed group and entering the ranks was quasi ‘natural’ (36%); recruited by force or threat (9%); or economic motivations (9%).

With ex-combatants of the AUC, their principal reasons for joining were: via an acquaintance who convinced the person to join (29%); because they lived in a zone under paramilitary control and joining was ‘just what you did’ (17%); recruited by force or threat (14%); or economic motivations (27%).

In this text, I will focus on the men because they were not only the majority of the demobilized combatants that we interviewed but because they are also the majority of those engaged in armed combat in Colombia.<sup>39</sup> If we combine ‘lived in a zone controlled by an armed group’ with ‘entered via an acquaintance,’ we see that these young people grew up in contexts in which alternatives to war were invisible. I use the term ‘young people’ quite deliberately; 65 percent of these ex-combatants entered an armed group when they were still minors. For example, Ramón spent four years with the AUC in Montería. When we asked him why he had joined the group, he responded with a shrug:

Boredom. But more than anything because where I grew up – they had weapons, and everyone really respected them. They paid really well – they let you take vacations. It’s

<sup>38</sup> I find the title of Philippe Bourgois’ book most appropriate. Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (California: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> It is estimated that up to 30 percent of the FARC guerrillas are women, and I certainly do not want to obscure the important role women play in the Colombian conflict. However, the absolute majority of the demobilized combatants I have interviewed are men and thus I focus on them in this article.

not like the guerrillas where you're dying of hunger and they don't even let you visit your mom. Besides – where I grew up, the state doesn't exist. Montería is *puro paraco* (under paramilitary control).

It is also worth noting that these former combatants live with images of a 'militarized masculinity' – both the men and the women. This was especially true with the ex-paramilitaries, who explained that joining the AUC allowed them to 'feel like a big man in the streets of their barrios,' to 'go out with the prettiest young women,' and to 'dress well,' privileges they insist would not have been possible if they weren't carrying a gun.<sup>40</sup> In Medellín, J.M. summed up why he had joined the paramilitaries: 'In this country, the man who has a weapon is a man who has power.' One goal of the DDR process will be 'demilitarizing' the models of masculinity that these men and women have, particularly when these men have so little access to civilian symbols of masculine prestige, such as education, legal income, or decent housing. I emphasize both the men and the women because this militarized masculinity is part of a performance, and the audience comprises not only the other men with whom they struggle for a place within the armed group's hierarchy, but also the young women who seek out these '*gran hombres*' (big men) as desirable partners in an economy of war.

However, even if the image is 'grand,' the reality is not. Of the 112 men we interviewed, 90 percent were '*combatientes rasos*' (foot soldiers) or squadron leaders in charge of a maximum of 10–15 men. We are interviewing the 'refuse' of the war – the cannon fodder that is woefully expendable. I emphasize the need to differentiate according to rank and to recognize that while many of these ex-combatants do blur the line between victim and perpetrator, they are not within those groups that are the true beneficiaries of this war. Obviously, differences in rank translate into differences in terms of earnings and responsibilities; additionally, they influence intellectual authorship, the severity of their crimes and the sense of guilt they have – and that others attribute to them. As my interviews reveal, the civilian population has its own ideas regarding the severity of the crimes and the corresponding punishment; within the calculations of this population is the rank of the ex-combatant and how much '*conciencia*' he or she could exercise in the midst of combat.

### ***Volver al Monte* – Returning to the Hills**

A phrase that echoes throughout my conversations with ex-combatants is '*volver al monte*' (return to the hills), which is a symbolically rich term that invokes much more than a geographical location. It is striking how these former combatants describe life in 'the hills' (i.e., the battle front): gnawing hunger; days and weeks without sleep; falling sick without access to medical care or medications; living in fear and clandestinity; having to kill and watch others killing incessantly, often

<sup>40</sup> The militarization of Colombian society is striking. I recall an advertisement that appeared frequently on the television last year as one component of Uribe's 'democratic security' initiative: 'Colombia – A Country of 40 Million Soldiers,' referring to the promotion of a network of 'citizen informants' as a means of extending the state's authority across its territory.

taking the lives of people ‘I didn’t even know – innocent people.’ The harsh reality of life in the hills has played a key role in motivating demobilization; indeed, more than half of these former combatants indicated they had abandoned the war because they had grown ‘so tired’ or ‘so sick’ of fighting. Moreover, the absolute majority of the former guerrilla members expressed their disappointment – their sense of deception – regarding both the ELN and the FARC. As several ex-guerrillas explained, ‘To work in favor of the poor, to make Colombia like Cuba? Lies! The commanders are rich – they get money from the *narcos*. This war is just a business to them.’ The pervading sense of having been deceived is a theme I will return to later in this article.

Additionally, ‘returning to the hills’ signifies being far away from one’s family and from the loving relationships that serve to humanize these warriors. It is common for these men to have spent years without having seen their families, and I was frequently told this as they blinked back tears. Indeed, among the former combatants that we interviewed, more than a quarter of them acknowledged they had deserted for family-related reasons. Family proved to be essential, acting as the tie that connected life in the hills with their memories of civilian existence – a tie that enabled many of these former combatants to remember that they were still human beings, even out there in *el monte*.

I recall a conversation I had with an administrator in the CRO in Turbo. As he told me, ‘Of course some of the *muchachos* tell me ‘Hey if I’m not paid, I’ll go back to the hills!’ He laughed. ‘You know what I tell them? Go ahead – get back out there in the hills!’ The threat of returning to the hills is a double-edged menace: clearly, it is the last thing most of these former combatants ever want to do. This is even true for those former paramilitaries in Turbo-Apartadó who collectively demobilized following orders from their commanders. Even though the original decision was not necessarily one they would have made, the demobilization process means they are back with their families and no longer constantly on the move in *el monte*. This opens up a space for reflection on what they lose *and* gain when they leave soldiering behind.

My research findings indicate that the majority of these former combatants are looking for some way to leave the war behind, and yet live that desire in the midst of limited economic options and an ongoing armed conflict. These demobilized combatants are, in many cases, eager to ‘have a civilian life.’ Unfortunately, the country remains highly militarized, and the men are frequently recycled back into the war. The irony? Many of these former combatants are ‘transitional subjects’ – the social context is not.

## Peace, Justice and Reconciliation?

Among the most striking conversations I have had with these former combatants are those exploring how they conceptualize justice, what they think about the collective demobilization process, as well as what they believe in regard to their country’s potential for peace.

Of the 112 demobilized combatants we interviewed, 96 percent expressed profound doubts regarding the collective demobilization process. They discern between those who have ‘demobilized with *conciencia*’ and those who are just cycling through the program until another armed option presents itself. Indeed, with the exception of Turbo-Apartadó, most ex-combatants described the collective process as a ‘facade,’ nothing but a ‘farce.’ For instance, a 27-year-old former paramilitary member stated that, ‘The negotiations are changing nothing. They’re just converting what is illegal into something legal – that’s all.’ In a similar manner, most of the ex-guerrilla members insisted they could never trust the paramilitary demobilization process because, ‘The state itself is totally paramilitarized. Uribe? He’s the president of the *paracos*.’

Additionally, their doubts transcend the collective demobilization process, and include a profound pessimism in relation to the possibility of ever achieving peace in their country. Particularly in the shelters of Bogotá, where former combatants live far away from their places of origin and their families, peace seems an elusive dream. For example, L.N., an ex-paramilitary from Medellín, insisted, ‘Peace doesn’t ever come. Peace isn’t just turning in our weapons. There are so many civilians that want to enter the ranks. To each his own crazy reason. Mine was that I’d lost my job.’ Others added that, ‘peace can only be found within each person,’ or would ask rhetorically, ‘Where is peace? Peace? I can’t imagine it.’ With the exception of the responses I heard in Turbo-Apartadó, the most optimistic answer I received was, ‘Peace? Hopefully – maybe some day.’

Equally striking was how these men conceptualize justice. For the ex-combatants of the guerrilla, justice is often associated with the ‘war councils’ they participated in. For instance, J.M. is a 28-year-old demobilized combatant from the ELN who had spent 13 years on a variety of fronts, ending his years of combat in Uraba. He had waited for a salary that never materialized, and finally deserted when members of the ELN assassinated his younger brother. J. M. explained to us in detail how the ‘war councils’ operate:

Say you are in charge of handing out some *merca* (merchandise, frequently drugs), probably worth around 30,000 (pesos). But you’re hungry. Well, you’re not allowed to take away any of it. Say you’re delivering some crackers, bread, soda – you would be punished. You can’t take anything without having the commander’s permission. If you screw up, you’ll get a sentence, a reprimand – that is, if it’s your first time. That’s how the war council works. If it’s your second time, you’ll be killed. Because of a few crackers, you’ll be killed! You’ll be called in front of everybody, the war council, and you’ll be shot right there, so that all your comrades, so all your *compañeros* can see. Of course they remain silent – because otherwise they’d kill them too. Yeah, they would call us to watch. Say you were really hungry. You didn’t know. So you would eat the things. And you would be shot dead. Yeah, that’s about it. That’s how the war council works.

L.R.'s explanation of the way justice is understood and practiced on the battlefield did not differ much from J.M.'s. After eight years in the FARC, he explained to us what justice meant to him:

Justice for me is like – well, you get somewhere, you get the commanders, and you call for a war council. Like, if someone is going to be shot, if that's what you want, you'll get a war council so that you stop messing around. So, justice for me – justice is that everyone has to pay for what he does.

Justice as *lex talionis* – the proverbial eye for an eye – is what dominated all our conversations. I offer a quick review of the most common answers: 'Everyone should do justice as he sees fit.' 'Justice is ... well, if someone kills my father, I'll kill him.' 'Justice? The word makes no sense to me.' 'I don't think justice exists. What you gotta do is take revenge.' Even those who did mention that justice should be administered 'by God' still qualified their statements by adding that 'helping him out' was not necessarily a bad thing.

I underscore the complete absence of the state in these responses concerning peace and justice. The state as actor, an intermediary, a protagonist in the administration of justice simply does not appear. The idea of looking to the Colombian judicial system for justice does not even enter the picture. I believe one factor that contributes to the desire for revenge that so many of these former combatants expressed is precisely the lack of legal alternatives for dispute resolution. If one component of justice is staying the hand of vengeance, then the Colombian state must be found guilty of failing to adjudicate conflicts and punish the perpetrators.

Finally, the thorny question of reconciliation. Not one demobilized combatant with whom I have spoken is aware that their demobilization is allegedly one component of 'national reconciliation' efforts. In addition to providing the legal framework for the DDR process, the Justice and Peace Law established a National Commission on Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR). As the name implies, part of their mandate is elaborating a reparations program and working toward national reconciliation. However, laws and government rhetoric aside, the DDR program has been implemented in isolation from the CNRR. This isolation extends to the personnel of the various CROs, shelters and *fincas*; they were surprised when I asked them how they address the issue of reconciliation with these former combatants. In response, I learned they do not.

However, this is one crucial facet of that overlooked 'R' in DDR. How do these men imagine life will be when they live once again among those they have harmed? Among those who consider themselves victims and may not want to even see these men's faces? I want to briefly cite from two interviews I conducted in a *fincá* outside of Bogotá.

The first young man was Barney. He joined the AUC when still an adolescent because, 'I always loved guns. Ever since I was just a little kid, having a gun was a dream of mine.' After he spoke at length about his time in the AUC, I asked him if he thought that forgiveness would be possible:

No. Forgiveness is just a word, but in the heart the resentment remains.

So forgiving would be very difficult?

Bueno, it depends on what type of forgiveness. It might be that you can't forgive from the heart. If someone killed a family member, maybe I could forgive them with words, but in my heart the resentment would remain.

So, where does that leave us if we want to think about reconciliation – about living together again?

Well, here people look at us like strange insects. But – for example in Bogotá – lots of people don't know how to look at [identify] an armed man ... not even with the markings [*brazalete*, literally bracelet but referring to the tattoos] of an illegal group. But the people who know, it's different. Those who have been mistreated – they're afraid, they resent you.

This young man would subsequently tell me that when he went into the nearby town, a storeowner told him he had 'the face of a demobilized combatant,' and told him to leave. There was no consultation with the townspeople prior to establishing the *finca*, and people wanted nothing to do with the *desmovilizados* who 'appeared overnight' in their town.

I had another lengthy conversation with Wilton, a young man from Turbo. He had been in the AUC for '4 years and 8 months.' He missed his mother terribly, but did not dare return to Turbo because he had demobilized individually, and would be easily identified:

... everyone knows who I was ... I committed a serious error. A person, a person isn't going to forgive me. The only one who can is God. In the meantime, the only one who can console me is God. Apologies yes, but forgiveness is a very big word.

So if I commit an error, in front of the family or the person – can I say anything?

The family, no. The family will never forgive me. They may accept my words, but they will never forgive me.

Even if they don't forgive you, could you live with them again – live in their town?

No, I couldn't. If you live there, you just don't know what might happen. We might be able to live together, but not all mixed up. God gives his touch to each human being, and to be a human being you have to work, to live through many things in your life and realize what you are doing. If not, you're not a human being. I repent for everything because I did things that weren't acceptable.

As Wilton and I parted that day, I asked him again if there was anything that we could do so that he might return to Turbo. ‘No, I’ll just have to go somewhere else. I can’t show my face there.’

I was struck by my conversations with these men for many reasons. This was the first time in the DDR process that anyone had talked with them about what would happen when they left the shelter or *finca* – the first time ‘reintegration’ was discussed as something other than passing by the CRO regularly for monitoring and picking up one’s cheque. Both these former combatants as well as the surrounding communities would benefit from efforts to imagine forms of reconstructing social life, and concrete ways of implementing those ideas.

## Deception

*The guerrilla rotted, just like the paramilitaries. They both just rotted – from the inside out.*<sup>41</sup>

As I noted earlier, key factors motivating the combatant’s desire to participate in the DDR program include missing one’s home town, friends, and family, as well as the ‘battle fatigue’ so many of these men (and women) expressed. A third variable is ‘*engaño*’ – the feeling of having been tricked, duped or deceived. This was a leit-motif in our conversations with these demobilized combatants, be they from the ELN, the FARC or the AUC. Although the sources of this sentiment varied depending upon the armed group to which the former combatant had belonged, what these individuals had in common was the conviction that they had been duped, exploited and deceived by those in command.

J.R., a former ELN combatant from Bogotá, explained why he had joined the guerrillas – and why he had decided to leave:

What pisses me off is that I still fool myself. But this is all a lie, in my opinion. They say they do this because they want to help people. What a lie! Every time we met, I wondered, if we’re helping the people, then why do we hurt them? We destroy them – highways, policemen, soldiers, people – then, are we helping? No, we’re making war. I asked “why?” And they would answer that we were just helping. But why did we manage the ports? Why did we tear down towers? We’re making war! Then this guy, C. A., asked why we also killed farmers for no reason. He started to wonder why he killed other people. That is, for no reason. To take care of a road, maybe? To protect some money? They say, let’s kill a *sapo* (informant or spy). But, the *sapo* – what did he do? This isn’t a *sapo*. What’s a *sapo*? They make you a *sapo* if you say anything to the cops. That’s the way things work when you’re in the guerrilla. And the *paramilitaries* also come with arms. And if you say anything, for sure you’ll be in trouble. Oh will you be in trouble. You’ll be called an informer. And what will they do? Kill you. That’s how they end up killing civilians – civilians who are innocent.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Representative of the Catholic Church, Turbo, September 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Of course not all of these men expressed remorse. Indeed, a few of them animatedly described to us how they had killed, and how much they had enjoyed doing so.



Another FARC ex-combatant, O.G., also assured us that the FARC would never really negotiate: 'Negotiating is not worth their time in economic terms. With drug traffic, they earn a lot, so they can afford to go on and on like that. War is business – business and nothing else.' When we asked O.G. how much he had earned by participating in such a 'business,' he shook his head in disgust: 'Nothing, of course. The commanders keep everything. We don't ever get anything.'

The assertion that commanders – be they from the FARC, the ELN, or the AUC – were the ones 'getting rich' while the rest 'paid the bill' was a widespread complaint. For example, J.P. had spent five years in the ELN and told us,

War is really hard. Plus, the commanders keep all the money, all the money they make from the coca, and you're left without a single peso, even if you're the one who will get shot in the war.

The former AUC combatants also echoed the theme of *engaño* when they described their experiences. In addition to the commanders profiting at their underlings' expense, these ex-combatants also complained mightily about the commanders' mistreatment of individuals in their units. For example, N.R. spent two years in the AUC in Medellín before he felt the need to individually demobilize: 'I got tired, bored, of all the injustice that exists between commander and patrol member.' When there is no sustaining ideology – or at least discourse – uniting combatants, daily injustices generate considerable resentment.

However, I believe that *engaño* springs from another source: how the ex-combatants feel about themselves. For the majority of the men with whom we spoke, it is a challenge to reconcile themselves with what they have done. A wide gap exists between the ideal image they hold of themselves – or that they choose to present to their interlocutors – and the reality of who they have been and perhaps still are.

For example, 24-year-old R.M. spent five years in the FARC. Currently he lives in a *finca* on the outskirts of Bogotá, unable to return to his hometown. As he explained,

I came here because I wanted to change my life. I got tired of killing people – people who aren't even guilty of anything. And I wasn't guilty either. To kill for something you don't even know about, to fight for something when you have no idea what it even is.

He shook his head as though trying to shake the memories out of his brain. 'I don't want to remember. Sometimes, it makes me sick. I don't want to remember what is past. It's in the past.'

It is also striking that many of the ex-guerrilla members insisted they had 'killed decently,' stressing that their lethal methods differed substantially from those used by the paramilitaries. As I. M., a former member of the FARC explained,

The guerrilla killed decently. If they had to kill, they killed normally. They didn't torture, smash heads, cut off ears or fingers. But I saw that stuff happen in Caquetá. The *paracos* kill with chainsaws, cutting people up into little pieces in front of everyone.

I was frequently assured that the paramilitaries chopped their victims up into small pieces (*picar*) while they were still alive. In contrast former guerrilla members insisted they administered a swift, 'decent' death to their victims 'so they wouldn't suffer.'

However, this assertion had its AUC counterpart. Several former paramilitaries also assured us they were actually 'good people' because they had not killed all the people they 'should have killed'; rather, they had allowed some of their potential victims to escape. Others insisted they had been working with or for the government, fighting to eradicate the guerrillas. However, those versions were few, recited in the stilted fashion of someone trying to remember just exactly what they had been told during their training. I understand these fragmented narratives as part of ex-combatants' attempts to come to terms with what they have done, and of locating their actions within a framework that allows them to manage the contradictory emotions that infuse their stories.

I turn next to a brief discussion of my findings according to region, demonstrating the importance of understanding the complexity of local histories in order to dismantle the structures of violence.

## Bogotá

Bogotá is characteristic of the individual demobilizations that have involved members of various armed groups. In effect, 99 percent of the demobilized ex-combatants in Bogotá left the combat fields via individual demobilization. Ninety-five percent of the people we interviewed came from some other region of Colombia, arriving in the capital either due to the availability of shelters within the city or in the outlying areas, or because they dared not go home.

My research confirms what others have suggested.<sup>43</sup> Shelters are of limited utility because they continue to isolate former combatants, which leads to further stigmatization, and because the shelter model conflates legal and social processes. To assume that a change in legal status – from combatant to ex-combatant – will translate into the social sphere in the absence of any preliminary process of consultation with the host community is inherently flawed. Our interviews with people in the surrounding neighborhoods revealed the deep mutual fear that exists between the ex-combatants and the host community. The failure to involve the broader community leads to a tenacious cycle of suspicion and fear, both on the part of the 'reintegrated' ex-combatants as well as members of the communities who suddenly find themselves living with former killers. Indeed, one person assured us that everyone looks at these demobilized combatants as though they were 'a new race.' Additionally, ex-combatants worry enormously about their own security. One ex-paramilitary in Bogotá explained the situation to us: 'Above all, I fear the *'Plan Pistola'* (the Pistol Plan).' Holding his hand to his head in a trigger-finger position, he explained, 'We know that we're being tracked down by the

<sup>43</sup> Faltas, *supra* n 2 at 2.

armed groups. They send murderers. That's why I can't just *boletearme en el pueblo* (show my face around town) because they'll kill me.'

How might the DDR program address the fears these combatants both suffer *and* provoke? Many of our interviewees made constant reference to the fact they felt they were being stared at and followed. Additionally, many acknowledged how hard it would be for them to return to their places of origin because they were 'marked men,' certain to be gunned down. This mutual fear was eloquently expressed by one the administrators of the Bogotá DDR program:

Really, I think it's a fairly complex process. First of all, the beneficiaries of the program are running a huge risk if they leave the program early because nobody has any idea what they will do if they have to manage their own homes. In addition to this, there's the question of what they will do whenever the state's aid runs out – how will they make a living when it's over? And then there's the problem of what might happen if the community does not know how to receive them. There hasn't been any work with the community so that they become used to all the demobilized.

And thus the central question: how to live together? This question resonated among the former combatants as well as their social circles and the host communities. Those ex-combatants living in shelters are isolated from the social worlds they are allegedly poised to rejoin, and severed from their families. Programs that keep reinforcing and reproducing their marginality without developing ways in which they might start to become members of society not only do a disservice to these former combatants, but also to the communities that fear their return. Without implementing mechanisms for the return and reintegration of former 'pariahs' – mechanisms that would provide security for all concerned as well as insure forms of justice and reparation – the DDR process will continue to be hampered by the high level of impunity that has characterized the program to date.

## Medellín: Administering Calm

*In Medellín, everything that moves, anyone who dies – it's don Berna who decides.*<sup>44</sup>

The city of Medellín has received a considerable number of collectively demobilized paramilitary combatants, as well as a smaller number of those who individually demobilized. Their apparent reintegration and the apparent reduction in violence veil important dynamics in the city. Though every sign might seem to indicate that the demobilized ex-paramilitary members are, in effect, peacefully reintegrating into civilian life, my research indicates they are reconfiguring themselves as an urban mafia with a vested interest in 'administering calm' in Medellín.

A caveat: I am not suggesting the DDR program is a failure from a technical standpoint: combatants are enrolling, weapons are being surrendered and statis-

<sup>44</sup> Interview with ex-commander, AUC, December, 2005. Don Berna is the *nom de guerre* of the highest-ranking paramilitary leader in Medellín. He is currently in jail, and it is from his prison cell that he continues to exercise this power. Although I think this former commander overestimates the power of don Berna, his assessment reveals both the tremendous power these paramilitary leaders still wield as well as the challenges of dismantling the paramilitary structures themselves.

tics are being compiled. There is also a sincere effort on behalf of the mayor's office to implement the DDR program. Sergio Fajardo Valderrama, Mayor of Medellín, expressed the challenges of doing so:

We have more than 4,000 *reinsertados* (reinserted combatants) here in the city, and we have to do something. This is the first step – no more killing. We don't want just any sort of peace by just any path. Negotiating with paramilitary groups breaks the conceptual frameworks because almost everyone thought that it would be necessary to negotiate with the guerrilla first.<sup>45</sup>

However, there is no question that a powerful occult economy and power structure exists, and that this parallel structure controls the transportation and sale of illegal products (drugs or weapons), and continues to charge for 'vaccinations' assessed on those merchants dealing in legal merchandise. Although these demobilized combatants appear to obey public authorities, this obedience is strategic and I doubt that it will be sustainable over a longer period of time unless the Colombian government dedicates economic resources and provides security for all parties to the process. In the state's absence, an urban 'mafia' oversees the resolution of conflicts and provides 'security' in Medellín. Hence the perverse calm that falls over the city.

My research assistant and I were afforded a powerful example of this while watching a lively soccer match one afternoon. A woman on the sidelines struck up a conversation with us:

Years ago, you couldn't even walk a block without getting shot because you always had to ask for permission from those that looked over your neighborhood. Oh, it was dangerous to walk around at night, to get on buses – you were always worried about getting shot. But now it's all different – you can walk around from one place to the other, no problem. Everything has changed ... the *muchachos* (paramilitaries) have settled down. Plus, if you have a problem, then you just talk to them, and they solve the whole thing. They make sure nothing goes wrong, and they're more peaceful now. The demobilization was good because now we can walk around without getting killed. But we always go to them for help.

What does demobilization mean when people continue to run to the paramilitaries for services the Colombian state is unable or unwilling to provide? While the '*muchachos*' may have settled down, I believe they have done so under orders from their commanders who want to maintain the peaceful façade. The public authorities' efforts to implement the DDR program in Medellín must be acknowledged, but it is equally clear that *paramilitarismo* has yet to be dismantled.

In the words of F. N., an ex-commander of the Cacique Nutibara Bloc with whom we talked in December 2005:

Yes, they're rearming themselves, and new groups are forming all the time. The economic structures of the *autodefensas* have not been destroyed. Basically, what you see here is a sort of social control. People know who's boss, and that's how things can run

<sup>45</sup> Mayor Sergio Fajardo Valderrama, September 13, 2006.

smoothly. Because in Medellín there are still lots of drugs, and everything here is the same – even if under a different image.

A similar caution was raised by J. N., a business leader in Medellín who hires demobilized ex-combatants in various parts of the city. His comments confirm the economy of war that keeps the Colombian conflict raging. As he explained:

I think the process fails not simply because of the failure of the government's administration. In fact, I think it fails because the men who have left the battlefields are still used to having a generous amount of money to work with. Secondly, it fails because of the power they had when they were wearing a uniform, carrying a big gun, owning nice cars, being able to enter any small town and just choose from the prettiest girls. Well, how are they going to have that now? They can't. These are all things that nice, normal life makes impossible, so the process fails from the outset. Signing peace treaties cannot really change anything. If anything, the demobilized will succeed at becoming a different social class – sort of a new race. Because of course everyone looks at them differently.

J. N. then explained how he saw the current situation, offering insights into the reach of *paramilitarismo*:

The paramilitary presence is obvious, especially among the socioeconomic classes not necessarily at the very bottom. In effect, you can see the greatest degree of influence and support at the highest economic levels – in public and private companies and enterprises, among governmental organizations. What they have control of is another form of real power – legal power.

Thus the skepticism regarding the DDR process in Medellín not only characterizes the poor socioeconomic sectors of the city; it also characterizes those who populate the upper strata of society, and even many of the personnel who administer the reinsertion programs and witness on a day-to-day basis the contradictions that infuse the process. It is crucial to work for justice institutionally, and for institutional legitimacy. The quantitative decrease in homicides and the disappearance of arms from public spaces does not necessarily mean that *paramilitarismo* has ended. The process is a complex one, even more so in Medellín, both because of the strategic nature of the region as well as its past history of violence and drug trafficking. Even though the paramilitaries have allegedly demobilized men and surrendered weapons, their power continues to dominate the city.

## Turbo-Apartadó

*Whenever we talk with the victims, we ask them, 'what do you want?' And they answer, 'to live in peace, to work in peace – that this stops happening over and over again.'*<sup>46</sup>

My final case study is Turbo-Apartadó. In this northwestern region of Colombia, the war is not a problem belonging to 'others'; rather, the violence is a

<sup>46</sup> Representative of the Catholic Church, Apartadó, September 2005.

part of every family and community.<sup>47</sup> In Turbo, victims, victimizers, and beneficiaries all live side by side – with ‘beneficiaries’ defined to include the regional elites who have sponsored this war. Indeed, a representative of the Catholic Church in Apartadó assured me that, ‘The regional elites, those who always licked the paramilitaries’ boots and looked to them for protection – now they are wailing, asking “who’s going take care of us now?”’ When it comes to determining who should finance the reparations program, these beneficiaries have an enormous debt to repay to society.

I would like to describe briefly the demobilization-related development projects that are being implemented in the area as one component of the DDR program. These projects could be considered models because they not only aim at the collection of weapons but at the reincorporation of ex-combatants into society, and at the reconstruction of a sense of community in which the issues of justice, reparation and reconciliation are integral. As one participant of the program told me, ‘The good thing here is that we live and work together – demobilized, displaced and the community. All together like we did during the war.’

The Turbo program is fortunate to have a former AUC commander on board. Don Hernán is someone who has demonstrated his commitment to the process, and he commands the respect of the ex-combatants who participate in the program. When they began the development project, this former commander apologized to the community in a public assembly. As we drove through the large field in which he and his men demobilized, he shook his head: ‘A few years back, I rounded up people in this neighborhood and killed them. So I thought this was the place to apologize.’ He looked over from the steering wheel of his truck: ‘Everyone has to realize that it’s worth it to lay down their gun.’ The Turbo case thus invites us to consider how to use the command hierarchy even while dismantling it: each stage of the DDR program has its own temporality and corresponding strategies.

The Turbo CRO coordinates a variety of projects, and each of these is made up of approximately 50 percent demobilized combatants, 25 percent internally displaced individuals, and 25 percent persons from the surrounding communities. One goal is to offer a safe space for socialization, making sure to address the needs of both the local population as well as the demobilized combatants. Indeed addressing the needs of the local population is very important in order to avoid exacerbating latent resentments; clearly, it is not just the demobilized who should be considered beneficiaries of the DDR program, but also the host communities. As one of the project directors insisted, ‘The reinsertion process is a process that never ends.’

In order to minimize conflicts, project participants have created their own internal regulations, voted for a board of directors, and bestowed upon this board the power of imposing fines on anyone who engages in fights or insults other participants. In the words of the livestock project’s spokesman:

<sup>47</sup> See Kimberly Theidon, ‘Practicing Peace, Living with War: Going Upriver in Colombia,’ Centre for Latin American Studies, Stanford University, 2001. Available at <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/01103001.htm>

This sort of working and living together is important. Even if you're just drinking, you might end up remembering things, and then problems can come up. But this way we try to make sure people take responsibility for what they do and what they want to do for society. We're all human beings, and of course, human beings are difficult to handle.

While I do not seek to romanticize these sorts of projects, I firmly believe that national processes should learn from and build upon these local initiatives and the creativity of the population. By articulating the various levels of transitional processes, DDR programs could achieve greater success in working toward social reconstruction.

## Articulations

*The Colombian community has been very generous in permitting the reinsertion of individuals previously known as subversive, and it will continue aiding us with their generosity because with each young man that abandons a terrorist group and decides to reincorporate himself into society comes the reaffirmation that we are indeed building a path towards peace. It is indeed the elimination of a path of tragedy, sadness, and mourning, and the construction of a path of joy.*<sup>48</sup>

In my previous work with the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Ayacucho, I studied how people attempt to reconstruct social relationships and sociability after years of living as 'intimate enemies.'<sup>49</sup> As I learned, local initiatives and local processes play a key role in postconflict reconciliation. Reconciliation is forged and lived locally, among families, neighbors and communities.

A central tenet of transitional justice is that it includes important performative aspects; via the secular rituals embodied in transitional legal practices, collectives engage in 'ritual purification' and the reestablishment of group unity. From this perspective, law is not just a set of procedures, but also of secular rituals that make a break with the past and mark the beginning of a new moral community.

In Colombia, there have been a series of televised collective demobilization ceremonies. However, these mediatic spectacles will not be sufficient to satisfy a need for rituals and for justice. Nor will the number of demobilized combatants compiled in the aggregate statistics. I do not question the sincerity of these events per se, but rather note that without careful consideration of the social processes that must accompany them, these collective demobilizations run the risk of remaining mere elements of statecraft, lacking social resonance. They risk confirming what many of these former combatants fear: that it is all as 'façade' – the state in its theatrical register, orchestrating a transition that does not reach beyond the flat shiny surface of the television screen.

<sup>48</sup> President Uribe, speech delivered at the election of the Third Cabinet of Public Ministers, 16 July, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> See Kimberly Theidon, *Entre Prójimos: El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en el Perú* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2004).

Frequently, peace processes, democratic transitions, and processes of ‘national reconciliation’ are little more than the restructuring of elite pacts of governability and domination. In these superficial forms of reconciliation, the dialogue involves the same interlocutors, the same silences and the same exclusionary logics that existed previously. If one wishes to maximize the commitment these demobilized combatants expressed regarding their desire to change their lives and reintegrate themselves into ‘legal life,’ then the public rituals must resonate in those communities where victims, perpetrators and beneficiaries must construct a new way of coexisting. Importantly, this coexistence will require a redistribution of resources and power.

For this reason, I underscore the importance of developing concrete, local mechanisms to reincorporate these demobilized combatants into the communities and barrios in which they will live. These local processes must avoid relying exclusively on the ‘generosity’ of Colombian society – a generosity that may well be depleted by the corrosive effects of state policies that do not take into account the need to work with the victims, the victimizers and the beneficiaries – all categories that may blur in the context of a prolonged internal conflict.

## Conclusions

*Beyond efforts to provide economic support to ex-combatants and other war-affected groups evenhandedly, the challenges of sustainable social reintegration can be met by linking DDR programmes with transitional justice and reconciliation measures.*<sup>50</sup>

I would like to conclude with several recommendations. The debates regarding the Justice and Peace Law and the DDR process reveal that DDR and transitional justice can no longer be separated conceptually or practically; DDR now figures as part of the overall transitional justice scheme in Colombia. This focus moves beyond the military and security frameworks in which DDR programs have been traditionally conceived, allowing us to locate DDR squarely within the transitional justice debates regarding truth, memory, reparations and reconciliation. The implication, however, is that the government may not be able to do whatever it deems necessary to attain peace. In this sense, transitional justice norms change the legal and political climate in which peace negotiations occur; the issues of truth, justice and redress may no longer be ignored nor indefinitely postponed.<sup>51</sup> DDR programs will be increasingly forced to consider the ‘R’ that has traditionally been the weakest link in the chain. Best practice standards will require moving beyond those measures focused on how to give warring parties an incentive to ceasefire, demobilize and disarm: the best practice will increasingly include careful consideration of how to articulate truth, justice and reconciliation with these programs, thus moving the unit of intervention and analysis beyond the former

<sup>50</sup> Stockholm Initiative on DDR (March 2006), Article 55. Available at <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4890>.

<sup>51</sup> Miguel Ceballos and Gerard Martin, ‘Colombia: Between Terror and Reform, Law & Ethics,’ *Journal of International Affairs*, 87 (2001): 93.



combatants to include the rights and demands of victims-survivors and host communities.<sup>52</sup>

I also insist that the discourse on national reconciliation must not be the monopoly of religious or political leaders, and that there must be local mechanisms for working on the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. Moving DDR onto the terrain of transitional justice may work to the benefit of both these former combatants as well as the broader society by focusing more systematic attention on various dimensions of the 'R' – reintegration, reparations and reconciliation. In the recently released Stockholm Initiative on DDR, the authors advocate reformulating traditional DDR to include links to transitional justice and reconciliation measures.<sup>53</sup> Thus, Colombia may be the first country to implement those recommendations, and will undoubtedly provide ample evidence of both the benefits and the challenges of making these recommendations a reality.

Additionally, there is an urgent need for the Colombian state to increase security while respecting human rights. It is the state's responsibility to fill the void left by the demobilization of various illegal armed groups, and in this way to work toward a climate that minimizes the fears of both host communities as well as the former combatants. Given the state's traditional inability to provide security as a public good, it is worth considering a UN presence similar to the UN Mission that accompanied the peace process in Guatemala. Increasing security may well open up the social and political space required for reconstructing social relationships without the toxic effects of fear and impunity.

I have also encouraged members of the CNRR to consider using the media as an ally in their efforts to implement DDR and promote reconciliation. One step in demilitarizing masculinity would be replacing the army's hour-long recruiting films with other models of 'being a man.' The widespread militarization of Colombian society – and the glorification of armed men – is an obstacle to helping these former combatants transition from soldiering to living a 'civil life.'

I conclude reflecting once again upon my previous research in postwar Peru and the importance of local level processes of assessing guilt, administering justice and rehabilitating perpetrators.<sup>54</sup> That experience taught me something worth repeating here: if Colombia does not open a path for those who wish to leave combat behind, they will continue wandering in the *puna* or, in the Colombian case, they may well return to waging war in '*el monte*.'

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, at 93.

<sup>53</sup> Stockholm Initiative on DDR, supra n 50, Article 3.5.

<sup>54</sup> See Theidon, supra n 5.