



CONTEMPORARY P/CVE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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““ The testimonies of former combatants, whether adults or children, constitute valuable counter-narratives to prevent recruitment and radicalization. ””

- Ines Marchand, Myriam Denov and Daniel Ruiz Serna

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WALKING THE COLLECTIVE PATH TO PEACE: A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO RECONCILIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ARMED CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

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Introduction

This paper explores the realities and complexities related to reconciliation in the aftermath of armed violence conflict in Colombia, and in particular, the conditions under which counter narratives of peace can be developed through reconciliation gatherings. Since 2007, *Agape for Colombia*, a foundation run entirely by volunteers, has been working with Colombian victims and perpetrators of armed violence, alongside members of civil society, with the collective goal of paving the path towards collective reconciliation. In its direct community-based work and through a set of reconciliation gatherings and healing workshops, *Agape* has been able to follow and identify the multiple and complex stages that victims and former perpetrators go through as they walk the path towards reconciliation and peace. This community engagement work has highlighted the importance of identity and the ways in which –over time and through healing– victims gradually abandon their perception of themselves as “victims” and begin to see themselves as “survivors.” Moreover, in many cases, former victims and perpetrators have collectively become “Peace Promoters” who help other victims and perpetrators walk along the same path, while providing valuable lessons to members of civil society who have witnessed this process. The paper ultimately highlights the importance of community-building and the development of counter-narratives in conflict and post-conflict reconciliation processes.

1. Armed Conflict and the Search for Peace in Colombia

On November 24th 2016, the Colombian government and the leftist guerrilla group FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) signed a peace agreement to end more than 50 years of armed conflict. This is a significant achievement but it does not put an end to armed conflict in Colombia. Other illegal armed groups such as ELN (National Liberation Army) - a Marxist guerrilla group, the BACRIM (criminal gangs), and right-wing paramilitary groups, continue to be active and operate in several regions of the country. According to the National Centre for Historical Memory, the Colombian armed conflict is considered the longest and more enduring conflict in Latin America. It has produced more than 220,000 casualties (81% of them civilians), forcibly displaced an estimated 5.4 million, while 60,630 have been victims of forced disappearances. An estimated 4,000 women have been victims of sexual violence (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

In the aftermath of signing the peace accord with FARC, the Colombian government now faces the challenge of implementing the accord aiming to recognize and respect the rights of victims to truth, justice and reparation. Furthermore, in search of lasting peace, Colombian society must instigate significant changes to strengthen the social fabric through the re-establishment of relationships of trust and through reconciliation efforts, not only among victims and former combatants, but also among multiple sectors of Colombian society.

2. *Agape for Colombia: A Strategy of Reconciliation*

Agape for Colombia is a non-governmental organization run entirely by volunteers. Many of its members have been victims of the armed conflict and reside in either Colombia, or in Canada, having moved to Canada as refugees and/or immigrants. Others are members of civil society living in one of the two countries. As a non-government organization, *Agape* has been working with victims, former combatants, and members of civil society since 2007. At its inception, *Agape's* program was geared exclusively towards support for former child soldiers who were participants in the government sponsored reintegration program. As part of *Agape's* program, a group of nine former child soldiers from Colombia travelled to Canada with the support of the *Instituto de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF)*, the Colombian Youth Protection agency. During their time in Canada, this small group of former child soldiers had, for the first time, the opportunity to meet with Colombian individuals and families who had been direct victims of the illegal armed groups. During the multiple gath-

erings facilitated by *Agape*, where the realities and impact of the armed conflict was discussed in depth, the former child soldiers spontaneously became agents of reconciliation. They recognized the profoundly negative impact that the armed conflict had on these individuals and families, assumed their part of responsibility and searched for forgiveness. In turn, the victims learned of the painful reality of child soldiers, and attempted multiple forms of reconciliation with them.

Following the success of this initiative, *Agape* continued to facilitate spaces where gatherings and dialogue between victims and participants of the armed conflict, in the presence of members of civil society, could take place. However, the organization's initiative came to a halt in 2010, when the Canadian government denied visas to former child soldiers because of their former affiliation with armed groups. In response, *Agape* decided to replicate the Canadian initiative within Colombia, obtaining similar powerful results in terms of reconciliation. In Colombia, the reconciliation gatherings expanded to include not only former child soldiers, but also other victims of the armed conflict, such as police officers (who were kidnapped, and held in captivity within armed groups up to twelve years), victims of forced displacement, victims of disappearances, and victims of sexual violence. Members of civil society also participated in the gatherings and are a key aspect of *Agape's* program. Members of civil society bear witness to the transformation of former victims into peace promoters, a process through which victims (re)build a sense of personal power, agency and promote forgiveness as a cornerstone towards reconciliation. Many of these civil society participants came to be a part of *Agape's* activities through word of mouth, alongside their personal interest in reconciliation. Preliminary interviews with victims (which are conducted over the telephone due to the remote locations of most participants) are conducted in order to assess their position and status along the path of healing and to determine their readiness to participate in a program where they are to come face to face with former combatants and members of illegal armed groups, often for the first time. In many cases, individuals who were not yet ready to undertake an often demanding and taxing personal process, left through attrition.

Importantly, during the reconciliation gatherings, participants (former combatants, victims and civil society members) live together under one roof for several days, and later they participate in meetings planned by the participants themselves. These different encounters, both formal and informal, help to build trust, rapport and significant relationships amongst participants, and over time, they gradually consider themselves members of the *Agape* organization. Over the course of several years, these members have assumed the role

of facilitators with regards to the inclusion and integration of new members. In this way, *Agape* has a core team of facilitators (the founders of the organization), but also has the spontaneous participation of long-term members, many of them former victims, who have assigned themselves the tasks of welcoming newcomers and ensuring that they are accepted and carefully integrated into the larger group. Facilitators are encouraged (though not forced) to share their own reintegration and reconciliation experiences with new members, spend leisure time together and encourage a sense of belonging. In this way, *Agape* continues to expand its range of community-based activities and participants. Since 2011, *Agape* has organized a total of eight reconciliation gatherings alongside two workshops to deal with issues of the healing and recovery path of victims and perpetrators. These activities have taken place in different Colombian cities and towns including Armenia, Cali, Villavicencio, Tocancipá and Bogotá.

3. “*Supervivientes*”: The Impact of the Gatherings

The majority of the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia come from rural areas. In most cases, for safety reasons and the ongoing presence of armed groups, victims were forced to abandon their natal homes and were forcibly relocated to safer urban areas. As a consequence of forced displacement, these individuals and families have suffered family fragmentation, loss of their communities, traditional practices, rural way of life, and have faced a profound lack of employment opportunities, alongside stigmatization in their new urban contexts. Government support has been made available, but has been slow to arrive. In many cases, displaced populations have relied on the solidarity and support of others who have faced similar circumstances.

During reconciliation gatherings held in 2013, victims who had progressed in their healing process declared to the core group of facilitators, that as a result of the ongoing workshops and reconciliation process, they began to identify themselves no longer as “victims” of the conflict, but instead as members of civil society. The core group of facilitators recorded these findings and presented them back to the former victims in order to verify the content of what had they shared. Some members of *Agape* who were not victims of the conflict suggested the term “*sobrevivientes*” to connote their experience, literally meaning “survivors.” However, participants responded that this term was insufficient, as it suggested that, as a noun, the term insinuated that they were “barely making it.” Instead, they wanted to be recognized as “*supervivientes*” which captured that they had conquered their victimization and highlighted their sense of power and agency. Furthermore, participants asserted that the term

was better suited to their belief that they had overcome resentment, forgiven their aggressors, abandoned their status as victims, and that they were committed to building new lives. Many of them reported that they were no longer exhibiting a passive position of helplessness and dependency. Instead, they reported having renewed energy and capacity to positively affect the course of their lives towards healing. Obviously, the pace and level of healing was unique to each participant. Those victims who attended the workshops and were in the beginning stages of healing, benefitted from the experience of the victims who had moved ahead in such a powerful manner.

Key factors that appeared to facilitate participants’ healing proved to be linked to the social dynamics fostered during the *Agape* reconciliation gatherings. This included the social support provided by other group members: members of civil society, other victims, *Agape*’s facilitators, many of whom are skilled clinicians, as well as the common awareness of reconciliation as a healing tool.

Art and Social Drama as a Reconciliation Tool

The use of social drama, which emerged spontaneously from group members themselves, has proved an important reconciliation tool during the workshops/gatherings. For example, a widow and Colombian refugee living in Canada travelled to attend the *Agape* gathering in Colombia. During a reconciliation gathering, she stood up and began to act out what she called “the Andes Climber.” This participant began to mimic and embody the difficult and dangerous climb of a mountaineer. Through pantomime, she drew attention to the tools she needed for her journey and arduous climb: a solid rock on which to step securely, a small tree solidly embedded on the mountain’s side, the need to look up (ahead of her) instead of down (behind or below her), the need to indicate to those following her (her family) the dangerous points along her route, and finally, her arrival to the mountain’s summit. She then turned around towards her audience, indicating that those are the challenges the victims face in overcoming violence, shame, guilt, loss and anger brought forward by years of armed conflict. Perhaps inspired by her creativity and commitment, that very same day, four more socio-dramas were created and performed by former victims, who, over time, began to consider themselves as peace promoters. The themes enacted included: victims of sexual violence, victims of kidnapping, the indifference of civil society, and multiple issues around the theme of reconciliation.

Agape for Colombia has provided venues where these new “peace promoters” are encouraged to find their voices, and present their socio-dramas to other mem-

bers of civil society. These performances are then followed by a group discussion with the audience. In this way, the socio-dramas enable victims to present their stories of recovery in a symbolic, accessible and meaningful language, and at the same time, their performances help to sensitize members of civil society about victims' experiences of the conflict. These performances have also been powerful tools for breaking social barriers and prejudices. During these presentations, there have been significant moments of closeness and connection where members of civil society are able to learn of the realities of armed conflict in their own country and generate empathy towards those who have suffered. There have been instances in which members of civil society have asked for forgiveness for their indifference and have engaged in peacebuilding efforts. In this way, the path of healing for victims has evolved into what Agape has called the "Peace Promoters Program."

4. The Path from Former Combatant to Civilian

In Colombia, many of the former combatants joined illegal armed groups as children, becoming fighters and combatants at a young age and living within the context of an armed group over extended periods of time (ranging from months to years). With little education, having spent most of their lives away from family, community, traditional culture, urban contexts, and having suffered the physical and emotional effects of their participation in the war, they experience enormous difficulties coping and adjusting to civilian life after leaving the armed groups. In spite of government efforts to facilitate demobilization, resources are often slow to reach these former combatants as they face a society that rejects them. Displacement from rural to urban areas, family fragmentation, loss of community, lack of education, lack of resources and opportunities, and stigmatization are common factors among the demobilized - often many of the same issues faced by victims of armed conflict.

Many of the former child soldiers that have participated in *Agape's* reconciliation workshops recognize their dual identity as both victims and perpetrators of violence and armed conflict. Through the reconciliation gatherings, and the support of victims of the conflict - the very population that former child soldiers often harmed during participation in armed group - former combatants have ventured towards reconciliation. However, former combatants continue to express immense guilt, shame and responsibility for their violent actions within the groups. Responding to their desire to understand their own healing path as perpetrators of violence, *Agape* conducted a series of workshops where former child soldiers were able to express their needs in a safe and secure context. These former child soldiers identified the following key needs

and challenges to their reintegration into the community: 1) the need to hide their identities and former affiliation with an armed group; 2) The need to blend in within the community; 3) the need to carry their guilt in silence; and 4) they identified a lack of trust and fear of community stigmatization as key challenges to their reintegration.

The former child soldiers who participated in the reconciliation gatherings reported that they had forgiven those who recruited them illegally and who were responsible for the actions they had committed as children. And yet, they expressed their own need to find forgiveness, which they accomplished through their reconciliation work with other victims. It was during these workshops that former combatants realized that most of them had not been able to forgive themselves. As these participants noted:

"I will have to live with what I did"

"I could not forgive myself."

"I wondered if there was a God to forgive me."

"I can't believe they (the victims attending the workshop) have forgiven me"

"I had never talked about what I did and I feel so relieved."

During the workshops, the former combatants reported that it was the first time they addressed their feelings of guilt and shame, and that self-forgiveness was only possible due to the level of trust generated by the presence and support of the reconciliation process. In this sense, *Agape* members had become role models for others attempting to walk the path of healing. The "*supervivientes*" had been able to inspire victims and former combatants, providing them with hope and courage in the reconciliation process. *Agape* members who were former adult combatants are also participants in the Peace Promoter Program and they take their poignant message to those unaware of the realities that these young people (former child soldiers) have to face upon demobilization and reintegration. The testimonies of former combatants, whether adults or children, constitute valuable counter-narratives to prevent recruitment and radicalization.

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5. The Significant Role of Civil Society

In Colombia, large segments of civil society live in urban areas, have not been directly affected by armed conflict and have remained largely neutral to the plight of victims (Basta ya, 2013). And yet, *Agape's* workshops have highlighted the significant role that civil society can play in the development of counter-narratives of violence and armed conflict. As witnesses, members of civil society play a powerful role in validating the experiences of victims and provide recognition and support, which is of immense value in a victim's healing process. The presence of civil society has facilitated the acknowledgement of their own contribution to the armed conflict, even if it is through their neutrality. More importantly, members of civil society can facilitate the inclusion and integration of victims and of former combatants and they can provide vital recognition, validation, support, acceptance and belonging. Through their involvement, members of civil society are able to communicate and make visible the lessons learned from both victims and former combatants.

6. Community Building and Leadership

A significant aspect of the *Agape* experience is that the victims and former combatants, perhaps unwittingly, have become the leaders in the process of reconciliation. They have taught others how to reconcile, how to overcome resentment, and ultimately how to be at peace and make peace with others. It is for this reason that *Agape* does not bring outside experts, nor does it offer courses and/or training. *Agape* observes, collects the accumulated experiences and knowledge and returns to its participants in a systematic manner. In *Agape*, the experts on overcoming victimhood are the victims themselves. *Agape* has, over time, thus built a community around the common interests of reconciliation and peace. Members who participated initially as "beneficiaries" are now leaders who actively facilitate reconciliation. Group members have established lasting personal bonds and fostered a sense of belonging in other marginalized, war-affected individuals and families. They have participated and initiated activities and have taken ownership of the program. The community and its members have provided and continue to provide support and solidarity to one another. This approach to community-building and leadership aims to champion empowerment and defeat traumatization and re-victimization.

Importantly, the *Agape* community transcends borders and physical locations, as its members live in two different countries. Participants and new members – regardless of their status as victims, combatants, or civil society members – come from diverse realities: differing regions, both urban and rural, ages,

genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses. Ultimately, the *Agape* community welcomes and encourages participants' diverse identities and social locations and the integration of these diversities into the reconciliation process is an important goal.

7. Key Steps in the Reconciliation Process

A core set of values and steps have been key to *Agape's* community engagement strategy. These values and steps have included: creating a common and safe space, using a bottom-up approach in its practices, the use of action and reflection, and horizontal and participatory communication, all of which are addressed below.

(i) Creating a Common and Safe Space

Since the beginning of its activities in Canada, *Agape* sought to create safe, secure and optimal conditions in which refugees of the Colombian armed conflict and former child soldiers could come together in peace. Through a number of gatherings in small groups, the sharing of experiences among participants became the main objective. Participants exchanged life stories and shared meals under the same roof – something largely unheard of in Colombia. When the program moved to Colombia in 2011, the gatherings were organized discretely and cautiously given the serious security concerns. For this reason, the idea of creating a safe space, which was one of the conditions that facilitated the Canadian experience, became central. Sharing a common space of coexistence and acceptance (Bloomfield, 2003), participants have been able to understand each other's emotional realities, realizing they have gone through similar experiences both during and following armed conflict. The creation of a safe space has been central to *Agape's* work.

(ii) Ensuring a Bottom-up Approach

A bottom-up approach (Freire, 1970) has been a core value and commitment of *Agape*, ensuring that the voices and realities of participants – who are largely marginalized populations affected by armed violence – are central, not peripheral, to the reconciliation process. This community-based approach was evidenced in the fact that former child soldiers became the agents of reconciliation for refugees living in Canada, as well as for the other victims who participated in the Colombian program. *Agape's* efforts to facilitate spaces where understanding and the transformation of prejudices can occur have allowed the facilitators to see reconciliation as a process in which civil society, victims,

and former combatants search for common ground and mutual recognition. In this sense, reconciliation in *Agape* is conceived of as a gradual and inclusive process that begins with its core members and that over time, facilitates community building and searches to promote understanding and engagement in search of peace among victims and former victimizers, in the presence of members of civil society as witnesses and participants.

(iii) The Use of Action and Reflection

Identification of the social processes witnessed through the activities of the organization and the presentation of these findings to the participants themselves for corroboration, have become a source of new action and further reflection. For this reason, the program in *Agape* is conceived as open-ended, and the process of healing has evolved organically. The organization at first did not have a precise idea or process through which reconciliation would be carried out. *Agape* was instead following the lead of victims and former child soldiers, understood the process of reconciliation, and began to facilitate venues in which this process could take place. These actions and gatherings led to further reflection and modifications of the way the gatherings were carried out. In this sense, the core process that *Agape* has developed, coincides with the idea of Action and Reflection coined by Freire (Freire, 1970).

(iv) Horizontal and Participatory Communication

The sense of belonging, involvement, and ownership of the program among all participants regardless of geographical locations, age, socio-economic status, race, and gender has yielded a horizontal and participatory style of communication. As such, *Agape's* program and methodology has evolved over time and continues to change according to the demands, challenges, creativity, and ideas of members and new participants, but also in view of the new and emerging political context now that Colombia's the Peace agreement has been signed. *Agape* works to respond to the demands that the end of the conflict imposes, yet through a non-hierarchical, participatory and open process in the hopes to contribute to integration and reconciliation.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

The accumulated knowledge and the sense of community fostered throughout the reconciliation gatherings and workshops are the foundation from which other communities affected by war, violent extremism, and terrorism might find a path towards reconciliation and peace. For the future, *Agape* hopes to ac-

tively participate in the peacebuilding process that the country has embarked upon after signing a Peace agreement with FARC, bringing the *Agape* community to many others to facilitate the process of reconciliation.

The collective work of *Agape* has provided important knowledge regarding community-based reconciliation processes. Through our ongoing workshops and gatherings, and through careful engagement with community members to ensure a safe and secure space, a bottom-up approach, the use of action and reflection, and horizontal and participatory communication, we have been able to generate positive interactions and lasting bonds among former enemies, all of whom have been marred by the brutality of armed violence in Colombia. Our work has not only underscored that reconciliation between multiple and often opposing groups is possible, but also the important role that civil society has to play as collective and responsible witnesses, participants and healers in reconciliation processes.

Following 50 years of armed conflict, a collective narrative of violence, fear, and insecurity has enveloped daily life within Colombian society. Moreover, just because a Peace Agreement has been signed, does not mean that society will immediately embrace "peace." The assumption that the post-conflict context immediately brings forth peace, prosperity and stability negates the reality that conflict, violence and poverty may become embedded in a post-conflict social fabric, requiring major structural renewal and rebuilding – both in theory and in practice (Denov & Buccitelli, 2013). The reconciliation gatherings spearheaded by *Agape* have shown that through a well-developed community engagement strategy, these long-standing narratives of violence, fear and hate can gradually – with time and commitment - be replaced with counter-narratives of peace, reconciliation and hope. Perhaps most importantly, it is the key players in the theatre of armed conflict – the victims, perpetrators and witnesses to the conflict themselves – who are essential to the creation and maintenance of these counter-narratives, ultimately contributing to reconciliation, community building and the prevention of radicalization and further violence.

Further studies would be necessary to confirm and/or replicate *Agape's* experiences. Moreover, it would be critical to learn and understand if our processes of reconciliation can be transferred and replicated in other war-affected contexts around the globe, as well as the necessary conditions for this process of community building to be successful in different cultural and geo-political contexts. In addition, given the vital role that civil society has played throughout our community engagement strategy, research might also consider the significant role that civil society plays in peace and reconciliation processes. While

civil society is often viewed as “peripheral” to the key players of conflict (perpetrators and direct victims), particularly in Colombia, further research would benefit from further exploring and understanding the valuable and powerful counter-narratives offered by civil society in the post-conflict context.

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This edited volume contains a selection of essays and contributions written by different authors and derived from the presentations made at the International Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Conference 2016, which was held in Jakarta, Indonesia from 6-8 December 2016. The Conference was co-hosted by Hedayah and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Other sponsors and organizers included the Governments of Australia, Spain and Norway, Coventry University, Edith Cowan University (ECU), Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Swansea University, UN Women, and Wahid Foundation.

The purpose of this edited volume is to further enhance the field of P/CVE research through a series of short research papers. The volume covers research on five topics: 1) innovative research and new dynamics in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE); 2) exploring distinct challenges in P/CVE; 3) preventing and countering violent extremism programming by case studies; 4) narratives and counter-narratives to violent extremism; and 5) methods for P/CVE and monitoring, measurement and evaluation methods. The edited volume also includes two annexes: “A Research Agenda for 2017-2018” and “A Policy and Programming Brief”.

