"Peace of Little Nothings": a View within the Peace Laboratories in Colombia[1]

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Peace Laboratories in Colombia; Peacebuilding initiatives from below developed by non-governmental organizations in several peripheral regions of the country. It analyzes a type of peacebuilding that traditional and dominant views about peace and conflict resolution tend to ignore and undervalue – grassroots peacebuilding based on civil society and local communities. It aims to give a critical outlook on conventional realist conflict management approaches and to emphasize to what extent, under local social processes such as the ones developed by the Peace Laboratories, different conceptions of peace and peacebuilding arise. It is suggested that these follow a distinct logic, one that is more social than political or military, and manifest on a micro level.

Keywords: Peace Laboratories; Colombia; civil society; armed conflict; conflict management; conflict resolution; conflict transformation; peacebuilding; peacebuilding from below; "everyday peace".

"A vida é feita de pequenos nadas"
Sérgio Godinho

Introduction

War and peace, violence and conflicts, as central elements in human condition, follow and mark deeply many social and political areas of activity. These are, therefore, subjects that have always been under the careful watch of political and social science, which is the reason why there are so many theories that approach an understanding of conflict and peacebuilding[2].

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[2] Morton Deutsch, "Subjective Features of Conflict Resolution: Psychological, Social and Cultural Influences" in Vayrynen, Raimo (ed.) *New Direction in Conflict Theory: Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation*, International Social Science Council (London: Sages Publications, 1991), p. 26

Peace and conflict resolution have been conceptualized and interpreted in different forms and under different modalities and focal lenses, both in academic and political points of view. In the same way, the actors and roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution vary in their objectives and identities.

Speeches about peace and violence as well as arguments on how to overcome the armed conflict are a daily occurrence in Colombia, from the political elites to a simple chat over a cup of coffee. Perceptions and understandings of peace are multiple and diverse, and just one of the factors which sustains the armed conflict.

In this article the emphasis is put on a certain view of peace and its construction that hardly ever gets the media's attention, nor makes major newspaper headlines – Peace as understood, developed and built from within peasant communities surrounded by an armed conflict. The question to be analysed is this: How is the daily efforts of *peacebuilding from below* understood by those living in forgotten Colombian territories? How does peace materialize? What forms and expressions does it take? What is "pragmatic peace"[3] on a local level?

Peace Laboratories, a program developed by non-governmental organizations in several parts of the country, with political and financial support from the European Union, are used here as a case study.

This discussion is the result of empirical research based on fieldwork conducted in Cauca, Nariño, Magdalena Medio, and East Antioquia, which included a number of interviews with the main actors of the Peace Laboratories and participant observation in several events and initiatives. It is based on the analysis of the projects and processes, and on a look at the initiatives, hopes, dreams, difficulties and anxieties of all those who suffer the violence of armed conflict and, by their own blood, strive to bring peace to these areas, proving that another country is possible.

Peace and its Lens: Peacebuilding Paths and Actors

The traditional and dominant views about peace and conflict resolution have given governments and main political actors an exclusive access to the competences and skills required in the peace and conflict's field of expertise.

Realism, the dominant political paradigm that determines to a large extent the "conventional" and hegemonic approach to armed conflicts (international and internal) not only in Colombia, but also on an international level, is basically, state-centered. The sub-state agents are seen as irrelevant actors, having little influence or meaning. Consequently, this is a political school of thought that gives civil society and local actors a minor role in conflict resolution, undermining their role in peacebuilding.

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[3] Catherine Barnes "Weaving the Web: Civil-Society Roles in Working with Conflict and Building Peace", in Togeren, Van Paul *et al.* (eds.), *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), pp. 19

Thus, only "main actors" should be included in a conflict management process[4]. As Marchetti and Tocci posit[5], the value of social organizations is "either secondary, marginal or non-existent".

Realism is, in its essence, an elitist focus, based on a top-down decision-making process, oriented exclusively for *Track I* conflict resolution; that is, the activities and diplomacy performed by official state agents, rather than non-official agents (*Track II*)[6]. According to this approach to conflict, peacebuilding activities are conceived as a process aiming to achieve a peace agreement, and into which only the roles of state agents and military elite ostensibly fit.

Negotiations based on power and interests appear as "the only practical alternative to inter-group violence"[7]. This theory focuses mainly in obtaining "negative peace", that is, putting an end to the hostilities or direct violence between the parties in conflict.

The emphasis remains on how to bring the parties in conflict to the negotiation table, and the nature and procedures of this process, once the actors are sitting down. What is not taken in consideration is how to deal with the problems implicated at the conflict's source, or finding creative and alternative solutions for it. It is focused, strictly, on the armed conflict and how to put an end to it[8].

To those who ascribe to this theory, solving or transforming conflicts is seen as unrealistic, given the irreconcilable differences of interests and values between parties; it is only possible to manage or to contain them, which is why the interventions must stay focused on obtaining political agreements. In particular, this means using recourse to political and military power to influence those involved[9].

This perspective has marked the historical views of peace and conflict in Colombia, conditioning the strategies of war and the official policies for peace over the last 40 years[10]. Nevertheless, this "classical" and "conventional" perspective of conflict management has been raised up for debate, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also a political one.

In the 1960s, Galtung, one of the pioneers of Peace Research made a radical rupture with this assumption through the development of "negative" and "positive peace" concepts[11]. This author expanded the meaning of peace, not only as an antithesis to war, but also in revaluing the notion of violence from its traditional meaning and connotation – physical violence – giving it a wider meaning

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[4] Peter Wallensteen *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 48

[5] Raffaele Marchetti, Nathalie Tocci "Conflict society: understanding the role of civil society in conflict", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 21:2, (2009), pp. 10

[6] Susan Allen Nan, Strimling, Andrea "Track I - Track II Cooperation" *Beyond Intractability*. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/track_1_2_cooperation/ (2004) [13th May 2009]

[7] Hans Morgenthau (1985) *apud* Richard Rubenstein, "Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development", *The International Journal of Peace Studies*, Volume 6, Nº 1, Spring (2001)

[8] Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2002)

[9] Hugh Miall, "Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task", Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (2004), pp. 3

[10] Miguel Barreto Henriques ""Laboratorios de Paz" en territorios de violencia(s) - ¿Abriendo caminos para la paz positiva en Colombia?", PhD Thesis in International Relations, University of Coimbra, April (2012)

[11] Johan Galtung, *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, (London: Sage Publications, 1996)

and reach. From this point of view, peace is not only the absence of war. What drives him is a peace conception understood not as war's opposite, but as the antonym to "violence(s)"[12]. According to the author, a world without war wouldn't be necessarily by definition, a world in peace. Galtung conceives peace as a deep restructuration of human relations.

Therefore, Galtung obviously defines and transmits a wider and denser peace concept, one that implies more than the weapon's silence. It is based on a global and comprehensive view of peace and conflict that establishes a clear and strong link between development, social justice and the peace themes.

Galtung's broader peace definition has opened, in this manner, the space for a more complete definition and comprehension of peacebuilding. The activities that confront and approach the structural and cultural aspects of violence provide a new sense and meaning to the term. Peacebuilding appears associated with a generation of processes, attitudes, relations, values and more inclusive and sustainable structures[13]. This perspective gives an important role to protagonists other than traditional political actors in conflict resolution, specifically giving civil society actors a particularly crucial role.

Galtung has a plural understanding of peace. He explains that we shouldn't think about Peace, but "Peaces"[14]. His is a view that supports a diversity of grassroots peacebuilding social experiences. For Galtung, peace depends more and more on the people that settle their own "peace policies" on a micro-level, and not strictly upon elite decisions.

Like Galtung, John Paul Lederach, another author of utmost importance affiliated with *peace research,* proposes a peacebuilding concept as a dynamic and continuous social process. According with this author, the "peace process" notion gains an entirely new meaning that goes beyond its conventional meaning as "peace negotiations". While a peace process in its conventional sense remains focused on armed actors' confrontation, agendas and political positions as the bases for achieving an agreement between them that puts violence to an end[15], peace processes for Lederach are continuous, complex and multitask processes, involving multiple activities that contribute to a constructive conflict transformation[16]. It is, simply, peacebuilding-as-process. This represents more than negotiations among political leaders and mediators for a cease-fire; it also moves beyond the United Nation's conventional understanding of *peacebuilding* and *peacemaking*. This author understands, fundamentally, peace building as the transformation and restructuration of relationships.[17]

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[12] José Manuel Pureza "Para que servem os Estudos para a Paz?", Colóquio Internacional "Caminhos de Futuro: Novos Mapas para as Ciências Sociais", Centro de Estudos Sociais, Coimbra, (2008), June 21st, pp. 3
[13] Escola de Cultura de Pau, "Construyendo Paz en medio de la guerra", December (2006), pp. 6
[14] Johan Galtung, *Peace by peaceful means*, pp. 13
[15] Escola de Cultura de Pau, Construyendo Paz, pp. 6
[16] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), pp. 63
[17] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace,* pp. 71

These theoretical presentations have given special meaning to what some literature calls "peacebuilding from below", that is, bottom-up peacebuilding based in local communities. Geraldine McDonald[18] defines this concept as:

> "Both a practice and an attitude. As a practice, it means a peacebuilding engaged at the local level by the people who live in the midst of violence. As an attitude, it rests on the assumption that those most affected by violence, who understand and have to live with its consequences, are likely to be best placed to find the most appropriate solutions to it."

This perspective has had a growing importance and feedback on the academic community, literature and international institutions. This peacemaking role of local communities has been increasingly emphasised by several renowned authors, who underline that "effective and sustainable peacemaking processes must be based not merely on the manipulation of peace agreements made by elites, but more importantly on the empowerment of communities torn apart by war"[19].

In fact, peace must be rooted in the same soil in which the conflict developed[20] and can only be achieved through the participation of the protagonists and victims of violence in each region and locality. Those most affected by violence have a profound knowledge of the real problems and the needs of the people. As Catherine Barnes[21] asserts, "people and societies must create their own systems for working through their differences. While governments must play a crucial role in this process, the people are the key to long term conflict transformation".

According to this new vision of peace, solutions cannot be brought from outside by a third actor; Rather, they are born and emerge among the resources of the people[22]. All social actors are essential carriers of peace processes and strategies. The transformation processes work through different levels. They are about changing the structures and people. Society's transformation is an undirected result of the individual transformation and not only of institutional restructuration and social and political reforms[23]. Social change comes with individual awareness and empowerment, elements that give meaning and relevance to grassroots peacebuilding processes, no matter how circumscribed they may be.

In fact, the civil society's peacebuilding role relates essentially to one factor – peace sustainability. A peace process is only sustainable if it involves the population. In order to consolidate peace and make it grow, its roots must be created among neighbors and in the heart of communities. Peace sustainability can only be endogenous. If Clemeanceau once said war was too serious to be trusted only to militaries, it could be said today that peace is too important to be trusted only to politicians. "People" are the key to develop a peace infrastructure and culture. Therefore, any long-

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[18] Geraldine McDonald, "Peacebuilding from below. Alternative perspectives on Colombia's peace process", (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1997), pp. 2

[19] Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The prevention, management and transformation of deadly conflicts*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005) 2nd ed., pp. 215)

[20] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace,* pp. 107

[21] Catherine Barnes, Weaving the Web, p. 7

[22] Tom Woodhouse, "International Conflict Resolution: Some Critiques and a Response", *Centre for Conflict Resolution Working Paper* 1, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, (1999) June, pp. 24

[23] Christopher Mitchell, "Beyond Resolution: What Does Conflict Transformation Actually Transform?", *Peace and Conflict Studies,* Vol. 9, N° 1, (2002) May, pp. 12

term strategy for a sustainable peace has to go through (civil) society. The social organization's role is crucial to widen and consolidate the peace processes achievement[24].

The Colombian Case: a Context of Multiple "Violence(s)" and "Peaces"

In Colombia, violence adopts several modalities, shapes, forms and expressions. It is not confined to armed groups themselves, but comes with social, political, economical, ethnic and cultural issues, which is why we must speak of "violences" rather than violence. In fact, violence in Colombia is a complex phenomenon and reality. It goes deeper than the uprising of rebel armed groups.

In this way, eradicating the use of violence by armed groups is insufficient to restore peace in Colombia. Peacebuilding in this country is a matter of social order's transformation in many regions, the development of legal mechanisms and institutions of conflict resolution, inclusion of marginalized social groups, and of fomenting a culture of peace.

Therefore, the elite's negotiation model historically developed in Colombia tends to establish a fragile and short-range peace. It can hardly bring a sustainable and long lasting peace to a country in which violence is a particularly complex and multidimensional phenomenon, and is not confined to the existence of armed groups. The multidimensional nature of violence in Colombia and the multidimensional causes of the conflict turn negotiations made strictly by the elites into something very limited. A comprehensive peace approach in Colombia should be contemplated as multidimensional.

The dark and unsatisfactory conflict resolution picture and systematic failure of the official political guidelines for peace that Colombia faces contrasts immensely with the effervescent outlook of its civil society. In the last 15 years there has been a sharp increase in this country of social mobilization and peace initiatives from the grassroots level, including Constituent Assemblies, Peace Communities, Indigenous "Mingas" and Peace and Development Programs; These function, by certain measure, as an alternative to the national negotiations with the *guerrilla* groups that have faced challenges and caused significant social and political frustrations. Here we see what Mauricio García Durán[25] defines as a contrast between a "national crisis and the local dynamism" in the peacebuilding field in Colombia. The rise in the last two decades of a high number of peacebuilding initiatives within civil society shows another side of the conflict and defines this country simultaneously as a war and peace (or peaces) scenario.

In this frame, the so-called "Peace Laboratories" feature as one of the most interesting, ambitious and original civil society peacebuilding initiatives that have ever emerged in Colombia.

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[24] Cécile Mouly, "Peace Constituencies in Peacebuilding: The Mesas de Concertación in Guatemala", in Pugh, Michael; Cooper, Neil; Turner, Mandy (eds.) *Whose Peace? Critical Perspectives on the Political Economy of Peacebuilding*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 304

[25] Mauricio García Durán, *Movimiento por la paz en Colombia, 1978-2003*, (Bogotá: CINEP, 2006), pp. 150

Peace Laboratories: a Singular Approach for Peace in Colombia?

Operating in several of the most problematic and conflictive regions in the country and deeply connected to Peace and Development Programs (PDP)[26], Peace Laboratories constitute multidimensional programs of peacebuilding from the grassroots level, in conjunction with civil society, the European Union (EU) and the Colombian government's support and participation. They are conceived as real "peace laboratories" because they seek out new ways and alternative "formulas" for peace at local and regional levels. They are pioneering and exploratory experiences that are intended to be provocative, build new relations and platforms for transformation, and formulate exit proposals on a micro scale. They work as a kind of "social laboratory", in which the researchers[27] and driving forces of conflict transformation processes and collective peacebuilding belong to the region's populations.

They operate within a complex nexus of social, cultural, economical and political grassroots processes that intend to integrate the peripheral Colombian territories and traditionally excluded social groups (such as the indigenous communities, women, youth, but mostly peasant farmers) moving them closer to institutionalization, development and democracy. They attempt to address the root causes of conflict in Colombia and to generate a peace culture and participatory mechanisms.

Above all, the Peace Laboratories are an attempt to create social, economical, political and cultural conditions for peace, and to focus in the factors that sustain and cause the conflict locally. They stand from the principle that peacebuilding must generate new life opportunities, the rural population's inclusion, and the social and economical development of communities[28]. In this way, they focus on how to create jobs for the peasants, how to give young people alternatives and to transform economical activity into peace and human development[29]. At stake is, basically, to remove labor force out of war[30].

The Peace Laboratories' philosophy and goal, based on the PDPMM's original conception is, by some measure, to reconcile the *two Colombias*: the "Carrera Séptima" Colombia in Bogotá (large urban centers) with the rural and excluded Colombia, the one of the territories "where the slightest presence of the State can only be tracked after days of walking, by river or riding a horse"[31]; they try to integrate the totality of the national territory into institutions, the rule of law and development; to bring democracy, a democratic culture and citizenship to remote areas; provide public services; fill in the deep institutional gap; share well being and the regional development's profits with everybody without

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[26] The PDP, which had start in Magdalena Medio, are the Peace Laboratories grassroots and they're directly linked to them, being its driving and conceptual force, reason why this research will not be detached from the Peace Laboratories analysis of the PDP.

[27] Javier Moncayo "Los proyectos en el PDPMM: Un laboratorio de paz", *Controversia*, N° 174, (1999), June

[28] María del Rosario Saavedra, León Diego Ojeda, *Trabajo en Red: Imaginarios conceptuales de paz, desarrollo y región en los programas de la Red Prodepaz*, Documentos Ocasionales n. 74, (Bogotá: CINEP, 2006), pp. 32

[29] Francisco De Roux, Interview, Cartagena de Índias: 23rd January (2008)

[30] Nicola Bertolini, interview by telephone, Bogotá - Brussels, 27th August (2007)

[31] Fernán González, Ingrid Bolívar, Teófilo Vázquez, *Violencia Política en Colombia: De la nación fragmentada a la construcción del Estado*, (Bogotá: CINEP, 2003), pp. 218-219

exception; narrow the gap between big centers and the suburbs; and overcome the barriers of geographic, political and economical nature. In some sense, they are a form of state building and nation building combined with a regionally sustainable human development initiative as a means to achieve peace.

Equally, the Peace Laboratories' goals are to create changes on a micro scale, that is to say, in the individuals as well as in communities. They pursue the creation of peace subjects[32] who embody ethical and democratic values, as well as pacific conflict resolution. They intend to politically educate people, create social emancipation, build citizenship, evolve the population's imaginations, and produce empowerment[33]. To a large extent, they intend to build what Lederach calls a "peace constituency"[34], that is, a type of peace-circumscription and culture of peace in the area.

Beyond this, the Peace Laboratories' philosophy forwards a participatory methodology. The Laboratories' formula is based on people and sustains the belief that civil society can and must play an important role in peacebuilding in Colombia. In order to be sustainable, peace has to be more than formal agreements between the insurrection leaders and the government. According to their philosophy, the Laboratories propose to launch, foment and develop participatory processes with the historically marginalized social groups, striving to give voice to all those who don't have a voice, encouraging and helping them to build social, economical and alternative political offers. They consider that these are not only the main victims of violence in Colombia, but also essential actors to build a peaceful country.

In fact, the Laboratories have been working essentially as micro platforms for peasant populations' and other actors' inclusion in social, economical, productive and political terms. To a certain extent, the Laboratories' intention is to be an instrument to build a direct democracy and to configure and democratize the political culture of the country in order to become more inclusive and participative. It is intended here to make citizens see themselves as masters and owners of their own fate, to promote development through an economy controlled by the population and to achieve peace through the reorganization of their political life and the citizen's control of public resources[35].

It corresponds to a certain humanist and inclusive sort of peace and development conception, in which these same social actors and communities are the primary peacebuilding agents. According to the PDPMM, the organization that sustains the Peace Laboratory in Magdalena Medio, "development is people", as claims one of its principles[36]. Either, peace and development are built by everybody, or they won't be anything but a mirage. The process centers itself around the population's participation and empowerment.

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[32] Marco Fidel Vargas, Interview, Bogotá: 23rd April (2007)
[33] Mauricio Katz, Interview, Bogotá: 27th February (2008)
[34] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace,* pp. 94
[35] Anders Rudqvist, Fred Van Sluys, "Informe Final de Evaluación de Medio Término Laboratorio de Paz del Magdalena Medio", ECO, (2005) February, pp. 4-5
[36] PDPMM http://www.pdpmm.org.co/FAQs.asp (2010) [21 April 2010]

Peace Laboratories posit that peace "doesn't come with a governmental offer or petition"[37] and should not be managed exclusively by the State. It represents a collective interest and good, which implies a wide population's participation[38]. These initiatives portray social actors as crucial peacebuilding protagonists. It corresponds to a peacebuilding-process *from below*. The project has made the assumption that peace is not exclusively a strategic matter, based on power and negotiation, but consists also of human, social and structural change[39].

"Peace of Little Nothings" – A Peace Built at a Local Level?

The Peace Laboratories configure, in their components, a wide, multidisciplinary and multidimensional range of projects, social processes, programs and initiatives, which seek to express their philosophy and approach for peace in the regions' far reaching realms. It represents a macro project that unfolds into a range of micro peace projects, focused on several aspects and elements of peacebuilding, under a global peace approach and concept.

They are an initiative conceptually and physically located on a micro level with feet set firmly on the ground, in the conflict's center. The experience is inherently local: its essence is peacebuilding on a local and regional level; grassroots peacebuilding projects conceived as decentralization experiences in conflict transformation. They aim to transform on the micro level, from each region's particularity and set of social actors, the political, social, economical and cultural conditions that sustain the conflict and create its own alternative ways to peace. It is intended that each project can be one micro platform for conflict transformation and dialogue between different social sectors[40].

Under these social processes at a local level arises a conception of peace that differs, on a large scale, from the hegemonic view and model of conflict resolution as a product or peace agreement between the government and the illegal armed groups. Peacebuilding for the communities and organizations involved in the Peace Laboratories reveals itself as a daily work process in each region. This perspective is proven by the words of Pascual Silva[41], a member of Magdalena Medio's Peace Laboratory:

> "We don't see peace as a speech or a degree, except how to lead people to create alternatives, so that they don't fall in the circles of armed groups".

The Peace Laboratories projects and processes are, essentially, "small peace" expressions, they are "micro peaces" built and developed by the transformation of conflict expressions on a micro scale. Therefore, they allow the contemplation of peace and its building to be subsumed under a different logic, more social than political, more horizontal than vertical, more local than national.

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[37] Francisco De Roux, "Francisco De Roux: una opción por la vida", Entrevista, in Orozco, Cecilia, *Y ahora qué?: Conversaciones con Cecilia Orozco*, (Bogotá: El Áncora Editores, 2002), pp. 17
[38] María del Rosario Saavedra, León Diego Ojeda, *Trabajo en Red,* pp. 34
[39] Francesco Vincenti, Interview, Bogotá: 26st February (2008)
[40] PDPMM, Informe de la Primera Fase del Laboratorio de Paz, Barrancabermeja (2005), pp. 6
[41] Pascual Silva, Interview. Barrancabermeja: 11th December (2007)

This understanding of peace is well evident in Guillermina Hernández's words[42], the director of Barrancabermeja's NGO "Merquemos Juntos", who claims that "peace is not about killing ourselves; peace is to look toward at better way of living, to accomplish the things we need". In a similar way, this conception of peace lived by the populations in the areas covered by the Peace Laboratories is demonstrated in the words of Juan de Dios Castilla[43], who coordinates the Barrancabermeja-based project "Comunas, territorio de no violencia" (Communes, non-violence territory), who notes:

> "Our peers establish a difference between political peace, the kind of peace you can get at the negotiation tables, and the peace built by communities. They say: Look, peace is not something external to us, we're building it daily in this place; peace is not about waiting that they sit down in Santa Fe de Ralito, Havana or Caracas, or wherever they want to sit, because that isn't but one part of the conflict created in Colombia; there is a peace created by the communities and this is what has been built permanently, not only in the communes, but all over the region. Peace is connected to that experience, the experience of saying no to all war actors, to say guerrilla is not wanted here, nor paramilitaries, we want to build non-violent communes."

Peace here acquires multiple colors, tastes and scents. It rises as a concept conjugated in the plural. It is based on various types of social processes and dimensions. More than just one peace, there are "peaces" at stake. In these processes, peace is conceived, built, and understood in several ways by the communities, and acquires meanings and materializations of its own. It is not mistaken with the political peace and absence of war, which drives political realism and conflict management theories. In the grassroots cases within the Peace Laboratories, to some, peace is having something to eat, to others it is to have tranquility or to be listened to; some associate peace with "real democracy"[44] or, as in the case of the Cauca's indigenous communities, with cultural identity.

To some, peace is based upon community solidarity (or the community uniting against...) against armed groups. Populations are aware that "by joining our fears we become more", as some participants in a Magdalena Medio "Espacio Humanitario" (Humanitarian Space) claim[45]. In this way, they search to create collective solidarity and dignity symbols, which allow them to be stronger and have more leverage and skills to dialogue with the armed groups and resist its violence and pressure. Therefore, Peace Laboratories recover and disclose a tangible political and social dimension, but also a utopian one. As Alfredo Molano[46] suggests in referring to PDPMM, its virtue was basically "to keep the hope alive", a non-quantifiable dimension in impact terms, but extremely important in the horrid context of an armed conflict.

Peace Laboratories have made possible to several local communities the ability to keep alive the dream of a better life and a country in peace, and a horizon of hope in despairing and violent times; they have rescued values endangered and obscured by violence's darkness, such as the dignity,

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[42] apud Jesús Blanco, "Colombia: ¿Laboratorio? de paz?", *Revista de Periodismo Preventivo*, 9 November (2008)
[43] Juan de Dios Castilla, Interview. Barrancabermeja: 13th December (2007)
[44] René Ausecha, Interview. Popayán: 15th August(2008)
[45] José Antonio Páez, "Los Espacios Humanitarios: Una pedagogía en la vida para la vida" in PNUD, *Sistematización de los procesos de desarrollo económico y social adelantados por el PDPMM entre 1996 y 2006,* Barrancabermeja, (2007), pp. 16
[46] Alfredo Molano, "30 años de construcción de paz en el Magdalena Medio", Corporación Colombiana de Proyectos Sociales, April (2009), pp. 56

tolerance, solidarity and brought them back to the community restoring the human value on its symbolic, economical and spiritual dimension. In this sense, they represent small steps on the way to peace.

In fact, in several cases, peasants' voices were for the first time heard, as a mark of these social processes, by allowing marginalized social groups like women, youth and farmers to take part in the political and social scene and the economical circuits. As Bayona[47] notes, "people started to believe in their own initiatives and that these could take them further." It allowed people to restore individual and collective confidence. The process has helped them to find their own voice and to have faith in their capacities, regardless of their social status or economical situation. In fact, one of the most often heard sentences from the grassroots population was "*yes, we can*", long before Barack Obama's motto.

One of the biggest achievements of these initiatives is a social emancipation process, associated with an affirmation of hope and an escape from a marginalized situation. Communities embrace progressively the dismantling process of their political and social exclusion and take control over their own status, as citizen bearers of rights and duties. The task of gathering the people, allowing them to hear and express themselves allows them to restore their expectations and, to a certain extent, the dignity and humanity lost in a war context. The Peace Laboratories' grassroots projects have been a shelter for the excluded populations and communities.

The fact that social and economical networks have been developed, that "people gather to talk about their cocoa, their chicken"[48] is a peacebuilding factor. War cuts social ties and affective bonds, as well as solidarity; as Father Hermes[49] of the Humanitarian Space of Cíenaga del Ópon notes, each person sticks to his or her pains and fears, the tonus is "the jungle's law, each one defending himself". These processes rescue the illusions and dreams such as fraternity, generosity, and care; they are an oxygenation and re-building of social fabric. In this way, they preserve and keep alive what Jenny Pearce[50] calls "participation space in the middle of violence". They are micro peacebuilding processes in which dialogue, negotiation and dignity prevail over violence, fear and humiliation. They constitute, to a large extent, what Mary Kaldor calls of "islands of civility"[51], that is to say, local communities in war zones that present a political challenge to armed violence. These processes allow, in small scales, the development of spaces of freedom and pacific coexistence in some of the most remote, and violence-ridden areas. They comprise of exercises and expressions in civility in the middle of the armed conflict, but also serve as a way to transform conflict from its grassroots and to foster a culture of peace. As the sociologist Elise Boulding[52] acknowledges, peace cultures can actually survive in small places and "pockets", even in the most violent of conflicts, which is exactly the case of

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[47] Manuel Bayona, interview by telephone Bogotá- Bucaramanga, 25th August (2007)
[48] José Antonio Páez, Los Espacios Humanitarios
[49] Aparicio Hermes, Interview, Barrancabermeja: 12th December (2007)
[50] Jenny Pearce, "Violence, Power and Participation: Building Citizenship in Contexts of Chronic Violence", IDS Working Paper 274, Institute of Development Studies, march (2007), pp. 28
[51] apud Sabine Kurtenbach, "Europe and the Colombian Conflict", Andean Working Paper, Inter-American Dialogue, June (2005), pp. 10
[52] apud Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, pp. 217

Colombia, and why some people within these social processes have referred to the Laboratories as a "god's blessing"[53] or a "life buoy"[54].

In other processes led by the Peace Laboratories, peace means a different form of policy making and experience of democracy, based on a different and closer relationship between citizens and political power, one which closes in on the ideal of participative democracy. These grassroots projects were intended to promote a new model of local democracy and citizenship[55], which could overcome people's suspicions towards the government's institutions. They aim to widen the population's direct participation in political life and decision-making. What is at stake is to build what Teresa Castrillón[56], a grassroots leader from Puerto Berrio, claims as a council "for everyone (men and women), not just for those who are the mayor's friends or related to the city councilors", that is to say, to have a full democracy and political inclusion. To a large extent, it represents a form of institutional-building on a micro level.

To other communities involved in the Peace Laboratories, peace relates to cultural processes. A substantial part of the initiatives developed by the Peace Laboratories seek long-term cultural transformations, both at an individual and collective level. Changes in how to think, act, and organize, are stimulated, and rest upon intangible factors, which go through complex processes of transformation of beliefs, views, interests and relationships[57] which assume a great deal of importance for positive and sustainable peace - "it contributes for people to see life from another point of view"[58]. As Gustavo Montenegro, Coordinator of a radio project in Nariño, suggests[59] "when a peasant dedicated only to his daily wage and everyday life all of a sudden starts to make radio shows and says – "this project changed my life!" – something has happened." This is a symbolical sign of the potential these projects hold. The foundations of peace start with each intra-personal transformation process.

As Lederach states[60], the relationship system is where conflicts emerge, and, likewise, forms the primary focal point and engine toward long-term transformation processes. To a large extent, Peace Laboratories are a transformation space for human relationships in their distinct dimensions, from the interpersonal to the economical, political and cultural. Peace laboratories foster micro transformation processes, which are both individual and social. As Francisco Ívan, member of a Nariño's coffee producer organization declares - "this is what we brought: lads for peace."

Another example described by Miriam Villegas[61] mentioning the council of San Pablo in Magdalena Medio, gives a powerful testimony of this cultural dynamic transformation:

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[53] Guillermina Hernández, Interview. Barrancabermeja: 3rd September (2008)
[54] Teresa Castrillón, Interview. Puerto Berrio: 28th August (2008)
[55] Franco Vincenti, Interview
[56] Teresa Castrillón, Interview
[57] Nathalie Tocci, "The European Union, Civil Society and Conflict Transformation", *MICROCON Policy Working Paper* 1, July (2008), pp. 19
[58] Alexander Ibarra, Interview. Popayán: 13th February (2008)
[59] Gustavo Montenegro, Interview. Pasto: 10th October (2008)
[60] John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformations*, (Good Books, 2003), pp. 17
[61] Miriam Villegas, Interview. Bogotá: 8th September (2008)

"San Pablo's people are very aggressive because it's a coca culture - a very hard culture of peril and nothing else: there wasn't any solidarity there. So, when we arrived at San Pablo and started to work, an organization meeting ended in a stab-wound, in disaster, people insulted their own mothers and fought with each other. Today they're still aggressive, but talk, and the organization thinks with solidarity that we have to support each other - we have to help get funding among us all, we're going to build a headquarters, a living project for everybody... they take into account solidarity. Today you see them quiet, organized, thinking how development is going to be for everybody. To me, that's what peace is. This is peace..."

Actually, the Laboratories develop a valuable job, by developing a new culture in the territories and changing the paradigms of thought in these communities. In several cases, as this anecdote proves, these experiences constitute a "peace of the little things"[62], micro expressions of multidimensional conflict transformation. Peacebuilding here is thus understood as a daily exploitation and development of new forms of relationships, attitudes and processes, which overcome the armed conflict's polarization and build alternatives to violence by creating social, economical, political and cultural inclusion leading to more justice and equity in different levels of human relations[63].

Another episode, which occurred in Montes de Maria and reported by Father Rafael Castillo, demonstrates with deep symbolism how inner change processes that develop on a psychological level can be meaningful and provide results. In his words,

"This lady, a friend of mine whose husband and son were killed, was going with her granddaughter to the cemetery and I greeted her. Then, I decided to join them and when we got there, she told me to go to her husband's grave. And I went and prayed; then after to her son's grave and I also prayed and the little girl was putting flowers; then she stood with a little flower vase and the lady said: Father, let's go and pray to another grave and I agreed, 'All right, quickly' and the little girl put down the flowers, brought water and everything that was necessary. I made my prayer and afterward I asked them: 'who was the dead man?' And she said: 'this was the man that killed my husband and son...I bring my little granddaughter here because, with the same faith that she prays to her granddad and daddy, she will pray for this person's soul. I can't allow her to grow with hate, resentment and vengeance feelings"[64].

This episode, of utmost symbolic charge, shows the need for closing violence's spiral, cycles of hate, and vengeance dynamics that feed the armed conflict. It is an individual gesture of strong symbolism in terms of de-legitimization of the ruling culture of violence. This person took the conscious choice to not perpetuate the transfer of hate from one generation to another, and for her granddaughter to "grow in peace". First, however, she would have to be in peace with others, including the executers of her father and grandfather.

This is a fundamental dimension of a culture of peace, which is, necessarily how an intra-personal and structural process exist simultaneously at a micro and macro level. In fact, as demonstrated by the example, the affective and cultural dimensions are the individual building of

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[62] José Manuel Pureza, "Construções Teóricas da Paz", Relatório da Unidade Curricular do Programa de Doutoramento em Política Internacional e Resolução de Conflitos, Coimbra: Faculdade de Economia da Universidade de Coimbra (2009), pp. 9
[63] Escola de Cultura de Pau, "Construyendo Paz, pp. 6
[64] Rafael Castillo, Interview. Bogotá: 26st August (2008)

foundations, as war and peace "are born in men´s minds"[65]. Such "little things" are an essential part of building peace.

In other cases, peace emerges as the possibility to bring forward development processes. Facing social and economical exclusion, the Peace Laboratories tried to answer with a wide group of economic projects, intending to create more inclusive and sustainable human development. Under this framework, the Laboratories have built and preserved licit economic spaces made of integrated communities and social sectors at potential risk of falling in violent or drug related activities; they provided to several social groups, such as young people from Barrancabermeja's slums or the south Bolívar peasants, economic and occupational alternatives and new life possibilities, inherently influencing the structural and direct violence felt by the region's most excluded populations. Through these processes, men were stolen from war, but also political and social spaces. This has contributed to a cultural and social de-legitimization of war and violence, and to proving that it is possible to address the country's structural problems through pacific means.

In this way, the Peace Laboratories cast away many of the limitations, gaps and absences seen in mainstream conflict management approaches. Basically, through its example and real social and political experience in the field, the Laboratories emphasize a critical peacebuilding actor, traditionally relegated to a second-tier plan by realist conflict management approaches – Civil Society. This empirical case thus makes a political contribution to the theoretical debate about *who* are the peacebuilding and social change agents. To a certain extent, these local initiatives reveal what was hidden in Colombian case – grassroots peacebuilding social processes that demonstrate how civil society can play an important role in conflict transformation through the work of communities and social organizations at a local and regional level. Social processes and spaces stand out as being capable of creating new configurations, structures and relationship guidelines[66]. Peace Laboratories show how to obtain civil space from the conflict through social, cultural, political and economical processes that lead people away from armed violence options, integrate excluded social groups into a licit economy, create pacific social relations, a culture of peace, and participatory democracy mechanisms.

These processes configure "local peaces", that is, micro spaces and peace expressions in which civility and solidarity have overcome dynamics of violence.[67] As evidenced by the Magdalena Medio and Macizo Colombiano Peace Laboratories' processes, there exists a "peace of little things"[68], or what Richmond has termed "everyday peace"[69] and Moura, "newest peaces"[70]. They are

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[65] UNESCO, *Acta Constitucional de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura*, Paris, (1945)

[66] John Paul Lederach, *La imaginación moral: el arte y el alma de construir la paz*, (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2008), pp. 99

[67] This reality converges with Mitchell and Allen-Nan's concept of "peace zones", that is, micro territorial spaces where they were agreed and establish some forms of regulation and limit to the destructive effects of a conflict in a certain area or period of time.

[68] José Manuel Pureza, Construções Teóricas da Paz, pp. 9

[69] Oliver Richmond, *Peace in International Relations*, (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 109

[70] Tatiana Moura, "Novíssimas guerras, novíssimas pazes: desafios conceptuais e políticos", *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 71, (2005) pp. 77-96

traditionally underexplored as peacebuilding contexts or alternative and post-Westphalian forms of response to conflicts. Generally, these are developed in micro social spaces, which boast an emancipation potential and attend not only to the security interests, aspirations and calculations of governments, but also to every type of actor[71].

In this way, these grassroots peacebuilding processes and social experiences challenge the state-centered and elitist conflict management approaches, which ignore the intra-personal dimension and micro social level of violence. They defy the realist paradigm and traditional notion of security, showing that there are other paths to peace and other political and social spaces, levels and fronts in overcoming conflicts. They evidence that each person has a role in peacebuilding, that peace can be built in daily basis by the people, and that individuals and communities are the ultimate receptacles of the necessary social changes in which a positive and sustainable peace may prosper. They show that peace, in some contexts, must be built against the State, political actors and the armed conflict protagonists, contesting and defying their logics, dynamics, and perceptions in conflict while emphasizing other elements, values and ways toward transformation.

Also, another element that is expressed in the Peace Laboratories experience in several regions of Colombia is the micro territorial importance of peacebuilding. Opposing the conventional conflict management model, which hides and rejects the internal diversity of armed conflict that manifest on territorial and social terms under oppressive power dynamics and high-level politics, Peace Laboratories show diversity in unity. They lift up the existence of different regional dynamics and micro conflicts inside of a macro conflict and show that each territory has its own characteristics and problems relevant to peacebuilding concerns. They show the complexity and diversity operating in the field, and that a political and military solution to a conflict cannot necessarily be applied in a homogenous and linear way throughout a territory or population.

Conclusion

One of the Peace Laboratories' fundamental contributions to the political and academic discussion about peace is their emphasis and inclusion of other levels of violence, as well as other time horizons and dimensions in peacebuilding; those which the realist conflict management approaches tend to devalue and fail to acknowledge. If Gill Scott Hero sang, "the revolution will not be televised", the same can be applied to a conflict's end. Peacebuilding is a long, subtle and sometimes invisible process, indicating intrapersonal change processes, the transformation of social relations, and shifts in political, economical, and cultural structures.

The intention here is not to describe peace social mobilization on a local level as a panacea. Though there are limits placed upon social organizations and initiatives to influence the conflict's dynamics[72] and the structures that sustain them, civil society removes several of the current limitations in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, which is the reason for which they need to be integrated in

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[71] Oliver Richmond, *Peace in Internacional Relations*, pp. 109
[72] Catherine Barnes, Weaving the Web, p. 21

conflict transformation efforts on a wider scale and at a macro level. Governments and top level political actors are essential to conflict resolution and transformation. As Jenny Pearce[73] highlights, "without the active support of a legitimate political authority, civil society organizations in themselves face great difficulty in bringing about wider contextual changes". Peacebuilding from below is very important to positive and sustainable peace, but it is not a substitute for the higher political decisions and national negotiations, which involve the participation of the government and armed groups. Civil society depends to a large extent on the State, and cannot replace it[74].

In addition, the peace pockets that they create are not impervious to the conflict's issues and the culture of violence surrounding them. Civil society is often a mirror and a reflection of the society and the State in which it exists. It figures as an independent agent of change, but also as a product of the existent structures, which is what makes it permeable to its vices[75]. The Peace Laboratories are not peace islands; the conflict permeates its processes. In fact, like Ramsbotham *et al.* assert[76], peacebuilding from below remains subject to the same constrictions and dilemmas as top-down elite peacebuilding approaches, and does not avoid in any way the complexity of conflict resolution.

The social processes lead by the Peace Laboratories must therefore be understood essentially as experimental micro spaces in political, social and economical terms, making room for pockets of inclusive development and democracy[77]. Their main achievement is of a symbolic and social nature, while they are likewise instrumental in preserving hope and alternative views in the middle of conflict and adversity. They show that there are other levels and paths to conflict resolution beyond high-profile peace agreements and signatures. They demonstrate that each person has a role in peacebuilding, and that peace acquires different meanings and valuations in each social and territorial context. They take a position that peace does not only have a political, military and national dimension, but also a social, cultural, symbolic and territorial component. There is a plurality of peaces and conflict transformation possibilities; there is peace on a macro level as well as a "peace of little nothings".

They demonstrate, both from a conceptual point a view as well as in social practice, that peacebuilding is not restricted to the central government, armed actors and negotiation processes at a national level, but rather as one that has a social expression in the framework of social processes developed at the local and community level[78], configuring local peaces with distinct colors, expressions, dimensions, faces, scopes and scales.

Above all, it should be taken in consideration that peace sustainability and conflict transformation require the participation of wide sectors of society, and must run through all spheres of social relationships. Peace has a macro and micro dimension, to complement its structural and

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[73] Jenny Pearce, Violence, Power and Participation, pp. 29
[74] Martina Fischer, "Civil Society in Conflict Transformation: Ambivalence, Potentials and Challenges", Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, October (2006), pp. 21
[75] Raffaele Marchetti, Nathalie Tocci, Conflict society, pp. 13
[76] Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, pp. 229
[77] Econometría, "Informe Final: Evaluación de Resultados e Impactos Tempranos del Programa de Paz y Desarrollo y Laboratorio de Paz", Bogotá, (2007) March, pp. 13
[78] Esperanza Hernández, "La paz y la no violencia adquieren significado propio en Colombia", *Reflexión Política*, Año 4, N° 8, UNAB, Colombia (2002), pp. 179

individual one. Borrowing from Lederach's imagery,[79] to build a "house of peace", one must work, from the rooftop to its foundations; every level of conflict and peacebuilding is equally important for its sustainability and insurance against collapse.[80]

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[79] John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace,* pp. 37
[80] Miguel Barreto Henriques, ""Peacebuilding from below" in Colombia: the Peace Laboratories' case-study" in Marchetti, Raffael; Tocci, Nathalia (eds.), *Conflict Society and Peacebuilding*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), pp. 174