

STEPS TOWARD CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT

Case Study

Territorially-based alternatives in the Colombian Conflict

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June – July 2004



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

Introduction

This study will examine several different experiments by communities and local or regional organizations in different parts of Colombia attempting to create and defend “alternative spaces” in the context of a deep-rooted armed conflict that has been simultaneously overwhelming and insidious in its impact on civilian communities. The conflict in Colombia has gone on for over 4 decades, with a destructive impact in every region. It has involved a military apparatus that is still deeply entrenched in the “national security” cold-war counter-insurgency thinking of its staunchest ally – the United States, as well as numerous allied paramilitary organizations, a dozen or so guerrilla movements, and scores of nonviolent civilian attempts to create viable alternatives for sustainable community life.

The Colombian context has a rich variety of relevant experiences for the STEPS project. In our interviews the STEPS concept was rapidly embraced as reflective of a desire and struggle that many groups are already deeply, and articulately, involved in. Our respondents often mentioned additional cases for study – “You really should also look at this community over in Meta, that regional group of communities in Antioquia, this other effort in Santander,” and many more. The majority of these other experiences have not received the kind of international attention that has been garnered by the “peace communities” which first attracted the attention of the project. With this snapshot of community efforts in Choco, Urabá and Cauca, we have only scratched the surface.

The STEPS project is entering a terrain here that academics, and activist-oriented research institutions inside Colombia are also trying to analyze. Not only are there considerable Spanish-language documentation, analysis, and testimonies about many of these experiments, there are also rigorous theoretical analyses of the concepts and challenges of civilian territorial defense in the context of the Colombian conflict.¹ In addition, we learned of several in-depth studies currently in process – but not yet published – about some of the same cases we are studying, among others. These studies, once available, will be based on more extensive field study than this STEPS investigation, and should richly complement the current study.²

Part one focuses on the department of Choco, in the northwest corner of Colombia bordering the Pacific Ocean and Panama. Geographically and historically it is closely related to the Urabá region (between Choco and the Caribbean). will focus on the efforts of dozens of communities organized into two large organizations: OREWA, which represents all the indigenous communities in Choco, and COCOMACIA which represents all of the Afro-Colombian communities of the *Medio Atrato* region of Choco. Both of these organizations are based in the departmental capital – Quibdo, and have been supported by and allied with the Catholic Diocese of Quibdo.

¹ See “Acción y espacio,” by Orlando Fals Borda (TM Editores-IEPRI), Bogotá 2000; and “Territorio y Cultura,” by Grupo de Investigación sobre Territorialidades, Universidad de Caldas, Colombia, 2001.

² There is some work in progress sponsored by the NGO Project Counseling Service (in a joint project with the Universidad Javeriana of Bogotá) and by Oxfam. Already published works are “Con la esperanza intacta. Experiencias comunitarias de resistencia civil no violenta”, by Esperanza Hernandez and Marcela Salazar (Oxfam Colombia, 1999) and “La paz y la noviolencia adquieren significado propio en Colombia en las iniciativas de paz que construyen las bases desde lo local”, by Esperanza Hernandez in *Reflexion Politica* anno 4, no.8, 2002, Bucaramanga, Colombia.

Part two will examine look at the *peace communities* and *resistance communities* further north, in the *Bajo Atrato* region of Choco and in the bordering *Urabá* region of Antioquia. We can offer an in-depth discussion of only one case: *San Jose de Apartadó* in Urabá, followed by a brief comparative discussion of several other peace community experiences in the area. These communities all share a common traumatic experience of having been violently displaced from their land in the military/paramilitary offensives of the late 1990s and of subsequently having organized together to return to their land with deliberate political and community strategies to sustain themselves within the ongoing conflict.

Part three moves to the Andean department of Cauca, one of the most indigenous departments in Colombia. In Cauca, we will look at both indigenous and non-indigenous campesino strategies in a department with an impressive history of social mobilization and a self-perception of being “different” and “alternative” within Colombia, but which is also undergoing a rapid paramilitary invasion during 2000-2003.

In both these departments we are dealing with specific ethnic cultures (indigenous and Afro-Colombian), for whom the current conflict is but a small piece of a centuries-old struggle for autonomy and survival in the face of conquest, which runs parallel with a history of indigenous and Afro-Colombian assimilation and cultural and political co-optation by elites. These dynamics have been chronicled and analyzed in a huge body of literature in the fields of anthropology, ethnic studies, black studies, indigenous studies, sociology, Latin American history, and political science, replete with any number of competing theories and analyses regarding the strategies (and sources and successes of those strategies) of indigenous and afro-American peoples throughout the hemisphere. The authors are not experts in this enormous body of work, but recognize its relevance to this study, and would welcome additional commentary from those with greater expertise. We are well aware that this brief glimpse into current strategies, as expressed by a very limited number of respondents, is quite limited and vulnerable to error.

Acknowledgements

We must thank many people for their assistance with this study – for orienting and guiding us in Colombia, and for agreeing to be interviewed. But for reasons of their own security, we will not name individuals here. We are deeply indebted to individuals in all of the following organizations: the Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, both in Bogotá and in Cauca, the Comunidades de Autodeterminación, Vida y Dignidad (CAVIDA) from Cacarica, the Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó, members of the Community of Jiguamiandó, members of several other communities from Bajo Atrato, members of the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), the Comisión Vida Justicia y Paz from the Diócesis de Quibdó, as well as to the Diócesis itself, the Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (ACIA), the Organización Regional Embera-Wounaan (OREWA), the Centro Cultural Mama’u in Quibdó, the Asociación Comunal La Vega (Cauca), the Asociación Comunal de Sucre, the Asociación Comunal de Caldono, the Autoridades Indígenas de Colombia (AICO), the Coordinadora Integral del Macizo Colombia (CIMA), the Coordinadora Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), the Federación Nacional de Usuarios del Agro (Fensuagro), the Consejo Regional

Indígena del Cauca (CRIC), the Cooperativas del Sur del Cauca (CoSurCa), and the Colombia Project of Peace Brigadas International. We are also grateful for resources and advice provided by advisors at the Universidad Javeriana and the Universidad del Cauca.

We look forward with hope to the day when naming one's sources of information in Colombia would put no one in danger and we could acknowledge all their support publicly as they deserve.

Political Background

Colombia is currently the worst and longest-running situation of conflict and human rights abuse in the western hemisphere, with hundreds of political murders and dozens of massacres annually, and literally hundreds of thousands of new Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) every year. The war is escalating, with these statistics worsening each year. There are no coherent negotiations in sight, and little evidence of hope for a near-term solution to end the violence. On the contrary, Colombia's current president's explicit policy is to escalate the war, and he has ample international support coming from both the United States and Europe. (For more explicit data on Colombia's conflict and human rights situations, see appendices 1 and 2.)

The current war represents a destructive high point in a repeating cycle of civil war and repression that has gone on continuously since at least 1948, the beginning of the notorious period known as *La Violencia*, during which partisan struggles led by Conservative and Liberal elites claimed the lives of over 200,000 people. *La Violencia* officially ended with a "deal" struck in 1958 in which the same partisan elites agreed to share power via alternating control of the "elected" government.

This deal was but one demonstration of the endemic problem of *exclusion* in Colombian politics and governance. Colombia claims to be one of most stable democracies in all of Latin America – with few of the embarrassing historical episodes of coups and dictatorships prevalent among most of its neighbors. But it has been a partial democracy at best, which never represented the working class or the rural poor. Governance in Colombia has seldom extended beyond the major cities and towns, while rural farmers are continually subject to rule by force.

Rural Colombia has seen the following process repeated over and over: in the face of disputes over territory, the elite strategy is expropriation and displacement via the use of force, in collusion with military and/or irregular forces, and the establishment of social control by elites. Poor campesinos are then allowed to colonize new frontier territory, and after they have opened the door and increased the value of such territory, the elites come in again and take over to consolidate larger landholdings--either buying the lands of the peasants unable to pay the credits they owe, or again expelling them by force. Meanwhile, in areas of resource extraction (oil, emeralds, wood, etc.), the normal process has been for external forces to come in with rapid short-term investment to suck out wealth quickly from frontier zones, with no ongoing investment in the region or its people.

In this process of repeated colonization, rural farmers have thus been continually displaced from their lands by force, long before the current massive wave of such displacement in the hands of paramilitaries and guerrillas. Colombia's wars, historically and to this day, have always been about real estate. *La Violencia*, often described simplistically as a crazed feud between two

political parties, was no different. It left many thousands of peasants landless, as opportunists used the violence to establish local fiefdoms. In response to attack, peasants in many cases banded together into armed self-defense militias, to defend themselves and their land. The guerrilla group now known as the FARC (Rebel Armed Forces of Colombia) began during *La Violencia* as just such a self-defense militia, made up of poor campesinos – not communists, but rather Liberal party members.

The Liberal-Conservative deal in 1958 did nothing for such rural peasants. The elites stopped shooting each other, but the poor were still excluded, and still ruled by force. Many self-defense groups saw no rational motivation to lay down their arms, and thus Colombia's modern guerrilla war was already underway when *La Violencia* was declared over. The Colombian elites and military, with constant support from the United States, maintained ongoing "counter-insurgency" operations including the targeting of civilian social activists with selective assassinations, disappearances and threats, and the use of a variety of paramilitary organizations over the years.

The paramilitary strategy has come to dominate the landscape in Colombia, but it is not new. The use of "irregular" or secret forces to carry out dirty-war operations, combined with elaborate political and propaganda schemes to evade state accountability, was a well-tested and fully documented counter-insurgency strategy, used by most if not all Latin American militaries and at times explicitly recommended by United States advisors and trainers throughout the "Cold War" period of Latin American state terror regimes.

Over time the FARC grew to the point of operating throughout the national territory. It embraced a communist ideology in the 1960s, and developed a strict military structure, a reputation for effective military tactics, and an elusive resilience. Meanwhile many other guerrilla movements sprouted up, all within the same milieu of popular exclusion from control over politics, the economy, or land. Over time, many of these other groups eventually engaged in negotiations with the government and de-mobilized. The FARC also entered into negotiations in the 1980s, and one of the outcomes was the creation of the Patriotic Union, a left-wing political party. Subsequently, demobilized FARC members as well as the Patriotic Union's civilian activists (only some of whom were former combatants) were systematically exterminated by the thousands in a military-paramilitary campaign in the early 90s, logically making the FARC deeply suspicious of any future negotiations.

Currently, the two primary remaining guerrilla organizations in Colombia are the FARC, with an estimated 15,000 combatants, and the ELN (Army of National Liberation), with an estimated 5,000 combatants (these figures vary widely). The largest Colombian guerrilla organizations have funded their operations primarily through different kinds of what they call "taxation" of local economic elites. Kidnapping or threat of kidnapping, especially of ranchers, became a lucrative source of extortion income. Demanding "protection money" or a percentage of income from local business was another (with the implicit threat of violence or kidnapping to back up the demand). As the drug industry expanded its operations in rural areas in the 1970s and 1980s, it also became a logical target for the guerrillas, who saw it as but another version of capitalist elite-driven profitmaking at the expense of the rural poor. The drug industry, facing increasing kidnapping and extortion by guerrillas, itself became a major supporter of the paramilitary strategy.

The military-paramilitary-drug cartel linkage escalated significantly in the 1980s. The kidnapping of two children of the Medellin cartel prompted a coalition of drug barons, ranchers and the military to collaborate in the formation and strengthening of a new and large paramilitary organization MAS (“Death to Kidnappers”). MAS viciously wiped out not only suspected guerrillas from the group involved in the kidnapping, but hundreds of civilian social activists labeled as guerrilla sympathizing within the prevailing anti-communist state ideology. MAS’s murderous rampage continued for years, and was interpreted by the military as an extremely successful counter-insurgency effort, causing a rapid increase in the military’s commitment to the paramilitary strategy. MAS spawned a number of other paramilitary operations, and a vastly expanded network of such groups now operates under the current organization AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or United Self-Defense Militias of Colombia). The close financial links with the drug industry have increased³, and the strategic alliance with the army remains the same.

Prior to the mid 1990s, statistics showed the one of the major human rights abusers in Colombia was consistently the army. Under increasing international human rights pressure, and also under a combination of human rights and drug-control pressure from the US, Colombia in the 1990s needed to clean up its image, and chose increasingly to “paramilitarize” its war. There was a phenomenal decrease in abuses attributed to the army since 1997-8, and a corresponding but much larger increase in such abuses by paramilitaries. New evidence of collusion between the army and the paramilitaries emerges daily.

Currently, an estimated 13.000 paramilitaries are represented by the umbrella organization AUC under the leadership of Carlos Castaño.⁴ Castaño has been an active paramilitary leader since the period of the MAS. The AUC is universally acknowledged to commit the majority of atrocities in Colombia, atrocities to which even Castaño admits (claiming they are a necessary evil in the fight against guerrillas). He and his colleagues have been indicted numerous times, nationally and internationally, for murder and other human rights abuses, as well as drug trafficking. Yet despite an unabashedly “public” presence in the country, he is never arrested.

In terms of propaganda, the Colombian government has done an impressive Goebbel-esque job of instilling doubt in the international community’s mind with respect to the nature of the paramilitaries, yielding debates regarding their “autonomy” which would be absurd were their consequences less horrible. We will not sink into those debates here.⁵ The paramilitaries may be institutions with their own leadership, leadership who are self-interested power-seekers like

³ Leaders of the AUC were indicted by the US as drug traffickers in late 2002. Carlos Castaño admits funding the AUC off of drug money.

⁴ The current paramilitary universe is also full of factions, divisions, and power struggles the complexities of which cannot be described here.

⁵ See, for instance the following reports by Human Rights Watch/Americas, *Colombia’s Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996), Colombia; *The Ties that Bind: Colombia and the Military-Paramilitary Links*, (February 2000) and *The Sixth Division*, (October, 2001) Human Rights Watch sharply criticized the Government for failing to address effectively the problem of continued military-paramilitary cooperation and general impunity for human rights violators and also charged that the Government exaggerated the effectiveness of its actions against paramilitarism with "a sophisticated public relations campaign."

many others, and who have their own motivations and ambitions, and their own semi-autonomous command structure. *But the paramilitaries are nonetheless a strategy of the Colombian state, its army and the traditional economic elites.* The army supports them, directs them, provides them intelligence, houses them, transports them, and makes sure to warn them whenever a zealous prosecutor considers the possibility of arresting one of them.

The paramilitaries are currently engaged in an extremely controversial “negotiation” with the government, allegedly with the objective of de-mobilization. Many Colombian human rights activists assail these negotiations as a farce (the state negotiating with itself) that only further distances the state from accountability. Most recently, even some army leadership oppose the ongoing negotiation between the paramilitaries and the government, arguing that de-mobilizing the paramilitaries would be a strategic military mistake.⁶

But the paramilitaries are more than a strategic military tool of the army. They are also closely allied with and financed by a range of Colombia’s economic elites. They directly implement or facilitate the economic strategies of these elites. They are deeply enmeshed in the drug industry. In ranching territory, they are linked to the large ranchers. In mining territory they are linked to the kingpins of the mining industry. They have close connections nationally with financiers and speculators in numerous other businesses. These economic elites, in turn, facing rapid developments in terms of globalization and international competition, are under increasing pressure to promote international investment and resource extraction, which affects the urgency of the paramilitary strategy in many regions of conflict.

As a result, the paramilitary strategy has complex regional nuances affected by both military demands and economic interests. One analysis of their direct conflicts with guerrillas in many regions is that it reflects their need to control territory in order to corner more of the drug market and consequent profit. Elsewhere, they will displace a community in the name of clearing out support for guerrillas, but then facilitate the taking over of that land by allied ranchers. Or, again with an ideological defense, they will destroy a union that is bothering a local industrialist. The vigor with which they seek to eliminate the guerrilla presence in an area is closely tied to the extent to which that guerrilla group has been successfully extorting funds from their business allies, or the perceived profitability of the territory.

Nazih Richani argues that Colombia had a stable war system for decades in which neither the army nor the guerrilla were seeking total victory.⁷ The army maintained control of urban areas, but did not directly contest guerrilla control in many rural areas. This lasted until about 10 years ago, after which the guerrilla began to challenge the military more directly, and the state likewise started more seriously combating the guerrilla, expanding the paramilitary strategy. An important contributing factor was the rapidly increasing financing available to both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries as a result of control over coca-producing territories.

⁶ “Colombian Fighters’ Drug Trade is Detailed, Report Complicates Efforts to End War,” by Scott Wilson, Washington Post, Thursday, June 26, 2003, page A01.

⁷ Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, State University of New York Press, 2002.

Therefore, the stable ‘war system’ is gone, and there have more recently been significant changes in territorial control, and more “disputed” territory, leading to much greater displacement. Because of the economic costs of maintaining large forces (and becoming habituated to drug-related income), both the guerrilla and the paramilitary are under constant pressure to control more territory, not merely for political or military reasons, but also to have sufficient “taxable” coca-producing territory under their control to maintain the necessary cash flow to finance the war.

The civilian impact has generally been worse in territory where the paramilitaries are disputing guerrilla control, or where the paramilitaries are supporting a major push for economic exploitation. The paramilitaries have used scorched earth tactics (massacres, assassinations, destruction of crops and houses, mass displacement, etc.), as well as more subtle tactics of bribery and co-optation. The FARC has also been guilty of increasing abuses against civilians. Both the FARC and ELN have long been willing to kidnap for profit and kill suspected civilian collaborators with the enemy, but in earlier periods

Political Violence statistics	
January – June, 2003	
Extrajudicial executions and international homicide of a protected person	922
Political assassinations	504
Combat deaths	1074
Cases of torture	157
Disappearance	132
Arbitrary detention	446
Kidnapping	207

most of these abuses of civilians were targeting only ranchers and other elites. Now it is not uncommon for the FARC to accuse poor campesinos of collaboration with the enemy, and to engage in assassinations, displacement and massacres. Some argue that the guerrilla’s easy access to drug and extortion-based funding has lessened their accountability to their original working class or peasant constituencies. Although the FARC claims to be an “army of the people” in the face of oppression, its human rights behavior has deeply damaged the credibility of that ideological position.

The FARC has gained strength over the last decade, numerically and economically. Likewise, the army and the paramilitaries have expanded their capacity. The army and the paramilitaries are on the offensive, with increased aerial forces thanks to Plan Colombia, and the FARC may have lost a certain strategic capacity in recent years. But the FARC has always been resilient, and has never seemed to be in a hurry, so any predictions about military outcomes in the Colombian war would be premature.

An additional recent dynamic in the conflict to keep in mind is that the international “anti-terrorist” environment since September 11, 2001 is facilitating counter-insurgency – in the broad “old-fashioned” sense of Latin American “national security” state terror regimes of the 1950s – 80s. In the name of anti-terrorism, and with international approval, the Colombian state is now justifying steps against the civilian population and in particular against social movements which attack their capacity to organize and protest, including manipulation of the justice system and new legislation to facilitate incarceration and prosecution of civilian political activists.

Colombia’s social landscape is also a crucial factor in understanding community attempts to create alternative spaces. The country is multi-ethnic, with a significant indigenous and Afro-Colombian population (about 1/5 of its population). It has been historically “regionalized” with

minimal economic and social contact between different regions⁸, yielding significantly different regional subcultures even among the mestizo majority. Both Choco and Cauca are characterized by strong ethnic minority presence and by a strong sense of regional identity.

Colombia also has a history of nonviolent popular resistance, mass movements, union movements, and peasant mobilizations. The indigenous are proud of resistance efforts spanning 500 years, and the Afro-Colombian population has an impressive history of slave and freed-slave resistance movements. There is a long history of communal autonomy linked to resistance, in these and other communities. This has emerged in opposition to conquest (either Spanish invaders, or rich *colonos* (colonists) coming in search of new land or exploitation of resources) and because the abandonment of rural areas by the state created the necessity for self-sufficiency and self-defense. Communal autonomy has been recognized legally for both indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians.

⁸ A national terrain dominated by two parallel rugged mountain ranges has historically split the country up in this regional fashion, without an economic infrastructure to create linkages among regions until the highway system was improved in the later 20th century. More recently, the conflict itself has diminished highway usage, again limiting social interactions among regions.

Part one: Choco

Introduction/background

The Choco department, together with some of the bordering regions of Urabá, as a combined region has some of the qualities of an “alternative space.” Within this regional space there are a number of concrete and distinctly different local experiments. We will examine two organizations’ experiences:

- OREWA – The organization of all Indigenous communities in Choco
- ACIA (or COCOMACIA – “Consejo Comunitario de la Asociacion Campesina Integral del Atrato” – the Community Council of the Integrated Association of Campesinos of Atrato.) This is the association unifying all the Afro-Colombian communities in Medio Atrato.

Some of our discussion will cover the whole department (such as the “Foro de Dialogo”, and the organizational work of OREWA). However, the specific cases we have studied make up only a portion of the department, so we can only draw conclusions about these cases, without generalizing to other communities or regions of the department. Thus, for instance, ACIA represents only the Afro-Colombian communities of the Medio Atrato. Other Afro-Colombian Choco communities outside of the Medio Atrato (e.g. further south, and in some other parts of Bajo Atrato) have also achieved collective land titles and are defending their autonomy, but we cannot assume that they are using the same strategies without further study. Nor can we draw any conclusions about their successes or failures.

Special characteristics of the region

Choco is a land of water and jungle, where large and small rivers are the regional bloodstreams, and transportation for most people means only boats, (and for the privileged few, airplanes). Men and boys in Choco discuss the varieties of outboard motors with an intensity reserved only for automobiles in many other places. The sub-regions of the department follow the rivers: *Bajo Atrato*, *Medio Atrato* and *Alto Atrato*, (lower, middle and upper Atrato) named for their location on the Atrato river, are three of the major sub-regions. Control of the rivers means control of the conflict and of the economy. The region of Urabá, Antioquia (see map in appendix 2) borders on the north east of Chocó, and is also linked by water: the Atrato River is the major connector between most Choco and the outside world, and it feeds into the Gulf of Urabá near the Urabá city of Turbo.

Choco’s wet jungle land is difficult to access, and difficult to exploit for agriculture. Therefore it was one of the most recent areas of Colombia to be colonized – in several waves during the early-to-mid 20th century. This colonization has been almost entirely poor Afro-Colombians, coming from Antioquia and other Caribbean coastal regions. Choco has a majority Afro-Colombian population. The next largest group is the indigenous people who were already there. A much smaller mestizo population is more concentrated in the larger towns. The Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations have co-existed as neighbors, living separately in small villages on subsistence agriculture and fishing. Both have deep traditions of community and ethnic autonomy – autonomy in practice, and autonomy in terms of ideological commitment. Both have been historically excluded from the power circles of the elites in Colombia. The social

systems here are closely affected by the self-sufficient reality of the economies. People are living by and large from their own subsistence agriculture and small local trading, with only a minor component of the economy made up of workers who earn income outside the community, for instance doing migrant labor, logging or other hired work.

Due to the difficulties of terrain and economic exploitation, the territory has been ignored by the state until very recently. But it does have a significantly strategic location: the Panamanian border facilitates contraband business. It has navigable rivers and is close to major Caribbean ports (Cartagena and Barranquilla). Its water access to both the Atlantic and Pacific has been fuel for speculation about the creation of a commercial transportation alternative in Colombia to compete with the Panama Canal. Its rivers and water are provoking interest from the fish-farm branches of agro-industry. It has some mineral resources, and many precious woods. It has some land, which is exploitable for grazing, and the ecosystem lends itself to the production of African Palm Oil, which is also attracting investors.

The intense violence of civil war is relatively recent in Choco, with a major military/paramilitary onslaught beginning only in the mid-1990s. The recent interest in economic exploitation of the territory is seen by many to be fueling the conflict.

Understanding the conflict in Choco

The extension of this war into the previously abandoned regions of Choco represents an intersection of economic and military interests both focused on control over territory. Prior to the 1990s, the ingredients of structural conflict were gradually coming together, but the ample availability of land avoided major collision. Sporadic incursions for economic exploitation caused hardships, but the population was able to accommodate it. Economic penetration in Choco was mostly limited to the extraction of woods and minerals, a process that demanded neither territorial control nor infrastructure. State presence was minimal to non-existent.

In the 1980s, with facilitating support from the Diocese of Quibdo, organizational efforts began to bring communities together for mutual support, resulting in two large organizations: OREWA and ACIA. Both groups became autonomous of the Diocese, with steadily increasing capacities for organization, developed over a period before wholesale conflict engulfed the region. A crucial achievement of both groups was to establish legal control over the territory via officially sanctioned collective land titles. This was achieved first by the indigenous, and later (in the 1990s) by the Afro-Colombians.

The guerrillas had some presence in the region prior to the 1990s, but without any integration with the population. The guerrilla used this remote area for training, rest, and the passage of contraband. There was no military confrontation – because there was no state presence to confront. Nor was there much cooptation or recruitment, as the guerrilla was largely mestizo, with little connection with the local Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples. The guerrilla presence was minimally exploitive and did not attract state or paramilitary response, since there were few sources of income to tax, and the region was of little strategic interest.⁹

⁹ The guerrilla did “tax” some of the earlier entries of external extractive industries, such as “Maderas del Darien.”

Despite relative peace, the seeds of structural conflict were in place: there was a gradually increasing external strategic and economic interest in the land just as these communities were consolidating their legal control over it. In bordering territories the war was escalating. The 1990s witnessed a series of interventionary dynamics in Choco among various actors, each reinforcing the other in a process of escalation.

The escalation of conflict

Armed interventions followed economic interests. The bordering area of Urabá and Antioquia was very strategic, due to the presence of the Pan-American Highway, and the extremely lucrative “Banana Corridor.” This region had seen some of the strongest development of paramilitary organizations as well a guerrilla presence spanning decades. In the early nineties, mineral and fish industry interests accompanied the entry of a paramilitary presence from Antioquia, via Carmen del Atrato and Quibdó. In the north, Urabá-based ranchers began expanding into the northern Choco and establishing cattle ranches. In 1996, the military and paramilitaries entered the Bajo Atrato from Urabá, rapidly expanding up the river to the Medio Atrato. Paramilitaries also entered the region from the south via the San Juan River, a mining region. Throughout the region, local residents began to be terrorized and displaced from their homes.

The guerrilla also began to expand its presence. It had the double motive of both defending a territory where it had traditionally been the only armed presence, and the desire to take advantage of the increasing potential for revenue (for instance, as ranchers moved in to the areas of Urabá bordering Choco, the traditional guerrilla revenue potential of taxation/extortion of ranchers increased.). Similarly, as extractive industries moved in (wood, mining) and other agrobusiness development (especially African Palm, fish and shrimp farming, and coca), the guerrillas were more easily able to economically sustain a larger presence in Choco.

The major paramilitary and economic interventions of the mid-to-late 1990s collided directly with the well-advanced processes of organization and control of land of the ACIA and the OREWA. All the indigenous communities had legalized collective titles to their land, and decisions about land exploitation required community-level decisions. Likewise, in the Medio-Atrato, the ACIA by 1997 controlled a single collective land title for the entire non-indigenous area of the Medio Atrato, encompassing 119 communities. In Bajo Atrato, the organizational processes were not as far advanced, and had not yet achieved as much in terms of collective land titles.

Therefore, territorial control in much of the region was legally fixed. The conflict amounted to a military and economic intervention attempting to gain *de facto* control over territory that was indisputably the property of the residents. The existence of collective titles to lands posed a serious problem for this intervention (which was otherwise not distinct from a long history of such ‘expropriating’ interventions all over Colombia). It is quite possible that those implementing this strategy of expropriating land via force and displacement were unaware of the legal problems they would confront. These communities still owned the land even if they were displaced. *Thus, the existence of these collective titles provided a powerful motivation not only to return to their homes, but also to stay together as communities.* The intervening forces (economic and paramilitary) tried many strategies to “buy” or “use” these lands, but the only legal solution requires the total consent of the collectivity that possesses the title, and a negation

of that title. This means, on the one hand, that communities with collective title over their land are in a strong position to protect it from usurpation. But it also means that their processes of organization and collective unity are directly challenging a combination of implacable forces (economic elites, the military, and the paramilitaries), whose logical response is to violently target and weaken those same collective processes with a variety of abusive and intimidating strategies.

ACIA and OREWA strategies

There are of course deep contrasts between indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and this study would be enriched by a much more complex ethnological or sociological approach than we are able to provide. What we discovered, though, was that in the face of a similar conflict setting, and with important similarities in terms of their communities' legal positions, ACIA and OREWA have responded to the war with remarkably similar defensive strategies, which we will analyze together.

Cultural identity

Unity and identity are key factors for both cultures in resisting. Within their separate communities, indigenous and Afro-Colombians each have a high level of homogeneity, shared history, traditions, and belief systems. They see both the paramilitary strategy and the militaristic impositions of the guerrillas as deliberately aimed at destroying that cultural unity. Both groups stressed the importance of strengthening cultural traditions *as a strategy* towards maintaining unity in the face of the conflict. This unity helps individual members withstand pressures to collaborate with armed groups.

Legal Autonomy

The crucial importance of collective land titles and legislated community self-governance cannot be overstressed. Both indigenous and Afro-Colombians in Choco are taking advantage of unique legal realities – realities they helped to create. The indigenous have long had legal collective rights to territory, and recognized autonomy with respect to that territory, and with respect to their own self-governance within it. For Afro-Colombians, this is a much more recent achievement.

In 1991, a Constituent Assembly created a new constitution for Colombia, which was quite progressive in many ways.¹⁰ The Afro-Colombian organizations of the pacific regions, together with indigenous representatives to the Constituent Assembly, united in an advocacy campaign to pressure that constituent assembly to constitutionally recognize the cultural rights of both groups. In this campaign they were also promoting a proposal to allow for collective titles over their land. In a campaign called the “*Telegrama Negro*” they mobilized over 10,000 telegrams to the assembly from Afro-Colombians. This was combined with media strategies and behind the scenes negotiations with assembly representatives, and direct action protests including the

¹⁰ The re-writing of the Colombian constitution was part of a ‘peace process,’ related to the earlier-mentioned negotiations between the government and guerrilla organizations in the 1980s.

takeover of the Quibdo mayor's office, and the local agrarian reform office in Choco. The bishop of Quibdo played a negotiating role in the process.¹¹

The new Constitution did not create exceptional rules for ethnic minorities, but it acknowledged the multi-ethnic pluralist character of the country and opened the door to specific legislation with respect to collective properties. Transitive Article 55 in the Constitution set in motion the legislative process which would yield, in 1993, "Law 70" – a complex articulation of the rights of Afro-Colombian communities to autonomy, self-governance and collective titles over their lands. In the two years leading up to the passage of "Law 70," ACIA continued to organize advocacy campaigns, as well as participating in the promulgation of legislative proposals. They organized a series of legal education campaigns in all ACIA communities.

"Law 70" was an unexpected and powerful milestone. It recognized the rights of Afro-Colombians to collective land, and sets up mechanisms for establishing titles. The collective land titles include "community collective land" which can never be sold and only exploited by agreement of the community, and other lands assigned to families, which can only be sold to other families within the community. Law 70 also recognizes Afro-Colombians' right to establish autonomous community mechanisms to protect their culture, identity, and rights. It recognizes these communities' control over their own development, and establishes the legitimacy of "Community Councils" to oversee that development.¹²

Finally, after years of legislative pressure and organization to unite the communities, in 1997 ACIA applied for and obtained a single land title covering nearly 700,000 hectares: the combined land of 119 Afro-Colombian communities in the Medio Atrato (91 located in Choco and 28 located in Antioquia.) These united communities consolidated their autonomous legal control over their territory and its development/exploitation, *just as the paramilitaries of the AUC were moving in to wrest it from them.*

Internal Social Control

Both ACIA and OREWA stressed the need for a unified community approach to all contact with the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the army. This required a discipline that was not easy to sustain. For instance, both ethnic communities have a cultural "hospitality" tendency, and are also under pressure to accommodate with those in power for the sake of survival. These tendencies historically left the communities open to infiltration and manipulation by armed groups. They would engage in commerce with armed groups. At times they allowed armed groups in the area to impose their own "justice" or mete out punishment to any offenders to the local order, rather than insisting on their own autonomy in matters of internal social control. These contacts and relationships lead to retaliations and accusations by the opposing armed groups when the conflict escalated.

¹¹ ACIA's political/legal campaigns with respect to the constitution and Law 70 are outlined in *Medio Atrato: Territorio de Vida*, (ISBN 958-8196-01-9) a book published in 2002 by ACIA and the *Red de Solidaridad Social*.

¹² For a much more detailed legal discussion of Law 70, see *Derecho Territorial de las Comunidades Negras*, by Francisco Javier Ocampo Villegas, Editorial Nueva America, Bogotá, 1996.

To sustain independence in the face of the increasing presence of armed groups, the communities have now had to define clear codes of conduct for their members, defining responses with respect to all armed groups.¹³ ACIA called them “*reglamentos de conducta*” (Rules of Conduct), which were written up and agreed to, and ostensibly served to give all community members a united “discourse” to armed players they come into contact with, minimizing the risk of actions that would later provoke retaliation. This discourse is, essentially: “If you want us to maintain a separation from the other side, we have to be able to do the same with respect to you.” OREWA had a similar process, included in a package of agreements called “*planes de vida*” (plans for life).

In principle, both indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have legal authority to judge and punish offenders within their communities, and this power has been used to deter community members from allowing themselves to be recruited by armed groups.

Reactive Strategies for Confronting Challenges to the territory

All communities were facing a similar set of challenges from armed groups, and were developing numerous responses, which we will list briefly here:

Armed actor strategy: voluntary recruitment

Community reactive strategies:

- Strengthen cultural unity.
- Create codes of conduct.
- Impose sanctions: such as threatening expulsion from the community. Indigenous representatives also mentioned sanctions against women who get involved with combatants from any group.

Armed actor strategy: forced recruitment

Community reactive strategies:

- *Human Rights Denunciations*, using national and international networks
- *Indigenous response*: Direct action - immediately seeking out the armed group and demanding the return of the recruited person (be it voluntary or forced). Some respondents described incidents of encircling a group of guerrillas and demanding they hand the person over. (Such a strategy was not described against paramilitaries).

Armed actor strategy: Attacks against the right to life (assassinations, disappearances, threats of same)

Community reactive strategies:

- *Human Rights Denunciations*, using national and international networks.
- *Organizing investigatory commissions*, including (a) commissions of the leadership of the communities, (b) commissions involving the Diocese or other national actors (including State representatives, such as the *Defensoria*¹⁴, etc), (c) commissions involving international NGOs, diplomatic corps, UN, whose reports ratchet up the pressure of community denunciations.. (d) mixtures of the above.

¹³ We have no data to judge the extent to which this discipline is successfully maintained.

¹⁴ The *Defensoria* and its head, the *Defensor*, is the Colombian equivalent of an Ombudsman’s office, an ‘independent’ state institution charged with looking after the rights of citizens.

- *Direct communication with armed groups:* OREWA says they talk directly to the armed groups demand a justification for the action. (Note: the discourse of OREWA is consistently to speak of “armed actors” rather than to differentiate between the guerrilla and the paramilitaries and the army, so it is hard to pin down and parse out some assertions like this, to distinguish whether this approach was tried with all armed groups, or only some.)

Armed actor strategy: Economic and physical “blockade” (robbery, taxes, inhibitions or intimidation against travel)

It is standard practice of paramilitaries and to a lesser extent the guerrilla to establish roadblocks. In Choco, this means checkpoints along the rivers. At these roadblocks goods and money are often confiscated, on the grounds that they are allegedly being transported to support the opposing armed group. These roadblocks often have established thresholds of some fixed value or quantities per person, above which goods will not be allowed to pass. These checkpoints are a locus of frequent threats and sometimes detentions or disappearances, and thus the fear they provoke also inhibits travel generally. This *de facto* blockade slowly strangles a community’s economic exchanges with others, eventually promoting displacement.

OREWA response strategies:

- Public denunciation
- Maximalist discourse: “*we will always travel and not allow the blockades and threats to stop us. If we accept that we cannot pass, that is the end.*”
- Always travel in groups
- Monitor all comings and goings of community members to be alert to look for any community member who fails to show up when he or she is due to show up.

ACIA response strategies:

- Public denunciation
- Community stores: With the help of the Diocese of Quibdo, ACIA established community stores in many communities.
- *Noah’s Ark:* In order to stock the community stores, ACIA bought a large boat, calling it Noah’s Ark. Once a month this boat is loaded in Quibdo with enough goods to re-stock all the community stores. The boat then travels down the river, with visible international and/or church accompaniment on board, delivering supplies to each community. They announce with complete transparency the entire itinerary of the boat trip over the radio in advance. The political cost to an armed group of an attack or robbery against *Noah’s Ark* was much higher than against an individual merchant or community.¹⁵

Armed actor strategy: forced displacement

Public strategy of OREWA, ACIA, and Diocese is the same:

- Discourage displacement. Stress the traumatic costs of displacement.
- Human rights denunciations and commissions (as above).
- Encourage people and communities to resist pressure to leave.
- *Local safe spaces:* In the event of local displacement, set up “safe spaces” with temporary lodging inside the community territory, to minimize the distance and duration of displacements. ACIA calls these “Humanitarian Centers,” OREWA calls them “*Dearade*”. In

¹⁵ Noah’s Ark was robbed only once, by the FARC, shortly before the massacre of Bojayá.

both cases, this appears to be a new strategy that has not yet been fully tested. It is a strategy that takes into account that rural family residences or neighborhoods are often quite isolated and vulnerable to intimidation. Once attacked or threatened, people may feel safer coming together in greater numbers, without taking the extreme step of flight to a distant location.¹⁶

- In the event of serious displacement, the strategy is to immediately provide support and hospitality to those displaced, and then encourage and organize the most prompt collective return possible, with the help of political pressure using alliances, and *commissions*. Numerous communities in this region have had to flee their homes, but a number of them then have been able to return with the organized support of ACIA, OREWA, the Diocese of Quibdo, the Diocese of Apartadó, and other Colombian and international NGOs.

Box 1: The Bojayá massacre

The worst single attack affecting ACIA members occurred in May 2002 in Bellavista, Bojayá – notoriously the worst massacre by the FARC in the entire war. A paramilitary contingent openly set up a base in this community, and the FARC attacked them. During the fighting, the civilian population took refuge in the church, and the paramilitaries maintained their positions near that church. At one point, the FARC launched a cylinder bomb, which hit the church directly, causing 119 deaths and many injuries. The use of cylinder bombs has been one of the major criticisms against the FARC by human rights groups, given their inaccuracy and indiscriminate impact. The FARC, and other local groups, have also blamed the paramilitaries for having used the community as a shield. The state and the army used this event to justify a rapid expansion of army and paramilitary presence in the area, resulting in a post-massacre increase in intimidations of neighboring communities. The combination of the massacre and subsequent intimidations led to substantial displacement. ACIA, the Quibdo Diocese, and national and international NGOs vehemently condemning both armed groups as well as the state and army (for not having intervened in the days before the massacre when local residents were protesting the paramilitary presence.)

Discussion

Collective unity and collective land control were the two dominant themes of our interviews. As we described, the collective land control strategy preceded the escalation of the conflict: ACIA had been working to achieve collective title to the land for a decade or so, and OREWA already had it. They saw collective land control as inherent part of their culture, but achieving such control involved the creation of strong organizational links – a tight fabric connecting many communities, and educating them about national political and legal realities in order to demand their rightful place within those realities. The multi-community organizational unity and the experiences of national political advocacy gained during those processes proved to be crucial strengths for these communities when the conflict exploded in their villages in the late 1990s.

The paramilitary incursion and escalation of conflict in Choco began over 7 years ago. ACIA and OREWA communities are still facing desperate economic pressures due to blockades, temporary displacements, and continued lack of support from the state. They face constant insidious attempts by outside economic forces to break down their commitment to autonomous control

¹⁶ The wisdom of this strategy depends on whether there is a reasonable risk of large-scale “massacre.” If so, collecting everyone together would not be advisable, as the massacre in Bojayá demonstrated.

over land-use. There are continuous pressures on individuals to “sell” land they have no legal right to sell, in order that it could be exploited by outsiders, for, for instance, for African Palm Oil production.

Worse still, they are still living in a war-zone facing constant harassment and intimidation, which shows no sign of diminishment. They fear of being caught up in (or deliberately placed in) the line of fire between the paramilitaries and guerrillas, such as occurred in the Bojayá massacre. Their organizations must constantly put precious energy into human rights denunciations and other short-term defensive actions, weakening their capacity to invest in long-term community development.

It appears to us that despite these pressures and the ongoing ravages of war, these communities have by and large managed to maintain and even strengthen their sense of unity and autonomy. They still have legal control of the land, and are pursuing their own development strategies. Although there is individual attrition, these communities have mostly avoided mass displacement. The two organizations believe that their organizational strategies revolving around collective unity and cultural autonomy are crucial to their survival within the surrounding conflict.

No one can predict the local outcomes of the war in Colombia, so we cannot say how ACIA and OREWA’s strategies for autonomy and survival will fare as the conflict continues to escalate. We left Quibdo, however, inspired and deeply affected by the commitment of the leaders and activists in these communities to stay together and defend their homelands, while withstanding great suffering and fear.

Part II: The Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó

Part one focused on long-term campaigns that preceded the advent of increased conflict. With the rapid escalation of the war after 1996, the Choco-Urabá region also saw several more spontaneous or trauma-inspired experiences, in which communities officially declared themselves as alternative spaces, either as “peace communities” or “communities in resistance.” These included:

- San Jose de Apartadó (Peace Community in Urabá)
- Cacarica - A community of “Self-determination, Life and Dignity” in Bajo Atrato.
- San Francisco de Asis and several other associated communities – A group of “Peace communities” in Bajo Atrato.
- Jiguamiando- “Resistance communities” in Bajo Atrato.

We turn our attention here to the specific case of *San José de Apartadó*.

San José de Apartadó (hereafter San José) is a township, or collection of small villages, founded in 1970 and located in the hills of Abibe, a mountain range running north to south on the eastern side of Urabá. (see map in appendix 2). San José is legally part of the municipality of Apartadó, which in turn is the principal city of Urabá, located below San José right on the Pan-American Highway and forming a key city in the northwestern ‘Banana Corridor’. During the 1990s San José was made up of 3000 people spread out among 32 villages. Some of these villages were as much as 8 hours on foot from the town center of San José. Most of the inhabitants are white¹⁷ peasants, who arrived in the middle of the 20th century fleeing *La Violencia* in other regions. The economy is small-plot farming for subsistence and small-scale trade, and some livestock ranching. As in the other regions studied, the state has had a very fragile or minor presence in San José.

San José is separated from the city of Apartadó by a rugged uphill road. Although it takes only 45 minutes in a four-wheel drive, this difference amounts to a significant border and isolation. Until the early 1990s, the guerrilla¹⁸ had a regular presence in Apartadó, and in general in all the municipalities along the Pan-American Highway in the Banana Corridor. There has long been an intense struggle for control of the region between the guerrillas, the army, and paramilitaries financed by the ranchers and banana plantation owners. The conflict intensified in 1995 with the entry of the ACCU (“Self-defense Militias of Campesinos of Cordoba and Urabá,” the founding paramilitary organization of the national umbrella AUC). The situation was complicated by peace negotiations which had led to the de-mobilization of the smaller guerrilla group EPL – after which some of the EPL were co-opted into the paramilitaries, and there ensued a terribly bloody dirty war against other former guerrillas and all social organizations in the region. By the end of the 1990s the army/paramilitary alliance gained control of the Pan-American Highway and the Banana Corridor, and then began to move into the Bajo Atrato, culminating with a brutal sweep of the Bajo Atrato area causing massive displacement in 1996-97, known as *Operation Genesis*.

¹⁷ *Blanco* (white) in ethnic terms in Colombia signifying Latino, or non-indigenous and non-Afro-Colombian.

¹⁸ Mostly the FARC, but also the EPL and ELN.

But controlling the Pan-American Highway did not guarantee control of the entire region, because up in the hills and mountains (such as the Abibe, where San José was located), the guerrillas were still able to move about, with relatively uninhibited access to Choco and to other parts of the country. Thus the military has always seen the hills of Abibe as a strategic location to control, especially San José because it is one of the key access points between the Banana corridor and these mountains.

During the 1970s, the army repression against campesinos had created sympathies with the Communist Party, which was active in the region, and later with the Patriotic Union. The combination in the 1990s of local military dynamics with the nationwide repressive campaign against the Patriotic Union made San José a frequent scene of combats and attacks against the civilian population – eventually causing massive displacement.

The Establishment of a “Peace Community”

In 1996, the Diocese of Apartadó, together with CINEP (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, Center for Research and Popular Education) the Inter-Congregational Commission for Justice and Peace, and the Dutch NGO Pax Christi proposed a new idea to the leaders of the community of San José: the creation of a “neutral zone” based on the principles of international humanitarian law. The plan was to achieve a higher level of respect for a civilian population committed to non-collaboration with all armed actors, to generate attention to this neutrality through formal declarations, external political support and church-based and NGO-based development projects.

The discussions about this strategy lasted several months. Meanwhile, other communities in Bajo Atrato were still being displaced by Operation Genesis, or enduring life in refugee camps in Pavarando and Turbo and elsewhere, so these same NGOs also began discussing the ‘peace community’ idea with them (See final section of Part II for further discussion of these cases.) Thus these separate ‘peace community’ experiences had nearly simultaneous beginnings, though they would have quite distinct outcomes.

Overall, the strategy discussion was marked by the following dynamics:

- Most of the discussion took place within the organizations that were proposing the strategy. The participation of the population was organized through a series of workshops, mostly attended by community leaders. The more general population was in some cases involved, but primarily in the final ratification stage.¹⁹
- The process was influenced by a particular event outside of the region that had national repercussion via the media. During that period the communities of the Indigenous Organization of Antioquía publicly declared a strategy of “active neutrality.” This organization had key leaders who were part of the government of Antioquía led by Governor Alvaro Uribe Velez (actual Colombian President). Alvaro Uribe co-opted this process, taking a series of steps to institutionalize the proposals for active neutrality and urging all communities to accept them. But Uribe’s version of ‘neutrality’ applied only to the

¹⁹ This dynamic was observed by the authors, as well as shared with us through interviews with members of the communities of San José and San Francisco.

communities' relationships with the guerrilla. This distorted but well-publicized appropriation of the term 'neutrality' by Uribe led many other communities to completely dismiss such a concept of neutrality, either because they disagreed with it, or because they felt it would be impossible to sustain such a position of exclusion towards only one of the armed actors in regions where the guerrilla had significant influence.

- Not all of the institutions involved in this process shared the same opinions about the idea of a "Peace Community." The Inter-Congregational Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP), for example, argued that to declare oneself "neutral" in such an unbalanced conflict with such profound social and territorial root causes and impacts on civilians, signified the voluntary ceding of significant political space and liberty – such as freedom of expression. CIJP proposed that the communities declare themselves "Communities in Resistance" in the conflict zone.

Eventually a consensus was reached, and the population of San José de Apartadó formally decided to declare itself a "Peace Community." The Diocese of Apartadó consulted with the primary military actors in the zone: the FARC and the paramilitaries, and both groups accepted in principle the existence of a peace community. (As will be seen later, neither armed group, nor the army, fulfilled this supposed commitment to respect the community.) On March 23, 1997, after a series of community consultations, the majority of the population approved the declaration of San José de Apartadó as a Peace Community.

Organizationally and socially, this began a very complex process. For instance, not all residents wanted to be a part of a "Peace Community," yet the interactions of any resident with the armed actors in the region would affect the community strategy. The dispersion of tiny villages over great distances made unity and coherence difficult to sustain.

After considerable discussion, the peace community formally distinguished three groups within the population under its influence:

- "the civilian non-combatant population residing in the township who have freely committed themselves to the Peace Community process
- "the civilian population who do not participate in hostilities and commit themselves to the rules and statutes of the community, and
- "other persons with a transitory presence in the community, who have committed themselves to the statutes and rules and are thus covered by the statutes protecting the civil population"²⁰

The third category demonstrated a flexibility to allow for temporary residency as long as the statutes and rules were accepted. Temporary residency was seen as a potential risk to security and infiltration. However, we also learned that in other peace communities (San Francisco de Asis) a stricter policy limiting external visits was a cause for considerable internal division and tension.

The difficulty in discriminating between members and non-members of the Peace Community was more difficult in the distant rural areas, where houses were quite isolated and community participation was minimal. However, we are not aware of any tensions arising between the different member and non-member groups in San José.

²⁰ Declaration of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó, article 2 and 3

There were other tensions, however. For instance, community rules prohibited the selling of alcohol anywhere in the community, for fear that it would attract combatants into the zone, or would provoke social disturbances that would tarnish the image of the community. In a country with a considerable tradition of drinking, this rule led to any number of conflicts and debates, especially between the community leadership and the small merchants. But as the security situation worsened, the shared perception of risk helped to keep the rule in place, albeit it with any number of transgressions.

The Protection Strategies

The peace community strategy had three pillars:

- 1) non-collaboration with all armed actors
- 2) formal declaration to generate public attention
- 3) external political support and development projects

Distinguishing among armed actors

The community's conception of an "armed actor" included the Colombian Army from the start, which was the cause of continual friction. The army insists that it is not "one more armed actor," but rather a legitimate institution of the state, with legal obligations and rights throughout the national territory, including the right to expect collaboration from the population. The community, given its experience with army repression, did not agree.

Furthermore, for many in the communities it was essential to distinguish among the different armed groups according to their nature and objectives, even though all were agreed that no distinction was acceptable with respect to actions taken against the civilian population. For others, however, making any such distinctions was tantamount to expressing sympathies with the guerrilla, which could endanger the entire community. So this group insisted on absolutely equivalent approaches to each armed group. Thus, when dealing with human rights violations, one position was to "denounce all human rights violations equally," while another position argued for "denouncing all violations with equal force, but with different strategies appropriate to the nature of the perpetrator."

One activist shared with us a campesino's analogy describing the need for different strategies: "*The tiger and the hyena are not the same animal, though they both can bite us. We need to understand their differences to protect ourselves.*"

Non-collaboration

As in the Medio Atrato, non-collaboration required a set of rules to guide any direct interaction with armed actors, and internal rules regarding the behavior and functioning of the community. The community declaration and internal rules lay out norms covering both areas.

Under the subtitle, "principles to orient the experience of civilian resistance," for instance, were included:

- a prohibition against owning or carrying arms or munitions.
- a prohibition against participation in military operations.
- Not offering any logistical support or intelligence to any of the parties in conflict.

- Not requesting support from armed groups, either for the resolution of personal or familial conflicts, or for the development of the community.

Given the importance of intelligence gathering to all armed groups, the prescription against providing information was a crucial component of community neutrality. The prescription against logistical support went so far as refusal to sell soft drinks to combatants who came by the community's small stores.

The problem of “visits” by combatants, or other undesirable actors.

One of the protection mechanisms the community established was a system of vigilance to control the access to the community of those who had no right to enter. Achieving such control has been critically important, but difficult to achieve, and it has cost a huge investment of community resources, with unmeasurable results. First of all, the territory is too extensive, isolated, and mountainous. With the exception of the town center of San José, the rest of the villages in the township are up in the hills more than an hour away on foot – some more than a day's walk. The Declaration of the Peace Community covered the whole township, especially as there was a desire to facilitate a return home of some of the population who had been displaced from outlying villages and were residing in the town center. But physical realities made control over access only feasible in the town center and in the closest village, La Unión, while the rest of the area was constantly subject to the presence of combatants, depending on the ebb and flow of the conflict. The hills of Abibe remained a passage for the guerillas, and the scene of military operations.

“Unwanted visitors”

Regarding ‘unwanted visitors,’ this primarily referred to unknown people in civilian dress who might be entering the territory with the objective of intelligence gathering for one of the armed parties. Because most of the villagers in the mountains know each other well, and such visitors tended to come in by the main road from Apartadó, the community assumed that such visitors could be informants of the paramilitaries or the army. In various instances, such visitors were asked to leave the town.

Presence of the Colombian Armed Forces

There were two stages of the community's strategy with respect to the presence of the army itself. For the first 5 years, from the founding of the peace community until 2002, the community continually pressured against any entry into the town by the army--not during military operations, and not even for the purpose of escorting government officials such as Justice Department officials who would visit the community. This demand was quite exasperating to the 17th Brigade, who argued that no part of the national territory could be off limits to the armed forces. During this period, the community suffered various paramilitary attacks and massacres, denounced as having been carried out in collusion with the 17th Brigade. The army never responded to protect the community, even when there was substantial warning of an imminent attack.

The fence

An interesting development during this period was the construction of a small fence along the perimeter of the territory. It was entirely symbolic, yet it clearly delimited the community territory. Even after the army formally agreed not to sustain a presence in the community, it

would make its presence known at this fence. As a form of pressure or provocation, soldiers would deliberately cross the fence and settle down for a rest, only leaving after the community had organized a formal delegation to come and protest their presence. The tactic of a symbolic perimeter fence was later also used by the Cacarica community.

The self-displacement ultimatum

Around 2002, as the community faced very precarious security conditions, a second strategic approach to the army arose, although the change was not formally declared. This involved a compromise that allowed the army to pass through the community, as long as it did not stay. This change acknowledged the location of the community on a public thoroughfare, and allowed the army to proceed through to the other side, even though the passage might be for the purpose of carrying out military operations.

This shift, however, was also accompanied by an ultimatum to the army: In the face of repeated threats that the army intended to take up permanent residence in the town center of San José, the community in one of its assemblies declared that if this were to happen, the entire population of the town center would immediately displace itself to La Unión, indefinitely. The residents of La Unión also declared the same intention – that they would self-displace to the town center if the army installed itself in La Unión. In our interviews, one of the leaders stated: “If they want the town, they get the whole thing, but *without us*. We won’t be victims of their combats on our own land when the others attack.” This was not mere posturing, as the leaders insisted that the entire community had insisted on this stance, which guaranteed the ultimatum would be implemented if necessary.

This ultimatum might seem a bit counter-intuitive, since the fundamental objective of the peace community strategy was to prevent displacement. But they were counting on the government’s unwillingness to brook the scale of international outcry that would result if the entire community of San Jose were displaced at once. The “self-displacement” strategy was backed up by the economic steps the community had taken in the face of constant economic pressures and blockades – developing self-sustainable food production, and easily transportable food reserves.

When asked about the risks of such a strategy, members of the directive council responded that they were prepared to sustain a long-term displacement if necessary and that they had made preparations for survival. Their primary concerns revolved around the possible destruction of their ongoing agricultural investments, such as mills, as well as their concern that in the absence of witnesses the army would plant evidence to later use against the community leadership (e.g. framing them with false arms caches.) To minimize these risks, the community strategy would be to call together national and international institutions who were accompanying or following the process, and have an external delegation verify the conditions in which the community left its property, so that whoever came in afterwards would be legally responsible for the conditions of the property and anything placed therein. Community leaders could not predict what would happen next, and could not project long-term scenarios. But given their extremely traumatic history of suffering, it must be assumed that a self-sacrificing ultimatum like this is not false bravado, but a plausible possibility.

Presence of the guerrilla, proving neutrality

The community equally opposed incursions by the guerrilla. It was crucial to demonstrate credibility nationally and internationally in this respect. From the start they requested a permanent presence of national and international institutions in the territory, to monitor and thus demonstrate their commitment to neutrality. Peace Brigades International has sustained a permanent presence in the community, and other groups such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation have sustained temporary presences as well. Over time, the community also requested the permanent installation of a delegation of the state's *Defensoria del Pueblo*, but without success (the *Defensoria* argued that its office in Apartadó was close enough to cover San José.) Similarly the community asked for a permanent delegate from the Presidential Office for Human Rights, which was also denied on grounds of resource limitations. In contrast, the community rejected the hypothetical idea of allowing the establishment of a police station in the town center, arguing that the police are armed and inherently have a 'military' function due to the reality that they are targeted by the guerrilla and must defend themselves against attack—therefore a police presence would compromise the neutrality sought by the community.

Using the Inter-American Court

Based on a petition submitted by the Inter-Congregational Commission for Justice and Peace, the Inter-American Court in December 1997 authorized/demanded that the state take precautionary measures for the protection of the San José community, including all its inhabitants, and demanded that the state to ensure the security of the physical territory as well. In 2000 the court emitted a new resolution including provisional measures demanding investigation of the attacks against the community, and protection of the return of displaced residents. It also called on the state "to allow the petitioners to participate in the planning and implementation of measures and, in general, to keep them informed of progress made with respect to the measures ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights." In this ruling the court recognized that the presence of armed forces in the community *inherently* posed a threat to civilians of retaliatory attacks from other armed actors. The ruling opened a space for the community to participate in debate over measures for its own security. This process was later replicated in at least six other cases involving communities in Colombia.

We are not aware of other such measures of an international court or international governmental organization that attempt in this way to provide protective coverage for a territorial community, and as such this development in Colombia is worth some transversal attention of the STEPS study.

Attacks against the San José Peace Community

The first armed incursions occurred a mere 5 days after the Declaration of the Peace Community. Since then there have been at least 10 serious attacks or incursions, most frequently by paramilitary operations. In addition, in the initial period the FARC executed several people, including a highly respected historical leader of the community. It was thus crystal clear from the very beginning that none of the armed actors present in the region was happy with this community's strategic project.

Looking back now with some perspective, there has been a clear evolution in the paramilitary attacks against San José. In the beginning each incursion left several community members

murdered, and resulted in a loud reaction from the community and from its national and international supporters. The community put great stock in its external accompaniment and other international allies for their capacity to generate prompt and effective political outcry. These outcries invariably placed responsibility on the nearby 17th Brigade and its commander, either as participants in the incursions themselves, or for lack of auxiliary responses to calls for help from the community. There are numerous testimonies from residents who recognized the soldiers involved in “paramilitary” attacks, sometimes noting the 17th Brigade insignias on their clothing, or noting in one case that only 20 minutes after a paramilitary attack, the 17th Brigade arrived coming in on the same road the paramilitaries had just exited.

Each successive commander of the 17th Brigade has had to do political battle with the peace community, and has been obliged to respond to accusations, even to the extent of having to confront the media themselves.

After a certain point these nighttime paramilitary attacks no longer left casualties among peace community members, instead limiting themselves to causing significant material damages. In one case they burned houses, threatening people and firing in the air. On another occasion, the attack directly targeted and assassinated several small merchants operating in the community – but who were *not* formally members of the peace community. In this incident, one of the peace community leaders tried to escape the attack by jumping off of a balcony. One of the attackers, recognizing him, told him not to bother to run, as this time he was not a target. This was evidence of a clear planning and calculation of the targeting of victims, based on some gruesome political cost-benefit analysis of the planners. After this attack, there were no more nighttime incursions.

The pressure did not stop, however, but rather was transferred to other venues, such as the access road to San José. There was then an increase in paramilitary roadblocks – often located only a few hundred meters from a formal military roadblock. These roadblocks, as we saw in Medio Atrato, limited mobility and transport of goods, causing economic hardship to the community. In addition, truckloads of goods from the community headed to market were robbed on the road. There came a point in 2002 when the paramilitaries were preventing all vehicular traffic in and out of the community, even assassinating the drivers of the buses or pick-ups that transported people or goods for San José. During this intense blockade, the only vehicles that were allowed to pass unmolested were the cars of Peace Brigades International and of the Diocese of Apartadó, again suggesting a careful political cost-benefit calculation. Responding with protests against this economic blockade, the 17th Brigade produced aerial photographs purporting to show that these vehicles were all carrying goods to the FARC. The community responded that these were their own agricultural products, and they were happy to have monitors or observers travel with the vehicles to prove it.

The economic blockade was devastating to the community, which had not been prepared for it. Facing a desperate lack of goods, the community assembly made a decision to march *en masse* down to Apartadó to buy goods and return with them in a large group. But this proved unnecessary, as the Diocese eventually broke the blockade through direct pressure and intervention: the Bishop of Apartadó himself accompanied several truckloads of basic staples up

to San José. After this the blockade was less strictly sustained, and the community began to develop better strategies for self-sufficiency.

Specific Security Strategies

The community devised many defensive strategies to survive under threat, such as:

- Always going out in groups to work the fields or to travel the roads.
- Reporting all exits and returns to the community, especially of members of the community council or other people facing particular risks.
- At the beginning they installed a bell in a strategic location in each community, and this alarm would be sounded if an incursion was suspected. The signal would call the entire population to congregate in the plaza and confront the incursion with the moral force of numbers. If anyone asked for their leaders, the collective response would be to refuse to identify them. The alarm was not effective in some cases where the paramilitaries came in too quickly, in commando style with lots of shooting. After several assassinations and continuous death threats, the alarm bell instead was converted into a signal to flee the town center hide in the hills until the attackers left.

External support

External support was always a pillar of the community strategy, and proved to be crucial. The whole mystique of a “Peace Community” fit very well into the Western imagination and gained broad international support right from the start. Such support included:

- The precautionary measures of the Inter-American Court.
- International solidarity campaigns of “Sister communities,”
- Various lobbying efforts which led to letters of support from US Congress-members and other political figures, and even yielded personal delegations and visits to the community from influential supporters.
- Humanitarian and development projects supporting the self-sufficiency of the community.
- Undoubtedly the presence of PBI and other international accompaniment had a protective impact. On a number of occasions members of the army threatened the community that “those PBI people will not always be here.” PBI confirmed this impact in meetings with the various changing commanders of the 17th Brigade.

General reflections on the strategies of the San José Peace Community

San José de Apartadó still occupies the same strategic location it did in the 1990s, with a FARC presence higher up in the mountains. The army and the paramilitaries thus remain attentive, seeing it not as an enemy stronghold, but as a vital passageway they are unwilling to relinquish. The pressure focuses on the highway leading to the town.

Since the creation of the Peace Community in 1997 there have been over 60 assassinations of residents of San José. The constant intimidation has prompted many families to leave the community over time, but it has not yet undermined the overall permanency of the community and its strategy. At least half of the community remains. Clearly, this is both a sign of strength and weakness. A significant portion of the community has left, which suggested limited success of the strategy. But that the community itself remains intact with its strategy is a success, given the attempts to destroy it. Is the glass half-full or half-empty? The answer must take into account

that Colombia has over 2 million displaced, and that this region – and this community - have been particularly targeted for displacement.

For the community project to stay alive despite such pressures suggests that the residents who stay perceive some level of security in their united strategy, and trust in their capacity for economic self-sufficiency. There is also a pride in their sense of ownership and connection to their land, and in their commitment to active participation in their community.²¹ These factors apparently carry more weight than the sense of fear and stigmatization arising from the attacks and harassment.

Most important of all, perhaps, as community members themselves will not hesitate to express, is the concept of *dignity* – their commitment to the right of any Colombian not to be expelled from their land nor attacked for staying on it. This perception of collective dignity is undoubtedly a key factor in sustaining the cohesion of the community in the face of so many challenges.

Other related community experiences

Several other communities in the region launched similar strategies after suffering the devastation of forced displacement in the late 1990s. After Operation Genesis and the accompanying escalation of conflict, thousands of peasants from Rio Sucio and Carmen del Darien (Bajo Atrato, Choco) fled their homes. Over 5000 ended up in squalid refugee conditions in Pavarando. Here they organized themselves, together with the church and the NGOs, to negotiate with government to guarantee a safe return to their land. On October 19, 1997, they established the Peace Community of *San Francisco de Asis*. In 1998 and 1999 the nearby communities of *Paz Natividad de Maria* and *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* united with San Francisco as peace communities.

During these same years, another group of several hundred refugees were organizing in the coliseum in the city of Turbo, where they had been stuck since March of 1997. They had fled from the communities of the Cacarica River, located north of the Atrato River up to the Panama border. They spent three years in Turbo—suffering hunger and privation, facing continued paramilitary threats, pushing through torturous negotiations with the government, and organizing a unified front for a return to their homes with dignity. Finally in 2000, the refugees in Turbo together with other displaced Cacaricans from other parts of the country returned to established the communities of *Nueva Vida* and *Esperanza en Dios* – about 4000 people all together. These communities chose not to use the “peace community” label, but instead call themselves a “*community of self-determination, life and dignity.*”

These peasants had all gone through similar experiences of traumatic displacement, followed by an intense period of physical co-habitation in refugee shelters. The crowding together of peasants used to rural spaces was inhuman, but it had the side effect of provoking intense collective organization. The refugee settings in Turbo and Pavarando allowed for daily meetings among

²¹ We do not wish to idealize the level of community participation in decision making, which in any situation will have its flaws and weaknesses. But the community has sustained regular weekly or bi-weekly assemblies, and the community leadership displays a high level of sensitivity to questions of community accountability for its decisions, without developing any tendencies towards arrogance or self-enrichment. (On the contrary, the leadership perseveres in the face of constant threats to personal security.)

people who would seldom cross paths in their rural homes. It facilitated frequent contact between community members, leaders, and external organizations. The regional refugee crisis attracted national and international attention.

The internal processes of community organization were central to each of these communities' processes of establishing themselves as 'something different.' Several factors contributed to these intensive organization processes. The San Jose region had a history of leftist political militancy, while Bajo Atrato had a background of ethno-communal organization similar to Media Atrato. Simultaneous with the return process from refugee camps, these villagers were also legalizing their collective land titles (all except San Jose, which is not Afro-Colombian and therefore did not fall under the scope of Law 70), which further solidified the communities.

All these processes had close supportive accompaniment by external players. Nationally, these included especially the Diocese of Apartadó, the Justice and Peace Commission, and CINEP among others. Each operated/es with a distinct methodology, intensity, and tempo. Some put a higher priority on physical presence and regular visits, a very important factor to the community. Some put emphasis on capacity-building workshops, some focus on higher-level political diplomacy. It is notable that all of these groups have some direct or indirect relationship to the Church, and the communities witnessed the whole range of church-based approaches, from the grassroots solidarity closer to the liberation theology to the more paternalistic traditions of the church in Latin America.

Another difference in these processes has been their extent and styles of negotiation with the State and governmental institutions. The Peace Communities of San Francisco de Asis and the other peace communities of the Bajo Atrato had brief negotiations with the Government in order to facilitate their return after being displaced, and got some support such as tools, seeds and so on. On the contrary, Cacarica communities had to postpone their return until after long and hard negotiations and pressure they achieved specific commitments by the Government, including the establishment of a Mixed Commission of Verification (with Government officials, representatives of the UN and diplomatic Corp and NGO like PBI). San Jose de Apartado has also maintained a sustained level of negotiation and confrontation with Government officials.

Internationally, Peace Brigades International sustained (and still sustains) a physical permanent presence in San José and Cacarica, and had some presence in San Francisco de Asis in the early period. Other international solidarity groups, such as the US-based Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Colombia Support Network, have sent sporadic accompaniment volunteers to stay in San José, while maintaining political pressure from the outside. The ICRC and the UNHCR have also visited these communities periodically.

These communities re-established their own control over their territory, confronting in this process the same economic and political forces that had expelled them years earlier. In fact, their 'expellers' have been forced to consent to these returns. The times have changed, international pressure is a significant force, and these armed and economic players are seeking their objectives through less blatantly brutal strategies.

The FARC has retreated from most of the areas of these communities, and there is near-total paramilitary control around them. These communities face constant economic encroachment and pressures, especially pushing them to engage in the externally controlled agro-businesses of cocaine and African Palm Oil. The people of Jiguamiando are firmly resisting these pressures, and given their more isolated location they are facing great military pressure for it, with less external publicity.

In Cacarica there are two strong and tightly grouped communities, with active national and international accompaniment, and their resistance to pressures to cede economic control of their territory gets considerable publicity. They have thus become something of a symbol of resistance. This “symbol” is apparently quite a thorn in the side of the elites, because the extensive efforts being made to de-stabilize these communities seem completely out-of-balance with the actual economic or military significance of their lands. Cacarica is made of two small towns of 3500-4000 people, and they have marked their space with a small barbed-wire fence – three lines of wire on posts. They cultivate basic staples for consumption, with some minor cash crop production. There is no guerrilla presence near them, as evidenced by the small army battalion in the area.

These 100 soldiers, however, are dedicated to watching and harassing these two small communities, using methods of psychological warfare that have been well-documented by the NGO *Justicia y Paz* and by the communities themselves. In August 2003, the Commander in Chief of the Colombian Armed Forces, General Mora Rangel, called a press conference in Bogotá with the sole purpose of denouncing the FARC’s “concentration camp” in Cacarica. This is grotesque on its face, but when you take into account that Cacarica is a couple of small villages of minor military importance, it is striking that the highest military official of the nation attributes such political importance as to give it its own press conference. The army also got its point of view on Cacarica published in an article in the Wall Street Journal in November 2003. All this suggests they consider these community experiments extremely significant—perhaps because they are proving that there are alternatives to ceding complete control over their land to the economic elites who want it. This magnitude of high-level military public attempts to delegitimize them, combined with the army/paramilitary investment in deliberate economic and psychological destabilization, suggests that these peasants, with nothing to defend themselves with but their dignity, their courage, their solidarity networks and their love of their land, are striking a nerve.

Part III: Cauca

Introduction

The department of Cauca, like Choco, has certain unique characteristics in terms of ethnic diversity and popular organization that make it a promising territory for a “regional” study, from the perspective of the STEPS study. As in Choco, we will describe some of the department-wide dynamics that have helped to promote or provoke alternative organizational responses, both from communities and from region-wide popular organizations. Likewise we will summarize some of the specific local experiments with alternative territorially based responses to the conflict.

Although we will see some similarities with Choco, the differences are more pronounced. Regional history, ethnic organization, economics, and the local longevity of the conflict all combine to yield a very different reality. Local strategies responding to this reality are thus also quite a contrast to Choco. And these strategies’ potential for success must be analyzed in light of these contrasting contextual dynamics.

Ethnically, Cauca is one of Colombia’s most indigenous departments, with 38% indigenous population, representing several different cultural and language groups. The department’s population is about 60% rural, and given that the indigenous are primarily concentrated in rural areas, this rural population might even be majority indigenous. The rest of the population is largely mestizo, with a small Afro-Colombian component²².

Cauca has a much longer colonial history than Choco. It is situated directly south of Cali and is economically and politically influenced by the Cali elite. Although the complaint of abandonment by the state is also voiced here, Cauca has not been abandoned by economic elites, and has undergone many historical waves of development/exploitation – mostly in agro-business, and most recently with considerable expansion of coca production.

The mountains of the *Macizo* in Cauca are legendary in the history of Colombia’s war, as they have been the home, hiding place, and theater of operations for various guerrilla movements for decades. Substantial portions of the department are historically considered “ELN territory” or “FARC territory,” or both, and one of President Uribe’s campaign promises was to “retake the *Macizo*.” Cauca’s southern border is the department of Putumayo, which was the FARC’s stronghold and *zona de despeje* during last round of peace negotiations.²³

In recent decades, social movements have played a major political role in Cauca. Some of the major social organizations (unions, campesinos movements and indigenous

²² Cauca’s Afro-Colombian population resides largely in the pacific coastal region of the department, and this region did not figure largely in our research.

²³ During the peace negotiations under the presidency of Andres Pastrana (1998-2002), the FARC was given autonomous control over a region the size of Switzerland in southern Colombia. This control was officially rescinded when the talks broke down in 2002.

organizations) have a history of several decades of struggle and organizational and strategic development, and this history has given them experience with dealing directly with all the armed actors in the war, and with the economic elites as well.

In the 1990s, social organizations in Cauca united several times to protest the state's failure to provide services or development. These protests involved massive civil disobedience of extended duration, in which tens of thousands of people took over (and blocked) the Pan-American highway, shutting down commerce for the southern region and blocking road access between Colombia's major cities further north (Bogotá, Medellín and Cali) and the rest of South America. These mobilizations, in 1991, 1996 and 1999, were sufficiently paralyzing to force the state to send representatives from Bogotá to negotiate over the demands of the protesters. However, in each case, the state negotiated agreements and then promptly failed to comply with them once the protests were ended.

The last mobilization in 1999 led to the formation of the *Bloque Social Alternativo*, an ongoing body which continued to pressure for state compliance to popular demands. A substantial portion of the *Bloque Social Alternativo* also decided that the power of this social movement should be applied in the electoral setting, and in 2000, an "alternative" indigenous candidate, Floro Tunubalan, was elected governor with their support.²⁴

After the 1999 mobilization and the 2000 election of Floro, the AUC (Colombia's largest paramilitary organization, led by Carlos Castaño) began a full-scale invasion of the department, moving rapidly south from Cali. Cauca had lived through many different paramilitary experiences in the past, but this was the biggest incursion ever, and the first time the AUC had targeted the department for control. Most people we interviewed interpreted this onslaught as a political response to either the mobilizations or to the election of Floro – in other words, that this was a clear attempt to "put down" an alternative social movement that was bearing fruit, and to prevent such movements from again damaging the economic interests of the elites by shutting down the highway. However, given the substantial coca production in the department, and given the FARC presence in the south, there was undoubtedly also a mixture of economic and military motivations behind the AUC strategy.

The AUC moved in quickly, combining tactics of terror and co-optation. The years 2000-2002 saw a number of massacres in Cauca. The frequent opinion of those interviewed, though, was that after the first effectively terrifying wave of paramilitary violence, the AUC has chosen a more "prudent" approach. It has succeeded in controlling the highway and the major towns, and in most cases avoided the highland areas, which are largely indigenous. Those interviewed repeatedly mentioned that it appeared that the AUC was

²⁴ The internal politics and divisions of the *Bloque Social* are too complicated to describe here, although they may impact the potential for strategic success of a mass-based social alternative in Cauca. It was clear in our interviews that the electoral strategy was somewhat divisive. Not all organizations in the *Bloque Social* agreed with it, some felt it hijacked the movement. Others went along but were soon disillusioned. Others, while recognizing the severe constraints under which the Floro departmental government must operate, are committed to continued support.

trying to “colonize” the area rather than purely terrorize it, by displacing people and then moving in with their entire families, and by getting involved in relationships with local women.

Current Situation

There have been no mass social mobilizations in Cauca since 1999. Some attribute this to fear of the paramilitaries. Others cite the “Floro” factor – the fact that a significant part of the coalition was banking on the ‘insider’ strategy of the governorship of Floro and was therefore holding off on popular mobilization during this period.

However, there was a strong sense of political disempowerment among those we met with. Many people were disillusioned with Floro, feeling that he had not achieved much for people, and that he had made some extremely questionable decisions – such as inviting the army to install a special “Mobile Brigade” in the department. There were many references to divisions within the movement, and some mistrust between the indigenous and campesino²⁵ sectors. There was a clear sense among campesino organizations that they had not had an effective political strategy to resist the paramilitary invasion.

Although the department has an impressive history of mass-based mobilization, the primary focus of most of our respondents was on local strategies of small communities. These strategies were quite long-term in their vision, and not geared towards immediately confronting the conflict or the armed actors. However, within this vision, we found a deep analysis of what it takes, in the long run, for communities to stand up to conflict, and a certain humble recognition that they might not have what it takes right now, and they needed to work locally on strengthening their communities.

It was striking, in the face of a major paramilitary onslaught, to find that most of our time was spent on discussing projects aimed toward community economic self-sufficiency, but Colombia’s war is very much a war of *political economy*: military and economic motives are intertwined, and thus for communities, economic vulnerabilities are directly related to physical security vulnerabilities. As in Choco, the defense of territory is seen as connected to community-based collective processes, both economic and political.

The indigenous communities and the campesino communities collaborate on region-wide strategies through the larger organizations, but they are organized separately. Within both sub-groups, there are multiple organizations and strategies, with various levels of power struggles and competition between and among them, as is normal in mass civil movements.

²⁵ Note: we will use the term campesino here as it was used in our interviews in Cauca, where it referred only to non-indigenous rural farmers and farm communities, while rural indigenous farmers living in indigenous *resguardos* were simply referred to as *indigenas*. This distinction is not universal in Latin America, as in many places the term *campesino* refers to all rural farmers regardless of ethnic origin. The distinction is also complex, because Caucan *campesino* communities often have many indigenous residents.

Indigenous resguardos

The legally established indigenous areas, or communities, are known as *resguardos* (roughly translated: reserves).²⁶ There are dozens of *resguardos* in Cauca, mostly located in the highlands, and they are autonomously governed – each choosing its leadership from among the community. The *resguardos* are also represented as members of two larger representative bodies:²⁷

- a) The CRIC (*Consejo Rural Indigena Cauca, or Rural Indigenous Council of Cauca*) represents the majority of the Caucan *resguardos*.
- b) AICO (*Autoridades Indigenas de Colombia*) represents several other Caucan *resguardos*. AICO is a national indigenous organization that also represents indigenous groups in Nariño, Caldas, Putamayo, and Huila.

The leadership of the CRIC described their strategy with respect to the conflict along three lines: Territorial Control, Autonomy/Authority, and Human Rights. It is important to note that our interview took place in the middle of a fairly hot and controversial event – the rescue by an indigenous community in Cauca of a Swiss citizen, Florian Arnold, from a FARC kidnapping attempt (described below). This rescue was national headlines as we arrived in Cauca, and the Colombian government was taking full propaganda advantage of it.

CRIC leaders described their methods of defending their territory as well-worn strategies practiced over hundreds of years.

The civil resistance that the government is cheering so much about is nothing new. It has always been here. It is part of us. All the armed actors are disputing our territory and our autonomy. We face attacks from guerrillas, and we face the tyranny of the state. Every time the state makes its presence known in our territory, it is only to damage us, never to help. It is always military. In addition, the state's policies are going directly in contradiction to our autonomy.

Both the army and the FARC are perversely pushing for the same outcome: to force people off their land. After the Naya massacre²⁸ by paramilitaries, the FARC was also encouraging people to leave and not come back.

And according the AICO representative:

“We are neutral and autonomous in the face of all armed groups. When facing armed threat, we have to demonstrate our humility and defend the territory without force, using dialog. It is a struggle to convince other what it means to us to ‘be different.’”

We will look at some of their specific strategies with respect to each armed actor:

²⁶ There are also many ethnic indigenous who do not live in the *resguardos*, but are intermingled in *mestizo-campesino* towns and villages.

²⁷ We were able to interview a Cauca representative of AICO. We had a much more extended interview with the CRIC, meeting with both former and current members of its directing council, as well as with local governors of one of the *resguardos*.

²⁸ One of the first massacres committed by the AUC when entering Cauca.

Strategies towards the guerrilla

The indigenous representatives we spoke to alluded to a long history of conflict with the guerrilla. The guerrilla groups have been moving around in these mountains for decades, traversing and living on indigenous lands. The guerrilla groups are not indigenous, and do not appear to be perceived by the indigenous as an ally.²⁹ Also, the FARC in particular has a reputation of being extremely authoritarian and military in its approach to communities, and thus not particularly respectful of indigenous communities' commitment to autonomy and self-governance. Our interview with the CRIC opened with a vehement speech denying the FARC the legitimacy of the label of being an "army of the people."

According to the AICO representative

We had a position of demanding armed groups don't even pass through our territory. At first they respected this. But no longer. This does not work. It can't be monitored and it can't be stopped... They don't seem to respect nonviolent resistance anymore. In Silvia, for instance, the FARC carried an attack inside the resguardo.

The CRIC also pointed out the impossibility of controlling the movements of the guerrilla on indigenous territory, given that the guerrilla have been co-habiting these mountains with them for decades. But they stressed the need to negotiate demands and constraints on behavior.

"We do not permit them to bring kidnapped victims through our territory. Nor do we allow them to pass with stolen vehicles. We can't of course always prevent their passing through."

The FARC are apparently open to negotiation with communities, although insisting on such negotiation seems to require that the communities take direct action. The governor of the Pioya *resguardo* described this example,

The communities of Pioya and Tambalo are quite close, but the terrain is extremely difficult, and for a long time there was no direct road. The only way to get there was through a long detour through Silvia. The community demanded the state build a road but it never happened. Finally, we built the road ourselves. If you look at the construction you can tell it was built by the community with local materials and without any heavy equipment.

As soon as the road was completed, the FARC took control of it. FARC vehicles were constantly speeding back and forth and intimidating any other vehicles. We protested – to no effect. So one day, 400 of us went out and took the road apart so they could no longer use it. We made the road impassable on both sides, leaving 7-8 FARC vehicles stranded between on the road. This finally allowed a more serious negotiation, and we were able to open the road again, and use it ourselves.

²⁹ An independent indigenous guerrilla organization known as *Quintin Lame*, did participate briefly in armed rebellion in this region, but negotiated a demobilization with the government in the 1980s.

The Rescue of Florian Arnold

Florian Arnold is a Swiss citizen who has been living and farming in the non-indigenous *campesino* community of Caldono, Cauca for 26 years. He also operated a small NGO that supported local community development projects. On July 1, 2003 a FARC patrol of four armed men entered his home, kidnapped him, put him in a vehicle, and drove him up into the mountains, passing through the *resguardo* of Pioya. According to the indigenous governor of Pioya:

When they were coming through our territory, we knew it right away. Since they were using a vehicle, it was quite easy to block their way, and force them to take the road right through the village. Then we used other vehicles to block their way forward, so they had to stop. We insisted they spend the night in the village. Overnight we roused the entire community, and neighboring communities as well. The next day no one worked, everyone come in to the center of the village where we had them. Hundreds of people. We all got there at 6 AM.

The four unfortunate guerrillas were completely surrounded by a crowd with machetes and bastones. We crowded them quite close, there was not chance they were going to draw their weapons. If they did, we said, "Kill all of us." This standoff lasted for hours.

Meanwhile, the women of the village crowded around Florian, and essentially grabbed him and took him away from the guerrillas.

Then we opened a dialog with them. They agreed they had probably made a mistake, but insisted they had orders and had to follow through on them. We told him, "OK, tell your commandante to come in here to the village, and we'll talk to him."

Later that morning, the Defensor³⁰ arrived. To pacify the guerrillas, he offered to go with the captain up high on the hill nearby to try to reach his commandante on the phone. We let them go. Then it took them three hours to get the call through – which was pretty suspicious to us. But they came back, with apparent permission from the commandante to admit they had made a mistake and that they could officially release Florian--although we already had him!

*- Indigenous former governor of
Pioya resguardo*

When asked if they feared that the guerrillas might use their weapons to escape the encirclement by the community – the risk of a massacre, the Pioya governors responded that they saw little risk of that given the numbers of people they had gathered. Their bigger fear was that the army might arrive and turn the situation into a combat. So, even though they held the guerrilla group overnight, they made no public denunciation until the situation was resolved, so as not to alert the army. The *Defensor* was only brought in on a quiet and confidential basis.

³⁰ Arnold's neighbors in Caldono had quietly alerted the government's *Defensor* in Popayán, the capital of Cauca.

This example shows a tactic that had also been mentioned by indigenous groups in Choco – a direct confrontation in which the entire community massed together and encircled an armed group with far greater numbers, demanding negotiation. It is a strategy that can only be used under special circumstances, and where the armed group is presumably not open to carrying out a massacre. When successful, it sends a clear message to the armed group that the community is willing to take a certain amount of risk to stand up for its demands. The Pioya governors mentioned using this strategy in other occasions as well. In one case they said it was effective to have only the women of the community confront the FARC³¹.

The indigenous groups repeatedly pointed out that they are between a rock and a hard place. If they confront an armed group, they risk reprisals. If they collaborate or negotiate with an armed group, they risk retaliation from that group's enemy. If the FARC establish a presence near them, the army and the paramilitaries target them. If the army installs an outpost, they are targeted by the FARC. This was playing out even as we spoke: after the rescue of Florian Arnold, they had news that the army was now entering the territory from three different routes. They were very concerned about being caught in the middle of combat between the army and the FARC. They believe that if the army establishes itself in their territory as a result of this incident, they will be targeted more by the FARC.

The army, the state, and the local mayor are completely manipulating this situation. They are trying to make it look like the indigenous are supporting the state. This is NOT what we are doing. We are just defending our territory. When the state tries to claim ownership over our actions, they are just making us a target for the FARC.

Strategies towards paramilitaries

In truth, it is probably easier to confront the FARC than it would be to confront the paramilitaries. The FARC are more respectful. – CRIC leader

In 2001 the paramilitaries carried out a massacre of 56 indigenous people in Naya, in the northwest of Cauca. Once again, the linkage of politics and economics seems to play a role. In general, the AUC invasion was not going out of its way to attack indigenous communities, but the Naya River is considered a promising waterway for future economic development of the region, and there was clear interest of the elites in wresting control of this territory from the indigenous. After this attack, indigenous groups organized a large protest mobilization in Cali. CRIC, ONIC³² and the *Defensor del Pueblo* organized a march in 2002 to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the massacre, with support from the Cauca governors' office, and protest the ongoing presence of paramilitaries. "With these protests, we earned some level of 'prudence' from the paramilitaries." Naya remains the only indigenous region in Cauca where the paramilitaries maintained a permanent presence.

³¹ Unfortunately, no further specifics were offered on these instances.

³² ONIC is a nationally representative indigenous body of which CRIC is a member.

In other areas, paramilitaries killed a number of indigenous people and threw their bodies into the Cauca River. CRIC leaders described a combined action in which indigenous communities worked together to reclaim the corpses from the river. They considered this a very important success that reactivated people. The paramilitary strategy of throwing the bodies in the river was a direct attack on their culture, and on the spiritual importance of appropriate burial rituals.³³ Thus the reclamation of the corpses was a non-confrontational step towards unity and empowerment in the face of the paramilitary strategy.

In January 2002 a massacre occurred in Corinto, leaving seven dead (3 indigenous and 4 campesinos). As the paramilitary invasion continued, the indigenous began organizing *Mingas de seguridad*, community meetings to discuss and formulate community-wide security strategies.³⁴

In sum, it did not appear from our interviews that the indigenous communities had had nearly as frequent contact with paramilitaries as with the guerrillas. They had not chosen the same level of forceful confrontation and negotiation strategies with the paramilitaries that they were willing to use with the guerrillas.

Strategies towards the Army

CRIC leaders complained that the army attitude is that “You are with us or against us.” For instance, when one indigenous leader accused the military of collaboration with the paramilitaries, he was promptly accused by the paramilitaries of being a guerrilla.

Recruitment

The state has also been trying to get indigenous into the ‘soldados campesinos’ [peasant militias]. They have taken some by force, and others by bribing them. But we always protest and demand they be returned. We know that if our muchachos are in the soldados campesinos, the FARC will attack their families. The army strategy is just going to make us more of a target.

The indigenous in Colombia have specific rights with respect to military recruitment, and there is a legislated process of ‘reclamation’ by which the community leadership can petition for a recruited indigenous person to be returned to the community. CRIC leaders told one story of a boy who was “recruited” and was held in the army base in Popayán. When the community demanded his return, the army commander insisted that he had enlisted voluntarily. Shortly thereafter, the boy committed suicide on the base. This scandal led the army to be more cautious about recruiting indigenous men or boys in the region.

The indigenous communities also discourage voluntary enlistment. According to AICO,

³³ The strategy of DISAPPEARING people in this way is highly strategically developed in the history of Latin American state terror, and has generally been implemented in a calculated fashion with deliberate knowledge of the devastating and paralyzing spiritual and social effects on families and communities.

³⁴ Specific strategies resulting from these gatherings were not outlined to us. However, the conscious process of putting security on the agenda of a community process is itself an important strategic step.

If one of our own wants to consider being recruited by one of the armed groups, we try to offer them something better. Perhaps some land. We work a lot with the youth in this respect. We need to give them incentives to stay in the community.

Army posts on indigenous land

The army is apparently now planning to establish more permanent posts in the mountains on indigenous territory in Cauca. CRIC leaders oppose this, pointing out the danger that if the army creates the image that the indigenous are on their side, they will be more of a target for the guerrilla. But given the escalation of paramilitary presence, they pointed out that they will probably not be able to stop it, and they have to be prudent. “If we protest the army posts too openly, we will be targeted by the paramilitaries.”

Strategies against displacement

Indigenous groups in Cauca have not faced mass displacement, with the exception of the aftermath of the Naya massacre in 2001. As with OREWA in Choco, they consider displacement a last resort, which should always be a collective process, accompanied by denunciations, and followed by the organization of a prompt return.

“La Maria” and the importance of Dialog

We were very critical of the Pastrana Peace Process, because there was no real space for the involvement of the civil society. We did not participate in the “mesas” in Caguan. Instead, we set up our own territory for dialog and alliance building. - CRIC

La Maria is an indigenous resguardo that straddles the Pan-American Highway in Cauca. After the 1999 popular mobilizations, indigenous groups decided to consecrate *La Maria* as a special *dialog* space, in which different groups (indigenous and non-indigenous, Cauca-wide and nationally) could come together to build unity and seek solutions to problems, and where official negotiations could take place. The process was initiated with special indigenous ceremonies, ratified by indigenous councils, and also ratified by decree 982 of the departmental government. *La Maria*'s strategic location on the highway gives any public gathering there the character of a political protest with the potential of disturbing the status quo, and it's location within indigenous territory ostensibly gives it a certain level of political and legal protection. In 2000, during a mass gathering organized at *La Maria*, the army blocked access of food and water to those gathered. Governor Floro denounced this army action as a human rights abuse.

Cultural and spiritual strategies

The AICO representative mentioned ‘spiritual resistance,’ pointing out that the indigenous believe that if they are spiritually clean, as individuals and as communities, they will succeed. And if they are not clean, they will not be able to take care of others or of their community. We did not obtain more specific detail on the mechanisms of such resistance.

An indigenous representative from the region of Caldonio also mentioned that indigenous medicine men had rituals and ceremonies that served to protect people and to make roads

or trails impassable³⁵. The impact of these rituals was suggested by an incident in which the guerrillas came into the village to find the traditional medicine man to get him to stop “plugging up” their routes, and this medicine man had to flee the community for some time. Thus, even though the armed groups are non-indigenous, and might not believe in the spiritual basis for such indigenous practices, they were sufficiently concerned about (or fearful of) their potential impact to try to put a stop to them. This respondent saw this strategy as one that complemented others, stating “and then when that no longer worked, we would seek other strategies.”

In addition, as in Choco, indigenous respondents mentioned the importance of sustaining their own internal justice systems, “*so that outsiders don’t come in to administer justice for us.*” Communities and individuals everywhere feel a great need for somewhere to turn for “justice,” and the enforcement of justice is often associated with those who have a monopoly over the use of force. This need, in places where there are no state systems of justice present, gives armed groups in the territory an “entry” into the internal lives of the communities, increasing their influence by fulfilling the “meting out justice” role. When the communities create their own alternative systems to resolve this need, they are eliminating that space of influence for all armed groups.

Local Campesino movements:

We had the opportunity to meet with several representatives of non-indigenous campesino organizations from a variety of communities in Cauca. These organizations included:

1. *ASOCOMUNAL de La Vega* (Community association of the La Vega municipality). The official association membership includes 30 groups, each containing 5-8 families. However, the association also works together with the Community Councils of 93 different small *veredas* (villages, sections or rural neighborhoods) in the municipality.
2. *Grupo de Gestión Comunitaria de Tequendama* (Community Association of Tequendama) representing over fifty families in Tequendama.
3. Campesino Association of Caldono – formed from linkages created among activists during the 1999 regional mobilization.
4. ANUC-UR (*Asociacion Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos-Unidad y Reconstrucción*), a national campesino union, with membership in several Cauca communities
5. FENSUAGRO (Federated Union of Campesinos), with affiliated unions in the municipalities of Mirando, Corinto, Tambio, Quintana, Patia, and Argelia.

Among all these groups, representing the efforts of dozens of communities, there was a coherent and shared set of strategies for defending territorial and community integrity in the face of the conflict. The strategies were small-scale and long-term, based on an

³⁵ The term used was *tapar caminos*, in which *camino* is any path, be it a simple trail or a full-fledged road, and *tapar* essentially means “to plug up.”

analysis that community self-sufficiency was a crucial objective in the face of vulnerability to a conflict that was both political and economic.

Conscientization/political analysis

All of these groups put a high premium on community education via workshops, etc. in order to help the community members to understand the conflict and the linkages between local sustainability and vulnerability to violence. They offered training in human rights, specific trainings for women, and sought external assistance³⁶ to facilitate workshops in political analysis. The analysis of these groups was that such education had to distinguish between the guerrilla and the paramilitaries and the army. Thus, these groups, in contrast to the indigenous groups' discourse, tended not to use the phrase "armed actors," rather specifying which group they were referring to. In addition, they tended to present the armed conflict as being between two sides – the guerrillas on the one hand and the army/paramilitaries on the other, making little distinction between army and paramilitary strategies.

The conflict is not about drugs nor about the guerrilla, these are symptoms. Conscientization is an unequal process, so there are no fixed strategies valid for all communities. Instead we focus on strengthening the local capacity to develop their own strategies.

- ANUC-UR

Human Rights denunciation and national/international linkage

All these groups were members of a regional human rights network (*Red de derechos humanos Isaías Cifuentes*) that denounces any infringements of human rights nationally and internationally. There was, however, considerable uncertainty about the effectiveness of these efforts. These communities were watching an escalating paramilitary takeover of the region despite any national or international human rights outcry they had been able to muster.

The conflict has forced new tasks on us, which we did not have to do before. Maintaining national and international contacts, Denunciations, etc. This takes a lot of time and energy. But we also need our focus to be on local work. The demand for our human resources is torn between the two.

- ANUC-UR

Such local work was much more heavily emphasized in these interviews:

Steps towards collectivization

These activists criticized the individualistic campesino approach, in which each campesino family fought for survival with their small plot of land against the vicissitudes of the market and the intrusions of external actors. Each organization was taking steps to create and strengthen local collective processes, bringing individual campesinos together in economic and social endeavors.

³⁶ These groups often cited *Justicia y Paz* as a source of advice and training.

They were aware that the longer-term “collective” processes among indigenous communities or among Afro-Colombians in Choco were a potential strength in the face of politico-economic invasion. They also recognized that their communities were a long way from this level of collective unity, in legal, economic, or social terms.

Food Sovereignty

Both collective and individual processes prioritized the goal of self-sufficiency in food production, and what they referred to as “Food sovereignty.” This involved moving away from export crops and setting aside land for production to meet the community’s own food needs. Activists stressed that the number of varieties of local crops had been drastically reduced in recent decades, and they were trying to recuperate these varieties. In addition, in the face of the costs of fertilizers and pesticides and the diminishing quality of the soil, these organizations were making efforts to reclaim the “traditional agriculture wisdom” of the elders of the community regarding sustainable agricultural practices.

“Seed conservation” strategies were stressed as a necessity to eliminate the community’s dependence on buying crop seeds every year from agro-business, by instead returning to traditional versions of crops from which seeds could be conserved and re-planted the following year.³⁷ A significant part of the economic dependence of rural campesinos on the agro-business elite revolved around the fact that “green revolution” crops based on seeds developed by international agro-business, whatever their claimed or real advantages, often do not produce seeds which can be re-planted. On the contrary, campesinos using these crops were forced to buy new seeds every year, which over time has become one of the sources of campesino indebtedness. And *debt* can be a crucial factor in a conflict that revolves so closely around processes of expropriation of land.

The food sovereignty strategy also requires changes in behavior. In addition to transferring land devoted to cash crops over to immediate food production, the change they seek affects local diets: people have become accustomed to eating food that they do not grow, and these purchased foods are not necessarily the same ones they can plant on their lands.

One fundamental argument behind the food sovereignty strategy is thus: the local campesino’s vulnerability to manipulation by armed groups and by local elites is closely linked to their economic dependence. They referred to “production as a mechanism of defense.” If campesinos felt they had the security to produce their own food, there would be less need for them to respond to the temptation of cash crops, and especially of coca. These organizations believe that the campesinos’ participation in the cash crop and coca economy fuels the conflict, and if they can gradually extract themselves from that dependence they will be in a stronger position to develop sustainable local economic and political alternatives. “Gradual” is the key word here: these activists openly admitted that their efforts were small, and getting started, and made no grandiose claims of their capacity to have any near-term impact on the conflict around them. Nevertheless, they

³⁷

did also mention that these strategies would help them in the face of economic pressures or blockades by armed groups.

A second complementary argument is that these “food sovereignty” strategies deepen the triangular connection between individuals, the land, and the community. It strengthens their sense of “ownership” and control, and given that challenging that ownership is a deliberate objective of the paramilitary campaigns, these strategies reinforce their ability to defend it.

Direct Security strategies

While we were interviewing a community leader from La Vega, he received a cell-phone call alerting him to the killing of several youths from the community. In general, these community representatives had stressed to us that they had thus far mostly escaped direct attack, and they perceived the paramilitary strategy to be more *suave*, indirect, and insidious in Cauca than it had been in other regions. But this attack was a reminder of the need for immediate protective steps in addition to long-range community strategies.

These activists mentioned certain concrete tactics for security in the face of attack. These included:

- The provision and use of mobile phones and radios.
- Monitoring comings and goings from the community.
- Holding security-focused workshops. Involving the elders of the community and learning from them about protective strategies that had worked for communities in the past 5 decades of conflict.
- Sharing knowledge within the community about the best escape routes

Despite these ideas, these campesino groups generally did not feel they had successfully developed strategies for immediate security. They mentioned feeling unprepared for the paramilitary invasion, even though they knew full well it was coming. One mentioned that they had held preparatory discussions of the possibility of a paramilitary incursion in their community, but since such an incursion had not yet occurred, they now feared people were becoming complacent. According to one community association leader:

If the Army comes in and forcibly recruits a community member, the Junta Comunal can't do much, other than denounce. The indigenous have more authority in this respect. They can even sanction their own members who are voluntarily recruited. Our only tool is persuasion.

Example:

In one community, whose name we omit for reasons of security, a community council representing over 50 families has an organizational strategy is focused on food production and collectivization. Their immediate protective strategies include maintaining hidden escape routes and monitoring who comes and goes. If they need to flee, their displacement strategy is to go higher up in the mountains, but stay relatively

close to their land. *“We love our life. We will stay here.”* They also have strategies for hiding food and seeds.

They see the paramilitary strategy as being inextricably linked to an economic objective of turning campesinos into day laborers for larger landholders. Thus they see community “food sovereignty” as a direct resistance strategy. They have been working for six years to reclaim traditional agricultural methods, reclaim traditional seeds, and diversify away from the single-crop economy that the state promotes.

In terms of collectivization, they have worked hard to create a community garden, or *Tul* (also a concept from indigenous culture). *“A campesino’s relationship with his individual parcel of land, creates a parcelization of his thinking... The land brings us together. Single-crop agriculture is not very creative and generates separation and competition. Diversifying our agriculture also enriches and diversifies our thinking.”* These community members joined together to set aside a large 22-hectare plot of land for collective agriculture. They share the costs of maintaining the crops on the land. They have a labor schedule through which each family puts two days labor per week into the *Tul*. They make collective decisions about the usage of the land. The *Tul* produces food for the community as a whole, but is also specifically geared towards the production of conservable seeds for future use. The land has public grazing for small animals, and medicinal plants, and some protected natural areas.

CoSurca: The Co-op strategy

CoSurca is the ten-year-old Campesino Cooperative of Southern Cauca, a region that has been heavily controlled by guerrillas, and overtaken by the coca-based economy. CoSurca is primarily made up of small coffee producers, including 1024 families in 13 local organizations in four municipalities. It is vigorously developing a strategy to promote alternative crop substitution and move farmers away from the Coca economy. CoSurca, like other groups just described, emphasizes the importance of the local economy as a resistance to being overwhelmed by the conflict, but their approach is quite distinct. According to its director:

*Our strategy is to actively engage with the national and international community with the objective of **building economic power** for campesinos. With economic power we are in a better position to negotiate for our needs. In order to do this we have had to find our own markets...Campesinos need to engage directly with international agro-business.*

The economy of Coca is unsustainable and damaging to campesinos. It is the worst of capitalist development. We are trying to build a local economy without Coca. We are encouraging community discussions about the Coca Economy and the need for alternative models. But we also have to prepare ourselves for confrontation with the war, which is escalating.

At the same time, we are encouraging members to plant for their own food. And we are supporting health projects. This kind of support lessens the tendency towards displacement.

CoSurca's strategies include:

Alternative crop substitution: They are taking advantage programs supported by the government, the UN and USAID that encourage campesinos to give up coca and plant alternative crops.

Taking advantage of the coffee export economy while also encouraging self-sufficiency and farming for ones own food.

Building strong international and official linkages. Unlike the other groups, these linkages were not 'human rights' based, but rather economic. Thus, CoSurca markets its coffee internationally through the fair labor organization, is building links with the international organic coffee marketers, and maintains good ties with the United Nations and USAID. It clearly sees these linkages not only as economically necessary, but also as a strategy of protection. For instance, CoSurca makes sure to print on every box of coffee it sells, the logos of the United Nations, USAID, and state programs that support the alternative crop schemes.

Building campesino economic power via the mutual economic support of a cooperative: By strengthening local organizations, and centralizing their collective power through the economic weight of the cooperative, CoSurca will become a more influential interlocutor for member campesinos. CoSurca is pursuing this strategy by building its own independent marketing links, in order to bypass the monopolistic middlemen who control the export of most Colombia coffee.³⁸ This has potential of greatly increasing the portion of profit that is returned directly to CoSurca members. However, it is also involves considerable risk of making an enemy of the coffee marketing monopoly, one of the pillars of the Colombian economic elite. CoSurca has counted on external political support to face this challenge.

CoSurca's 5-year plan includes programs on environmental improvement, investment in improving the quality of their export coffee, renovation of the soil, housing, and health improvements for members, and food security.

So what does this have to do with the war? A "Co-op" strategy is not particular to conflict, and its benefits could be justified in almost any rural setting. Yet when a conflict dominates the rural setting on an apparently permanent basis as it does in Colombia, it is not possible to disentangle security strategies from economic strategies. When CoSurca mobilizes people away from coca it is confronting the income strategies of all the armed groups. When it confronts the coffee monopoly, it is confronting the elites who support the paramilitary strategy. CoSurca, as in other cases mentioned above, sees its members' vulnerability to the conflict as one in the same with the campesinos' vulnerabilities to economic manipulation and devastation. Thus the co-op strategy is a conflict strategy, with positive security potential as well as security risks. And just as we have seen in Choco, the extent to which communities succeed in creating a "collective" force characterized by institutions that can sustain their unity in the face of adversity, to this extent they may have a greater capacity to withstand the external threats posed to them by armed groups and the state's war strategies.

³⁸ This strategy also required CoSurca to begin roasting its own brands of high-quality gourmet coffee aimed at the export market. This is quite unusual in Colombia, where the majority of local producers sell their coffee beans "green" onto the international market, and roasting happens elsewhere.

Box: CoSurca Director: *We have gradually earned greater respect from the FARC. Once, the FARC stopped me and demanded 10 million pesos from COSURCA. I negotiated directly with them. I said, "OK, I can give you the 10 million as long as I can get our 1200 members to agree. So let me talk to all of them and see." They let me go.*

CIMA – “Dare to Govern!”

CIMA is the *Comite de Integración del Macizo*, or Committee for the Integration of the Macizo, and was deeply involved in organizing the mass protests of the late 1990s, the *Bloque Social Alternativo*, and in working together with governor Floro to create policy alternatives for Cauca. Among our respondents in Cauca, CIMA represented and described the Cauca-wide strategy of using the departmental government to promote an alternative space on a Cauca-wide level.³⁹

CIMA was founded in 1985 in southern Cauca, an area completely ignored by all state services and development. It is made up of many member campesino local organizations. CIMA played a key role in coordinating mass mobilizations of rural communities in 1991, 1996 and 1999, each one bigger than the last – with 46,000 people occupying the Pan-American highway for 26 days in 1999. CIMA negotiated directly with the state after the 1996 and 1999 mobilizations. CIMA describes these mass mobilizations as “a space for organizing and building unity, and for creating proposals together.” Communities and organizations camped out on the Pan-American highways for weeks at a time formed bonds and mutual strategies together which formed the basis of an ongoing movement.

In addition to organizing mass actions, CIMA works now with leaders in 12 municipalities in Cauca and 5 municipalities in Nariño, and has ongoing projects and policy proposals in the areas of agricultural development, education, and culture for the region. Its lemma is “*Vida Digna, Integración Regional, Desarrollo Propio*” (“a dignified life, regional integration and self-control over development”) and it has positioned itself as a source of policy initiatives for the region, in opposition to externally imposed models for development coming from the central government in Bogotá.

CIMA also has a “human rights” program – a necessity in the face of the conflict and a paramilitary invasion that categorizes all social organizing as subversive. Its strategies in this area are straightforward: national and international denunciation and the constant strengthening of international linkages.

The electoral strategy

CIMA leadership saw the 2000 election of governor Floro in Cauca by the *Bloque Social Alternativo* as a substantial change in the tradition of governance in Colombia. “*In this government, social organizations have more influence.*” They admit that the Floro government has not been very successful: the departmental government has had financial

³⁹ CIMA’s regional strategy is not in contrast to the local strategies being implemented by communities, but rather complementary to them. In fact, in addition to being a regional political force, CIMA is also a network of local organizations, many of which are engaged in strategies similar to those just outlined.

problems, faced intense conflict, and been over-ruled or ignored by Bogotá. They recognize that the departmental government has very little power or control as compared with the central government or the army. But in contrast to the suspicions and resistance in many social organizations towards the corrupt and elite-controlled process of governance in Colombia, CIMA argued, “*Apostamos a gobernar.*” (“We must dare to govern.”) “*We have tried. We believe in democratic participation. We have to be creating our own proposals for the future. It’s very difficult.*”

In Floro’s defense, they point out that he was an outspoken critic of fumigation, and that he has attempted to intervene with respect to the paramilitaries. “*On occasions he has called the army to alert them of the presence of paramilitaries nearby and insist that they take action. The army replies ‘Of course,’ but when they arrive, of course the paramilitaries have been warned in advance and are not there.*”

CIMA recognizes that despite having won the election, the successful paramilitary invasion puts their entire regional alternative strategy on the defensive.

This is now very difficult. The paramilitary strategy destroys the social fabric. There is a great deal of fear. So our focus is to sustain our organizational force through projects and proposals. We have to strengthen those communities with the capacity to resist – and create models that will survive. For example, the community in San Sebastian is organized enough to dialog directly with the guerrilla.⁴⁰ Some have suffered from threats. Others have been able to resist. Sustaining organization in the midst of conflict is extremely difficult. We insist on a negotiation strategy for the war, but negotiation has to involve civil society, and that civil society must be strengthened to participate.

We also prioritize the formation of alliances: with indigenous groups and other organizations. We have created a joint ‘Proposal for Development and Peace’, which will be released publicly in August. We believe our combined experience here in Cauca is relevant to the search for national solutions.

“Sur Colombiano” (The Colombian South) is a regional effort bringing together Cauca, Nariño, Putamayo, Huila, and Valle de Cauca. One aspect brings together the governors. Another part brings together civil society. We are working towards consensus on region-wide proposals. There is broad agreement in the southern region that the solution must be political, that the regions must be listened to, and that social needs must be attended to.

Finally, we engage in collaboration on a national level. In September we will be meeting with people from Mogotes⁴¹ and other experiences in other regions to share experiences about how groups have maintained social spaces within the conflict.

⁴⁰ This was our final interview in Cauca, and was another example in which our respondents named new case examples to us. We have no further information about San Sebastian.

⁴¹ Mogotes is a community in Santander, with another experience that could be studied by STEPS. It won a national ‘peace prize’ in 1999 for having mobilized and directly negotiated with the ELN guerrillas to prevent kidnappings.

It is difficult to judge the prospects for future success of the strategy to create an alternative space in Cauca on the basis of mass mobilization, alliance-building, and electoral engagement as articulated by CIMA. At the moment of our study the process was clearly on the defensive. Nevertheless, regional and national alliance building and mobilization may be the necessary complement to local community-level strategies trying to protect their territory from the war. As long as such community struggles are small, few, and isolated, they are unlikely to survive in the face of a conflict in which the paramilitaries, the army and the elites have long-term and nationwide political and military strategies to control the territory.

Discussion: Territorial Defense in Cauca

Cauca is diverse and pluralistic, with many different kinds of regional and local political and cultural spaces. These are to some extent complementary or superimposed, and to some extent in tension. The indigenous have ancestral strategies of protection, reinforced by the legal creation of *resguardos*, territorial spaces whose autonomy precedes the conflict. The other community-level or region-wide campesino strategies are more recent in their development, and are generating new territorial concepts. The paramilitary incursion starting in 2000 was a major scenario change, which has had unequal effects on these organizational processes. The indigenous strategies have been less affected. The campesino movements have been quite knocked off balance.

All these initiatives have a regional perspective (Cauca) as well as a local connection to their immediate territory or land—a connection which is a fundamental part of the identity of both indigenous and campesino peoples. And they closely link the concepts of territorial defense with that of food sovereignty. The level of regional integration, however, is quite low. CRIC unites the majority of indigenous *resguardos*, and CIMA has had region-wide influence among campesinos, but a great many communities and organizations have no direct affiliation with such large organizations.

An important new development is that Cauca has now been chosen by the European community to host the installation of a so-called “Laboratory of Peace” between 2004 and 2007. This will signify significant investment in development projects ostensibly aimed at addressing the causes of conflict, and considerable diplomatic interest in Cauca maintaining an image of being an “alternative space.” However, in other such “Laboratories of Peace,” most notably in the *Magdalena Medio* region, these development investments have appeared to go hand in hand with a marked increase in paramilitary control of the region. In any case, this choice by the European Union implies that “the international factor” will take a substantially greater role in Cauca as the conflict develops. It would be instructive to re-visit this analysis in a few years to see how all these processes have progressed.

It is important to try to put these resistance strategies into perspective, given the intensity of the conflict. Each of the armed actors aims to hold the political and economic control (hegemony) of a given territory. A requirement for this is to first hold the military control of this territory. Gaining this hegemony is frequently a multistage process:

I. Territorial dispute stage: No one holds decisive military control of the territory. Two or more armed actors stay simultaneously in the territory, and there is combat.

II. Consolidation of military hegemony: Territory is dominated mainly by the presence of the one hegemonic armed actor, with stable bases. Sporadic brief presences of opposed armed actors, but the latter cannot claim control of substantial parts of the territory. Combat is significantly reduced.

III. Political, social and economic consolidation: the hegemonic armed actor is able to secure the collaboration of the territorial population around specific political and economic and social objectives. There is no combat, and less emphasis on military activities and requirements. There may be selective attacks against individuals or entities opposing the hegemonic actor.

The logical sequence progression is from I to II to III, but at any given moment an armed actor can go back from II to I (due to the military pressure of another armed actor), and from III to II. Also it may happen that there is no stage I or II, but due to lack of confrontation with an opponent, the armed intervener aims straight for social and economic control.

If we apply these stages for the conflict in Cauca, we can see that the protection strategies around food sovereignty are suitable for a stage III, but they may be not so useful in stages I and II. In our interviews we have found that the entities in Cauca have not developed consistent strategies for the stages I and II of the conflict, but are preparing to resist the eventual stage III. This is a fragile process, because stages I and II demand that significant energy be spent on purely defensive strategies, whereas their strategy for stage III requires investment in longer-term constructive projects: construction both of agricultural “food sovereignty” capacity as well as social construction of community unity. And, as we have already seen in Chocó, community unity, coherence and organization is one of the direct targets of the paramilitary strategy. The challenge ahead for these Cauca communities is to withstand these pressures now while building strength for later.

Part IV Conclusion

Colombia has suffered a half-century of uninterrupted conflict, which since the late 1990s has escalated to one of its worst periods. The country has some truly intractable structural and economic problems which have facilitated the conflict, and which sustain armed strategies. But Colombia can not be written off by the outside world as a hopeless case. It is not a failed state, nor is it a chaotic mess. There are in fact powerful traditions of nonviolent community resilience and courageous social organizing. One of the major impediments to the search for peace in Colombia has been the reality that continued conflict was effectively serving the political and economic interests of the armed parties – all of them. Negotiating an end to the conflict, therefore, is unlikely to succeed as long as armed party interests are the only ones at the negotiating table. In other Latin American conflicts, this balance has changed when the agenda of civil society gained enough force to become a strong factor in the negotiating scenario. For this to occur, there needed to be first and foremost a strong sense of community, regional and national organizing for

peace within civil society. There also needed to be powerful allies who could help to leverage the civilian agenda onto the table—and these allies included the international community and the churches.

Experiments like those outlined in this paper are helping to build such alliances, and they fit into a broader quilt of community and political efforts throughout Colombia, led by civilians who have not given up hope. They are developing ever-stronger international alliances. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church hierarchy in Colombia has yet to fulfill the potential role it could in this process. But church-associated groups like *Justicia y Paz* and many others are seizing what opportunities they can to encourage community efforts—both individual community experiments which resist the war as well as community alliance-building.

Colombia is not an easy place to predict the future. Any one of these experiments might be undermined or crushed. But the increasing number of such attempts in these communities and in others we have not described suggest the potential for a growing strategy on a national level. If the Afro-Colombians of Choco can hold onto their collective land titles in the face of powerful paramilitary and multinational opposition, there is hope. When the most powerful military general in the country has to devote a press conference to delegitimizing a community experiment in Cacarica, and paramilitaries keep harassing them for no military reason, they are suggesting that these symbolic experiments make their armed project vulnerable. When a guerrilla group has to hand over its hostage to the unarmed indigenous community surrounding them, they too are showing a vulnerability to civilian power. When Caucan or Chocoano farmers can refuse to plant coca and insist on growing their own food, they are developing a base of independent power, because self-sufficiency is power. And if such examples can inspire other Colombians to hope that they too can find creative ways to survive the conflict with dignity, then their survival, their power, and their dignity, will end the war.

Appendix 1: Amnesty International report on Colombia (below)

Appendix 2 – maps (separate document)

Appendix 1: Amnesty International Excerpt on Colombia, 2003

(Extracted from AI Annual Report 2003⁴²)

REPUBLIC OF COLOMBIA

Head of state and government: Álvaro Uribe Vélez (replaced Andrés Pastrana in August 2002)

International Criminal Court: ratified

Background about the conflict.

Peace talks initiated in 1999 between the government and the main armed opposition group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, collapsed on 20 February. Attempts to initiate negotiations between the government and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), National Liberation Army, had stalled by the end of the year. The armed conflict between the security forces, acting in conjunction with paramilitary groups, and guerrilla groups, intensified following the break-down of peace talks with the FARC.

This resulted in a marked deterioration in the human rights situation. More than 500 people “disappeared” and more than 4,000 civilians were killed for political motives. Forced internal displacement continued to grow dramatically. Over 2,700 people were kidnapped, at least 1,500 of whom were kidnapped by guerrilla groups and paramilitary forces. This cycle of political violence was exacerbated by the security policies of the new government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez which took office in August. The main victims of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continued to be the civilian population, including the internally displaced, peasant farmers, and members of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities living in conflict zones. Colombia’s largest paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia, declared a unilateral cease-fire on 1 December and in the same month the government announced its intention to initiate negotiations with army-backed paramilitaries. There was concern that government measures to facilitate negotiations with illegal combatant groups and government legislative initiatives might result in impunity for members of the paramilitary groups, the armed forces or the guerrillas responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity and other crimes under international law.

State of emergency and security legislation

On 25 November, the Constitutional Court declared that parts of Decree 2002 were unconstitutional, notably those parts granting judicial police powers to the military. The government stated that it wished to make permanent some of the provisions contained in the state of emergency and Decree 2002. The government announced it would submit legislative proposals to Congress in 2003 to grant judicial police powers to the security forces after proposed reforms enabling the Attorney General to grant such powers to the security forces were blocked in Congress in December. The authorities announced the creation of a million-strong network of civilian informers, who are expected to assist the security forces in their counter-insurgency strategy, and began recruiting “peasant soldiers”, who will live within their own communities. There were concerns that this would drag the civilian population further into the conflict and strengthen paramilitarism.

⁴² AI index: POL 10/003/2003

Armed opposition groups.

Armed opposition groups were responsible for numerous and repeated violations of international humanitarian law, including hostage-taking and the killing of civilians. In May, the FARC issued “resign or die” threats to judges, mayors and local councillors. The FARC subsequently killed several local officials and civilians they accused of collaborating with their opponents. The FARC carried out numerous disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks which resulted in the deaths and wounding of many civilians.

Armed forces

There were reports of direct involvement by the security forces in serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture, “disappearances” and killings.

Paramilitaries

Paramilitary groups continued to spread and consolidate their presence throughout the country, particularly in areas with a heavy military presence. Paramilitaries operating in collusion with the security forces were responsible for the vast majority of “disappearances” and killings of civilians.

Persecution of human rights defenders

Under the new government, human rights activists were killed, “disappeared”, detained, threatened and harassed. While expressing an interest in maintaining dialogue with nongovernmental organizations, in practice officials and some sectors of the media frequently treated human rights defenders as subversives, targeting them during intelligence and counter-insurgency operations.

Official and unofficial restrictions on movement meant that human rights defenders were not always able to gain access to areas where human rights violations were reported to have taken place. Some activists, journalists and humanitarian workers were interrogated or arbitrarily detained during attempts to reach people in conflict zones cut off from the rest of the country. During raids carried out in so-called intelligence and counter-insurgency operations, individual personal details and valuable information regarding the involvement of members of the security forces in human rights violations was seized from social organizations. Human rights activists from all sectors of society were targeted. By the end of the year, more than 170 trade unionists had reportedly been killed, the majority by paramilitaries. Several indigenous leaders and journalists were also killed.

Civilians in conflict zones

Peasant farmers, Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities living in conflict zones or areas of economic interest continued to be among the main victims of violations of human rights or international humanitarian law committed by the security forces and their paramilitary allies and by guerrilla forces. Over 350,000 people were internally displaced in the first nine months of the year as a result of threats and killings of civilians committed by both sides in the conflict.

Intergovernmental organizations

The UN Commission on Human Rights again condemned the grave and persistent breaches of international humanitarian law committed mainly by paramilitaries and guerrillas. It also strongly condemned the persistence of impunity and expressed concern at the links between the armed forces and the paramilitaries. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted that military courts launched or continued with investigations into human rights violations despite recommendations to the Colombian authorities to ensure that all cases of human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law should be excluded from military courts.