

The Colombian Truth Commission: Innovations and Challenges

As we approach three years since the negotiated peace agreement between the FARC-EP and the Colombian state, the University of Bristol hosted members of the Colombian Truth Commission (CTC) to participate in 'Truth, Memory and Diaspora: The Seeds of Peace in Colombia', a week of transnational dialogue and collaboration between UK and Colombian institutions.

The week of events served as a unique opportunity to hear directly from the CTC about the opportunities and challenges faced in the implementation of the peace agreement, at this pivotal time in Colombia's history. Embrace Dialogue participated in the events and organised a public dialogue at University College London, to spread the word about the work of the CTC. In this snapshot we highlight the key messages shared.

Gender and Pedagogical Innovations

Alejandra Coll, of the Gender Working Group at the CTC, addressed the question: 'What does it mean to be a feminist and a learning Truth Commission?' Together, she and Ana Cristina Navarro, of the Pedagogy Working Group, discussed the Truth Commission's innovative approaches to gender and pedagogy - two fundamental issues on the peacebuilding agenda in Colombia.

It should be noted that Colombia is the first Truth Commission to have a gender approach central to its entire mandate and, in addition, pedagogy is one of its four operational pillars.

Do Colombian society and Colombia's education system embrace diversity? This is one of the key questions that needs to be tackled through the Truth Commission's intersectional work. Alejandra Coll described the importance of uncovering the ways in which racism, patriarchy and misogyny, colonialism, and poverty have each contributed to conflict in Colombia.

The CTC is able to make recommendations to address structural inequalities and stimulate long-term policy and social change in its final report, including through education.



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The Truth-telling of 'the Colombia outside Colombia'

Commissioner Carlos Beristain commented on the work being done to collect testimonies in "the Colombia outside of Colombia", to investigate how the armed conflict has been experienced by Colombians living abroad, many of whom were forced to leave the country in exile.

The Commissioner asserted the challenges of carrying out truth-seeking processes in such a polarised context, where lies have been institutionalised, pain internalised, and social fractures run deep in society.

The CTC intends to create new spaces where previously silenced memories can be shared. Carlos Beristain was joined by members of the UK Truth Commission hub of civil society organisations to reflect upon their efforts to encourage UK based Colombians to give their testimony.

"We hope you fall in love with the truth commission and become the channel of communication between people who want to give a testimony and us," said Andrei Gomez Suarez, who is one of the individuals documenting interviews for the Truth Commission in the UK.

The Challenges of Working in a Polarised Context

Gonzalo Sánchez, the former director of the Colombian National Centre for Historical Memory and a member of the Advisory Board of the Truth Commission, reflected on historical memory and peacebuilding in times of polarisation.

Gonzalo discussed the question of who produces memory work and for whom? He raised concerns that in Colombia today, memory and truth are being threatened by "toxic narratives," made up of hatred, vengeance and fear, built up over years of conflict, and driven by those who oppose the negotiated peace agreement.

Related to this is the issue of legitimacy and memory production. A key challenge for the Colombian Truth Commission is to ensure that marginalised voices, which have historically been excluded and discriminated against, are heard and taken seriously by the Colombian state.

"It would seem that we are moving from a memory by and for the victims to one constructed by and for those responsible."



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The Opportunity for Reconciliation 'The Witness'

(El Testigo), a film about the photographer Jesús Abad Colorado who has documented violence in Colombia for over 25 years, allowed Gonzalo Sánchez and Lina Malagón, a Human Rights Lawyer teaching at the University of Bristol, to reflect on whether Colombia is ripe for reconciliation.

The documentary tells the inspiring human stories of the people in his photographs, exploring the pertinent themes of resilience and forgiveness, and what they mean to those for whom so much is at stake. According to Gonzalo, the invaluable memory work of Abad to not only document, but also humanise the conflict, opened the door for the victims to speak out. It is time to know the truth because we all have a story to tell and we need to move on, expressed Lina, in a resounding message of hope.

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Lessons learned

Truth-seeking in Colombia will not end with the culmination of the CTC's three-year period. It is hoped that the final report produced by the CTC will be accompanied by meaningful efforts to promote dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence in Colombia, and will create conditions conducive to peace.

Therefore, if you are Colombian or a friend of Colombia in the UK, we invite you to learn more about the CTC, connect with the country's transitional justice process and to support peacebuilding efforts. Do get in touch and embrace the CTC with us.



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