

FARC's Peace Signatories – Challenges and Creative Solutions to COVID-19

This snapshot summarises the highlights of our event, [“The Impact of COVID-19 on the Reincorporation of the FARC in Colombia”](#). We heard from FARC ex-combatants from the formerly named [Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation \(ETCRs in Spanish\)](#), and Laura Villa, representative for the FARC in the National Reincorporation Council (CNR), who discussed the challenges they faced before and during the pandemic, and how they are providing creative solutions to this global crisis from their territories. Disappointed by the deep social inequalities across Colombia, Laura told us that she joined the guerrilla in 2003, after finishing her studies in medicine. In the FARC, she engaged mainly in healthcare-related work and was always aware of the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict. Laura is now a student, a mother and also an official of the CNR, where she participates in working groups on the creation of guidelines to address psychosocial, ethnic, health and gender issues that affect the populations living in ETCRs and the New Areas of Reincorporation (NARs). These latter are not officially recognised by the government and hence are not financially supported, nor given food supply. All ex-combatants, however, do receive their monthly allowance (90% of the minimum salary in Colombia, COP \$877.802, approximately GBP £189).

The Challenges

In Laura's view, the pandemic has exacerbated the structural instability already present in the country, including inequality, violence -including violence against women- and the gap between cities and rural communities, where most ex-guerrilla members live. Reincorporation is severely underfinanced by the current administration, and one of the main problems is that demobilised FARC members have been forced to migrate to the NARs, where economic and security guarantees are inexistent. Approximately 200 ex-guerrilla members have recently abandoned two ETCRs in Antioquia and Cauca after being targeted with several death threats by paramilitary groups. They are now recognised as people displaced by the armed conflict.



In addition, since the signing of the peace agreement back in 2016, 200 ex-guerrilla members have been murdered, plus an additional 26 since lockdown started. Even though only two cases of COVID-19 and one possible case of infection have been reported among the ex-combatant population, the death of a baby who was not able to receive adequate and timely medical care underscores the many problems rural communities suffer as a consequence of inadequate access to health care, and general state neglect. Despite these setbacks, Laura, who has been advocating for mutual and lasting solutions since her participation in the peace negotiations in Havana, arduously works to push for the implementation of the peace agreement, recognising that achieving peace is not solely the state's responsibility.

The Response

Drawing on wartime lessons whereby comradeship, teamwork and solidarity were key to preserving lives during the conflict, ex-guerrilla members are dealing with the current pandemic crisis through community efforts. "During the 53 years of the armed conflict, we did not only learn how to use weapons, but we also developed skills in healthcare, house building and food production", said Laura.

In the ETCR of Miravalle (Caquetá), for example, ex-combatants, the community, and the armed forces came together to build a piping system to address the lack of water supply. In multiple ETCRs, disinfection machines have been made and face masks sewn to be donated to neighbouring communities and vulnerable populations. This is the case of the ETCR in Icononzo (Tolima), where ex-combatants are manufacturing face masks for prisons, where Colombia's highest number of COVID-19 cases are concentrated.

Implementation and Transformation

Laura spoke about political reincorporation, the government's use of funds for peace implementation (which has recently been questioned for alleged misuse), and other aspects of implementation of the agreement, such as the solidarity economy projects being advanced by FARC peace signatories during the current crisis. Improving communication challenges, acknowledging the problems in the territories, and engaging in pedagogical work to inform former FARC members about the peace agreement are, according to Laura, the core priorities of the FARC's party to complete transition from their previous military structure, in which former commanders unilaterally solved all the problems affecting the rank and file members.



Laura also emphasised that the reincorporation and the Territorially-Focused Development Plans (PDETs) are very different points of the agreement, also mentioning there have been significant difficulties in harmonising solutions, as implementation has been fragmented according to this framework.

She also said that the Commission for Follow-Up, Promotion and Verification of the Implementation of the Agreement (CSIVI), an institution made up by three FARC and three government representatives in charge of the follow-up, promotion and joint verification of the implementation of the Agreement, which is also the authority tasked with monitoring the budget for implementation, is currently at an impasse, given the US has identified Cuba as a state that does not fully cooperate with US counterterrorism efforts, despite Cuba's support to peacebuilding in Colombia. In response, the FARC political party has decided to cease their participation in the CSIVI, signalling their concern regarding the Duque-Trump policies for the future sustainability of peace in Colombia.

Embrace the Dialogue supports the efforts of the demobilised FARC members, who actively and proactively work to build social fabric and fight for peace, even in the midst of the pandemic. We urge academics, the private sector, NGOs, civil society and the international community to continue supporting reincorporation initiatives generated from the territories and to express their rejection of acts of violence

