

CHALLENGES OF WAR: PEASANT RESERVE ZONES AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN RURAL COLOMBIA

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Executive Summary

This policy brief looks at promoting Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRC) as a model for strengthening peasant communities affected by the ongoing armed conflict in Colombia. It will also consider the direct relationship between violence, land grabs and the systematic implementation of neoliberal policies in the countryside. Likewise, this monopolistic occupation of land represents a delivered attempt to restrict peasant communities from their access to suitable territories and natural resources, often threatening traditional livelihoods. This policy brief highlights the reconfiguration of peasant communities by designing developmental alternatives at ZRC to confront land accumulation dynamics. By providing peasants with control over their territories and natural resources in ZRC the continual development of rural communities in conflict-prone areas will be guaranteed.

Introduction

The Colombian government instituted Law 160 of 1994 that aimed at the creation of Peasant Reserve Zones (*Zonas de Reserva Campesina* -ZRC), a figure designed to stop the spreading of big landholdings by assigning collective and individual titles to peasant communities in certain marginal areas of the countryside. Historically in Colombia, the accumulation of land became a symbol of power and territorial control rather than a direct investment in productive capital. At the same time, with low income, fewer employment alternatives, and deficient tenure system, dwellers of small-scale holdings become a source of low-paid menial farm labourers for large-scale plantations (Escobar 2008; Otero 1998; Araghi 1995). Then, peasant cultures and identities became deconstructed from their relationship to land, natural environment and community. These conditions represent a unique opportunity for what Richani (2002, 115) called the 'narcobourgeoisie elite' often associated with the upsurge of land grabs, the expansion of coca plantations, and the consistent escalation of rural violence. This phenomenon exerts pressure over small and medium scale peasants. As a consequence, the state's incapacity to fulfill its social and economic roles has increased inequality and might be a contributing factor explaining the emergence of armed groups in Colombia (Sánchez 2001, 25). Additionally, a portion of land has provided an enclave for commercial agriculture in areas with links between drug cartels

and high rates of human rights abuses (Thomson 2011, 343; Richani 2005, 145). Overall, this 'accumulation by dispossession', in the words of Harvey (2003), is driven by the imperatives of capital development converging food, energy, financial, and environmental crises. Neoliberalism and globalization had intensified economic inequality, facilitating a western economic framework that has evidently destroyed rural communities, while increasing the presence of armed actors in their territories. Therefore, a deliberate attempt to disengage peasant communities serves the purpose of exposing them to the ambitions of particular armed groups.

Global Modernity And Peasant Alternatives

Colombian peasantry has endured a systematic process of land grabs and rural underdevelopment. This fuels an ongoing armed conflict resulting in one of the largest displaced populations in the world. Moreover, the lack of state control over marginal land and the proliferation of the drug economy, often promoting extensive cattle ranching, has dramatically accelerated the violent expel of peasants in most regions (Medina 2012). It is estimated that between 1985 and 2010 more than 5,5 million people were displaced and more than 6,6 million hectares were forcefully taken away from former tenants (CODHES 2011; III ENV 2010). Additionally, there is a direct link between the extensive concentration of land for plantation enclaves, mostly oil palm, and the use paramilitary forces for the state's effort to bring in large capital investments (Grajales 2011). This manifestation of competing interests is nonetheless largely associated with a neoliberal agroindustrial project, as well as a reinforced vision of modernity, aiming at both: the global control of natural resources and the further proletarianization of the peasantry. This pervasive effort continues demeaning peasant populations with an unequal distribution of income, power, rights, and opportunities in the countryside.

Reaffirming the peasantry requires contemplating distinctive alternatives to secure local projects such as considering advocacy for food sovereignty (Boyer 2010); biodiversity and food security alternatives (Isakson 2011); creating a network of cooperatives and national association of producers (Borras 2003); or being part of a global a global peasant movement for the development of alternative models in *La Vía Campesina* (Desmarais 2007). In the case of ZRC, the consolidation of their peasantry will be attained if full ownership is given to land as well as to cultural and political peasant projects. This full recognition of all other

intersectionalities within the peasant population, including gender and racial differences, must recognize the heterogeneity of rural communities and the need to address relevant local issues.

Challenges And Expectations Of Zrc In Conflict-Prone Areas

Peasant Reserve Zones are the result of concerted negotiations between the government and Cocalero movement leaders as an alternative to aerial fumigation and manual eradication of coca plantations in the South of Colombia. (Ramirez 2002). There are currently six ZRC operating in Colombia benefiting almost 9,000 families over an area of 550,000 hectares. Through the formalization of collective and individual land titles, the state intended to institute a form of capital intervention and stronger institutionality to secure areas badly impacted by the ongoing conflict. Subsequently, pilot projects financed by the World Bank were able to operate independently in ZRC. From the peasantry perspective, ZRC was one important mechanism to reclaim peasants' identities while contemplating the reconfiguration of an undisturbed territoriality. España (2001) recognizes that ZRC could create incentives for peasants to protect national parks and highlands from further deforestation and expansion of the agrarian frontier.

Policy Recommendations

Given previous assertions, rural organizations must urge the state to recognize some level of autonomy and organization capacity for the implementation and support of ZRC. On this basis, the policy recommends the following:

1. Financing projects at the interior of ZRC as part of the national programs on food security and environmental protection must be fostered. Shifting from coca eradication to coca substitution programs, while supporting alternative crop production and commercialization will disavow armed actors claims over peasants' territories.
2. Titling of communal and individual land is imperative for institutional control and peasants' empowerment. Fostering the expansion of new ZRC is necessary to challenge pressing violent dynamics affecting peasant populations.

3. Supporting the conformation of new ZRC on land previously expropriated from drug lords and in marginal land is needed to impede the establishment of armed actors and illegal crops. Therefore, adequate policies must incorporate elements of community participation for the development of distinctive peasant alternatives. Current ZRC are located in remote areas and will need better infrastructure and access to public services for peasants to sell their produce.

Conclusion

The final goal of this policy brief will be to recognize ZRC as an invaluable tool that might eventually allow peasant communities to reclaim traditional livelihoods away from armed actors. By developing a multidimensional view of the peasantry, they may be able to reconfigure the conditions in which to affront local and global realities. More importantly, ZRC will operate as an antagonistic force in providing a unique territoriality for peasant communities in Colombia, while contributing to the expression of peasant identities in places with ineffective institutionality, adverse influence by all armed actors, and neoliberal provisions constantly challenging traditional rural livelihoods.

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