

TRÓCAIRE LEARNING SERIES: Mainstreaming Gender in Programming

CASE STUDY 2 Diverse Dialogues for Peace in Colombia



1. Summary

Trócaire supported an 18 month project with the aim of building an inclusive dialogue among a diverse range of stakeholders in Colombian society that would address the deep-rooted issues of conflict in Colombia. Taking a strong gender lens, the project raised the profile of sexual violence as a weapon of war, a war crime and a violation of human rights. It also resulted in women demanding and receiving political decisions that would improve their security and contribute to overcoming the injustices that fuel the conflict.

This case study illustrates the outcomes of committing to diversity in programming, and carrying a power analysis through into programme work.

2. Project Context

Conflict in Colombia

Colombia has suffered from an internal armed conflict for more than 50 years. This conflict is pursued irregularly, among guerillas, paramilitary groups, and the official armed forces of the state. Ordinary citizens are heavily affected, and impunity for violent crime is the norm. Features of the conflict include displacement, forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, maiming and death from mines and unexploded devices, assassinations, forced recruitment, threats and attacks on human rights defenders, confinement and sexual violence. As section 3 below shows, experiences of the conflict are gendered: conflict impacts on you differently depending on whether you are a man or a woman.

To date, the responses of numerous governments to the conflict have focused on trying to defeat the guerrillas by force; they have also centralised peace-building at a national level. Civil society has been consistently excluded from government-instigated peace negotiations in the past and more recently has been substantially absent from the so-called Justice and Peace process¹.

Project response

With EC support, Trócaire worked with four partner organisations to build **diverse dialogues for peace** in Colombia. The project began from an analysis that the prospects for peace in Colombia were weakened by the fact that peace negotiations were viewed as the exclusive preserve of national government and the armed actors. Not only were regional actors and civil society excluded from dialogue, but these stakeholders themselves operated in a segregated way.

There was very little constructive engagement between NGOs, government, the private sector and academia. Within civil society itself, national and large regional NGOs tended not to engage with grassroots movements or organisations.

The issues affecting individual regions varied: the conflict had a different character in the North of the country to the South or West. With so many different silos, the prospects for active engagement on issues of common concern were bleak.

This project aimed to strengthen the capacity of civil society to promote and participate in peace building at a local level, to introduce new and diverse stakeholders to the process, and to pro-actively seek and include the voices of women.

¹ The Justice and Peace process is a transitional justice mechanism promoted by the Colombian government. It does not aim to resolve the ongoing conflict or to address its root causes; rather, it attempts to apply justice to some of the atrocities committed during the ongoing conflict. It focuses on two parties to the conflict: the paramilitaries and the guerrillas, principally the former. The national armed forces are not being investigated or tried in the framework of this law.

Project partners

The project involved 4 partner organisations, working closely together under an EC grant for 18 months, and coordinated by a dedicated Trocaire Programme Assistant with responsibility for the project. The partners were: Vamos Mujer (a regional women's rights organisation from Antioquia); The Popular Training Institute (IPC) (a regional NGO from Antioquia); Compromiso (a regional development NGO based in the north-east of Colombia); and the national secretariat of Pastoral Social (the social-work branch of the Catholic Church that works nation-wide), in particular, their team working in the south-east of the country.

The core components of the project were as follows: building capacities for citizenship and peace dialogue; acknowledging loss and trauma; and promoting peace dialogues amongst a very broad range of stakeholders at local and regional level. Gender was mainstreamed across the entire project which is explored in detail below

At the heart of the project were the peace dialogues. These were events held in the 6 provinces of the project, in which a wide range of stakeholders who did not usually interact debated and explored ways forward for peace. Some events were regional, involving hundreds of people and lasting two or three days. Others were organized locally, as sites for learning-by-doing among the civil society organisations supported by the project. The peace dialogues represented a new, diverse and inclusive approach to building peace from the bottom up in Colombia.

3. Prioritising gender

Differentiated experiences of the conflict for men and women

Colombia's armed conflict has different impacts on men and women. While these are not singular (each individual experience is unique, and influenced by many factors), there are strongly gendered trends. A more detailed description of these trends is included in annex 1.

While men bear a disproportionate burden of injury and death from the conflict, women face the corresponding burden of loss (of close family, friends and husbands), along with a disproportionate burden of the emotional impact of trauma and fear. In addition, they have the burden of responsibility that comes with becoming a head of household for the first time after they have lost their husbands. Sexual violence as a weapon of war and abuse of power is used by all armed groups in Colombia. Women are almost always the target.²

Men and women playing a role in local decisions and peace-building

As explained above, local level peace initiatives are limited, with the principal discussions about peace taking place at national level. In many ways, men and women in poor rural communities are equally excluded from political dialogue and decision-making.

However, men and women play different roles in their communities, and experience exclusion differently. This project engaged with community-based organisations, including parish-based service organisations, and victims' support organisations. These were often dominated by women.

Women's experience of decision-making and public engagement tended to be far less extensive than that of men. While they are often community activists, in a patriarchal society, women have less experience of speaking out, voicing their opinions, disagreeing and proposing solutions than men. They experience fear and sometimes a backlash for playing "inappropriate" cultural roles. This is especially the case where armed actors are present. These forces take control in communities and enforce very conservative social values. As such, women in the project had less experience than men of claiming and exercising any degree of public or political power.

4. Mainstreaming activities

Programme design & implementation:

Drivers of gender mainstreaming: From the very outset, there was a clear commitment to gender mainstreaming in the project. This was a requirement of the EC funding for the project; but it was also typical of Trócaire's approach in Colombia, where strong women's rights partners have promoted a gender lens over a number of years. The project design responded to exclusion from political decision making; the most significant excluded group was poor rural women, and especially women victims of the conflict. The principle driver of mainstreaming activities was the Trócaire programme assistant who coordinated the project (Tito Contreras). Of the four partners, one was a dedicated women's rights organisation – Vamos Mujer – and they also played a proactive role in ensuring a gender analysis in the project. However, the commitment was present in all partner organisations from the beginning.

Dedicated women's rights partner: While all partners had a responsibility to ensure a gender lens was applied in the project, Vamos Mujer played an active leadership role, and worked directly with the other partners in certain initiatives. For example, Vamos Mujer provided expert input in partner meetings in order to explore gender and the armed conflict. They also worked on a joint project in Antioquia with IPC to carry out a gender analysis of the survey on the right to peace (see below).

² Statistics on sexual violence in Colombia are notoriously difficult to verify, as reporting is very limited. It is even harder to identify the exact extent of conflict-related sexual violence. However, there is widespread acceptance that violence against women is a major feature of the armed conflict in Colombia, and that all actors (state/ guerrillas/ paramilitaries) carry this out.

Gender-related commitments agreed and documented

from the beginning: The project logical model had one result (out of three) dedicated to incorporating a gender perspective throughout the project. At the very beginning of implementation, two workshops were held in which partners actively explored the links between gender and the conflict and the project strategies. A joint agreement was established between all of the project partners including Trócaire, establishing a consensus on gender in the project, and noting that gender-based violence and exclusion of women were features of unequal power relations. This led to agreement on the project approach outlined in this case study, particularly the emphasis on empowerment and sexual violence.

Discussing gender at partner meetings: Project partners met in 5/6 working sessions per year, and there were skype sessions held twice a month. Gender was always included on the agenda, and Vamos Mujer played an active role in bringing an expert eye to these issues. For example, information on UN resolutions 1325 (on the role of women in peacebuilding) and 1820 (on sexual violence as a matter of international security) were shared with partners so that they could be integrated into work on women's rights.

Disaggregated project data: At both programme and project level, careful efforts were made to ensure that data collected was disaggregated by sex; this was implemented from the beginning in the programme baseline.

Gender-specific research and analysis: An early project activity was a wide-ranging survey of attitudes to the "right to peace". This right is provided for in the Colombian constitution, but it is little known or observed. Vamos Mujer worked with IPC to carry out a gender analysis of the research findings from Antioquia (one of the 6 departments covered by the project) to demonstrate the different experiences that men and women had of the conflict, and their correspondingly different expectations of peace (see annex 1 for the findings of this analysis).

Mainstreaming in project strategies

Targeting: The purpose of the project was to enable a diverse range of people at multiple levels in society to participate in defining solutions to the conflict. As such, the project reached out to as many different groups as possible, across sectors (including NGOs, grassroots groups and movements, churches, businesses, politicians and academics). The core target groups were those who were most excluded: rural people who were victims of the conflict (often organised in victims' groups, though not always). A majority of these were women.

Agreeing activities with target groups: Once the project was working with specific groups, activities were organised in cooperation with those people. Planning of events – their times, locations, content and even methodology – was carried out collaboratively between partners and their target groups. This was important to ensure that activities did not inadvertently exclude any particular group, for example because they happened in a place that was not accessible to women, or at a time when women were typically occupied.

Analysis of the data on participation in the project shows that the breakdown of women to men in training and capacity building activities was as high as 65% women to 35% men. This is largely because the project had a focus on working with victims of the conflict, and women make up a disproportionate number of victims of the conflict (often they have lost their husbands, fathers and brothers). While there was a strong analysis of the different experiences and impact of conflict on women and men, the project partners did not go out of their way to reach out to men in the project.

Empowerment: As noted above, the project aimed to bring power to people who had little experience exercising it, particularly in public spaces. For women to take power in the spaces promoted, they needed to overcome a profoundly patriarchal culture. This required an approach which was categorically different to the traditional NGO sensitisation and training methodologies.

- Because of the hidden/ internalised nature of gender discrimination and gender-based violence, partners used **experiential methodologies in training sessions**. This meant enabling participants to have a personal experience of the issue in question, so that they would learn by doing. It gave participants practical experience and allowed them to reflect on their experiences.
- Project partners made an agreement to **always use language, materials and images that were not sexist** and that would not reinforce a patriarchal and chauvinist world view. As a result of the project, new materials were developed for use by civil society organisations, dealing with subjects such as citizenship and human rights, but also gender and violence.
- The **methodology used in the peace dialogues** themselves was designed to be empowering. Organisers were encouraged to ensure that the dialogues occurred in an equal and inclusive space. A broad mix of speakers were invited to give a focus to the dialogues; these included small-scale farmers, indigenous people, and other traditionally excluded people, and always included women. Within these dialogues, the idea of expertise was turned on its head: all participants were seen to be experts in their own lives and their own experiences. Rather than having formal panels, there were brief inputs, and all participants were encouraged to take part in the dialogue. While this was often challenging in practice (owing to the large numbers of participants at many dialogues), it was a principle which enabled a new view of power.
- The peace dialogues themselves provided **role models for women, and for traditionally excluded people**. A powerful moment in the final dialogue, which was held in Bogota, over the course of 3 days, was a testimony by Monica McWilliams, a women's rights and peace activist and ex-politician from Northern Ireland. Women participants reported feeling inspired to see the role that they could potentially play in bringing peace to their country.

- The project enabled women from poor rural backgrounds (often victims of violence) to play roles which were new for them. They were given an opportunity to exercise leadership in their own communities, and to carry out political advocacy. While this is a core approach of the project (rather than an outcome of gender mainstreaming), it was particularly effective for women because of the approaches outlined above.
- The purpose of the peace dialogues was to bring a new perspective on the armed conflict to powerful stakeholders, including local and national political representatives, churches and unions. The dialogues were carried out in the run-up to elections in October 2011, and **community groups, victims' groups and women's groups were supported to develop proposals** oriented towards the electoral manifestos. As outlined below, this enabled excluded people (particularly women) to access duty-bearers and to make concrete demands according to their rights. Compromiso directly targeted women electoral candidates to ensure that they would incorporate the theme of peace in their canvassing and subsequent actions.

Sexual Violence: Owing to the shared analysis of the impact of the conflict in Colombia, it was clear that women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. This became an important focus of the project:

- Sexual violence is widely accepted or ignored in much of Colombian society. The project committed to **"making the invisible visible"**. It sought to give victims of violence the confidence and strength that comes from knowing that you have been wrongly treated and that your experience is relevant and valuable. It did this through linking to the legal framework, and through actively facilitating the acknowledgement of historical memory of conflict-related violence, and celebrating the survivors of violence.
- This historical memory was created through **memorial actions**, which took many forms, frequently public and very creative. For example, a television documentary was aired telling the stories of a number of women affected by violence, and exhibitions were mounted with the same purpose. This gave a powerful voice to a previously excluded group.
- The project made it clear that **sexual violence is a weapon of war**, and that it is prohibited in international and national law (through, among other instruments, UN resolution 1820). Resolution 1820 was incorporated into training sessions and in memorial actions, which helped victims to overcome feelings of stigma and shame, and gave them the power to speak out and claim their rights.
- Through the project, community based organisations and victims' groups developed **proposals** for moving beyond conflict to peace. Partners helped groups to identify specific actions that could be taken by local politicians to overcome sexual violence. A good example of these is establishing offices for women's issues at district level – which is allowed for in the law, but rarely acted upon or resourced.

- The work on sexual violence did not include any component specifically targeting men – see lessons learned at the end of this study.

Using research to inform reflection: The research on the right to peace was an important touchstone for discussions about the nature of an inclusive peace. At the various peace dialogues, opportunities were taken to reflect on the differentiated impact of the conflict on men and women; some speakers were invited specifically to reflect on this subject. Along with the very diverse attendance at the peace dialogues, using this analysis enabled participants to reflect on conflict in a different way, and to consider its impact at a personal level.

5. Impact of Mainstreaming

Specific changes related to violence against women: The project was carried out in the run-up to local elections, and dialogues and proposals focused on potential change that could be brought about by local politicians. In at least one case, a local mayor committed to opening an office for women's issues as a result of the lobbying carried out within the project³.

Putting sexual violence on the public agenda: The project succeeded in changing the discourse on sexual violence in certain targeted areas. The memorial actions had a significant public profile, and they were diverse in the methods they used (film, exhibitions, performances). As a result, there is a greater level of awareness in the targeted areas that violence against women is illegal and an abuse of human rights.

Empowerment of very excluded people – especially women: The project worked specifically with individuals who had very limited experience of playing public roles. A number of women have testified to partner organisations that they have experienced real change as a result of the project. Previously they believed that men were leaders (not women), and that women should not speak their minds; now they say that they are not afraid to speak out. Partners to the project evaluated the project as having had real impact in the promotion of women's political activism.

Creation of new, more inclusive spaces for dialogue towards peace: The spaces traditionally open to political/peace dialogue are patriarchal and exclusionary. The project created new spaces – ones which were inclusive, respectful and open, where participants were genuinely equal. This allowed for a different type of dialogue. Those spaces could make a meaningful contribution to fair decisions in Colombia, and partners are of the opinion that they promoted sustainable capacities and relationships, to deepen community problem-solving and peace.

³ A limitation of the project is that it ended rather abruptly when the funding period ended. No follow-up was carried out as to whether the priorities in the various proposals were taken up following the local elections.

Strengthening of grassroots women's movements: The project enabled very local, grassroots groups to participate in political processes, often for the first time. It also strengthened the coordination of such movements, through a common platform called the Peaceful Path of Women in Antioquia.

Improvements in gender approach of partners: While Vamos Mujer was a women's rights partner, and Pastoral Social in the South of Colombia had already built a body of work on women's empowerment for peace, the other two partners to the project began with less knowledge and skill on working on gender rights. Through their participation in the project and interaction with Trócaire and other partners, IPC and Compromiso developed their capacities notably in the area of gender.

6. Key lessons learned

- The project benefited from including a strong women's rights partner (Vamos Mujer) to integrate gender expertise across all strategies. Vamos Mujer frequently played a lead role in carrying out a gender analysis and identifying opportunities for women's empowerment.
- The project took on gender issues whole-heartedly, and from the beginning. From the outset, partners explored these issues in detail, and drew up concrete agreements about how they would be embedded in project actions. There was no sense that gender was simply an add-on to the project.
- The project aimed for experiential action learning about gender discrimination, violence and power. This is much more effective than academic "training" or "sensitisation" on rights. It equips people with the tools and skills necessary to take charge of their own situations.
- Working with diverse and marginalised people means that what are usually considered essential skills for political participation may be absent (public speaking, debate, even literacy). However, people who are accustomed to being excluded often bring a refreshing and new skillset to activities: they can be more creative, innovative, willing to find new ways of making themselves heard through music, theatre and art.
- Openness to diversity has positive impacts for all systematically excluded groups. As a result of regular reflection on gender, project participants saw LGBTI rights and discrimination as an integral part of taking on a gender perspective, and the project tackled both issues.
- While the project had a focus on sexual violence, it did not reach out to men separately to overcome sexual violence. Victims (principally women) told their stories, and reached out to the wider population to change perspectives on sexual violence; but the rest of the community was not directly targeted. The project could have been strengthened by diversifying the approach to challenging sexual violence.

- There are two ways in which participants felt that the project could have had more lasting impact. First, by extending over a longer time period: it ran for 18 months, and reached its end just when a new opening was emerging for engaging with the national peace process. Second, the project successfully began to build links across sectors, between NGOs and the private sector for example. But the project partners did not feel it was as successful in really linking the local to the national. An extension of this project would invest more in bringing the issues identified at local level through research and needs identification, and ensuring that these fed into national policy and peacebuilding processes.
- The project did not engage especially with the risk that both men and women confronted in their day to day lives in engaging with political activism. If it were to happen again, a risk analysis could be carried out locally to identify threats, and plans could be put in place to support participants in the event of threats or attacks.

Annex 1: Gender analysis of impacts and responses to the conflict

The following analysis was essential to the project, and emerged from a survey carried out on the right to peace, which was analysed by Vamos Mujer and IPC to understand the gender dynamics in the conflict. What follows is a summary of the main findings of this analysis:

Men make up a majority of the combatants and a majority of the dead and wounded. They suffer disproportionately from assassinations, mines and unexploded devices, as well as forced recruitment. Men have a very different experience of displacement to women. In a context where men are often the main breadwinners, the loss of employment and status as a provider can result in major stigmatisation and trauma among men. According to UNHCR, the principal aspect of the masculine identity remaining is sometimes the power a man has over his wife and children⁴. There is a close link between the erosion of traditional masculinity and domestic violence.

Women, on the other hand, suffer disproportionately from rape and sexual violence⁵. Women are subject to numerous other vulnerabilities that do not affect men, including domestic slavery, forced abortion, forced sexual relationships with armed actors, and unwanted pregnancies arising from these relationships. Forced recruitment of women is often accompanied by sexual violence as a way of ensuring compliance. Among displaced communities, sexual violence is especially prominent.

⁴ ACNUR, quoted in the project guidance note: Instrumento para la incorporación del enfoque: Género, conflicto armado y construcción de paz.

⁵ Statistics on sexual violence in Colombia are notoriously difficult to verify, as reporting is very limited. It is even harder to identify the exact extent of conflict-related sexual violence. However, there is widespread acceptance that violence against women is a major feature of the armed conflict in Colombia, and that all actors (state/ guerrillas/ paramilitaries) carry this out.



Participants in a Diverse Dialogues project workshop

The conflict has a deep cultural dimension that impacts equally but differently on women and men. Women often suffer stigma as a result of rape, particularly if it results in pregnancy. Once armed groups take control of a region, they usually impose strict codes of behaviour reinforcing very traditional gender roles. Holding alternative sexual or gender identities can result in threats, attacks and murder.

Differentiated responses of men and women to the conflict

When surveyed on their perceptions on peace and conflict, women often focused on the damage done to social and family ties. Survey responses overlapped considerably, and there were some trends. Women tended to define peace as the ability to live freely with family and friends, with stable work, education, and peaceful dialogue.

Men, on the other hand, tended to be both more idealistic and more security-focused: they were more likely to define peace as freedom, a clear conscience, and security – although like women, they saw education as crucial.

Women's responses prioritised the well-being of the community while those of men tended more towards the individualistic.

When it comes to the responsibility for resolving the conflict and ensuring peace in their municipality, men were more likely to accept this as the role of the national government, while women placed a greater emphasis on community actions to bring about peace.

Women saw the armed actors as being a source of insecurity – men were more likely to support a military response to the conflict.

It follows that any response to the conflict designed and consulted mainly with men will be inadequate to the needs or expectations of the whole population.

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Trócaire is the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland and a member of CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis. Charity number: CHY 5883

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