

**A Farewell to Arms:
The Challenge of Studying Politics by Former Rebels in Colombia¹**

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[T]here has been war of some kind almost [all the time]
[W]ars are fought by the finest people that there...

Ernest Hemingway

Preface to the 1948 edition of *A Farewell to Arms*

1. Introduction

This paper is a result of an investigation that was carried out by the Interdisciplinary Research Center (CIES) of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of Icesi University in Cali, Colombia, as a part of a broader project under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Colombia, to study the cases of best practices to overcome the conflict. These cases have been organized in a public database, which is maintained by UNDP³.

The main purpose of the research project was to identify key features of each of

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³ The UNDP virtual database (in Spanish) can be found at <http://saliendodelcallejon.pnud.org.co/> (last accessed in January, 2009).

the cases with regard to suitability, efficiency, sustainability, legitimacy and replicability of various indigenous initiatives in five regions of Colombia.⁴ At the same time, for the author of this paper, the participation in a joint UNDP-Icesi research enterprise turned out to be an opportunity not only to comply with research tasks established for the entire project team, but also to mirror several other –not less important- facets of peace-building in Colombia.

One of these important facets is the central theme of this paper, namely, the issue of peace education in the country. This is because in today's Colombia, peace education, or, better to say, education for peace, is rather misleadingly but widely understood as narrowly fomenting of peace values among kids and adolescents in schools and via informal educational networks. While the importance of teaching peace values to youngsters cannot be overestimated, there is another, and, perhaps, not less important role that educators could play in helping to achieve a long-lasting peace in this war-torn country, namely, the training of professionals by the system of higher education. These professionals must be apt to make a contribution in the peace-building process at various levels, making part of the efforts that would eventually help to overcome the durable internal conflict in Colombia.

In addition, the case study in this paper is an example of not simply a professional training at university level, but the one which is offered to demobilized members of guerrilla. So far, this is the only case of such program in Colombia. The uniqueness of the educational program is obviously limiting the possibility for generalization. Yet, taking into account the growing number of demobilizing rebels in the country during the recent years,⁵ the case study may open the way to learn the lessons that could be of some value for similar programs in the future. That is why this paper will be taking into consideration various key pillars of the challenge of studying politics by the former rebels.

Firstly, it is the particular role that the academy and the system of higher

⁴ See IPSHU Research Report No. 23 for more information about the project.

⁵ Some 8,000 people in 2008 The Directorate of Demobilization and Reintegration, Roundtable at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Colombia on International Cooperation, 12 December 2008, San Carlos Palace, Bogota, Colombia ...

education can play in the process of peace-building in Colombia, by facilitating the participation of former guerrilla fighters in legal political activities in the country. Secondly, it is the identification of the particular features of the process of rapprochement between the government, demobilized rebels and universities that ended up with the creation of a program of professional training at the University of Valle in the city of Cali. Then, it is the actual process of professional training at the university. And, finally, the paper will point out a number of conclusions that can be made in order to explain the reasons of success of a program that can be considered an important contribution in peace-building efforts, which followed one of the most significant peace agreements ever made in Colombia.

2. Peace-building and Education for Peace in Colombia.

In a peace-building context, the academy is usually given a recognizable but rather auxiliary role, which is limited to the tasks of research and advising. However, as it will be shown in continuation, the academy can and must play a more significant role in the processes that would eventually facilitate the task of overcoming the conflict in the country.

Indicatively, one of the central thesis of a recent *UNDP Report on Human Development in Colombia* is that “peace is a result of education, or, more accurately, of learning”⁶ This is precisely the kind of education, which is at the center of examination in this paper. Of course, it would be impossible to measure, in some numerical terms, the efficiency of education for peace with regard to an armed conflict. Yet, as it is emphasized in the above-mentioned report by the United Nations, education for peace can be considered one of the most sophisticated mechanisms for the learning the ways of reaching peace by all the actors involved in the conflict, if education is understood

⁶ See *A National Report of Human Development in Colombia* (in Spanish), United Nations Development Programme in Colombia, Bogota, 2003, p. 419. Here and further in the paper all translations from the originals in Spanish have been made by the author.

in some broader term. Education for peace is also one of the preferred options at times of frustration and hopelessness, as it is argued by several Colombian authors (see Diaz, Mosquera and Fajardo 2002).

Obviously, when the interpretation of education for peace is not limited to standard schools curricula, it is necessary to recognize the fact that this kind of education has various dimensions. However, in Colombia, the overwhelming majority of programs that are labeled with “education for peace” sticker and that are taught outside schools deal with the task of healing the wounds caused by an armed conflict to the conflict’s victims. The list of these programs often includes the projects that are aimed at the providing of educational services to people who have been directly or indirectly suffering as a result of the long-lasting Colombian internal conflict. Also, there are various educational initiatives, which are thought to involve young people in the peace-building process in a more active way, by explaining the root causes of violence in the country and advocating peace values as a rule for every-day living in communities at risk⁷.

It is worth of mentioning here that, explaining the particular characteristics of higher education for peace in Colombia, a Colombian scholar of the issue has been pointing out the following key features of these programs:

1. *The most successful programs are the ones, which have been organized in such way that it is possible to combine an interdisciplinary approach with the need of meeting common teaching interests and objectives, despite of having a diverse teaching staff and student population.*
2. *The successful programs have a clear pedagogical and methodological vision of how to train the future peace builders.*
3. *Responding to a criticism for having an excessively open focus with regard to the root causes of political and social violence in the country, the programs designers insist that it is necessary to keep*

⁷ See, for instance, the relevant discussion in Mosquera 2002, 153-175

*the focus broad, as an answer to the demand by the students whose interest is motivated by their own living experience*⁸.

Hence, the interdisciplinary approach, an appropriate methodology, and the curriculum, which reflects the participants' personal living experience, are the key elements that make the programs of education for peace successful⁹. At the same time, the use of the term *education for peace* requires, at the first place, a proper answer to a question, *what peace?* Perhaps in the Colombian case more than in many others, there is a strong need for the introduction, in an educational context, of a concept of peace which is closely linked to the Colombian reality. In the words of Vera Grabe, a former member of M-19 rebel group and one of the graduates of the program at the University of Valle, "it is necessary to count with a concept of peace, which is autonomous in a sense that it serves the purpose of identification of peace in such situations, in which conflict is not palpable"(Grabe 2002, 224).

The Colombian programs of education for peace usually deal with two fundamental themes: civil society and conflict resolution. In the case with the latter theme, the term resolution refers to any kind of conflicts, be that one a family quarrel, armed clashes, labor or social conflict. This is because many educators in Colombia believe that the efforts at peace-building in the country will be successful only after the change of mentality of Colombians will begin.¹⁰ However, it is equally important to explore a specific terrain of the internal armed conflict, keeping in mind another relevant observation of Vera Grabe:

"[The main objective of a program of education for peace] is to form the professionals –and the citizens– who possess a peace vision and

⁸ See Lopez 2002, 287

⁹ The success or failure of a program in the area of education for peace can be established based on the same criteria as the ones used by the United Nations Development Program to evaluate the cases of best practice to overcome the conflict, namely, pertinence, sustainability, academic quality of the program, efficiency (in terms of matching the objectives of the program with the results), and some other. We discuss these criteria in detail in conclusion to this paper.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lopez 2002.

mentality, and who, from this perspective, are able to support the decisions, the conflict resolution, the building of [a civil society], the search for the solution of social problems, the political activities, the post-conflict reconstruction, the teaching and the formation of new generations”(Grabe 2002, 229-231)

Since Colombia has been heavily marked by an intensive internal conflict for several decades, one may presume that there is a serious demand for various scenarios that would enable this nation to advance towards the resolution of the conflict. At the same time, while the availability of options is certainly a plus, any of the successful plans of action must include the acceptance of the right to exist of the “others” and the respect of others identity. As Earl Conteh-Morgan put it, “[p]eace-building... involves transforming the social and political environment that fosters intolerable inequality, engenders historical grievances, and nurtures adversarial interactions” (Conteh-Morgan 2004, 232).

It is also pivotal to accept the plurality of political opinions and representations with the simultaneous rejection of the use of violent forms of political rivalry and the promotion of a dialogue. From this perspective, a university-level program of education for peace must establish, as its primordial objective, the formation of professionals, who are capable of identifying the above-mentioned scenarios. The graduates must be also able to design new scenarios and proposals as well as to empower the relevant political decisions at national and regional level by giving the priority to the use in their professional acting such instruments as analysis, systematization and evaluation of political and social experiences of the community.

The capacity to promote the mechanisms that are more likely to bring about a better social and political environment is equally important. It seems to be very appropriate to underline here that in the end of 1980s - beginning of 1990s, the advance of peace negotiations¹¹ became possible precisely because the attempts of

¹¹ For Colombians, the signing of the Agreement of Uribe in 1984 signifies the beginning of one of the most impressive and successful attempts to end the internal

various political and social strata of the Colombian society to promote non-violent scenarios of Colombian social and political development turned out to be a successful ones. This historical and political context can be best described as a revitalization of hopes with regard to the possibility of sustainable peace and an impressive enthusiasm in the society that paved the way to a number of remarkable initiatives to promote the peace-building.

In other words, the Colombian success story of the turn of the decades has created an adequate context for Colombian universities, to contribute, in a more efficient manner, in the efforts to build peace in the country. On the one hand, it was necessary to properly evaluate, from an academic perspective, the experience gained by the rival political actors during the rapprochement of 1980s, in particular, to identify which of the scenarios for conflict resolution worked out. On the other hand, the tasks of examination, analysis and systematization would not describe all the possible contributions of the academy. Taking into account the importance of peace agreements with M-19 and other rebel groups, the remarkable political changes of the time, including the gathering of a constitutional assembly and the adoption of a new political constitution, it would be reasonable to consider the incorporating in educational practice of the lessons learned by the Colombian society at the turn of the decades.

In the first part of 1990s, educators in Colombian universities strongly believed that the best way to implement the task of incorporating the experience of peace-building of the previous decade is to promote the professional integral training of peace promoters and peace builders.¹² It was perceived that, after the graduation,

conflict in the country. The Agreement of Uribe is a key document signed during the peace negotiations, which took place between the end of 1982 and November 1985, resulting in peace agreements with a number of guerrilla organizations, including the most powerful at that time, the Movement of 19th of April (M-19). The other rebel groups that said “Farewell to Arms!” were the Popular Liberation Army (EPL by Spanish initials); the Quintin Lame Movement; a part of the National Liberation Army (ELN); and the Workers Self-Defense Group. The process that started in Uribe in 1984 has culminated by the adoption of a new political Constitution of Colombia in 1991.

¹² The new (1991) Colombian Constitution has created the official posts of “people’ defenders”, in order to facilitate the promotion of the construction of a more just and rightful state. In many regions of Colombia, there are also governmentally financed posts of “peace promoters”, who are responsible for the implementation of tasks similar

at their work places, these “peace pedagogues” would enable the Colombian society to advance towards the construction of a more peaceful environment in the country.¹³ Hence, in the mid-1990s, many Colombian higher educators had been sharing a similar perspective with regard to the need of constructing an authentic concept of education for peace, which would meet the requirements of the promotion of an integral and comprehensive education in conflict prevention and resolution with an explicit emphasis on the Colombian historical political and social context. This is how Colombian educators thought to facilitate the realization of an urgent task to bring about so much needed integral change in the country, which would include a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in the country, rejection of violence as the way of resolving social conflicts, and the fomenting of peace culture in Colombian communities at risk.

However, not many universities or other types of higher education institutions in the country were ready to accept educational proposals based on the above-mentioned principles. This is because a shift in perceptions and a better awareness of top-ranking university authorities would be necessary before a program in education for peace would find the way to occupy its space in university’s timetables. As it is turned out, in the mid-1990s, only one amongst numerous Colombian universities managed to answer the call for change.

3. The Construction of New Educational Space for Peace at a University.

The fact that the University of Valle had become the first institution of higher education in Colombia to adopt a new concept of education for peace, by introducing a program in political studies and conflict resolution for the former rebels, is due to a number of factors, which are discussed in detail below.

For the former members of M-19, the issue of education for peace has a key

to those assigned to people's defenders, but who are using different legal mechanisms.

¹³ See Lopez 2002.

significance and is considered one of the central themes for the National Company for Peace (COMPAZ by Spanish initials). This NGO was born in the city of Cali in 1993, at a meeting of former directives of M-19. The meeting was dedicated to the review of a number of urgent tasks concerned with the advancing of the processes of normalization, reconciliation and reintegration following the agreements reached with the government¹⁴. The central idea beyond the creation of COMPAZ was to facilitate and assist the process of pacification and democratization in Colombia, in various ways.

In the beginning, the priority was given to the design and implementation of the Program of Land Distribution for Internally Displaced Persons, to the promotion of the proposal of conducting Peace and Post-Conflict Surveys, juridical evaluation and the follow-up of peace agreements with the government. However, the topic of education for peace was considered of no less importance. In fact, the members of COMPAZ had an idea to transform the NGO into an educational institution, which would become a departure point for the members of COMPAZ to challenge the area of education for peace in the country. A proposal to establish a University for Peace had been elaborated based on the model adopted by the University for Peace in San Jose in Costa Rica¹⁵.

On the other hand, there was a need to provide ex-combatants with some form of formal education, since many of the former rebels had joined the guerrilla before finishing their undergraduate studies. The significance of this fact can be explained by the political context of post-1991 Colombia, in which, in accordance to the agreement

¹⁴ Formally, the NGO had been registered in the city of Bogotá in 1994, since the majority of founding members reside in the Colombian capital.

¹⁵ Interview with Gricerio Perdomo (COMPAZ Chairman), Bogota, Colombia, 5 June 2008. The United Nations-mandated University for Peace was established in Costa Rica in December 1980 in accordance with a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. The mission of the University for Peace, according to the Charter of the University, is “to provide humanity with an... institution of higher education for peace with the aim of promoting among all human beings the spirit of understanding, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, to stimulate cooperation among peoples and to help lessen obstacles and threats to world peace and progress, in keeping with the noble aspirations proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations.”

reached with the government, a large number of ex-combatants (and ex-students) had being assigned to important posts in political and governmental institutions at national, regional and local levels whereas some other had been elected in national and regional parliaments or became city mayors. But many of these new members of the Colombian political elite did not have a sufficient professional background that would enable them to comply, at a full scale, with their duties: the former rebels with no higher, or sometimes, even secondary education could be often found amongst the high-ranking bureaucrats of the ministries, city councils, governmental agencies, etc.

Yet, almost none of neither public nor private universities in the country accepted COMPAZ proposal to resolve the issue of the lack of appropriate education amongst the former combatants. Some universities rejected the proper idea to allow former rebels to appear in the quality of students. For these academic authorities, the possibility of seeing *los guerrilleros* at a student' bench along with the “normal” students appeared to be a worst nightmare scenario. The other did not want to discuss any adjustments to the already existed university programs of law, political studies or conflict resolution. However, COMPAZ considered the adjustment of the existed programs a pivotal element of their efforts to offer education that would match the expectations of the participants in terms of quality, appropriateness, and demand.¹⁶ Fortunately, the call of COMPAZ for change had been answered after all. The University of Valle, the third largest public university in Colombia, became an exception in the list.

The University of Valle, which currently enrolls more than thirty thousand graduate and undergraduate students, was founded in 1945 and is considered the major institution of higher education in the Western Colombia. The rapprochement between the University of Valle and COMPAZ became possible, at the first place, because a significant number of ex-members of M-19 had been studying at the university before joining the rebel movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, some faculty members and students had abandoned their studies and academic work and joined the armed struggle,

¹⁶ Interview with Gricerio Perdomo, *Ibid.* Due to the circumstances beyond the control of NGO, COMPAZ had to abandon the idea to open their own university.

most of them under the banners of M-19 movement¹⁷.

The changes initiated by the university's authorities in order to expand the educational offer in the area of political and juridical studies became another factor that contributed in the success of negotiations between the University of Valle and COMPAZ. According to one of the protagonists of the process of rapprochement between the university and the NGO of ex-rebels in 1992 and 1993, COMPAZ proposal came just at the right time for the educational authorities who thought to reinforce a newly created Institute for Higher Juridical, Political Studies and International Relations by a program that would have an interdisciplinary perspective and an emphasis in conflict resolution.

It is important to note that before the cooperation between COMPAZ and the University of Valle has started, education for peace was not considered the university's strong side. However, this higher education institution did possess a sound tradition in studying the issues of violence and armed conflict. In particular, a group of researchers at the Department of Humanities had significant achievements in the area of Human Rights and Political History of Colombia already in the beginning of 1990s. The University has been also known for its school of philosophy, which had been always given the priority to the theme of the conflict in Colombia. At the same time, one cannot escape mentioning the academic and educational traditions at the Faculty of Social Science and Economics, including the group of violontologists, highly respected in the country, under the leadership of Alvaro Guzman and Alvaro Camacho. In addition, in the beginning of the 1990s, the Faculty of Administration had been offering a program in public policy, which dealt with many areas that could be considered part of education for peace curricula.

In other words, the seeds of cooperation with COMPAZ had been falling in a fertile ground. Indicatively, the first contacts between former rebels and the university took place at the level of professorship, on the university's side. It was Lugardo

¹⁷ One of M-19 leaders, Antonio Navarro Wolf had been occupying the post of Professor and Dean of the Department of Chemical Engineering before joining the guerilla movement.

Alvarez, the professor of sociology, who communicated, for the first time, the idea of COMPAZ to the Rector of the University of Valle. Soon after, other professors started to advocate the proposal as well: Professor Humberto Velez, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and the future Director of the Institute for Higher Juridical, Political Studies and International Relations; Renato Ramirez, the professors' representative at the university's Superior Council and Hector Alonso Moreno, the representative of the Governor in the Council¹⁸ all said "yes" to the proposal of opening a professional training program for the former rebels¹⁹.

While the contacts between COMPAZ and the University of Valle had been fast developing in Cali, another professor of the University of Valle Javier Fayad had been collaborating with COMPAZ in Bogota: the professor had been assisting the NGO in designing a program of secondary education for the former rebels, together with the National Pedagogical University. Professor Fayad had shared his experience with a number of colleagues at the University of Valle, which served as an additional incentive for the construction of the project in Cali.

Besides the political will of the authorities and the experience of studying the issues concerned with the internal conflict in Colombia by the researchers and educators of the University of Valle, there was another factor that greatly facilitated, in the beginning of the process, the implementation of the proposal to open a program in education for peace in the third largest public university of Colombia. This factor is the existence of the university's proper System of Extension²⁰, which turned out to be a key element of the proposal since many of the likely beneficiaries of the program had been occupying important political and administrative posts and were unable to suspend or postpone the carrying out of their duties in order to become full-time students. In addition, a significant number of future students had been based in very

¹⁸ The Governor of the Department of Valle del Cauca is a member of the University of Valle Superior Council according to the university's charter.

¹⁹ Interview with Renato Ramirez, 27 May 2008, in Cali, Colombia. Interview with Jose Joaquin Bayona, 7 March 2008 in Cali, Colombia.

²⁰ In addition to the use of the traditional elements of the extension, for example, Study Modules and the control by correspondence, the University of Valle has been using the newly introduced technologies like the Internet. Interview with Erick Rodriguez 26 February 2008 in Cali, Colombia.

distant geographical areas throughout the entire Colombia. The University of Valle thought to apply the Methodology of Distant Education as the way of making possible the participation in the program of those prospective students who otherwise would not be able to join the university due to their employment obligations or geographical remoteness.

Eventually, a joint COMPAZ-University of Valle initiative to introduce the program of professional training in the area of education for peace had found supporters in the Presidential Reintegration Program, which became the third contractual party in the agreement signed on 27 May 1996, aiming at the offering of a program of professional training to demobilized rebels of M-19, EPL, CRS, and PRT”²¹. It was also agreed that COMPAZ will take an active part in the designing of the academic curricula. The University of Valle has appointed two professors for this task while COMPAZ has designated two members in order to make sure that the final version of the curricula matches the expectations and requirements agreed between the parties. According to Gricerio Perdomo, who participated in this work as a COMPAZ representative,

*“This work had a plain objective: to design a program of professional training for ex-rebels in the areas of political studies and conflict resolution. The graduates would have been armed with the combination of academic knowledge and their rich living experience”*²²

Because the University of Valle had no its own program of political science, the university and COMPAZ decided to invite to participate in the design of the program’s curriculum various external experts, in particular, Professor Ricardo Peñaranda, Director of Political Science Program of the National University of Colombia and Dr

²¹ Universidad del Valle, Propuesta para un Proyecto Destinado a la Financiación de Matriculas en el Programa Profesional en Estudios Políticos y Resolución de Conflictos de la Universidad del Valle a estudiantes Desmovilizados del M-19, EPL, CRS, PRT. Presentado a la Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia – UNED, Febrero de 2000.

²² Interview with Perdomo, Ibid.

Jaime Zuluaga, a senior researcher at the Institute for Political Studies and International Relations (IEPRI by Spanish initials) of the same university.

The complex work of the academy, ex-rebels NGO and the governmental agency culminated with a curriculum, which was approved by the University of Valle's Academic Council and included courses on Political Theory, Theory of the State, Economy and Society, Conflict Theory and Conflict Culture, Political Constitution of Colombia, Foreign Languages and some other²³. This is how the Program of Political Studies and Conflict Resolution had been born at the University of Valle. This was the first offer in the area of education for peace at university level in Colombia. It is important to emphasize here that this program was opened for all of the former rebels, who matched the minimum requirements to be a university student and who was the former member of one of those insurgent groups that signed an agreement with the government to stop the armed struggle. Indicatively, the Resolution No. 34 of the University of Valle's Supreme Council published in March 1997 underlines that

“In the context of social, economic, political and cultural realities of the country and the urgent issues that require swift solutions, in the Colombian society there is a demand for professionals who not only have a solid academic background in socio-political and ethnical studies, but who are also able to handle the task of moving towards the resolution of the Colombian conflict as administrators, political leaders, social workers and by enriching educational and academic environment with a new knowledge and experience”

4. From Rebels to Students: Learning of How to Follow the Ideals of Social and Political Change in a Post-Conflict Context

²³ Resolution No. 034 (13 March 1997) and No. 058 (8 November 1997) of the Supreme Council of the University of Valle.

For those of educators who had been involved in the preparatory work that preceded the actual opening of the program at the University of Valle, it was obvious that some of the students may experience difficulties meeting the strict requirements of a formal university education. But the professors had been also facing certain challenges, since their students would be the ones who spent years in defending, with arms, their quite radical values and ideas and the ones who took part in the Constitutional Assembly that symbolized the onset of new political realities in the country. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to overestimate the richness of a program of education for peace, which had amongst its participants many of those people who had direct experience in changing political and social settings in the country. These people were committed to follow the ideals of social and political changes, but this time, as a part of the legal political activities. Hence, as Joaquin Bayona emphasized, “here a purely academic approach would not work. It was necessary to find an appropriate crossing point between the experience of many years of political struggle and the need of meeting the strict academic standards”²⁴.

In order to facilitate the process of reaching the above-mentioned crossing point, it was decided that the candidates for the program would have to pass through double filter: one, established by the University of Valle and another one, by interviews with the COMPAZ staff. In the moment of the opening of the program in 1997, it was expected that the number of students will reach the number of approximately three hundred²⁵. However, the process of enrollment had not been an easy one due to the geographic remoteness of the residences of many likely students and some other kind of difficulties in recruiting students. Whereas in October 1998, first 24 students have graduated and in March 1999 another 10 students received a diploma of professional training in conflict prevention and resolution, when the University of Valle started negotiations with the Spanish university UNAM in order to ensure the financial, logistical and academic participation of the latter in the project, the number of students had been reduced to 130. Yet, a quick look at the geographical distribution of the

²⁴ Interview with Joaquin Bayona, Ibid.

²⁵ Interview with Rodriguez, Ibid. Interview with Bayona, Ibid.

students demonstrate a true success of the program in recruiting the students even in the very distant –from Cali- geographical areas of the country like Santander and Putumayo (see Map1).

The decrease in the number of students reflected various issues that the program's directives had to deal with soon after the actual schooling had started. Firstly, this was a great deal of dissatisfaction of the students with regard to the initial pedagogical strategy that had been chosen by the university, in particular, the methodology of distant learning. Besides, this methodology turned out to be a very expensive for the university. The program's staff, then, started to practice a semi-internal methodology, which included the visits of the professors to the areas outside the university but with a large number of students residing in those areas. Soon, however, the elevated costs to maintain the program became a real obstacle on the way of the continuation of the program since the University of Valle had to face a severe financial crisis in the second part of the 1990s²⁶.

²⁶ The Colombian economic crisis in the second part of the 1990s and a poor management of the University of Valle became some of the causes of a severe crisis at the third public university of Colombia.



Map 1. Geographical Distribution of the Students of the Program of Political Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Valle.

The crisis of the 1990s had paralyzed many university's projects, and the program for ex-rebels became one of them²⁷. While COMPAZ had been offering its offices in Bogotá for conducting the classes to those students for whom it was easier to

²⁷ The University's main campus had been closed for about six months.

come to Bogota than to Cali, coordinating the handling in of the assignments, assisting in self-study activities and with the teaching assistance, the financial sustainability of the program was put into question. Although COMPAZ, which facilitated the payment of the tuition fees of the students from Bogota²⁸, was not the only sponsor of the students –in the Department of Valle del Cauca students had been receiving the financial aid from the Council for Development, Security and Peace of the City of Cali– in the context of a general economic crisis in the country, a significant number of the students had been starting to experience certain difficulties in meeting their financial obligations to the Program.

The forced time-out in the end of 1997- first part of 1998 had served to the educators for the purposes of analyzing all pros and cons of the program, in order to make curricula and teaching methodology more apt to the need of the students without downgrading the academic standards. It is because, in addition to the financial issues, the academic performance of the students was one of the concerns by COMPAZ, which remained an active actor of the process. The revision was also necessary because, following the change of the university's leadership, the University of Valle had been even more actively promoting the agenda for peace as a part of its educational and research tasks. In particular, the university has created a group on "Policy and Conflicts", which consisted of an inter-disciplinary group of professors and which had handled to the new Rector of the University Oscar Rojas several documents, including a conceptual proposal "Peace Portfolio" based on the following seven pillars: a project of the distant learning for the rebels and paramilitaries in Colombian prisons, a proposal for the designing of a program of peace culture dissemination in the city of Cali, a proposal for the opening of a professional training program for community's peace workers, a proposal for "the cities of peace" in the Department of Valle del Cauca, a project "Entrepreneurs for Peace" and a proposal for Master's Program in Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building, in addition to the continuation of the program in political studies and conflict resolution for demobilized

²⁸ The students from Bogota had to pay only 30 per cent of the total fees while COMPAZ paid the rest of the costs

guerilla. Hence, as one can see from the contents of the above “Peace Portfolio”, the initial program for the former rebels, which started as rather a small initiative by COMPAZ and the professors of the University of Valle, soon after, gave a very strong impetus for the further development of educational and research projects at the university in the area of education for peace.

It is important to emphasize here that the idea to re-open the Program of Political Studies and Conflict Resolution was shared not only by the authorities and general public in Colombia, but by various actors of international cooperation as well. The Colombian Embassy in Madrid has been facilitating the contacts of the University of Valle with the UNED University in Madrid, which eventually joined the Colombian university in the efforts of the latter “to make a sound contribution in the research, professional training and in the area of education for peace”²⁹. The negotiations between the diplomats and universities ended with the signing of an agreement that enabled the re-opening of the program by providing the necessary funding for the payment of tuition fees by the remaining students. The significance of the continuation of the program can be expressed in the word of Jaime Perea, a former M-19 rebel and then the Regional Coordinator of the General Directorate for Reintegration:

*“For us [former rebels] and, as we understand, for the university as well, this was an effort that transcended the academic field to become one of the most important achievements of [Peace Agreements of the 1980s-1990s].”*³⁰

Indicatively, in a letter sent to the General Coordinator of the National Commission for Doctoral and Master’s Programs on 13 December 2000, the Rector of the University of Valle has been pointing out the important role of the program in the context of the reintegration processes in Colombia and reaffirming the stand of the university to actively promote peace initiatives by expanding the offers of programs in

²⁹ The Letter of Intention, by the Rector Oscar Rojas, Rector, University of Valle and Jaime Montavlo Correa, Rector, UNED University, 2 March 2000.

³⁰ Letter of Jaime Perea sent to the General Coordinator of the National Commission for Doctoral and Master’s Programs on 23 November 2000.

the area of education for peace, its strategic area of teaching and research. This is because one can see the success of the joint efforts by COMPAZ and the University of Valle to create a program that would be taking into account, from an academic perspective, the rich previous experience of its students, after taking a closer look at the graduate thesis presented by the former rebels.

The majority of the students had chosen the themes that reflected their previous experience of being members of the insurgent movements as topics of their graduate works³¹. The study at the University of Valle provided them with an opportunity to re-examine their past –questionable and rejected by many in the Colombian society– as an academic exercise. Of course, the program also served for the purposes of facilitating the process of adaptation to the new rules of the game, for better understanding of the new situation, for finding a better way to reintegrate into a civil life and participate in legal political activities. Yet, as Vera Grabe underlines,

“[The program at the University of Valle] has provided the academy with a meeting point of dialogue and knowledge, in which everyone has participated and shared their perspectives on the essence of politics and the way of making politics.. In this context, the construction of new knowledge with regard to the answering the question of how peace is possible is the most important contribution of the program in the field of education for peace”³²

Nowadays, many of the graduates of the Program of Political Studies and Conflict Resolution of the University of Valle have been successfully implementing their duties as members of governmental and political institutions at national and regional levels, important non-governmental organizations or as peace educators throughout the entire country, facilitating the process of finding a solution to the

³¹ Some of these topics are “The peace process with M-19. A view of the national from a local perspective”, “A complex reality of the conflict in Colombia and political will”, “The way to the meeting point: demobilization and reintegration in the civil life”, “FARC as a political actor”, etc.

³² Interview with Vera Grabe, 8 April 2008, Bogota, Colombia

long-lasting Colombian conflict and making most of their previous experience and skills obtained at the university. Have completed the original task of given a professional education for the former rebels, the Program of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Valle in Cali is now open for any prospective student who is willing to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to work in the area of peace-building in Colombia. Not mistakenly, the Program is now hosted by the Institute of Education and Pedagogics, which mission is to prepare “educators and other professionals who are committed to work with the citizens in the context of tolerance and dialogue, taking into account the diversity of the Colombian society and the ideals expressed in the Political Constitution of Colombia”³³

5. Concluding Remarks

What can be learned from the experience of the University of Valle?

Soon after the end of the Second World War, Ernest Hemingway was terrified by the fact that, although a big war is over, there is no peace on the planet Earth. Some six decades later, concluding his book “Peace Studies: A Theoretical Introduction” by a chapter entitled “Whither Peace Studies?”, Masatsugu Matsuo has emphasized that local wars and conflicts, and other forms of organized violence, especially their prevention and solution, should be given a particular attention, if ones truly wishes to see peace studies directing itself towards its ultimate goal, peace (Matsuo 2005, 172). The case study examined in this paper is dealing with one of the aspects of this kind of a local war, which is also about the prevention and solution of a long-lasting political, economic and social conflict in the *El Dorado* country.

The rebels that have concluded peace agreements with the government in Colombia in the end of the 1980s – beginning of the 1990s had been praying certain ideology that led them to the ideas of armed struggle in order to achieve social and

³³ Resolution No. 017 of the Supreme Council of the University of Valle, 10 February 2003,

political changes in the country. This same ideology played an important role in their decision to stop the fighting and find another way to follow their ideals. However, their study in the Program of Political Studies and Conflict Resolution at the University of Valle not only helped them to acquire skills and knowledge necessary to participate in legal political activities in Colombia. The program has also allowed the former rebels to maintain a crucial though intangible resource: their shared identity. The symbolic value of this collective identity was reinforced by the fact that the rebels who formerly belonged to different insurgent groups had been sharing the same educational space and because, during the educational process, their previous rich living experiences has been taking into account by the professors. In the light of the rejection by the majority of Colombians –and, sometimes, even by the closest relatives– of the past that the former rebels considered a valuable asset, the program gave the former insurgents an opportunity to reintegrate in the civil life without the need to deny everything from the past.

Another key factor in the success story of the University of Valle is the new role of academy in the process of building a sustainable peace in Colombia. Firstly, it would be impossible to discuss the proper idea of opening a program of political studies if there would be no commitment of the professorship of the third largest public university in the country. Then, there was a political will of the university's authorities, governmental officials and a non-governmental organization to meet the challenge of giving an opportunity to study politics to the former rebels. And last, but not least, this is the role of international cooperation in the area of education for peace, which is not always getting enough attention by the part of international donors.

Ultimately, the existence of such program as the one opened at the University of Valle must be considered a sound contribution in the peace-building process in the country. This is because the program not only helped to overcome the fragmentation of new political elites in Colombia, which appeared as a result of the political processes in the beginning of the 1990s. The program also may serve as an example for those insurgent groups that are continue to stick to the armed struggle and are unwilling to negotiate peace. Indicatively, the first experience with the program in education for

peace destined to the former rebels was followed by a number of other proposals to expand the educational offer in the area. Time has come to say a farewell to arms in Colombia.

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