

From Peacebuilding and Human Development Coalitions to Peace Infrastructure in Colombia

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We invite readers to respond to the papers (as to all articles). Interesting and original contributions can be added to the web version of the Dialogue.

To Berghof Handbook Dialogue No 10 *Peace Infrastructures – Assessing Concept and Practice* the following authors have contributed:

- ≡ Stina Lundström and Barbara Unger (eds.) (introduction)
- ≡ Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka (lead article)
- ≡ Oliver P. Richmond (response article)
- ≡ Hannes Siebert (response article)
- ≡ Borja Paladini Adell (response article)
- ≡ Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka (reflection on the responses)

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1 Introduction¹

This response reflects on the concept and practice of peace infrastructures from my perspective as a practitioner working for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Colombia. UNDP is providing political, technical and economic support to local level institutional, social, communitarian and ethnic peace initiatives in several war-torn regions of the country. Since 2003, it has supported more than 400 local peacebuilding initiatives as well as peacebuilding networks regionally and in relation to national peace initiatives and dynamics (UNDP Colombia 2010).

This article will start with a short look at the Colombian conflict, briefly reviewing the national peace infrastructures. I will then present the strategy and achievements of UNDP's partners' work in the Nariño region, where UNDP has a local office. Drawing from this experience, I will then introduce some key ideas to enrich the understanding of the concept of peace infrastructure explored in Hopp-Nishanka's lead article *Giving Peace an Address? Reflections on the Potential and Challenges of Creating Peace Infrastructures*.

2 The Conflict Situation in Colombia and Nariño

The armed conflict in Colombia has been going on for more than 50 years. It is a highly complex and multidimensional conflict that involves many actors – both armed (state security forces, guerrillas, paramilitary and self-defence groups, criminal gangs and drug-trafficking cartels) and unarmed.

The protracted war – really an explosive cluster of interrelated conflicts – can be characterised by a complex combination of historical, social, economic and political causes. Among the many contributing factors are: the weakness of the state (particularly at a local and regional level); the strength of informal, illiberal and undemocratic regional powers; inequality and exclusion of broad sectors of the population; the illegal economy surrounding drug trafficking; and armed actors' control of other legal and illegal sources of income. This reality has placed Colombia among the principal theatres of war and humanitarian crisis in the world, but it is also one of the most interesting laboratories for understanding local level peacebuilding.

The department of Nariño is located in the southwest of the country, north of the border with Ecuador. The population of 1.6 million people is ethnically diverse and predominantly rural. A mostly peaceful region in the 1980s and 1990s, in the last decade it has become one of the main sites of the war in Colombia. In the last six years, Nariño has also experienced unique peacebuilding efforts in which local actors – led by the regional government and supported by UNDP and other actors – have jointly built alliances and provided the base for peace infrastructures. The example of Nariño can enrich our understanding of how peacebuilding processes can be organised at a sub-national level in Colombia, and how local ownership is one of the main driving forces for peacebuilding. This is important in the light of the peace process launched in October 2012 between the national government and *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP), the biggest and oldest guerrilla group in Colombia.

¹ Borja Paladini Adell serves as Head of UNDP Colombia Regional Offices in Nariño and Cauca. The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the official views or opinions of UNDP, the United Nations or its member states.

3 National Peace Infrastructure in Colombia and the Need for Local Peace Infrastructure

Colombia has a very rich array of local, regional and national peace initiatives and peace infrastructures. With regard to the latter, this section will start by providing two examples of structures at the national level (see *Boxes 1* and *2* below) in order to highlight its limitations in contrast to approaches that combine national, regional, and local level initiatives.

The national peace structures have played a limited role in peacemaking in Colombia and Nariño, and an even smaller role in peacebuilding. There are two main reasons for this. First, the outreach of the peace-promoting bodies is dependent on few people, particularly the Colombian president, who determines the level of any external involvement in any peacemaking effort in the country. The President has assigned peacemaking facilitating roles to individuals who are part of the government (the Peace Advisor) as well as to external ad hoc facilitators with a very narrow mandate (such as Piedad Cordoba, Álvaro Leyva and representatives from the Catholic Church). None have considered the national or sub-national peace infrastructure useful for supporting their efforts. Second, the national mechanisms are primarily aimed at reducing violence, humanising the violent conflict and advocating ceasefires, meaning they are based on conceptions of negative peace and top-down peacebuilding approaches.

Box 1: The National Peace Council (*Consejo Nacional de Paz*)

The National Peace Council was created by the Colombian Congress in 1998 as an advisory committee of the national government with a mission to promote the achievement and maintenance of peace and to facilitate harmonious collaboration between the state's entities, prioritising political and negotiated alternatives to armed conflict and the achievement of social relations that assure a integral and permanent peace. The Colombian president occupies the council's presidency, giving it a clear political profile. The other members are several national government ministers, two representatives of the regions (one departmental governor and one mayor), six members of Congress, several representatives of other power branches of the state, a delegate from the Catholic Church, delegates from other religious confessions, and civil society members representing, among others, entrepreneurial organisations, peasants, ethnic communities, peace and human rights initiatives, universities, and victims of the armed conflict. The law also includes similar regional and municipal councils led by departmental governors and the local mayors. There are no relationships between the national and the local councils.

Box 2: The National Conciliation Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Conciliación*)

The National Conciliation Commission is an autonomous and independent entity convened by the Catholic Church. Since its inception in 1995, it has been one of the principal civil society arenas for attempting to promote, foster and facilitate a negotiated political solution to the armed conflict. The commission has been instrumental in seeking formulas to overcome the difficulties that have prevented the conflict parties from starting negotiations that could open the way for development and reconciliation in the country. It has demanded the conflict parties to respect international humanitarian law and human rights as the foundation of peace. Since 2009 the commission has advocated a series of

guidelines for a permanent National Peace Policy to build peace and promote a transformative agenda for agrarian reform, education, a transparent democracy, inclusive economic development and active citizen participation. The commission has developed regional branches, which have in some cases been able to articulate regional commissions led by local bishops.

The examples of peace infrastructures described in the boxes above have been directed by national actors responding predominantly to national actors' understanding of peace, which are then transmitted to the Colombian regions. From a local perspective, the national infrastructures are weak and have not always sought or received local legitimacy.

My contribution to this dialogue series advocates the promotion of local level and sub-national peace infrastructure as the foundation of any national effort. The key challenge resides in the collaborative relationships and linkages between local and national peace infrastructures, and in creating arrangements for more effective and legitimate peacebuilding processes.

4 From Peace Initiatives to Innovative Social Coalitions and Peace Infrastructure

The Colombian experience shows that local contexts – even those affected by extreme war – contain actors, capacities and constituencies for peace in whom peacebuilding dynamics can be rooted. Some of these local capacities are oriented towards peace while others are oriented to social, political and economic change. In Nariño, the term *sustainable human development* is a driving force for change for many local actors, including the last four regional governments. The existence of peace actors, capacities and forces for change is not enough, however: the main challenge for local leaders and supportive external actors is how these driving forces can be creatively combined to foster more strategic peacebuilding dynamics from below.

Working with local and international actors, Nariño's regional government has supported cooperation between individual peace and development initiatives. In doing so, with the support from UNDP, it made use of some of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness principles: inclusive ownership and citizen participation, alignment to local priorities, mutual accountability, and local partnerships for more effective development. As a result, a wide array of actors has been able to converge around an emerging local human development and peacebuilding strategy. Some of these processes were planned during the participatory process of developing Nariño's Regional Development Plan 2008-2011 and its International Cooperation Strategy (such as the women-led process described below), while others have emerged more recently, stimulated by a critical assessment of good and bad practices. Today, the regional government speaks about a Nariño peace proposal that includes many of the processes described in this article, including those in the new development plan for 2012-2015 and the updated international cooperation strategy. Both policy documents have become a reference point for all actors in the region, including local communities, NGOs, local governments, and international actors working in Nariño.

During the period 2007–2012, the regional government and a large number of grassroots, ethnic and civil society actors promoted a series of territorial, sectorial and thematic processes that generated a plurality of local agendas for development and peacebuilding in the region. These coalitions are consolidating local level platforms, including local alliances, committees, partnerships, roundtables, strategic programmes and capacity development initiatives: all represent a local level understanding of peace and give peace a contextualised “address”.

Drawing from the Nariño experience, I believe that the peace infrastructure debate could be enriched if we envision a more proactive role for peace infrastructure as a set of interrelated actors (organisations), processes and outcomes (alliances, platforms, spaces, policies) which give peace a physical address but also a direction defined by non-violent actors (local institutions, grassroots and civil society actors).

Thus, my perception of the concept of peace infrastructures is different to the one proposed by Hopp-Nishanka (2012): I believe the peace infrastructure concept should go beyond the organisational dimension. In her article, Hopp-Nishanka says the “objective of peace infrastructure is to assist the parties (e.g. through capacity building or advice), the process (e.g. through mediation between the conflict parties or facilitation of public participation), or the implementation of process results (e.g. through monitoring and coordination of agreement implementation)” (2012, 4). In my opinion the objectives and roles of peace infrastructure are fundamental and necessary, but the structures can only play a role if the legal and illegal armed actors allow them to do so in the different phases of conflict.

Here I would like to advocate innovative social coalitions as a conceptual bridge between individual peace initiatives, peace infrastructures and strategic peacebuilding. The examples described in Box 3 are *innovative social coalitions* through which local actors promote transformative agendas for resistance, autonomy, protection, restitution of rights, and other peacebuilding and human development objectives (Nariño Decide 2012; Paladini Adell 2012).

Box 3: Innovative Social Coalitions in Nariño

Examples of innovative social coalitions in Nariño include territorial coalitions such as the Life Plans of the Rural Territory of Samaniego and the Jardines de Sucumbios region, population-based coalitions such as the youth social coalition *Adelante Nariño, con los Jóvenes Adelante* or the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Innovative Coalition, and the human rights coalition, *Comité de Impulso*. Another is the Nariño Pacific Ethno-Development Plan, in which local institutions (such as the regional government or the Tumaco municipality), in consultation with regional ethnic actors on the Nariño Pacific coast, build their development and peace agenda for the region and invite outside actors to join and promote the plan as a programmatic peacebuilding agenda. The agenda includes concrete programmes to address the problems caused by the war: for example, programmes to substitute illegal crops through rural development strategies, programmes focused on preventing young people from becoming involved in the armed conflict, or protection and rights restitution programmes. The programmes also strengthen local level institutions such as the *Cabildos Indígenas* or the *Afro-Colombian Consejos Comunitarios*.

Before exploring how the concept of innovative social coalitions complements the idea of peace infrastructure, let us then briefly clarify what it means. The concept arises from territorial development studies and can be defined as “a set of different actors who engage in convergent actions around a territorial development dynamic” (author’s translation of Berdagué 2012, 88; see also Tanaka 2012). Adding on to Berdagué’s work (2012, 89-94), and including a peacebuilding perspective, innovative social coalitions can be characterised by five functions.

First, they include diverse actors (community, institutional, public, private, and ethnic) who coordinate themselves to promote resistance to (and the transformation of) the tensions generated by the armed

conflict and its causes. This coordination is not necessarily formalised through a written agreement; rather, most of the time it constitutes an informal working alliance. Second, with the leadership of the regional government and the support of international actors such as UNDP, the coalitions are capable of promoting convergent objectives, agendas and strategic programmes among their members. Third, the coalitions accept the need to act in the short term, while also promoting medium- and long-term transformational approaches. They also recognise the importance of building peace in ways that reflect the images and views of peace represented by the Nariño’s “peaceful but rebellious” population (especially the ethnic and peasant communities and other grassroots social movements). Fourth, the coalitions’ diversity enables them to combine the differentiated strengths and characteristics of their constituent actors in order to mobilise a set of tangible and intangible resources. Fifth, the coalitions may be the basis for generating locally driven peace infrastructures and giving it a multi-level dimension. They should be rooted in the territory and be deeply contextualised in the local reality since they generate horizontal relationships between actors in the territory, as well as vertical relationships among regional, national and international actors and peace infrastructures.

One example of a coalition that is turning into base of local peace infrastructure as is the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Innovative Coalition (see *Box 4*). It was formed when a local-level alliance created an innovative social coalition to promote women’s rights and women’s participation in peacebuilding. The example shows us an ideal-type evolution from alliance to peace infrastructure. It also shows us that local actors and local structures promoted by women are influencing local and national peacebuilding dynamics today.

Box 4: From Local Level Peacebuilding Platform to Peace Infrastructure – the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Innovative Coalition

The regional government and international actors supported this alliance by designing and implementing a strategy of capacity development and women’s empowerment. A peace infrastructure is being developed consisting of a number of local, sub-regional and departmental committees in which women from across Nariño participated. Together these arrangements created the conditions for participation in a regional policy for women’s rights and gender equality. This policy allows for programmes such as a departmental agenda for the prevention of gender-based violence and armed conflict, a women’s rights restitution programme, and a programme to enhance women’s participation in peacebuilding in Nariño. The local alliance, the peace infrastructure (departmental, sub-regional and municipal committees) and the policy instrument create a local peacebuilding platform which has been instrumental in promoting women rights in Nariño. The platform is an expression both of a process (alliance, policy, programmes, agendas) and a concrete organisational structure (women’s committees with a mandate to represent women’s interests, and regular meetings between the regional governments, the committees and the supportive international actors). At the regional level, women in Nariño have been implementing a peacebuilding agenda within the women’s policy with short-, medium- and long-term objectives. At the national level, Nariño’s women are influencing national peacebuilding, such as the national gender equality policy and the victims law. In this way, local peacebuilders get a voice in national peacebuilding arenas. Furthermore, national peacebuilding (including an eventual peace agreement) encounters a local-level platform where national policies and programmes can get contextualised and rooted by promoting local ownership and a sense of sustainability.

The examples above have generated local governance and development dynamics for peace based on five key elements: structure, vision, action, ownership and roots:

- ≡ *Structure*: they are expressions of local alliances among diverse actors in the region (local institutions, including the local state, social, community and ethnic actors) with the support of a plurality of international actors (international NGOs and UN agencies with a permanent presence in the region).
- ≡ *Vision*: they have generated strategic agendas (plans, strategies, policies) based on the differentiated voices and agencies of the plurality of actors in Nariño and the identification of common interests.
- ≡ *Action*: they are promoting programmes and projects that seek to transform the living conditions and human security of communities, financed with local, regional, national and international resources, and leading to concrete peacebuilding actions.
- ≡ *Ownership*: these processes have been developed with a very high level of participation by (or representation of) community, ethnic and social actors. Through a series of informal schools certified by local universities thousands of people have participated in these innovative social partnerships and have become advocates for the change processes expressed in the policies, plans and other transformative agendas, thereby strengthening local ownership.
- ≡ *Roots*: these processes are rooted in local “everyday” views of peace.

Nariño’s innovative social coalitions thus combine medium and long-term processes that are expressed in the design and implementation of regional policies and organisational arrangements that are reflected in the wide set of representative alliances and formal and informal structures that have emerged in the territory. Both process and structure are thus fundamental to making peace infrastructures sustainable and transformative.

Innovative social coalitions and peace infrastructures, then, are complementary concepts and approaches. Whereas the former highlights the strategic importance of the coordination of nonviolent local actors in promoting development, peacebuilding and local governance agendas, the latter emphasises the dynamic network of interdependent and multi-level structures that contributes to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. While social coalitions create the local-level peacebuilding agendas and platforms from the wide plurality of agencies in a territory, the peace infrastructure facilitates the vertical mechanism where the locals have the chance to influence national peacebuilding dynamics (and vice versa, as when national peacebuilding dynamics become contextualised in local realities).

The combination of the two approaches can make peacebuilding more strategic and transformative and more firmly based on everyday notions of peace – thus making peace more rooted, durable and legitimate and gives it an “address”. The debate around peace infrastructures could be enriched by further reflection on how it is created from local-level dynamics, promoting local peacebuilding processes and structures where national dynamics, processes and infrastructures should be embedded. As a working hypothesis, local structure, vision, action, ownership, organisation and roots constitute the basis for more durable and effective local level peace infrastructures and dynamics.

5 Concluding Thoughts: Building Peace Infrastructures from Below

Peacebuilding as a practical and political undertaking is a relatively recent concept that has been developed within the last 20 years. Originally it was promoted primarily through great international efforts represented by peacekeeping operations and their top-down logic. These efforts have achieved important advances in the conceptualisation of how to build peace, but they have also been resounding failures in practice in the case of Somalia, Rwanda and, more recently, as evidenced by the ambiguous results of the efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. These failures have given rise to a group of critical voices that have questioned not only the effectiveness of peacebuilding as a political undertaking, but also the legitimacy of the effort. With regard to effectiveness, some have questioned the ability of peacebuilding efforts to achieve their underlying objective: a sustainable, just and lasting peace. In relation to legitimacy, others have seriously questioned the morality of peacebuilding, arguing that it has become a new form of control and power exercised by Northern countries over Southern countries and others on the periphery that are affected by war.

In recent years, some authors have injected the debate with more constructive criticism, calling for a bottom-up peacebuilding logic, led from the local level, which understands peace as an emancipatory effort of the people who have suffered from war (“everyday” peace). This peacebuilding logic is driven by local power and agency and aims to build a set of social, community, ethnic and institutional structures that promote peace within a framework of rights. From this perspective, local proposals – with their community and ethnic logic based on custom and tradition, as well as an understanding of peace close to the concept of a dignified life – are combined with a political framework of institutional arrangements and organisational structures based on liberal principles and political values and the logic of representation and democracy inherent in states governed by the rule of law. This combination of local elements, normative frameworks and liberal structures generates a broad set of hybrid arrangements that are enriching state-building and state formation processes in many contexts, particularly at the local level. This does not necessarily reject the contributions that can be made by international actors based on liberal frameworks, but it does demand that these international practices be implemented on the basis of local peace efforts, proposals and agendas, without rendering them irrelevant.²

This new vision of peacebuilding not only generates more effective and legitimate peacebuilding processes, but also better reflects the reality of how peace is being achieved in the world. From the experience in Nariño, and in dialogue with Hopp-Nishanka’s argumentation (2012), a set of conclusions can be drawn for future reflection.

Peacebuilding must be based and rooted in local level peace infrastructures; this gives peace its address and its legitimacy. It also means that innovative social coalitions which can generate peace infrastructures should be promoted by the local state and local civil society and supported by international actors. The peace infrastructures at the national level should recognise these local efforts as the foundations of any peacebuilding effort. Moreover, local level peace infrastructures not only provides opportunities for the management and transformation of conflicts, but can also constitute real peacebuilding efforts in the sense of building the legitimacy of the state from the local level based on the agency, agendas and desires of local state and non-state actors. These efforts are crucial to processes of social transformation based on a democratic logic that promotes peace based on peoples’ everyday lives.

² For more on this debate see, Newman et al. 2009; Philpott et al. 2010; Richmond et al. 2010; Richmond 2011; Campbell et al. 2011; and Tadjbakhsh et al. 2010.

It is important not to forget that local level peace infrastructures are generally not promoted in ideal contexts; rather, they are promoted in contexts in which “war infrastructures” predominate – for example the invisible actors and interconnections that support the trafficking of drugs in Nariño. So it is necessary to develop and support local level peace infrastructures on the basis of a clear conception and political analysis of their importance and potential in opposition to war infrastructures, identifying the risks, dangers and opportunities for peacebuilding. The relationship between the peace-supporting infrastructures and the war-supporting infrastructures is a key point for further inquiry.

Besides being an expression of local agency and autonomy, sub-national peace infrastructures based on innovative social coalitions have the potential to create strategic platforms for peacebuilding (in the sense used by John Paul Lederach 1997, 2005). This is true for four main reasons. First, peace infrastructures have a multi-level dimension by which local actors and national and international actors connect. Second, they have a temporal dimension, connecting the identity, history and memory of local actors (the past, their roots) with short-, medium- and long-term proposals and agendas for change, as well as visions and dreams of the future (as expressed in the Life Plans of ethnic communities, and recognised in the several of Nariño’s public policies). Third, the concept and practice of local peace infrastructure can lead to a more legitimate and effective peace provided that it is not forgotten that the infrastructure must constitute an expression of the critical agencies of grassroots, community, social, ethnic actors and the local state, and that it must be based on a concept of peace that does not ignore the everyday dimension of how peace is understood by these grassroots actors. And fourth, local peace infrastructures create the local platform where peace and national peace infrastructures become contextualised. In this way, for example, any peace agreement that may come out of the current negotiations between the Colombian Government and FARC-EP may be contextualised and rooted in local realities, aspirations and agendas.

Local peace initiatives which create social coalitions for peacebuilding and peace infrastructures give peace a local address, bringing sub-national issues and ideas to the national level, and contextualising and rooting local realities, aspirations and agendas in national policies and peace agreements.

About the Author

Borja Paladini Adell is a professional involved in peacebuilding and conflict transformation activities. During the last nine years, he has been working in Colombia as a UNDP professional for its programme on conflict sensitive development. He is a UNDP Program Analyst, serving as the head of UNDP’s Offices in Nariño and Cauca in southern Colombia. In this capacity he encourages (and is inspired by) a wide range of local organisations and community-driven peacebuilding initiatives. Building from his practical and field experience, Borja’s research looks critically at concepts such as strategic peacebuilding, peacebuilding infrastructures, peace constituencies and non-violent conflict transformation. Institutions such as UNDP, USIP, the National University of Colombia, and the Catalan Government, among others, have published several pieces of his research and consultancy work. He can be contacted at borjapax@gmail.com or be tweeted at [@borjapax](https://twitter.com/borjapax).

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