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Urban DDR-processes: paramilitaries and criminal networks in Medellín, Colombia*

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Abstract. While most scientific studies on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants focus on the countryside, the case of the paramilitaries in Medellín, Colombia, provides an exceptional opportunity to study such a process in a metropolitan environment. Analysis reveals how an urban DDR-process may lead to highly contradictory results: a strong decrease in the number of homicides and at the same time a consolidation of networks of criminal groups. Extralegal combatants, especially in an urban environment, are able to form extensive networks with criminal organisations. Although DDR-approaches warn of the risk that ex-combatants may resort to violence, scholars tend to disregard existing networks of groups of combatants and powerful criminal organisations in their analyses. Taking theories on DDR as a starting point and reflecting on earlier local peace initiatives, this article analyses the process with paramilitaries in Medellín. It argues that although, the local peace process has led to some significant results, it has to date failed to address the wider network of criminal organisations within which former paramilitaries were and continue to be involved.

Keywords: Colombia, Medellín, paramilitaries, DDR, demobilisation, urban violence

Introduction

As former paramilitary leader Fernando Morales walks along the steep alley on the fringe of his neighbourhood, Comuna 13, he recalled how guerrilla fighters in the hills shelled the neighbourhood and how he heard women in the houses screaming as his paramilitary group responded to the fire. After the guerrilla was expelled and paramilitaries took control of the neighbourhood,

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Morales participated in the first disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)-process of paramilitaries in Colombia. Nearly three years after the disarmament ceremony he is proud to be a community leader, showing off new projects, such as a workshop where women make handicrafts or a children's zoo with small animals. At first sight Morales exemplifies the success of the local DDR-process. His neighbourhood was previously one of the most violent areas in Colombia. After years of guerrilla presence, the Comuna 13 was the object of Operation Orion in 2002, a military operation without precedent in an urban area in Colombia. Shortly following the army succeeded in expelling the guerrilla, paramilitaries moved in. At the end of 2003, the paramilitaries took part in the local DDR-process. According to Morales, afterwards everything changed for the better.[1] He and other demobilised paramilitaries began to dedicate themselves to community projects. Yet when we arrived at the children's zoo, I was struck by a powerful symbol of the violent past: the zoo was named after the former paramilitary commander Don Berna, a man held responsible for mass killings among civilians. Don Berna had also been part of the Medellin drugs cartel and was for a long time considered a powerful figure in the criminal underworld of Medellin.[2] Morales waved away such criticism of the man he considered a hero, stating: 'Don Berna expelled most of the guerrilla from the city, he saved Medellín, we are proud of him.' The children's zoo symbolises the contradictions involved in the peace process with paramilitaries in Medellín, a process that has been controversial from the outset.

In 2003 Medellín was chosen as the site for a pilot-project involving the demobilisation of the local paramilitary group Bloque Cacique Nutibara, preceding a nationwide demobilisation of paramilitaries. These paramilitary groups were initially created to combat the guerrilla in areas with limited state presence, but many of them became involved in extensive human rights violations against the civil population. The government and the paramilitary umbrella organisation *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) reached an accord in July 2003 in the northern town of Santa Fe de Ralito. In the first demobilisation project in Medellín, a total of 873 paramilitaries took part.[3] Since then more than 30,000 paramilitaries throughout the country have

[1] Interview during a visit to Comuna 13, in February 2006. The names of former paramilitaries and residents of Comuna 13 have been changed for security reasons.

[2] Don Berna's paramilitary group is held responsible for mass graves that have been discovered in the surroundings of Comuna 13. See for instance *El Colombiano*, 6 October 2006.

[3] Medellín counts now around 4,000 demobilised paramilitaries, including former combatants from later demobilisations elsewhere in the country who choose to settle in the city and to participate in the local reintegration project. Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *Proceso de paz con las Autodefensas, Informe Ejecutivo de desmovilizaciones colectivas 2003–2006* (Bogotá, 2006), www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/libro/librofinal.pdf (accessed 10 March 2008).

handed over their weapons.[4] Though it is still too early to assess the results of these more recent demobilisations, the DDR-process in Medellín has now been underway for a few years. It has been controversial from the start. Advocates emphasise its contribution to reducing levels of violence, whilst critics allege that the programme has allowed the perpetrators of human rights violations, to walk free, virtually, and even rewards them with benefits.

This article analyses the local disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process with the paramilitaries, highlighting the ways in which the context of an urban environment has influenced the outcome. In the course of the research an apparent contradiction emerged between a decrease in the number of homicides and persisting reports about the involvement of former combatants in violent criminal organisations. In an attempt to explain this contradiction, the article analyses the relationship between the paramilitaries and the criminal underworld before and after the demobilisation process. One of the consequences of a DDR-process in an urban context is that the ex-paramilitaries live in or near the same place where they were active as a combatant. I argue that although the local peace process has led to the demobilisation of paramilitaries, it has so far not addressed the wider network of criminal organisations in which former paramilitaries were and continue to be involved.

This article is based on the findings of fieldwork undertaken in 2004 and 2006, throughout several neighbourhoods of Medellín in the Nororiente, Noroccidente and Comuna 13. It included 60 interviews with residents of neighbourhoods that have a presence of armed groups, members of neighbourhood committees, local government officials, and members of NGOs and former paramilitaries. In 2004 paramilitaries were present in most neighbourhoods and forced disappearances of residents were continuing. Security issues defined my research methodology. Under these circumstances, I was not able to be on the streets on my own in violent areas, but networking enabled me to contact new respondents. These were recommended by acquaintances who, in turn, introduced me to others (a method known as snowball sampling). Such a process typically started at an NGO or neighbourhood committee who would introduce me as a person of trust with whom respondents felt they could speak relatively freely. Sometimes, when it was considered safe, I would walk with respondents through the neighbourhood so that I could see the places they were telling me about. During my second trip in 2006 the situation was completely different as a result of the local DDR-process. Paramilitary roadblocks had

[4] Organization of American States OAS (MAPP/OEA), *Seventh Quarterly Report of the Secretary General to the Permanent Council on the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia* (August 2006), www.oas.org/documents/OEA-Colombia/VII_Informe_IN.doc (accessed 10 March 2008).

been replaced by police surveillance. Residents said the neighbourhoods were much safer and that the death threats some had formerly received had ceased. In general, the atmosphere was much more relaxed and it was easier to approach respondents.

The authenticity of testimonies in areas where violence and fear are dominant is a subject of considerable speculation.[5] Perpetrators of violence have reasons to conceal their crimes, residents may tell only part of the truth out of fear of retaliation by armed groups, and government officials often emphasise the positive results of their policy without mentioning the failures. Consequently, in order to obtain more complete pictures of the (former) paramilitaries, I interviewed them as well as others in the neighbourhoods they controlled. In general the former paramilitaries talked openly about their life as combatants, justifying their actions as necessary at that time, without concealing details of operations they were proud of. But they did not want to talk about certain subjects, particularly drug trafficking. In my interviews with neighbourhood residents and members of neighbourhood committees, they provided details about how the (former) paramilitaries operated within their neighbourhood. I held such interviews in secure locations (a separate room in a community house, sometimes in my hotel room in the city centre) and on the strict condition of anonymity. It was seen as an advantage that I was a foreign national, as it was assumed I did not have links with an armed group in Colombia. Some respondents said they would not have given the same information to a Colombian national.[6] Moreover, I attended some workshops with former paramilitaries and visited (together with a psychologist) some of their families in order to try and gain more insight in their backgrounds. To build an understanding of the local peace policy I interviewed key figures of the municipality, among them the then mayor, Sergio Fajardo.

After a short review of theoretical approaches to DDR-processes and an explanation of the paramilitaries and the peace process at the national level, this article analyses the formation of armed groups in metropolitan Medellín, reviews earlier local peace initiatives and then focuses on the ongoing local DDR-process with paramilitaries.

DDR Processes

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants aim to reduce violence, dismantle armed organisations or networks and

[5] For a discussion about the authenticity of testimonies see Arthur Schmidt's foreword in R. Gay, *Lucia. Testimonies of a Brazilian drug dealer's women* (Philadelphia, 2005), p. xii.

[6] The interviews were held before revelations appeared in the Colombian press about the participation of European nationals in the guerrilla movement FARC.

reintegrate ex-combatants into civilian life.[7] In 2005 over a million people participated in DDR programmes in some 20 countries, mostly in Africa: 43 per cent of them took part in armed forces reduction programmes, others in DDR programmes for armed opposition groups or paramilitary groups.[8] Although the specific content of DDR programmes may depend on local circumstances, they share a common starting-point.

DDR is understood as falling within the broader concept of peace-building that aims to address the deeper causes of a conflict, such as poverty, the distribution of wealth or land, or social and political exclusion, and provides alternatives to war.[9] Peace building aims to encompass, generate and sustain the processes needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships. Such interventions can lead to changes in relationships by improving communication and exposing the fears, hopes and goals of the people involved.[10] Field experiences with DDR are reflected in guidelines, such as the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), developed to coordinate the work of different UN agencies.[11] Some approaches to DDR, such as the Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration, emphasise the importance of a broader integrated approach.[12] The Stockholm initiative was launched in order to review current DDR practise and involved regular meetings over the course of two years with representatives from 23 countries and a mixture of international and national organisations. In their final report, the participants encouraged efforts to establish appropriate links between DDR programmes and transitional justice initiatives. Moreover, the

[7] Although the term DDR is commonly used, some authors prefer CDDR where C stands for ceasefire; others use DDRR, splitting the phase of reintegration in short-term re-insertion and long-term sustainable reintegration. See. K. Koonings and K. Nordquist, *Proceso de paz, cese al fuego, desarme, desmovilización y reintegración – CDDR – paramilitar y (apoyo internacional a la) misión de apoyo al proceso de paz de la OEA–MAPP/OEA – en Colombia. Informe final* (Bogotá, 2005); M. Knight and A. Özerdem, 'Guns, camps and cash: disarmament, demobilisation and reinsertion of former combatants in transitions from war to peace', *Journal of Peace Research*, 41–4 (2004), pp. 499–516.

[8] A. Caramés et al., *Analysis of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes existing in the world during 2005* (Barcelona, 2006):www.pangea.org/unescopau/img/programas/desarme/ddr0011.pdf (accessed 10 March 2008).

[9] B. Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping* (New York, 1992): http://www.un.org/Docs/SG/agpeace.html; R. J. Fisher, *Interactive conflict resolution* (New York, 1997), p. 11; Knight & Özerdem, 'Guns, camps and cash'; SIDDR *Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration, Final Report* (Stockholm, 2006).

[10] J. P. Lederach, *Building peace. Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies* (Washington, 1997), pp. 20, 34, 82.

[11] UN DDR Resource Centre, *Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS)* (New York, 2006) www.unddr.org

[12] SIDDR, *Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration* (Stockholm, 2006), pp. 23, 27 30.

report especially recommends providing support to communities receiving ex-combatants as a direct complement to the DDR programme. The participants of the Stockholm Initiative propose two distinct funding instruments for DDR processes: one for financing programmes for ex-combatants and one directed at affected communities.

Various preconditions are recommended to improve the prospects of success for DDR: *security* involving a safe environment so that parties can give up their weapons, and the *inclusion of all warring parties*. Other preconditions are a *political agreement* defining the end of hostilities – a ceasefire or a peace agreement – a *comprehensive approach* integrating the different phases of the DDR process and *sufficient funds*.[13] Reintegration of ex-combatants requires special attention: it cannot be simply decreed or enforced, nor can it be achieved by focusing on the ex-combatants alone. It will only happen if families and communities allow ex-combatants in their midst. They are most likely to do so if they are intimately involved in the DDR programme in question.[14] A lack of funds for education or employment opportunities can lead to disappointment among demobilised combatants. If they do not see prospects in the world of legal activities, ex-combatants may resort to crime or violence, threatening the peace process.[15]

Despite growing enthusiasm for DDR, little research has been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes in Latin America, especially in urban environments. Evaluations of DDR programmes should consider the overall level of security in the city, the restoration of livelihoods and income-generating opportunities for ex-combatants, and their relationship to the community. It is, moreover, valuable to include the views of the families of ex-combatants and key figures in the neighbourhoods at different phases during evaluations of the DDR-process.[16]

Paramilitaries in Colombia

The 2003 decision of Colombian president, Álvaro Uribe, to initiate a DDR-process with the paramilitaries was a break with the past in which negotiations were held only with guerrilla groups. Under the preceding

[13] M. Fusato, *Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants* (Univ. of Colorado, 2003), www.beyondintractability.org/essay/demobilization

[14] S. Faltas, 'DDR without camps', in: BICC, *Conversion Survey* (Bonn, 2005), p. 5, www.bicc.de

[15] N. Hitchkock, 'Disarmament, demobilisation & reintegration: the case of Angola', *Conflict Trends*, issue 1 (2004), www.trainingforpeace.org/resources/accord.htm#ct (accessed 10 March 2008); M. Koth, *To end a war: demobilisation and reintegration of paramilitaries in Colombia* (Bonn, 2005), pp. 16, 25, www.bicc.de.

[16] R. Muggah, *Reflections on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in Sudan* (London, 2006): www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2795 (accessed 10 March 2008).

presidency of Andrés Pastrana efforts foundered to reach an accord with the guerrilla movement *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). Uribe then campaigned for a different policy adopting a tough stance towards the FARC and an open attitude towards other groups that would agree to a ceasefire, including the paramilitaries.[17]

Paramilitaries in Colombia have existed throughout the twentieth century, although their presence has not been continuous. According to Richani, in the 1920s, private armies manifested themselves as the 'defenders of social order'.[18] At the end of the 1960s the Colombian government legalised paramilitary groups within the context of the Cold War and the doctrine of National Security. In 1987 paramilitary groups were declared illegal, but in practice continued to exist.

The most recent wave of paramilitaries has various origins. Landowners established their own small paramilitary armies in order to defend themselves against the guerrilla. Other paramilitary groups, created or fomented by drug traffickers such as Pablo Escobar and leaders of the Cali Cartel, include the extremely violent paramilitary movement *Muerte a los Secuestradores* (MAS), established in 1981. That same year a paramilitary group was created in the central department of Antioquia by the brothers Fidel and Carlos Castaño, who came to play a key role in the organisation of paramilitaries at the national level. The Castaño brothers made a fortune in the illicit drug trade and maintained alliances with powerful *narcotraficantes*.[19]

In 1997 the paramilitaries established a national organisation, *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), with the professed aim of defeating the guerrilla. The AUC confronted the guerrilla in many parts of the country, but also perpetrated massacres among the civil population whom they accused of collaborating with the guerrilla.[20] The AUC operated relatively independently from the counter-insurgent actions of the state, were heavily involved in drug trafficking and had a complex organisational structure.[21]

Several developments contributed to the AUC's decision to enter into a peace process. Increasing tensions within their leadership contributed to the

[17] D. Pécaut, *Midiendo fuerzas. Balance del primer año del gobierno de Álvaro Uribe Vélez* (Bogotá, 2003), p. 42; D. Kruijt and K. Koonings, *Stability Assessment Colombia for the Conflict Research Unit of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael* (The Hague, 2007), p. 22.

[18] N. Richani, *Sistemas de guerra. La economía política del conflicto en Colombia* (Bogotá, 2003), p. 166.

[19] Richani, *Sistemas de Guerra*, p. 172.

[20] C. M. Gallego. and M. T. Ardila, *La violencia parainstitucional, paramilitar y parapolicial en Colombia* (Bogotá, 1994); M. Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas 1982–2003* (Bogotá, 2003).

[21] Although the AUC was independent of the state's forces, its actions were often co-ordinated with sectors of the army, especially in the early years of the AUC. The army was also decisive in linking the paramilitary group of the Castaño brothers with paramiltaries in Puerto Boyacá. A. Rangel, *El poder paramilitar* (Bogotá, 2005). See also Richani, *Sistemas de Guerra*, p. 171.

view that perhaps a paramilitary organisation at the national level would not have a secure future. One of the issues that divided the leadership was drug trafficking. While some of the leaders wanted to distance themselves from such operations, others maintained it was the only way to finance an armed struggle against the guerrilla.[22] Internal rivalries resulted in the murders of various AUC commanders, among them the political leader of the AUC, Carlos Castaño, who was assassinated in April 2004.[23] Competition between regional paramilitary blocs further undermined the position of the AUC as a national organisation. Another major concern was changing public opinion towards the paramilitaries. Initially their operations were viewed as successful actions against the guerrilla, especially in the north of Colombia. But when atrocities and massacres perpetrated by paramilitary groups became more widely known, public support declined. Some leaders of the paramilitaries hoped – and do still – to prevent their extradition to the United States on charges of drug trafficking by taking part in a peace process. Other paramilitaries felt demobilisation offered a chance to enhance their political and social influence. Many rank and file members simply wanted to return to their families.[24]

Beginning in 2003, parallel meetings took place with four different groups of paramilitaries, including the national organisation AUC. The outcome of the talks with the AUC set the standards for negotiations with other groups. The Santa Fe de Ralito agreement was signed in July 2003. This committed the AUC to fully demobilise by December 2005 and expressed their support for an end to *narcotrafico* in Colombia. The next year a special *Zona de Ubicación Temporal* or temporary concentration zone was inaugurated in Santa Fe de Ralito in northern Colombia where paramilitary leaders converged and further talks were held. Although the deadline of December 2005 was not feasible for all paramilitary blocs, demobilisations followed in quick succession and, by June 2006, a total of 30,944 paramilitaries had been formally demobilised.[25]

One of the most controversial issues proved to be the legal status of the demobilised paramilitaries. As transitional justice strategies are often applied

[22] D. García-Peña Jaramillo, 'La relación del Estado colombiano con el fenómeno paramilitar: por el esclarecimiento histórico', in: *Análisis Político*, no. 53 (2005), p. 58–76.

[23] *El Tiempo* 23 August 2006; *El Colombiano*, 24 August 2006.

[24] Koonings and Nordquist, *Proceso de paz, cese al fuego, desarme, desmovilización y reintegración*, pp. 58.

[25] Alto Comisionado para la Paz, *Proceso de paz con las Autodefensas*, p. 4; C. J. Arnson, *The peace process in Colombia with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC* (Washington, 2005), p. 4; Koth, *To end a war: demobilisation and reintegration of paramilitaries in Colombia*; M. Romero, *The demobilisation of paramilitaries and self-defences: risky, controversial and necessary* (Uppsala, 2005), http://www.kus.uu.se/pdf/publications/Final%20Final%20Romero.pdf (accessed 10 March 2008).

in situations where peace is fragile or perpetrators retain real power, a balance must be found between the demands of justice and achievable short term outcomes.[26] The paramilitaries particularly wanted to avoid long prison terms, even in cases where they were responsible for gross human rights violations. Following fierce congressional debates the *Ley de Justicia y Paz* was finally approved in June 2005.[27] The law was a compromise that limited penalties for former paramilitaries responsible for human rights violations to a maximum of eight years in prison. Non-governmental organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, severely criticised the law,[28] yet the Colombian government argued that it was a necessary compromise in order to secure the AUC's demobilisation. In order to be granted amnesty, former paramilitaries are mandated to tell the truth and confess their crimes. During the first trials, under the Law of Peace and Justice, held in Medellín in 2007, paramilitary commanders revealed some details about massacres, but human right organisations maintain that the confessions are limited. Residents in Medellín expressed mixed feelings about the law: some saw it as positive because of the role it played in ending death threats; others feared it would allow most paramilitaries to go free. In addition, the government budget for reparations was generally perceived as insufficient to meet relatives' needs. Organisations representing victims emphasise that most government benefits are directed towards the former paramilitaries and not to the families of those killed or disappeared. In some specific cases, the Inter-American Court for Human Rights has ordered the Colombian government to pay compensation to victims, arguing that it failed to protect its citizens against paramilitary violence.[29]

Medellín's History of Peace Initiatives

The project with the paramilitaries was not the first peace process to take place in Medellín. Indeed the municipal authorities were determined to avoid the mistakes of two earlier local peace initiatives: an accord with left wing militias reached in 1994 and the so-called co-existence pacts with youth gangs orchestrated in the second half of the 1990s. A short history of the

[26] M. Flournoy and M. Pan, 'Dealing with demons: justice and reconciliation', *The Washington Quarterly*, 25–4 (2002), pp. 111–23; SIDDR, *Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration*, p. 30.

[27] Some sections of the law were later modified by the Supreme Court to avoid challenges on the grounds of inconstitutionality.

[28] Human Rights Watch, *Colombia, Librando a los paramilitares de sus responsabilidades* (New York, 2005): http://hrw.org/backgrounder/americas/colombia0105-sp (accessed 10 March 2008).

[29] El Tiempo (27 July 2006).

urban violence in Medellín explains the background of these earlier initiatives.

Although Medellín became known as one of the most violent cities in the world, it was not always so. In the 1960s and 1970s it was a prosperous industrial city with a low crime rate. This changed in the 1980s with the advent of the drugs cartel of Medellín. Pablo Escobar founded a private army of hundreds of *sicarios* or mercenaries, who assassinated members of opposing drug gangs and others who refused to cooperate with the cartel's operations. The boom in drug trafficking created conditions favourable for the consolidation of youth gangs. Young people were attracted to the lucrative returns of participating in organised crime. In this context left-wing guerrillas made their first appearance in neighbourhoods of Medellín. In 1985 the then guerrilla movement M-19 began to set up so-called Camps for Peace and Democracy (*Campamentos para la Paz y la Democracia*) in some of the poor neighbourhoods of the city. After the M-19 demobilised in 1990, some of its ex-members formed gangs or became hired killers in the service of the drug cartel.[30]

When the government threatened to extradite cartel leaders to the United States, Escobar responded with an unprecedented attack on the state, including bombings in Bogotá and Medellín. The year 1991 was the most violent ever in Medellín with a monthly average of 529 assassinations.[31] The death of Escobar in 1993 preceded the fall of the Medellín drug cartel. Most of the drug trade was taken over by cartels elsewhere in the country (principally the Cali cartel), but the level of violence in Medellín failed to diminish. Many *sicarios* formed new criminal (youth) gangs.

The expansion of these gangs provoked a reaction, especially in the neighbourhoods of the Nororiente, where illegal popular militias were formed to protect the civil population against the gangs. The *milicias* adopted political views close to that of the guerrilla elsewhere in Colombia.[32] Ceballos Melguizo and Cronshow describe the militia groups as a hybrid of guerrilla urban cells, armed urban commandos from far left parties and common

[30] L. A. Restrepo, 'Violence and fear in Colombia: fragmentation of space, contraction of time and forms of evasion', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds.), *Armed Actors, Organised violence and state failure in Latin America* (London, 2004), pp. 172–85.

[31] M. A. Alonso, J. Giraldo and D. J. Sierra, 'Medellín: el complejo camino de la competencia armada', in: M. Romero (ed.), *Parapolítica. La ruta de la expansión paramilitar y los acuerdos políticos* (Bogotá, 2007); A. Salazar, *La parábola de Pablo. Auge y caída de un gran capo de narcotráfico* (Bogotá, 2001).

[32] G. Medina Franco, *Historia sin fin … Las milicias en Medellín en la decada del noventa* (Medellín, 2006); C. E. Londoño, 'Evaluación de procesos de negociación con y entre actores armados urbanos en la ciudad de Medellín en la década del noventa', in: A. Monsalve Solórzano and E. Domínguez Gómez (eds.), *Colombia. Democracia y paz* (Medellín, 2001), pp. 145–83.

criminals.[33] Adopting a similar structure to that of the gangs, the militias expanded rapidly. The militias engaged in armed confrontations with youth gangs, aimed at securing their demobilisation or physical elimination. They also functioned as de facto authorities in the neighbourhoods where they operated, mediating family conflicts and seeking to prevent domestic violence.[34] The militias justified their existence by pointing to the absence of a state presence to protect residents from violence.[35] In accounting for the reasons for the initial success of the militias, Gutiérrez and Jaramillo identify three reasons. Firstly, they provided security. In many popular neighbourhoods gangs had exercised tight control through violence and when the militias cracked down on the gangs many residents felt they had been liberated. Secondly, residents appreciated the militias' provision of security and community services. A third reason was that the militias promoted a return to community values.[36]

The growth of the militias, however, provoked new problems. Different militias, operating in the same parts of the city, began to see each other as rivals and armed confrontations occurred between rival factions. Moreover, in order to fill their ranks the militias lowered their recruitment standards, permitting former gang members to join. The subsequent increase in criminal activities and abuses against the civilian population generated growing concern on the part of the residents.[37] In an attempt to curb the violence, the government proposed a negotiated settlement. A special law was adopted in December 1993 (Law 104) which granted benefits to groups of militias willing to lay down their arms. The government of President César Gaviria was eager to reach an agreement with the militias in the city after the failure of national negotiations with the guerrilla. The militias were also keen to negotiate: according to militia leader Pablo García, 'the strategy was to negotiate and to establish a political movement that represented the community. The community was tired of the violence and we needed an alternative.'[38]

[33] R. Ceballos Melguizo and F. Cronshaw, 'The evolution of armed conflict in Medellín: an analysis of major actors', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 28. no. 1 (2001), pp. 110–31.

[34] A. M. Jaramillo Arbeláez, *Milicias Populares en Medellín: entre la guerra y la paz* (Medellín, 1994), p. 27.

[35] Londoño, 'Evaluación de procesos de negociación con y entre actores armados urbanos en la ciudad de Medellín en la década del noventa', p. 171.

[36] F. Gutiérrez Sanín and A. M. Jaramillo, 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security – the case of Medellín, Colombia', *Environment & Urbanization*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2004), pp. 17–30.

[37] A. M. Jaramillo Arbeláez, R. Ceballos Melguizo and M. I. Villa Martínez, *En la encrucijada. Conflicto y cultura política en el Medellín de los noventa* (Medellín, 1998), p. 65; Jaramillo, *Milicias Populares en Medellín*, p. 35.

[38] Londoño, 'Evaluación de procesos de negociación con y entre actores armados urbanos en la ciudad de Medellín en la década del noventa', p. 173.

Preliminary talks began in 1991 and a formal peace process was inaugurated in 1994. An agreement between the militias and the government was presented on 26 May 1994, proposing the demobilisation of around 600 individuals. The main points in this agreement were the creation of a security cooperative, named Coosercom, in which former militias would participate, social investments in the neighbourhoods and legal immunity for those militias that had been involved in criminal activities.[39] Many problems subsequently came to light, especially with the cooperative Coosercom. Shortly after its creation, Coosercom members carried out abuses against the civilian population and were involved in criminal activities. They carried out house searches in the neighbourhoods, arrested people and even forced residents to leave their houses.[40] About six weeks after its creation, the leader of Coosercom and the main negotiator on behalf of the militias, Pablo García, was murdered. The power struggle that followed his death claimed many lives.

The continuing abuses against the civilian population, the murders of former militiamen from different factions and increasing tensions between the cooperative and the state police finally led to the disbandment of Coosercom in 1996. During its existence more than hundred militia members were killed, among them all those who had assumed leadership positions in the cooperative.[41]

The peace initiative with the militias, although initially promoted by the local government as 'an example for Latin America', is now generally viewed as a complete failure. Most criticised was the security cooperative composed of former militias. Among those who voiced criticism against Coosercom was the regional prosecutor of Antioquia, Fernando González Carrizosa, who stated: 'principles of democracy are not respected when armed groups provide security. This is a service that the state should provide.'[42] Another major shortcoming was the training of Coosercom members. As Ana Mercedes Gómez, director of the daily *El Colombiano*, stated: 'The militias did not really understand the meaning of peace. They did not receive retraining to enable them to abandon their militarised views of society.'[43] Programmes for employment and the promotion of small businesses were

[39] A. Daza, 'Entre esquinas, cambuches, cruces y callejones', in A. Daza, G. Salazar and L. González, *Experiencias de intervención en conflicto urbano, tomo II* (Medellín, 2001), pp. 82; Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 67.

[40] G. Medina, *Coosercom* (Medellín, 1996), p. 7; Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 81; J. C. Vélez Rendón, 'Conflicto y guerra: la lucha por el orden en Medellín', *Estudios Políticos*, no. 18 (2001), pp. 61–89.

[41] Gutiérrez et al., 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security'; Ceballos Melguizo et al., 'The evolution of armed conflict in Medellín'.

[42] Medina, *Coosercom*, p. 3.

[43] Medina, p. 9.

inoperative due to lack of official coordination and funds.[44] After the disbandment of Coosercom the militia movement fell apart, although small groups remained active in some neighbourhoods. The youth gangs, however, continued to function.

In the second half of the 1990s, the municipal government backed negotiations between local gangs initiated by the Catholic Church in Medellín. These informal agreements – *pactos de convivencia* – between gangs aimed to stop the violent confrontations between them. The key principle in such negotiations was mutual respect. Not only of youth gangs towards each other, but also between community organisations and youth gangs. To gain trust of the residents, gangs were required to stop robberies and other violence immediately within their neighbourhood. Resolving territorial disputes between gangs was an urgent priority, considering the high injury and fatality rate not just of gang members themselves, but of residents caught in crossfire in gang turf wars.[45]

The priest Francisco Leudo was among the first to sponsor a local pact between youth gangs. In 1996 he was assigned to work in barrio Caicedo in the central eastern part of Medellín. In this neighbourhood, 380 members of different gangs were killed in two years during confrontations with each other. Leudo, shocked when his first Sunday church service was interrupted by armed exchanges between rival gangs, designed a strategy in different phases to bring the gangs towards an agreement. In the first two months he observed the gangs and gained their confidence. In a second phase he talked to relatives of gang members and to children who worked for them as informants. This process finally led to a meeting where the gangs agreed to end the violence in the neighbourhood and cease hostilities.[46] Other priests also initiated local peace talks with the gangs. Their strategies varied from making friends with gang members, their girlfriends or family members, frequenting their meeting places, or organising religious activities in line with gangs' codes. For example, one priest noticed that gang members manifested a strong belief in María Auxiliadora and he distributed images of her as a means to initiate negotiations.[47] The agreement mediated by Father Francisco Leudo provided a '*via libre para todos*', so that every resident could move freely around the neighbourhood without facing gang threats or stray bullets. A further condition was that gang members immediately abandon criminal activities within the neighbourhood. A difference between the earlier agreement with the militias and the *pactos de convivencia* with the gangs was that the latter were not written down, but rather were based on the word of

[44] Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 82.
[45] Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*; Vélez Rendón, 'Conflicto y guerra: la lucha por el orden en Medellín'; Gutiérrez et al., 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security'.
[46] Leudo, interview 18 March 2004.
[47] Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 140.

one gang to another. Within the internal laws of the gangs, the respect for the spoken word has a special value. '*La palabra de hombre, the word of a man, that is what it is about.*'[48] The effect of the first *pactos de convivencia* was an immediate decrease in the number of violent deaths, especially among youth. For this reason the municipal authorities decided to back the initiative through an *Oficina de Paz y Convivencia* (Office for Peace and Coexistence) that took part in the negotiations and provided some financial support.[49] This was created to implement local peace policies though in recent years other municipal offices have taken over its task. However, the project's positive results lasted for only a few months. New youth gangs from other parts of the city entered neighbourhoods where pacts had been reached, which led to renewed confrontations. In 1998 the municipality of Medellín suspended negotiations with the gangs. Still, it is believed that the pacts saved many lives of youth in the neighbourhoods.

The agreements with the gangs suffered from serious shortcomings. A fundamental problem for the local government was that it was negotiating with criminal groups without a political or legal framework within which to do so. Many of the gang members had committed crimes that were not prosecuted and were even able to continue criminal activities, although no longer within their own neighbourhood. Moreover, they still possessed their weapons, as the pacts did not involve disarmament of the groups.[50] A longer term problem was the informal character of the agreements. Without written commitments the process remained particularly vulnerable. For the negotiating priests, the deeper cause for the gangs lay in the lack of opportunities for youth. For this reason the pacts included strategies for education and the establishment of micro-businesses. Some government institutions were involved in these efforts, but the initiatives were few due to a lack of funds.[51] For the residents the pacts with the gangs meant a short period of relief, but soon new armed actors infiltrated their neighbourhoods, including paramilitaries.

The Advent of Paramilitaries in Medellín

When paramilitaries first entered Medellín in the late 1990s, a reconfiguration of armed groups had taken place. Remnants of the old militias continued their activities and received support from guerrilla movements outside

[48] Leudo, interview 18 March 2004; see also Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 134.
[49] Vélez Rendón, 'Conflicto y guerra: la lucha por el orden en Medellín', p. 70.
[50] Jaramillo, *En la encrucijada*, p. 142.
[51] Vélez Rendón, 'Conflicto y guerra: la lucha por el orden en Medellín'.

the city.[52] These groups belonged to the FARC, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and the *Comandos Armados del Pueblo* (CAP).[53] By the second half of the 1990s profound changes had also taken place in the nature of organised crime. Criminal organisations with a strong central command had been replaced by networks with a loose, more horizontal structure. Powerful criminal organisations known as *oficinas* took over Pablo Escobar's role as providers of arms and contracts to other illegal groups in the city.[54]

The paramilitaries who had previously confined their activities to rural areas, had several reasons to enter Medellín. First, they believed that increasing guerrilla activity in the city required a tough response. The presence of many other armed groups in the city meant that military resources (such as trained people and weapons) were relatively easy to come by. In addition, Medellín was a site of strategic importance with corridors to all sides of the country. The strategy adopted by the paramilitaries to gain control of the city was to establish strongholds in neighbourhoods where residents had complained about left-wing militias. They co-opted part of the gangs and the earlier mentioned *oficinas* forming a powerful network of paramilitary and criminal elements.[55]

The urban warfare that broke out between paramilitaries and guerrilla militias claimed many casualties, combatants and non-combatants. Micro-wars occurred in areas as small as a few blocks. Residents who were unlucky enough to cross front lines between guerrilla and paramilitary territory were often hit by stray bullets. The confrontations led to a high number of *desplazados* or internal refugees within the city.[56] The paramilitaries expelled the guerrilla from most parts of the city and consolidated their control over most of the neighbourhoods. The exception, however, was the western

[52] Some authors (for example, Gutiérrez et al., 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security') use the term militias; others speak of guerrilla groups that infiltrated neighbourhoods on the city's outskirts during the second half of the 1990s: see, for example IPC, 'Breve recuento de los actores armadas en Medellín, década del 90', *Boletín virtual 04* '*Por la vida* (Medellín, 2003). See also A. Restrepo, *Jovenes y antimilitarismo en Medellín* (Medellín 2007), p. 122.

[53] The FARC and the ELN were both established in the 1960s. The FARC had its roots in a peasant movement that demanded land reform, while the smaller ELN was more inspired by the example of the Cuban revolution. Both insurgent groups operate nationally and finance their operations through drug trafficking, extortion and kidnappings. The CAP operated only in certain parts of Medellín between the late 1990s and 2002, when they were incorporated within the ELN.

[54] Gutiérrez et al., 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security', p. 26.

[55] Alonso et al., 'Medellín: el complejo camino de la competencia armada'; Gutiérrez et al., 'Crime, (counter-)insurgency and the privatization of security', p. 26.

[56] Restrepo, 'Violence and fear in Colombia'; R. A. P. Rozema, 'Medellín', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds.), *Fractured Cities. Social exclusion, urban violence and contested spaces in Latin America* (London, 2007).

neighbourhood Comuna 13, which enjoyed a heavy guerrilla presence. Comuna 13 became the object of Operation Orión, a two day military offensive launched on 16 October 2002. Recently elected President Uribe authorised the entry of 3,000 troops, supported by Blackhawk helicopters. The aim was expunge the guerrilla presence.[57] Although before Orión smaller military urban actions had been mounted (such as Operation Mariscal on 21 May 2002), the massive scale of this intervention in an urban area was unprecedented in Colombia. The Comuna 13, an intricate mosaic of small alleys in the western hills, inhabited by around 135,000 people, was a difficult terrain for a military operation. The choice of Comuna 13 was also remarkable because most other Comunas suffered comparable levels of violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups. But while other neighbourhoods were in the hands of right-wing paramilitaries, only Comuna 13 was dominated by left wing guerrillas.

During Operation Orión the army succeeded in defeating the guerrilla movements completely. Guerrilla fighters fled to the mountains, while hundreds of suspected militia fighters were detained.[58] The number of casualties was considered low (18 fatalities) and in the media the operation was applauded as a success. In addition, more than twenty kidnap victims hidden in Comuna 13 were liberated. Residents expressed relief that the repressive guerrilla regime had come to an end.[59] Critics, however, allege that troops used violence against civilians. The Bogotá-based NGO *Noche y Niebla* concluded in a report that the civilian population was attacked indiscriminately by the armed forces. Attacks by fighter helicopters and automatic weapons caused civilian casualties and severe damage to houses. Moreover, shortly after the operation, paramilitaries settled in Comuna 13 and started to exert a regime of terror on the residents.[60] It was the beginning of a period of forced disappearances. When I visited Comuna 13 in 2004, residents told stories of a red car without number plates that entered the neighbourhood in the night. People were taken out of their houses and never returned. Neighbours who had seen such incidents said the victims had nothing to do with the guerrilla

[57] Washington Post, 'Urban Anti-rebel raid a new turn in Colombian war' (24 October 2002), p. A28.

[58] In the years following Operación Orión the FARC and ELN continued to operate nationally, but not in Medellín. In 2007 a small number of FARC-combatants returned to the Comuna 13, some minor bombing attacks were attributed to them, but generally they kept a low profile: Instituto Popular de Capacitación, *Población juvenile: objetivo de grupos armados en la Comuna 13* (November 2007). Internet: www.ipc.org.co (accessed 10 March 2008).

[59] El Colombiano, 'Un mes después, la 13 respira otro aire', 15 November 2002; Y. A. Rendón, *Comuna 13 de Medellín. El drama del conflicto armado* (Medellín, 2007), pp. 173–94.

[60] Noche y Niebla, *Comuna 13, la otra versión*, nocheyniebla.org (Bogotá, 2003), p. 20; for other testimonies about Operation Orión, see R. Aricapa, *Comuna 13: crónica de una guerra urbana*, p. 208.

and were generally innocent people.[61] The presence of the paramilitaries in Comuna 13 immediately after the Operation Orión led to the suspicion that the army and the paramilitaries had established some kind of cooperation. The *Los Angeles Times* revealed a document of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that said an agreement about Operation Orión had been signed by the army and local paramilitary leaders.[62]

Disputes between different paramilitary factions in Medellín provoked renewed violence. In several neighbourhoods in the hills heavy armed confrontations took place in 2002 between the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara* (BCN) and the *Bloque Metro* (BM). The Bloque Cacique Nutibara was much more successful and finally expelled the Bloque Metro from Medellín and incorporated some of its fighters. From then on, BCN controlled around 70 per cent of the city. For residents of the comunas in the hills it was hard to believe that after the expulsion of the guerrilla, urban warfare continued as never before.[63] The fighting between the two paramilitary factions had much to do with a dispute between the leaders of the BCN and the BM that can be traced back to the origins of the paramilitaries. While both aimed at 'restoring order by eliminating insurgent groups', the BM wanted to restrict the power of drug-traffickers within the paramilitary organisation, whilst drug traffickers played a leading role in the BCN.[64] The paramilitary commander of BCN, who strengthened his already powerful position by defeating the BM, was Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano, alias Don Berna or Adolfo Paz. His leadership was a key factor enabling the BCN to gain control over large parts of the city in a very short space of time. Don Berna was not only the commander of the BCN, but also the leader of criminal organisations in the city. Together, the paramilitaries and the criminal underworld formed a vast network of armed groups, severely disadvantaging the BM. Don Berna was a powerful figure in Medellín's criminal world since the mid 1990s. He started as a drug trafficker in the service of the cartel of Pablo Escobar. He then joined Los Pepes (the

[61] Interviews in the Comuna 13, April 2004. The story of the red car was told independently by two informants; several others confirmed that at that time disappearances were still occurring, sometimes of several people a week.

[62] Los Angeles Times, 'Colombia army chief linked to outlaw militias', 24 March 2007. Based on the CIA-findings, the newspaper stated that 'in jointly conducting the operation, the army, police and paramilitaries had signed documents detailing their plans. The signatories (…) were army chief General Mario Montoya, the commander of an area police force, and paramilitary leader Fabio Jaramillo, who was a subordinate of Diego Fernando Murillo Bejarano, the head of the paramilitaries in the Medellín area, known as Don Berna'. Montoya has denied the existence of such an agreement.

[63] The war between paramilitary factions in Medellín is the theme of a widely acclaimed documentary *La Sierra*; see www.lasierrafilm.com (accessed 10 March 2008).

[64] The commander of the Bloque Metro, Carlos Mauricio García Fernandez, alias Rodrigo Franco or Doble Cero, withdrew his bloque from the national paramilitary organisation AUC in September 2002. He was assassinated in Santa Marta in May 2004.

group that attacked Escobar's drug empire with support of the Cali Cartel), subsequently building up a drug and assassin-for-hire organisation know as the *Oficina de Envigado*, going on to organise his paramilitary group BCN under the umbrella of the AUC.[65] A few years later Don Berna endorsed the first paramilitary demobilisation process in Colombia of the 873 paramilitaries who came from his BCN. In 2005 Don Berna was arrested in connection with the murder of a local politician. He was extradited to the US on charges of drug trafficking in May 2008. His dual role as head of a paramilitary and a criminal organisation indicates how the two were intertwined.[66]

Considering the impact of armed group activity on people's daily lives in the popular neighbourhoods, the peace process was significant. Pécaut, referring to Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil', coined the expression 'banality of violence' to describe the situation in Colombia.[67] With the proliferation of various types of armed groups, violence became 'routinised' and 'normalised' as an essential part of the functioning of Colombian society. When paramilitaries or militias of the guerrilla took over a neighbourhood, residents faced harsh repression. The armed groups established their own law and order to which residents had to submit. During interviews I held in 2004, residents of the Comuna 13 recounted how the paramilitaries repressed the local population. Roberto Giraldo, a local resident, recalled how at the end of 2002, after an army operation that expelled the guerrilla, the paramilitaries arrived:

> When the army had withdrawn its troops, other armed men took to the streets. At first we did not know who they were, then it turned out they were paramilitaries. They drove around in luxurious cars and expensive motorbikes. In our neighbourhood we are not used to seeing such wealth. They took possession of the empty houses on the top of the hill. Later they moved into the neighbourhood, they sometimes bought or rented houses, but they also forced residents to leave their homes. They patrolled the streets and intimidated residents with their weapons.[68]

According to residents, the forms of repression used by the paramilitaries were similar to those deployed by the guerrilla before them, but there were important differences as well. While the guerrilla shot people who refused to

[65] Salazar, *La parábola de Pablo. Auge y caída de un gran capo de narcotráfico*, p. 328.

[66] Alonso et al., 'Medellín: el complejo camino de la competencia armada'; Amnesty International, *The paramilitaries in Medellín: demobilization or legalization?*, September 2005; Revista Cambio, 'Los archivos de Don Berna', 29 August 2005; *El Colombiano*, 'Don Berna se entregó a las autoridades', 28 May 2005; *El Tiempo*, 'Se acaba la 'Oficina de Envigado', una de la más temidas organizaciones del mundo delincuencial', 20 July 2005.

[67] D. Pécaut, 'From the banality of violence to real terror: the case of Colombia', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds.), *Societies of fear, the legacy of civil war, violence and terror in Latin America* (London, 1999); H. Arendt, 'From Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil' (New York, 1963); M. I. Villa Martínez, L. A. Sánchez Medina and A. M. Jaramillo Abeláez, *Rostros del miedo, una investigación sobre los miedos sociales urbanos* (Medellín, 2003).

[68] Interview, April 2004.

cooperate, the paramilitaries employed the tactic of disappearances. Shortly after their arrival the first *desaparecidos* were reported. Nelly Arango, who lives in the central part of Comuna 13, characterised the differences between the guerrilla and the paramilitaries:

> In this *barrio*, with the paramilitaries, the law of silence reigns. You could say we were better off with the guerrilla, because they acted openly. You could get killed in a shooting, but at least you knew where the bullets were coming from. With the paramilitaries everything happens in secret. We do not know exactly who is responsible for the disappearances.[69]

Mass graves have recently been discovered in the surroundings of the Comuna 13 attributed to the paramilitaries.[70] As with the guerrilla, the paramilitaries introduced their own set of rules to control daily life. Most informants agreed that there was, in practice, little difference between the regimes of the guerrilla and the paramilitaries. Paramilitaries prohibited informal gatherings in the streets and collected taxes (*vacuna*) from shops, supermarkets and bus and taxi companies. When the paramilitaries took control of Comuna 13, they announced 400 job vacancies. Teenagers were attracted by both money and status. Families came under severe strain when their sons enlisted in the paramilitary organisation. 'One of my neighbours, a fourteen-year-old boy, decided to join the paramilitaries. His parents were in tears when they heard about it', said Roberto Giraldo. In response to the threats posed by the armed groups, social interaction declined. Restrepo's concept of the fragmentation of space indicates the impact of the fear of violence.[71] Residents selected streets that were considered safe enough. With the increasing threat of violence public transport became more and more limited. In Medellín, taxi drivers avoided popular neighbourhoods known for the presence of armed groups, such as the Nororiental, Noroccidental and Comuna 13. Moreover, people felt uncertain about the future and did not make plans for coming years. This had economic consequences because residents were unwilling to start businesses or invest.[72] As the authorities were unable or unwilling to crack down on the paramilitaries, a negotiated settlement appeared to be the only way forward.

The Paramilitary Peace Project

In 2003 President Uribe authorised the then mayor of Medellín, Luis Pérez Gutiérrez, to initiate the first local peace process with a paramilitary group. A relatively new branch of the national paramilitary organisation AUC was

[69] Interview, April 2004.
[70] *El Tiempo*, 18 October 2005.
[71] Restrepo, 'Violence and fear in Colombia', p. 179.
[72] *Ibid.* p. 181; Villa Martínez, *Rostros del miedo.*

chosen: the BCN, a aforementioned creation which had a strong presence in the popular neighbourhoods of Medellín. The first phase of the DDR-process, disarmament, took place on 25 November 2003, when 873 paramilitary fighters laid down their weapons during an official ceremony in the convention centre of Medellín. In the centre, rows of men sang the national anthem and then handed over their AK-47s, rifles and revolvers, but fewer than 200 weapons in all.[73]

Television images underlined the highly symbolic value of the first paramilitary disarmament that was presented as the beginning of a new chapter of Colombian history. Critics, however, argued that the number of weapons handed over was negligible and expressed doubts about the intentions of the demobilised paramilitaries. The quantity of weapons laid down is one of the most controversial aspects of a DDR-process. Part of the weapons cache is retained, hidden by ex-combatants and those weapons surrendered tend to be in poor condition. Caramés, comparing DDR-processes in different countries, finds that generally an average of 0.46 weapon is handed in for every demobilised combatant. In Colombia the number is higher: the paramilitaries delivered an average of 0.61 weapon per combatant (less than the 0.75 in Afghanistan, but much more than the 0.26 in Liberia).[74] But perhaps more important, as Knight argues, is that even by delivering part of the weapons the group in question demonstrates its commitment to the peace process.[75] Fusato emphasises the symbolic value of the process as it underscores the transition from military to civilian life.[76] The demobilised paramilitaries expressed mixed feelings about the whole process. Alberto Valencia, a former youth gang member who had been in the BCN for two years, said he did not hand in all his weapons, because he needed them to protect himself. But he also told about his dream of studying to be a car mechanic and starting his own legitimate business.[77]

The phase of disarmament may focus on weapons, individuals or groups. The risk of focusing exclusively on weapons is that such an approach may attract individuals who seek the benefits of the disarmament programme, but who were never part of an armed group. Focusing on individual disarmament may be rejected by paramilitary leaders who feel they lose control over the process. One of the most successful strategies is working with a specific

[73] OAS, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the demobilization process in Colombia* (2005), www.cidh.oas.org/countryrep/Colombia04eng/chapter1.htm (accessed 10 March 2008); The New York Times, 25 November 2003; Washington Post, 25 November 2003.

[74] Caramés et al., *Analysis of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes existing in the world during 2005*, p. 22.

[75] Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, camps and cash'.

[76] Fusato, *Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants*.

[77] *El Tiempo*, 16 November 2003.

group and in this way ensuring the cooperation of the group's leaders. This approach, however, may also have negative effects, such as strengthening the commanders' control over combatants and enabling abuses by the commanders who may give non-combatants access to the DDR-programme and benefits.[78] In Medellín, the leaders of the BCN confirmed who were part of their group and thus eligible for the DDR-programme. In practise it was not only paramilitary fighters who participated in the demobilisation process, but also members of youth gangs who never had been part of a paramilitary group. This was a consequence of the situation in Medellín, where the boundaries between the paramilitary organisation and criminal gangs were not clear.[79] Moreover, not all the paramilitaries in Medellín participated in the demobilisation ceremony, especially those who feared long prison terms for criminal activities.[80] Both local authorities and the international observer mission of the Organisation of American States (OAS) acknowledged such problems, but emphasised the importance of the ceremony as a first step to get the peace process on the right track.

For the demobilisation, the second phase of the DDR-process, the tranquil municipality of La Ceja, east of Medellín, was chosen as the site where paramilitaries would congregate during the first weeks. Demobilisation involved assembly of the ex-combatants, orientation programmes and transportation to the communities of destination. The demobilised paramilitaries stayed at an abandoned hotel, Club Prosocial, which was renovated specifically for the occasion. Over the course of a few weeks the ex-combatants received an orientation programme to prepare them for their return to civilian life. This included sessions on education, economic activities, health issues, psychological assistance, legal matters and workshops on themes such as human rights. The ex-combatants received identification cards for medical assistance and cash allowances. The programme thus addressed their needs and defined their rights and obligations. Practical details were discussed with each participant about the neighbourhood where he was going to live, educational and work prospects. Most of them returned to their families in Medellín. In some cases other solutions were proposed when ex-combatants feared security problems in their own neighbourhood.[81]

[78] Fusato, *Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants*.

[79] Alonso et al., 'Medellín: el complejo camino de la competencia armada'; Caramés et al., *Analysis of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes existing in the world during 2005*.

[80] Some paramilitaries of the BCN participated in later demobilisations elsewhere in Colombia.

[81] *El Colombiano*, 6–16 November 2003, 14, 16, 18 December 2003; *El Tiempo*, 6 November 2003, 2 December 2003.

The programme in La Ceja, however, did not lead to an immediate disbandment of the paramilitaries. Even after returning to their communities in Medellín the ex-combatants seemed to maintain their organisational structure intact. Former paramilitaries kept close contacts with their former commanders and organised joint protests to agitate for increased government benefits. Some criminal activities attributed to paramilitaries, such as the extortion of transport companies, continued after the demobilisation in La Ceja. Koth argues that demobilised groups may use their old military structure for criminal activities, as happened in Medellín.[82] One of the reasons was that many former combatants returned to the neighbourhoods where they had been active as a paramilitary.

With the DDR-process already underway, a progressive municipal administration took office in January 2004 that came up with a different policy to curb violence in the popular neighbourhoods. The main shift was not to concentrate fully on the demobilised combatants, but rather to involve residents of the popular neighbourhoods in a more active way. Alonso Salazar, the *Secretario de Gobierno*, responsible for security affairs, explained why he was not happy with the way the DDR-process had started:

> We did not agree that the local community had not been involved in the talks. Negotiations were held with paramilitaries, but local residents were excluded. We would have started the project in a very different way.[83]

The municipality concentrated on issues such as security and the generation of employment in the popular neighbourhoods. Various local government officials came from an NGO with extensive experience with community projects in violent neighbourhoods.[84] This emphasis on the development of popular neighbourhoods contrasted sharply with the policy of previous municipal administrations that had focused on the elite and the middle classes.[85] The mayor Sergio Fajardo, who was independent from the traditional political parties, but had strong ties to social movements, confirmed his belief that reintegration of the paramilitaries, in combination with social

[82] Koth, *To end a war: demobilisation and reintegration of paramilitaries in Colombia*.

[83] Interview, 3 April 2004. Alonso Salazar was elected mayor of Medellín in November 2007.

[84] Alonso Salazar and Clara Restrepo, Secretario de Desarrollo Social, had been affiliated with Corporación Región, an NGO with projects in neighbourhoods most affected by the violence. Salazar is also the author of a bestselling book on armed groups in Medellín, *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Bogotá, 2002).

[85] Investments in the popular neighbourhoods included the building of schools, libraries and the metrocable, a cable car transport system connecting the neighbourhoods in the hills directly with the metro. Special projects (Proyectos Urbanos Integrales) were designed for the Nororiente and the Comuna 13 that included housing and social projects such as training courses for community leaders.

projects in the popular neighbourhoods, would lead to a significant reduction of the violence.[86]

The new municipal administration developed an extensive programme for the long-term reintegration of the demobilised paramilitaries: the Peace and Reconciliation Programme 'Return to Legality' (*Programa Paz y Reconciliación* '*Regreso a la Legalidad*'). Sustainable reintegration, the third phase of a DDR-process, refers to a social and economic process that leads to a broad acceptance of ex-combatants among the population, takes time and includes the full participation of the demobilised combatants in social, economic and political activities in their neighbourhoods. Important steps in reintegration are initiatives for the reunification of families and cooperation with formal and informal social networks.[87] The 'Return to Legality' programme included psychological accompaniment for demobilised combatants and economic programmes. Typically, DDR-processes may include education and vocational training, public employment, or encouragement of private initiative through training and micro-credit support. The creation and promotion of jobs takes place at two levels: through financial incentives for new jobs (such as subsidies to enterprises that employ former combatants) as well as subsidies for businesses set up by ex-combatants.[88] The programme in Medellín included education and practical courses aimed at income generation. Some of the demobilised paramilitaries attended training courses for car mechanics, construction workers, cooks or salesmen. Others studied at universities or schools. A few worked as interns in companies or institutions such as the general hospital, the local public television station, Telemedellín, private security companies or car dealers. Half a year after the demobilisation ceremony 762 of the 873 demobilised paramilitaries had a paid job.[89]

Within the neighbourhoods regular workshops were held for ex-combatants, their family and community leaders. A team of around forty Colombian psychologists held personal interviews with ex-paramilitaries and family members or held workshops with small groups of ex-combatants. Attending the workshops was mandatory for former paramilitaries claiming

[86] Interview held at the Colombian embassy in The Hague, The Netherlands, 12 November 2004 (Fajardo was in Europe for talks aimed at securing additional funds for the paramilitary DDR-process).

[87] I. C. Douglas et al., *Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, A practical field and classroom guide* (Stockholm, 2004), p. 86; SIDDR, *Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration*, p. 28.

[88] Caramés et al., *Analysis of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes existing in the world during 2005*, p. 23; Douglas, *Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, A practical field and classroom guide*; Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, camps and cash'; Hitchkock, 'Disarmament, demobilisation & reintegration: the case of Angola'.

[89] *El Colombiano*, 23 May 2004. The employment projects in Medellín benefited from more funds than those allocated for other demobilisations elsewhere in Colombia.

the monthly cash allowance, a payment provided during a maximum of four years. During some workshops I attended in 2006 the ex-combatants demonstrated a strong motivation to participate and talked openly about problems they encountered. Ex-combatants stressed they were convinced they would stay with their families and not return to war, but they also felt a commitment to their former paramilitary leaders. Yet meetings between ex-combatants and victims of paramilitary actions have contributed to a better understanding and some reconciliation, although this is by no means guaranteed. The observer mission of the OAS in Medellín emphasises that most of the DDR-process is carried out by Colombians themselves and in that sense the peace process is different from those in most African and some Central American countries. There is, for instance, no need to recruit psychologists or relief workers from abroad.

The most remarkable achievement in Medellín has been in the field of security. In January 2001 the number of homicides was 310; in September 2006 the number had fallen to 55 in a continuous downward trend.[90] The municipality attributes this success to the disarmament of the paramilitaries, the presence of a police force in the popular neighbourhoods and to its social and economic development policies. Also, even within the Comuna 13, residents affirm that the situation is improving. According to an employee of a neighbourhood organisation:

> There are now many community initiatives; we have community leaders with a good profile. For instance, residents work together in the *red de confecciones* (a cooperative of small businesses for clothing), we have computer courses for youth, we have several libraries, we organise projects to help residents find a job. (…) The neighbourhood is improving too, the municipality is constructing public squares and parks. Social life is returning to the neighbourhood. You see people strolling in the streets, which was impossible for many years. So there are positive developments. But residents still fear that the violence may return, there is still a lot of tension.[91]

In the Noroccidente, some neighbourhood committees work directly with former paramilitaries, contributing to their integration. According to a community leader:

> We organise youth gatherings and demobilised paramilitaries are participating too. We have discussions with them about family life, the education of their children, and also about the violence, the assassinations. At least we talk to each other. But I'm also worried because the ex-paramilitaries are still using violence against residents. We need to work to change their mind set. It is a long-term process.[92]

In general the former paramilitaries themselves said they felt positive about the municipality's programme and confirmed they were glad the war was

[90] Alcaldía de Medellín, 2007.
[91] Interview, at the neighbourhood organisation, Realizadores de Sueños, 1 March 2006.
[92] Interview, in the Noroccidente, 3 March 2006.

over and they had returned to civilian life.[93] According to the ex-combatants it was worth taking part in the demobilisation, because they were now able to live with their families without the threat of violence:

I want to be with my wife and my three children. The war in our neighbourhood was terrible. I joined the paramilitary group BCN because I had no work. But my family cried: they were very worried. We had to expel the guerrilla. I personally killed several of them. But also some of my *compañeros* were killed. I was never injured, but I was very afraid during the combats in the night. Now the state is paying me, it is about the same as the paramilitaries did. I am happy that I can take part in the programme of the municipality. In the future I hope to have my own business and my own house.[94]

Another demobilised paramilitary started as a teenager in a left wing armed group:

I was in a left wing militia. I was very young. After a few years some people came to our neighbourhood and talked to us. They offered a salary, so I decided to join BCN. You know, my mother died when I was fourteen; my father is disabled. But it was dangerous to be with them. I did not take part in the demobilisation of BCN, because I was in prison at that time for arms trafficking. I only had one automatic weapon. When I was released I joined the Héroes de Granada, another paramilitary group. I demobilised later together with this group. I am happy now. I attend the workshops, I work with merchandise. There is no conflict any more, I feel free now.[95]

A majority of the residents of the popular neighbourhoods said in a survey commissioned by the municipality that they felt positive about the presence of ex-combatants (76% in August 2004; 66% in December 2005). A minority believed some of the ex-combatants were involved in criminal activities (46% in August 2004; 35% in December 2005). In the same period, fear among the residents for ex-combatants diminished (from 52% in August 2004 to 32% in December 2005).[96] Contributing to the sense of safety is the police presence in the popular neighbourhoods. Small groups of policemen now control the roads and have replaced the paramilitary roadblocks. But former paramilitaries continue to exert their power in certain neighbourhoods as a community leader in the Noroccidente explained:

Residents still feel that the former paramilitaries are the leaders in the neighbourhood. The ex-combatants punish people who they accuse of wrongdoing. But it also comes from the residents themselves who ask former paramilitaries to solve certain problems, for instance in cases of domestic violence. Residents still use the term 'comandante'. The presence of ex-paramilitaries is less dominant than before, but they continue to exert their power.[97]

[93] Interviews, March 2006.
[94] Interview with a 28 year-old demobilised paramilitary, March 2006.
[95] Interview with a 24 year-old demobilised paramilitary, March 2006.
[96] Alcaldía de Medellín, 2006.
[97] Interview in the Noroccidente, 3 March 2006.

The peace process is ultimately aimed at a full reintegration in society of the demobilised paramilitaries. This includes their possible membership of social and political organisations, such as neighbourhood committees and youth groups. Tensions arose when demobilised paramilitaries wanted to take part in meetings of neighbourhood committees. Half a year after the demobilisation, during the local elections of April 2004, some demobilised paramilitaries were elected to *Juntas de Acción Comunal de Medellín* (JAC). The elections were considered fair. Former paramilitaries elected to the *juntas* appeared interested in civil projects, although their long-term influence remains to be seen. In some other neighbourhoods local committees were subject to intimidation, presumably by former paramilitaries.[98] In such cases improved security was accompanied by tight control by former paramilitaries and criminal groups, as I will analyse in the next section.

Criminal Networks of Ex-paramilitaries

Various authors point to the risk that former combatants, who feel disappointed about the process, may engage in criminal or violent activities that threaten the peace process.[99] The situation in Medellín is even more complicated because the paramilitaries of the BCN already formed a network with existing criminal and drug traffic organisations when they entered the city. According to political scientist Manuel Alonso, the cooperation with criminal gangs explains how the BCN gained control over most popular neighbourhoods in a very short time:

> BCN used the mafia networks of the *oficinas* and drug traffickers (…) to secure a monopoly of coercion in places where militias or gangs were present. In this way the BCN gained control over the activities of the illegal economy and became part of daily life in the neighbourhoods.[100]

A similar observation was made by the International Crisis Group: The BCN was not a traditional paramilitary group but a network with many components, including drug traffickers (…) and gangs involved in multiple criminal activities. (…) These criminal organisations were not part of any demobilisation; many exist to this day.[101] Some practises attributed to the

[98] Amnesty International, *The paramilitaries in Medellín: demobilization or legalization?*, p. 49.
[99] Hitchkock, 'Disarmament, demobilisation & reintegration: the case of Angola', p. 40; Koth, *To end a war: demobilisation and reintegration of paramilitaries in Colombia*, p. 38.
[100] Interview with Alonso, 11 March 2006. See also: Alonso et al., 'Medellín: el complejo camino de la competencia armada', p. 127.
[101] International Crisis Group, 'Colombia's new armed groups. Latin-American Report 20' (10 May 2007), p. 18.

paramilitaries continued after the demobilisation, such as the extortion of transport companies and shops.[102] Alonso argues that the demobilisation of the BCN is partial: 'The network contains many nodes – paramilitaries, drug traffickers, gangs – and with the demobilisation of the paramilitaries, only part of the nodes have been unravelled.[103]

Local organisations maintain that some combatants who took part in the demobilisation continue their criminal operations. 'The majority of the demobilised paramilitaries started a new life and stay out of criminal activities, but a minority continues drug trafficking and other illicit activities' said the director of an NGO.[104] Although former paramilitaries talked openly about armed confrontations with left wing groups, they evaded the topic of drugs trafficking, which is excluded by the Law of Peace and Justice.[105] Some said they had never been involved in it; others refused to talk about it.[106] It remains unclear how many of the demobilised paramilitaries are still involved in criminal organisations.

Sustainable peace requires the dismantling of such network structures. Castells argues that dismantling strategic nodes of a network is only a first step towards the disarticulation of the network as a whole, and subsequent measures are necessary to prevent the reconfiguration and reproduction of the network.[107] Alonso predicts that paramilitary groups will disappear from Medellín, but as long as the larger network structures remain intact, armed groups will continue and may even intensify their criminal operations.[108]

Critics of the local peace process say the spectacular reduction in violence in Medellín was not only a result of the new government policy, but was also a consequence of shifts in the ways the paramilitary commanders exercised their power. In the course of the DDR-process, informal security agencies have been established by former paramilitaries in some neighbourhoods. Although such vigilantes do not wear a paramilitary uniform, residents know they are dealing with former paramilitaries and that they better obey them. In

[102] Interviews with residents in Comuna 13, March 2006.
[103] Interview, 11 March 2006.
[104] Interview, 7 March 2006.
[105] The *Ley de Justicia y Paz* (Ley 975, 25 July 2005, article 16, 29) stipulates that former paramilitaries receive sentences between 4 and 8 years for crimes committed as members of paramilitary groups. Other crimes, such as drug trafficking, are not within the framework of this law.
[106] Interviews with ex-paramiltaries, March 2006.
[107] Castells, 'La guerra red', in *El País*, 18 September 2001.
[108] Interview, 11 March 2006.

Comuna 13, patrols of masked men reappeared at the beginning of 2006.[109] In such cases, it is not the formal, legitimate apparatus of the state that takes care of the safety of its citizens, but instead a sort of 'parallel state' that weakens democratic institutions.

People loyal to former paramilitary commander Don Berna still appear to regulate the underworld. As Don Berna decided to cooperate with the DDR-process, his men generally do not permit killing, but crimes such as extortion of businesses, robbery and drug trafficking continue.[110] Although the presence of the state in the popular neighbourhoods increased during the paramilitary DDR-process, after so many years of negligence it is nearly impossible for the public authorities to be in full control. An urban 'mafia' oversees the resolution of conflicts and provides 'security' in Medellín.[111] Some analysts argue that a new form of 'paramilitarisation' has emerged in parts of the city.[112] It is a contradictory and ironic outcome of a DDR-process: armed groups that include former combatants and that control parts of the city in relatively peaceful way.

Conclusions

The case of Medellín demonstrates how an urban peace process may generate highly contradictory results. Important achievements such as the spectacular decrease in the number of homicides contradict the consolidation of a network of criminal armed groups in the popular neighbourhoods. The participation of former paramilitaries in this network is partly related to the urban aspect of the DDR-process: the demobilised paramilitaries live in the same neighbourhoods where they were active as fighters, they still meet their fellow combatants and together they can easily decide to form another armed group. In Medellín, however, it is also the character of the paramilitary group BCN that makes the peace process vulnerable. The BCN was never an isolated organisation; it was already integrated into an extensive network of criminal groups before the demobilisation process. This wider network under the leadership of the local paramilitary

[109] Interviews with residents of the Comuna 13, March 2006. In 2007 small armed groups using the name Aguilas Negras (black eagles) entered some neighbourhoods of Medellín. The Aguilas Negras emerged in several parts of Colombia after the demobilisation of the paramilitaries. There are speculations that they come from criminal organisations or that former paramilitaries are involved (source: residents of Comuna 13 and the *Instituto Popular de Capacitación*, February 2008).

[110] Interviews with residents of the Comuna 13, March 2006.

[111] Kimberly Theidon, 'Transitional subjects: the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, vol. 1 (2007), pp. 66–90.

[112] Sociologist Jesus Balbín, *Instituto Popular de Capacitación*, interview, 2 March 2006.

commanders has never been dismantled – only the paramilitary branch of it – and the network continues to operate, while the same commanders continue to be in charge.

When evaluating the results of a DDR-programme various other criteria play a role, such as the feeling of security among residents of the neighbourhoods, the economic and social reintegration of former combatants and their relationship to the community. The reduction of violence – as occurred in Medellín – improved living conditions in the popular neighbourhoods, a result welcomed by residents. Although the funding of the DDR-project was primarily directed on an individual basis to the ex-combatants, the municipality also provided funds – as suggested by SIDDR – for community development, including incentives for new economic activities. This comprehensive approach contributed to the positive overall results. Most of the preconditions to start a DDR-process pointed to by Fusato were fulfilled, such as a political agreement, a comprehensive approach and sufficient funds to begin the programme.

When comparing the paramilitary peace process in Medellín with the earlier initiatives with left wing militias and with the youth gangs it becomes clear the authorities avoided shortcomings of the previous experiences. Members of the left wing militias handed over their weapons, but when they worked in the security cooperative they received weapons without control, which led to new abuses. In the case of the co-existence pacts with the gangs, the process was so informal that it did not work in the long term. In both processes, with militias and gangs, the authorities failed to supply sufficient funds for education and job creation, while funding was more forthcoming in the paramilitary demobilisation. Moreover, the authorities maintained more control over the demobilised paramilitaries; those who failed to attend obligatory courses and psychological sessions forfeited their monthly allowance, a mechanism that motivated ex-combatants to continue their participation in the programme.

However, the long term remains especially problematic as long as some of these continue to participate in urban networks with criminal groups. Scholars have pointed to the risk that demobilised combatants may resort to criminal activities following DDR processes, but they tend to disregard the possibility of pre-existing networks of paramilitary groups and criminal organisations. When combatants are part of an isolated organisation under a central command a successful demobilisation may be relatively easy to reach. However, in the case of a network of combatants with alliances to other armed groups, a more comprehensive demobilisation strategy is required. Such a strategy should not only address the paramilitary group of combatants, but also its informal allies and its extended network of associated criminal groups.

Not only Medellín, but also other cities with a heavy presence of drug gangs could be confronted with such powerful networks if paramilitary groups emerge. In response, local authorities could extend a demobilisation process by both addressing the paramilitaries and dealing with the wider network of criminal groups. A partial approach addressing only the main armed group in the city makes the local peace process vulnerable. It may be that in the long term security may not improve if links between former paramilitaries and criminal organisations continue to exist.