

“Fests of Vests”: The Politics of Participation in Neoliberal Peacebuilding in Colombia

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Abstract: The Colombian Peace Agreement signed in 2016 was saluted internationally by scholars, policy makers and practitioners for encompassing the concept of territorial peace as a means of ensuring local participation in the strengthening of state institutions. Based on engaged research conducted in the Department of Cauca and Bogotá between 2017 and 2020, we critically analyse territorial peace, exploring its ideation, implementation, and subsequent decline in favour of security and stabilisation. We argue that the government’s peacebuilding rationale and mechanisms sought to reinforce the neoliberal state through a constrained participation model, which marginalised the progressive struggles of local communities living in former conflict affected areas. Without a radical breakdown of pre-existing power structures of exploitation and domination, community participation in peacebuilding runs the risk of legitimising state-led initiatives that ensure the political rule of capital, strengthen the bureaucracies of the centralised state, and create new violent disputes without resolving existing ones.

Resumen: El Acuerdo de Paz firmado en Colombia en el año 2016 fue celebrado por académicos, políticos y funcionarios de todo el mundo por su innovador concepto de *Paz territorial*, el cual proponía fomentar la participación social a escala local y simultáneamente fortalecer la institucionalidad estatal. Partiendo de una investigación activista desarrollada entre el Departamento del Cauca y Bogotá en los años 2017 a 2020, analizamos críticamente la *Paz territorial* desde su diseño, su pobre implementación y su declive en favor de una nueva estrategia basada en la seguridad y la

estabilización. Sostenemos que la racionalidad y los mecanismos gubernamentales para construir paz han reforzado el estado neoliberal a través de un modelo de participación restringido, que marginó las demandas progresivas de las comunidades que viven en zonas afectadas por el conflicto interno armado. Al no transformar ni superar relaciones de poder pre-existentes, que reproducen la opresión y la marginación, la participación comunitaria en la construcción de paz corre el riesgo de fortalecer las burocracias del estado centralista, legitimar sus estrategias tendientes a asegurar el predominio político del capitalismo, y crear nuevas disputas violentas sin antes resolver las existentes.

Keywords: peacebuilding, statebuilding, participation, neoliberalism, passive revolution, Colombia

Introduction

Disillusionment with liberal top-down peacebuilding has led scholars and practitioners to advocate a legitimacy-based approach to post-conflict statebuilding (Heathershaw 2008; Zamudio and Culebro 2013). International donors and peace agencies have promoted local ownership of peacebuilding processes by increasingly embracing the idea of bottom-up, locally owned and participatory post-conflict operations (Carl 2019; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). Despite the importance of the “local” as a site for grassroots empowerment and social struggles for autonomy (Eaton 2015), critical scholars have shown how participation has been mainstreamed and co-opted in neoliberal post-conflict (re)construction (Campbell 2011). In fact, locally “owned” peace operations have reproduced wartime neoliberal economic structures, resulting in greater exploitation of nature by agrarian and mining industries, weakening subsistence farming and rural livelihoods (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020; Grajales 2021), and moving communities away from progressive forms of politics (Gray 2010; Nash 2013).

In Colombia, the Peace Agreement¹ signed in 2016 between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC–EP) was perceived as a new opportunity to rebuild the state and create a legitimate social contract with the rural population. For the first time, the structural causes of violence in Colombia, including unequal access to land and the exclusion of broad sectors of the population from central decision-making, were explicitly recognised. The Agreement promised to build peace by implementing a comprehensive rural reform through Development Plans with a Territorial Focus (PDET), and a National Programme for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS). The intention was that PDET and PNIS should be formulated and implemented with the participation of rural inhabitants from areas affected by the armed conflict, an approach labelled as “territorial peace” by the architects of the Agreement (Jaramillo-Caro 2014).

In this article we draw on engaged research conducted in northern Cauca, where over 40% of the population are indigenous or Afro-Colombian. The area has been affected by conflict for decades, despite the local population engaging in ethnic and inter-cultural resistance to colonial oppression and, more recently, corporate land grabbing by mining and agribusiness (Dest 2020; Vélez-Torres 2014). Cauca remains the region most affected by post-war violence since the

signing of the Agreement. In this context, between 2017 and 2020, an interdisciplinary team, including human geographers, anthropologists and political scientists from Colombia and the United Kingdom, attended meetings between local populations and public authorities to discuss the implementation of the Agreement. In the *municipios*² of Buenos Aires, Miranda and Corinto, we held workshops and interviews with Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, mestizo peasants and ex-combatants to learn from their trajectories of struggle (Escobar-Tello et al. 2021). In addition, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with public officials from the outgoing administration of President Santos and the incoming government of President Duque.³ Documents, reports and legislative texts published by state institutions, which lay out government policies and describe the implementation of the Agreement, were also analysed.

We combine a top-down analysis of the Colombian government’s rationale, with a bottom-up account of the narratives of rural population affected by the internal armed conflict, making an important contribution to understandings of participation in territorial peace. We show how discourses and mechanisms of bottom-up peacebuilding succeeded in legitimising top-down decision-making in war-torn geographies. We argue that participation in peacebuilding created a fiction of democratic empowerment among rural communities, which deferred their demands for more radical and progressive change, and enabled local engagement in peace operations as a mechanism to expand extractivist frontiers.

Following this introduction, the rise of the participatory “local turn” in peacebuilding and statebuilding is discussed before analysing the trajectory of territorial peace in Colombia during three key phases. First, its disputed ideation during the peace negotiations (2012–2016); second, its partial, delayed and constrained implementation (2016–2018); and third, the rise of militarised peacebuilding shaped through discourses of security and stabilisation (2018–2020).

Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: The Rise of Participation and the Consolidation of the Neoliberal State

In the context of post-Cold War peace processes, international organisations and donors, led by the United Nations, promoted the principles of liberal democracy, human rights and the market economy as a way to build sustainable peace (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). Armed conflicts were viewed as the product of a weak, incomplete or fragmented state, hence building a state based on the rule of law was promoted as key to peacebuilding (Call and Wyeth 2008; Paris 2004; Paris and Sisk 2009), an approach that was pioneered in Latin America (Peceny and Stanley 2001). While the initial focus of peacebuilding was on political liberalisation, priorities shifted during the following decade towards statebuilding and institution building. As geographies of peace have highlighted, “peace is a precarious and ongoing spatial process that varies across time, place, and scale” (Koopman 2019:209). The statebuilding agenda in areas affected by violence or controlled by non-state armed groups has become popular, both with the international community and governments of fragile states themselves (Muggah 2013).

Some scholars, however, have advanced doubts about the actual complementarity of peacebuilding and statebuilding processes, and have pointed out that, historically, statebuilding has been a violent and conflict-ridden process (Newman 2013; Rocha Menocal 2011). Moreover, liberal statebuilding has been increasingly criticised for its technocratic, top-down character and accused of neglecting the specificity of local populations' cultures and history (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). In response, new themes, such as participation, local agency, institutional decentralisation and gender, have been incorporated into dominant international discourses of peacebuilding and are now considered essential to long-term conflict transformation (Lederach 1997, 2005; Paffenholz 2014). There is a growing awareness that (re)building states is not just about creating formal institutions but establishing a social contract between states and populations (Cox and Sisk 2017; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty 2015).

Local participation in peacebuilding has been embraced as a milestone for revitalising war-torn economies, promoting reconciliation, and enduring democratic stabilisation (Didier et al. 2013; Guasca et al. 2020). Such participation has been embedded in neoliberal governance frameworks, mainly in response to a critique of top-down modernisation models, the failure of the state, the external imposition of programmes, and the limitations of grand explanatory narratives (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004). The main aim of participatory approaches is to situate and include marginalised peoples at the centre of decision-making processes by listening to their voices and involving them at all stages: diagnosis, planning, implementation, intervention, and assessment. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programmes have adopted participatory approaches as ways of including certain groups, enhancing reconciliation, ensuring better communication, and managing the resentment of communities (Kilroy 2014).

Despite consensus on the importance of the local, there are substantial disagreements over its meaning and scope. Donais (2009) identified two radically different interpretations: a "liberal" approach, which adopts a largely predetermined and mainstream vision of peacebuilding; and a "communitarian" approach, where local actors are expected to design, manage, and implement their own peacebuilding process. More recently, Leonardsson and Rudd (2015:826) have drawn a distinction between "the local in peacebuilding as a means of effective peacebuilding" and a more radical approach that sees the local "as a means of emancipation". These differences have important implications for the way peacebuilders identify local actors with "peacebuilding potential", and how and why they decide who to support (Paffenholz 2014).

Critical scholars argue that the participatory approach and "local turn" in peacebuilding reflect a shift in the rhetoric and scale of conventional peacebuilding, rather than a change in the economic model and the historical power relations of oppression (Alves 2019; Hoddy and Gready 2020; Ochen 2017). International development agencies, public institutions and NGOs that embrace participatory models tend to reproduce power dynamics, which end up silencing communities through depoliticising their voices. Ironically, such participation may result in disciplining, co-option, and opportunism, as people's knowledge is

reduced and constrained by Eurocentric bureaucratic planning (Córdoba et al. 2014). Despite preaching participation, oppressive societal structures, such as patriarchy, tend to be retained (Goetz and Jenkins 2016; Ochen 2017). By obscuring and excluding crucial questions about the unequal distribution of wealth and power from ostensibly participatory processes, peacebuilding is safeguarding positions of power held by elites, thus maintaining neoliberal⁴ domination (Gray 2010; Piccolino 2019).

Participatory approaches can be claimed to align with the neoliberal decentralisation of the state, without redistributing political and economic power between regions and societal groups (Ballvé 2012), thus generating competition between communities (Alderman 2018). Participation has been criticised as a new orthodox neoliberal framework that conveniently aggregates moral imperatives in state-building, such as empowerment, democracy, governance, peace, and civil society inclusion (Henkel and Stirrat 2001; Leal 2007; Telleria 2021). By opening new paths for corporate actors to consolidate their power, participatory peacebuilding runs the risk of perpetuating post-war violence after the establishment of peace agreements (Paris 2004), reinforcing wartime structures of dispossession and marginalisation (Ahearne 2009; Wade 2008), and depoliticising development (Cornwall 2011; Kapoor 2005). Despite appearing democratic on the surface, participation can conceal structural inequities and marginalise subjects with progressive forms of politics, thus contributing to maintaining the status quo (Nash 2013). The concept of passive revolution, as suggested by Gramsci (1971:308–311), reflects this paradoxical situation whereby counter-state revolutions and social contest end up contributing to what they have set out to overcome. This critique does not imply that all policies, mechanisms, and the advocated social dynamics of participation in transitional contexts are insincere or corrupt but rather that participation is constrained by overarching power relations and economic interests, which in Colombia shape the hegemonic capitalist and racist state project (Dest 2020).

Participatory peacebuilding models have been embedded in Colombia's framework of territorial peace (Del Cairo et al. 2018). Velásquez et al. (2020) argue that the Colombian peacebuilding participation model was envisioned to replace the role of the state in sustaining rural development and pursuing structural actions of change that are required to confront the multiple legacies of war. Participation may have generated improbable dialogues (Lederach 2005) but has not transformed power hierarchies nor modified the direction of corporate agrarian change (Grajales 2020; Vélez-Torres and Lugo 2021). Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda (2020) have recently argued that “post-conflict” geographies in Colombia are characterised by the continued dispossession of local communities in favour of corporate agrarian extractivism. By pacifying the actors and geographies of war, the Colombian state and elites have aimed to engage rural communities in agrarian market economies, while gaining access to land-based resources that had previously been kept out of capitalist exploitation. Peacebuilding is thus being used to entrench capitalist industrialisation and expand corporate mining and agrarian frontiers.

We now turn to examine how participation in territorial planning in Colombia for peacebuilding has evolved over time, starting with the period immediately prior to the signing of the Agreement.

Imagined Territorial Peace: 2012–2016

The Colombian Peace Agreement was the culmination of a four-year negotiation process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, which aimed to put an end to a conflict that had lasted several decades. Both the Agreement and the process that preceded it were saluted by policy makers and academics as an example of a locally owned and progressive peace settlement. The Colombian negotiations were seen as a model for transformative social dialogue in war-torn geographies, achieving consensus through inclusive negotiation and participatory methods (Diaz et al. 2021; Mendes et al. 2020). The 310-page Agreement is inspired by a view of peacebuilding that is not just limited to ending armed confrontation but aims to transform the conflict and overcome all forms of violence (Bermúdez Liévano 2018). Alongside the cessation of hostilities and the process of laying down of arms, the Agreement addresses comprehensive rural reform, offers full political and citizen participation, suggests solutions to the illicit drug problem, supports victims, and ensures transitional justice (Gobierno de Colombia and FARC-EP 2016).

Intersectional and participatory elements are at the core of the Agreement (Diaz and Lombard 2019). Colombian feminist organisations, which for decades supported agendas of demilitarisation, equal land distribution, condemnation of sexual violence, and gendered differential approaches, managed to incorporate a unique gender and LGBT approach in the Agreement, making Colombia the first country in the world to explicitly embrace these perspectives in a peace agreement (Céspedes-Báez and Jaramillo-Ruiz 2018; González, 2017; Koopman 2020). The ethnic focus was a product of the sustained mobilisation of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian organisations, which created the Ethnic Commission for Peace that managed to include the explicit recognition of the rights to ancestral territories, ethnic self-determination, autonomy, and prior consultation and informed consent in the final Agreement (Braconnier Moreno 2018). The importance of ensuring the full and effective participation of ethnic authorities and organisations in the participatory planning and implementation of the Agreement, and the need to include ethnic and cultural perspectives when implementing the PDETs, were also indicated.⁵

The core concept at the heart of this inclusive and participatory vision in the Colombian peace process is “territorial peace”. Presented by Colombian policy makers as a commitment to changing the power asymmetry between the centre and the rural periphery, territorial peace offers greater transformative ambitions than previous statebuilding programmes (Borja 2017; Del Cairo et al. 2018). The concept of territorial peace was widely popularised by Sergio Jaramillo who, as Vice-Minister for Human Rights in the Ministry of Defence (2006–2009), National Security Adviser (2010–2012), and High Commissioner for Peace (2012–2016), was a key architect of the Colombian peace process. Jaramillo first mentioned

territorial peace in a presentation at Harvard University in 2014, where he argued that the focus on rights in the peace process needed to be complemented by a territorial focus:

I believe that the centralist model, where civil servants land as Martians among the communities in order to bring the state, has exhausted its possibilities ... What we need is a new alliance between the state and communities in order to build together institutions in the territory. (Jaramillo-Caro 2014, translated from Spanish)

Jaramillo's version of territorial peace drew heavily on international discourses of the “local turn” and neoliberal decentralisation, in which participation and the effort to rebuild and reform state institutions were tightly connected. Although the neoliberal nature of the state itself was not questioned, Jaramillo recognised that the Colombian state needed to change its capacity for exerting effective governance across the nation, and believed that the peace process provided momentum for enacting institutional reform and restoring relationships of legitimacy and trust between citizens and public institutions (Rocha Menocal 2011). The PDETs were the key instrument introduced to promote participatory planning in war-torn areas, whereas the PNIS focused on developing specific policies crucial for peace-making in what were considered narco-territories.

While the progressive potential of territorial peace captured the attention of international organisations and scholars, and participation was portrayed as a successful example of bottom-up peacebuilding (Del Cairo et al. 2018), we claim that the changes incorporated into the PDET and PNIS did not destabilise the neoliberal hegemonic model of the state. Rather, the territorial peace approach retained the assumption that it is necessary to modernise the state, embrace capitalist economic development, and engage with the private sector in order to assure lasting peace (Rettberg 2019). Consequently, the political space for community voices in peace-making operations was limited to the micro-scale and the peripheries, simulating the democratisation of statebuilding while keeping the neoliberal status quo intact. In this context, the concept of passive revolution, as used by Nash (2013) and Dest (2020), illuminates how economic and political peacetime transitions can be captured by capitalist relationships of property, power and production.

A series of tensions and contradictions around the extent of the transformation envisaged in the Agreement, and the definition of territorial peace itself, became visible during early stages of the public phase of negotiation. Government delegates, and even President Santos himself, argued that a key aim of the Agreement was to end the armed conflict without compromising fundamental aspects of national life (Santos 2012). This position contrasted with that of Iván Márquez, head of the FARC-EP delegation who, in his first public speech, stated that, in order to achieve peace in Colombia, it was necessary to resolve a series of structural problems, including reforming the neoliberal economic model, the structure of land ownership, and the security doctrine adopted by the armed forces (Márquez 2012). The government delegation flatly rejected these suggestions and responded by calling on the guerrillas to take these ideas to the arena of democratic politics once they had converted to an unarmed political force (De la Calle

2012). Santos' (2012) view was that if FARC-EP wanted to propose changes to the economic model, they should discuss them in Congress if they managed to be elected. These declarations may have been a tactical way of reassuring the Colombian public and warding off criticism from right-wing actors, however they revealed important differences regarding the meaning of participation, deliberation, and democracy.

In anticipation of the regulatory framework in which territorial peace was to be implemented, new legislation exemplified how the rhetoric of institutional building could act to support corporate expansion. In December 2015, the Territorial Renewal Agency (ART) was created to work alongside the National Land Agency (ANT) and the National Rural Development Agency (ADR). The ART was the office given the primary responsibility for coordinating the PDET planning process but was not allocated a budget to implement projects, which had to come from other state institutions. This restructuring of institutions regulating access to land fragmented the state landscape into three distinct entities, resulting in highly bureaucratic procedures, disconnected actions, and blurred responsibilities. Landless communities, often with high levels of illiteracy, are forced to navigate complex legal encounters to access peacebuilding programmes and basic but differentiated rights (Dest 2020; Hougaard and Vélez-Torres 2020). This institutional redesign should be interpreted, we argue, as a deliberate attempt to de-politicise community ambitions for agrarian reform, drowning them in highly complex and bureaucratic procedures.

A month after the creation of ART, the government signed Law 1776 to establish Zones of Interest for Rural, Economic and Social Development (ZIDRES). These zones reproduce narratives of human development, equity, poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability, appearing to advance more socially inclusive access to rural territories. Core elements of the ZIDRES include: facilitating access to land and land ownership for corporate actors; fostering the agrarian marketisation of peripheries; and expanding the agro-industrial frontier into "post-war" territories. Although celebrated by agro-industrialists from the oil palm sector (Castro 2018), the ZIDRES were critiqued for being instrumental to the neoliberal agrarian model by offering legal stability to agribusinesses over and above protecting the social and environmental rights of local peasants (Méndez 2017). This state-led agro-industrialisation via the ZIDRES, together with the responsibility given to technocrats from ART, demonstrates how territorial peace was designed to both expand agrarian capitalism and legitimise neoliberal statebuilding through participation. State bureaucracies facilitated the neoliberal domination of peacetime agrarian change, thereby marginalising community struggles for radical agrarian transformations through the technocratisation of their claims.

Between 2014 and 2016, a series of events contributed to a political turn towards a more conservative interpretation of territorial peace. In 2014, President Santos lost the first round of votes to the right-wing candidate Oscar Zuluaga, who had openly opposed the peace process and the Agreement. Although Santos managed to win the election, supported by a broad democratic pro-peace coalition, his popular support was clearly fading, the implications of which we now turn to.

Territorial Peace in Practice: 2016–2018

In 2016, with an agreement already reached with the FARC-EP, Santos decided to seek a citizen endorsement through a plebiscite. This move proved to be counter-productive when a 50.2% majority voted “No” and the government was forced to renegotiate central elements of the Agreement. The Santos administration’s inability to reach an agreement with other guerrilla groups, such as the ELN, also contributed to creating a sense of an incomplete and fragile peace process, which undermined consensus for the pro-peace coalition. While President Santos lost political endorsement and popular support, the right-wing opposition, led by former President Uribe, grew. Uribe and his party, the Democratic Centre, focused their political discourse on opposing the peace process, accusing President Santos of surrendering to “terrorists”.

Despite these political changes, invitations for local participation in PDETs proliferated during this period, following a funnel structure based on administrative divisions. Inhabitants from dispersed rural areas were asked to elect representatives to participate in the *vereda* meetings; from these, a reduced number of community members were chosen to attend the discussions in the *municipio*, and even fewer people were invited to the subregional meetings. Public officials interviewed in Bogotá indicated they were satisfied with the dialogues generated at this time during PDETs:

Some dialogues were very constructive. People either opened up or together built a shared vision. We consider these more important than previous dialogues, which were about “I need this” or “I have this but need X, Y or Z”. In other words, it is good to hear about the problems and initiatives in the territory but it is even better to open these spaces for dialogue in order to rebuild trust in society that was destroyed by the conflict. (ART officer, Bogotá, July 2019)

Participation in peacebuilding generated the expected improbable dialogues (cf. Lederach 2005). Communities, however, perceived these dialogues as co-opted strategies without any intention of or clear mechanism for discussing or transforming the capitalist, centralist and racist power structures inherent in Colombian statebuilding (cf. Dest 2020). The methodological approach to participation in the PDETs reveals a strategy designed to exclude certain actors, themes, and conflictive trajectories of place-making. Government-led participation was determined by administrative divisions, overlooking the socio-ecological connectedness of the region. The government’s rationale reproduced a modernist conceptualisation of territory as “neatly fragmentable” (Olarte-Olarte 2019:31), thereby denying its essentially fluid and interdependent socio-ecological nature. Furthermore, the participation model marginalised the politically contested, socially disputed and culturally diverse nature of the Cauca. In this way, the pretension of hegemonising the territory as an entity under the control of the state was installed, nullifying the entangled and overlapping territories produced by local communities (cf. Halvorsen 2019).

Following considerable lobbying by national ethnic organisations in Bogotá, local indigenous Cabildos, Afro-Colombian Community Councils and peasant Associations were invited to participate in meetings in the *municipios*. Although representatives from the *veredas* pushed for infrastructural development for each

fragmented area, the ethnic and peasant organisations demanded structural changes at a regional scale concerning access to land ownership and guarantees of land formalisation. Often, these demands were justified by the shared trajectory of corporate-led spatial exclusion and the need to achieve inter-ethnic agreements that ensure greater enforceability vis-à-vis the state (Escobar-Tello et al. 2021). However, by not having participated in the early discussions at the *veredas*, the organisations' ability to influence the *Pactos Municipales* was limited.

This situation calls into question the ability of social organisations to influence the government's top-down decision making. Especially recently created social organisations, such as those of victims or ex-combatants, find it particularly difficult to actively participate. Former guerrillas, for example, participated as individuals during the formulation of the PDETs, not as members of the *Comunes* party or a demobilised front. The logic behind this decision, as explained by an ART official, was that social organisations represented "particular ideologies" that could generate an undesired impact on the process. This clearly shows how ART reproduced liberal understandings of participation based on the assumption that individuals could be separated or de-linked from their political identities and collective histories of mobilisation. Moreover, it reveals an attempt to rid the territories targeted for peace-making from the intertwined trajectories of social and political conflict and harmonisation.

The marginal impact of governmental peace-making programmes has consequently been contrasted with the communities' peace imagination, which is seen as a more effective and powerful way to challenge enduring violence (Diaz et al. 2021). A leader from the Miranda explained her frustration regarding visits by representatives of different institutions as follows:

This peace has been nothing but a fest of vests! They say, "Come here to talk ... Now go there and talk to another one." ... And in the end, we can see and confirm that there is nothing to be gained. There is nothing to be gained from the Agreement as such. (Indigenous leader, Miranda, February 2018)

The "fest of vests" (*la feria de los chalecos*) refers to the vest-wearing culture in Colombia whereby representatives of various governmental institutions and international agencies wear different coloured vests. These vests provide a sense of security for the officials wearing them and, by inscribing a powerful symbolic difference between "normal" people and in-vest professionals, officials and technical assistants, vests embed social distinction to those who are foreign to the communities and territories. Local social organisations, such as the indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant guards, have re-appropriated the symbolic power of vests, using them to express territorial belonging and to assert their legitimacy as actors with "equal" authority when negotiating with the state. In this context, the above testimony describes participants' sense of overwhelming state bureaucracy, requests for participation, and consequent saturation from meetings, which have not led to any real transformation.

Participation generated a false illusion of the potential for change and resulted in widespread frustration among community members. The model of participation employed, and the power dynamics involved, reveal how decisions were

taken before such meetings at which rural inhabitants were invited to uncritically legitimise a model of agrarian change that had been predefined. Rather than breaking down centralised and hierarchical power relations with the state, communities and social organisations from territories previously dominated by FARC-EP found themselves forced to embrace any project or investment opportunity stemming from Bogotá.

On 11 September 2018, a participatory PDET session took place in Buenos Aires, attended by over 50 community representatives. The objective was to discuss the social ordering of rural property and land use. During the meeting, an ART officer raised his voice instructing the participants, “You need to revise all the initiatives registered so far. No proposal should be formulated with verbs such as acquire, buy, title, expand or build. The verbs to be used instead are help, accompany, manage, support or promote”. A similar message was given to more than 500 community delegates and local institutions in Popayán on 10 December 2018. At this meeting, ART officials insisted on there being no institutional commitment beyond “support” or “management” in the Action Plan for Regional Transformation (PATR), which was designed to build on the PDETs to generate a ten-year regional transformation plan.

As admitted by an ART official during an informal conversation, although corporate actors consistently refused to attend the PDET meetings, they pressured government institutions in Bogotá to limit community ambitions regarding land access and the recognition of ethnic autonomies. Consequently, the agribusiness interests were protected by the government through slick technicalities. For example, changing the wording from “land purchase” to “support in purchasing land” reveals a strategy to belittle communities’ demands for agrarian reform. Correspondingly, there was a move away from the material sphere of the peace commitments (i.e. land) to the bureaucratic sphere of peace-making (i.e. officials overseeing the purchase of land). Consequently, not only were progressive community demands removed from the peacebuilding devices, discourses, and norms but the hegemony of the state and the privileged interests of agrarian corporate capital were strengthened. In the process, little progress was made towards achieving peace. One year after the PATR was discussed in Popayán, a leader from northern Cauca illustrated their lack of power in the participation process:

All the plans they have brought us are like a recipe that we have no choice but to follow. First the PDET and now the local development plan ... The truth is that the government arrives with everything defined and gives us very little room for manoeuvre. (Indigenous leader, Corinto, December 2019)

Even local government officials, who had previously held great hope for the scope of territorial peace, critiqued the triviality of the proposals included in the PDETs:

In theory, the PDETs were designed to transform the territory but they managed to look more like a grocery list ... If there is no planning instrument that actually addresses the root causes [of conflict], we can state that many of these PDET initiatives are not even going to be applied ... It is like a good musical instrument that will sound good if it is in the hands of a good musician; if not, it will remain an ornament. (Local government official, Buenos Aires, August 2019)

Most of what has been achieved so far in implementing the Agreement relates to creating a bureaucracy for peace-making (Vélez-Torres 2019). Communities perceive participatory sessions as part of a theatrical practice of public officials coming from Bogotá or representing international agencies, without addressing the root-causes of the war. Aimed at legitimising discredited state institutions and locally rooting peace-making operations, participatory peacebuilding has turned conflict-affected areas into territories overcrowded with new state bureaucracies. From the perspective of conflict victims, despite the novel presence of government officials in peripheral regions of Colombia, social participation did not manage to transform centralist, racist and capitalist statebuilding, displayed rurally through a technocratic “fest of vests”. Rather than agents of “real” and positive change, government officials became the visible agents of exogenous extractivist models that contradict communities’ alternative visions of anti-capitalist and anti-racist claims for life, autonomy and territory.

Territorial Peace through Security and Stabilisation: 2018–2020

In 2018, Iván Duque, the presidential candidate supported by Uribe, won the elections against a divided pro-peace front. The election of Duque further destabilised the peace-making process and contributed to closing the remaining avenues for progressive change. Shortly after his election, Duque launched a new policy “Peace with Legality” (Republic of Colombia 2018a), which ostensibly restated the government’s commitment to peace but shifted the focus to security and stabilisation (Piccolino and Ruetten-Orihuela 2021). Anxiety and uncertainty grew among social organisations, rural communities and local institutions regarding the fate of the Agreement. Duque’s agenda for territorial peace was reduced to multipurpose cadastral measuring, land formalisation and militarisation (Republic of Colombia 2018a). Key social claims, such as accessing rural land and controlling the agricultural frontier, were bypassed.

President Duque’s government has thus moved away from the moderate transformative elements of the Agreement towards an instrumental approach focused on stabilisation. A key mechanism of this new approach is the introduction of Strategic Zones of Integrated Intervention (*Zonas Estratégicas de Intervención Integral—ZEII*), legally framed in Law 1941/2018 and Decree 2278/2019 as an institutional strengthening device that serves to guarantee national security. The ZEIs, now renamed “Future Zones” (*Zonas Futuro*), do not replace or contradict the PDETs but rather make them dependent on first accomplishing security. This interdependence is not only ideological and political but also economic, as finance for peace becomes finance for militarised securitisation and stabilisation. Peace with legality, the political imagination that sustains the Future Zones, has adopted a familiar governmental path, mirroring previous stabilisation policies implemented under Uribe and Santos, which were labelled “consolidation”: first, militarily secure the territories, defeating criminals, terrorists and narco-terrorists, and then guarantee the rule of law. This governmental trajectory also ensures

stability for corporate investment in conflict-affected areas (Republic of Colombia 2018b:34–35, Vélez-Torres 2014).

Although FARC-EP demobilisation has been completed, the Duque administration has maintained a high level of investment in the military and has expanded military presence in targeted areas. In January 2018, Duque launched the Joint Hercules Task Force for Stabilization and Consolidation, mobilising 9,800 personnel (6,000 army, 2,000 navy, 1,000 national police and 500 air force).⁶ By 2019, Colombia’s military expenses represented around 11% of its total government expenditures and 3.2% of GDP, by far the highest proportion in Latin America (SIPRI 2020). Military operations involving disproportionate and unnecessary use of force have been reported; according to the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR 2020), in 2019 there were at least 15 cases of alleged extrajudicial killings, ten of which were linked to anti-narcotic actions conducted by military forces and four by the national police. Controversially, security policies have focused on the war on drugs (Vélez-Torres and Lugo 2021), while violence against social leaders and other targeted assassinations show no sign of decreasing: 173 assassinations of social leaders were recorded in 2020, 29% more than in 2019 (Congreso de la República de Colombia 2021). Indepaz reports even higher figures,⁷ with 310 social leaders assassinated during 2020, as well as 64 ex-combatants.

The Cauca Region has been one of the most affected by these forms of violence; while the overall murder rate decreased in Colombia during 2020, it increased by 4% in the PDET subregion Alto Patía—Norte del Cauca, where it is about three-and-a-half times higher than the national average (Congreso de la República de Colombia 2021). Again, the government has responded as if these security problems could be addressed through an almost exclusively military response. In August 2019, Duque ordered the deployment of 1,350 military personnel in Cauca in order to guarantee the security of communities and contain combats between FARC dissident groups, ELN, EPL and paramilitary groups. Following the massacre of five indigenous people in northern Cauca in October 2019, 2,500 more personnel were deployed, with the objectives of ensuring territorial control, and dismantling illegal economies and armed groups.⁸

The post-Agreement situation is highly complex in northern Cauca. There has been a reactivation of armed confrontation between illegal armed groups, combined with ongoing distrust towards state institutions. A peasant explained his view on local (in)security as follows:

It is true that here we must talk about security because every week we have one or two deaths. It is a slaughter that does not stop ... The government is focused on national security but there is no social investment. We are not talking about more military because if there are no alternatives for the people, military responses will not work. It could have been very simple because if the government invested in crops to replace illicit crops then we would have a chance. (Corinto, December 2019)

From the perspective of this peasant, security cannot be achieved through militarisation, rather the solution resides in overcoming structural violence, achieving substitution of illegal crops, and ensuring sufficient and appropriate rural

investment. Similarly, local leaders stated that rather than guaranteeing security, military presence in their territories generates more violence and confusion. Armed paramilitary and dissident groups that remain active in the region have threatened many community leaders, labelling them as military collaborators. A local leader who has been threatened on several occasions explained how:

We didn't want the military base to be there any longer and we fought for it to be moved away. That request was taken as an offence by the military but we told them frankly that weapons do not guarantee what they call security and they are not taking care of us. (Corinto, August 2019)

The rise of militarist intervention has gone hand in hand with the neglect of rural reform and other peace-making programmes (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2020). A report prepared by opposition members of Congress shows that for the period 2017–2020, 68% of allocations to peace-making projects targeted non-PDET areas (Congreso de la República de Colombia 2021). Controversially, ADR and ANT showed low budget execution rates in 2020: 44% and 66%, respectively. This situation not only illustrates a structural delay in the implementation of the Agreement, running the risk of generating new waves of violence, but exposes a clear violation of the law as the budget meant for peace-making in conflict-affected areas has been reallocated to other regions and new militarist priorities. The problem of financing the PDETs and other aspects of the Agreement were often mentioned by local government officials, who were afraid that they might be asked to implement them out of their, often meagre, budgets. As one official from the Department of Cauca explained, “Do you know what worries us? What worries us is that the money that has been talked about is the same money that has already reached the territories” (Popayan, August 2019).

A dramatic institutional shift in the implementation of the Agreement occurred in November 2019, just before changes in local governments took place in January 2020. ART announced that local governments would take full responsibility for implementing the PDETs and PNIS. Since centralisation of political power had already been achieved via the top-down definition of their terms and scope, this “local turn” appears more like an evasion of responsibilities by the central state than an effort to strengthen local democracy and bottom-up political decision-making. As one incoming mayor said, when asked about the new involvement of *municipios* in the PDETs and PNIS, “They make us carry a dead body” (Corinto, January 2020). Given that most *municipios* prioritised for the implementation of the Agreement have the fewest resources, any attempt to delegate responsibility for the PDET and PNIS to them without transferring significant financial resources suggests an attempt to circumvent the Agreement.

The increasing lack of fulfilment of the “developmental” expectations generated by the Agreement is weakening the already fragile credibility of the state. In 2019, a survey of 12,000 people from 73 PDET *municipios* showed widespread dissatisfaction with the implementation of the peace process, with over 60% dissatisfied in Alto Patia—Norte del Cauca (PRIO and UNDP 2020). A local government official told us how:

People are disappointed not only with Duque’s government but with the government [Santos] that signed the Agreement ... We worked hard for the PDETs and great expectations were generated. It was very ambitious, they painted us heaven, paradise ... but nothing from the PDETs has been implemented. Today you speak with any community representative and the people no longer believe in the government ... We lost credibility. (Corinto, August 2019)

Despite underfunding, the process of participation in territorial planning has been nominally maintained. The mechanisms operate but involve local communities and organisations in the government’s agenda without addressing their interests and unfulfilled agreements. A representative of coca peasants in the PNIS explained the complex negotiations that are generated between social organisations and the government around the definition of agendas and routes for participation:

They [the government] called us but the surprise is that the meeting’s agenda has nothing to do with the PNIS. It was completely and exclusively about what Duque’s government wants to impose. We told them that we were not going to participate under those conditions, so we held a parallel meeting [with other social organisations] and created an alternative agenda. This new proposal was shared with the government but, unbelievably, when they invited us again they did not include anything that we proposed. It was the same government agenda again. One wonders what do they want? We feel like we are at a crossroads and no longer know whether to participate or not. We feel like we are being used [by the government] ... And the risk is that if you make yourself available to participate, you could be found accountable and guilty [by the armed groups] in the *vereda*. (Cali, October 2020)

Participation has remained a functional mechanism for legitimising Duque’s government, while generating a fiction of empowerment within communities. Activating and calling for participation allows the government to simulate the democratisation of power and the state. From the perspective of local officials, it complies with the expectation of bringing the state (and peace) to the territories, allegedly correcting past state-abandonment and taking responsibility for the continuation of violence, which communities believe is due to the physical absence of the state (cf. McFee 2020). Meanwhile, ethnic and culturally diverse conceptions of peace and territory are marginalised from the political imagination of statebuilding, reproducing power through domination (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). Via three massive national strikes—held in March 2019, October 2020, and April to June 2021—communities have challenged the growing militarisation, the incomplete and fragmented implementation of the Peace Agreement, the socially harming economic policies of Duque’s administration, and the top-down direction of decision-making. Renewed rural-urban entanglements in the social struggles have generated deadly responses by military and paramilitary actors aimed at countering this resistance.

Conclusions

By critically addressing the role of participation in territorial peace in Colombia, this article shows how, although the state actors, agendas and interests differ over time, territorial peace has been consistently framed by an attempt to promote a

neoliberal peacebuilding model. In the early years (2012–2016), territorial peace aimed to boost participation in order to build a strong and legitimate institutional framework that would bond communities from territories historically affected by war to the peace-making project (Sierra and Antón 2018). The approach, however, was based on the assumption that the modern liberal state could resolve its contradictions with civil society through cooperation and improbable dialogue (Lederach 2005). While territorial peace was seen by scholars, practitioners and international donors as contributing to a locally “owned” peacebuilding process, which could change power asymmetry between the centre and the rural periphery, in reality it was underpinned by a neoliberal imagination and power relations were never challenged. Despite the emphasis on participation, voices from local organisations were not listened to and statebuilding interests and practices were imposed top-down by the national government.

The period 2016–2018 was characterised by the slow, fragmented and incomplete implementation of the Agreement (Olarte-Olarte 2019; Vélez-Torres 2019). Although there were consistent attempts to include participation, the government dominated the territorial peace agenda, constraining themes and actors, and directing participation towards legitimising the state and promoting neoliberal agendas. Participants were subordinated by depoliticising their identity and denying their capacity to change the status quo (Dest 2020; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). The most recent period 2018–2020, framed by the slogan “Peace with Legality”, shifted the focus to ensuring security and stabilisation through militarist interventions, renegeing on commitments to land access for poor peasants and voluntary substitution of illegal crops, thus removing any attempts to include policies aimed at enhancing social welfare. Territorial peacebuilding in Colombia illustrates how the “local turn” can be used to stabilise fragile states and promote neoliberal agendas in frontier territories that have been kept at the margins of capitalist accumulation for many years, often through violent repression (Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2020). As structural transformations of power, property and control are not achieved through constrained participation in peace-making, new and old violence risk (re-)emerging (Belloni and Moro 2019; Moe and Stepputat 2018; Velásquez et al. 2020; Wade 2008).

Wartime marginalisation in Colombia was sustained by neo-colonial power based on racial and ethnic segregation (Alves 2019). Despite the promises of a “local turn” that would create a new social contract with the rural population, we have shown how participation in peacebuilding has unfolded as a strategy that is blind to the local cultural and political histories of identity and struggle. When structures of power and mechanisms of dispossession are not challenged, peacebuilding runs the risk of being captured in wartime by rebelocracies and in peacetime by bureaucracies of capital accumulation (cf. Arjona 2016). Although participating in the PDETs and PNIS conveys a feeling of community agency, the hegemonic power structure in which decisions are made is based on dominant interests that consolidate the neoliberal model.

We thus contend that neoliberal peacebuilding in Colombia has roots in: the state-led marketisation of agricultural programmes, such as the PNIS for the substitution of coca crops (Vélez-Torres and Lugo 2021); the legalisation of wartime

land-grabs which, based on the alliance of rural elites and right-wing paramilitaries, have facilitated the expansion of agroindustrial flex-crops in the Pacific and Amazon regions (Potter 2020); the fragmentation and transfer of responsibilities from the state to NGOs, aid organisations, and international agencies regarding the provision of basic services, such as health and education, and the design of policies, programmes and plans; and the administrative and fiscal decentralisation of the implementation of the Peace Accord, which for two decades has not contributed to democratisation of political and economic power or diminished socio-economic inequities between regions (Ballvé 2012; Guarderas 2007; Restrepo 2004).

Participation in neoliberal peacebuilding in Colombia is shown to favour a liberal over a communitarian or emancipatory “local turn”, simulating the democratisation of political power, while reproducing oppressive peacetime state relationships over marginalised territories and communities. By promoting a model of participation that simulates democratic deliberation but does not transform oppressive economic and political power relations, the Colombian state folklorises the political agency of communities while ensuring the bureaucratisation and technocratisation of their radical struggles. Progressive demands—such as political self-determination, access to land, autonomy and anti-extractivism—have been marginalised from the peacebuilding arena by excluding alternative visions of peacebuilding and security. Consequently, Colombian peacebuilding turns out, once again, to be a top-down, centralist and exclusionary state-crafting exercise.

By drawing on the testimonies of state officials and local actors, this paper shows how, when bottom-up peacebuilding is co-opted to achieve a neoliberal state order, agro-capitalism flourishes and new cycles of dispossession and violence emerge (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda 2020; Campbell 2011; Grajales 2021). Without a radical breakdown of pre-existing power structures of exploitation and domination, participation in peace making runs four core risks: legitimising state-led initiatives to ensure the political rule of capital; strengthening peace-making bureaucracies; creating new violent disputes without resolving existing ones; and blaming local populations for not fully understanding and embracing the “neoliberal opportunity” to participate in the capitalist state. In order to rescue peacebuilding from neoliberal policies and epistemologies, it is not sufficient to recognise inequity and centralisation as core conflict-inducing relationships (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Richmond 2018). Market-led interests in peace-making need to be challenged to emancipate statebuilding from capitalist power relations and embrace histories of struggle and radical agencies. Only then will it be possible to create social and political scenarios for progressive, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-extractivist everyday politics of peace.

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Data Availability Statement

The most relevant data that support the findings of this study are available at <http://pazal-tocauca.net/>. Other data could be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ Hereafter referred to as the Agreement.

² A *municipio* refers to the third level subdivision of administration of government of the state, which is headed by a mayor elected through democratic process, and controls an independent budget. *Veredas* and *corregimientos* are first level and second level subdivisions of administration, but do not have elected public officials. *Departamentos* are at the fourth level, equal to provinces, with the governor democratically elected who then assembles his/her administration.

³ All interviews and discussions took place in Spanish but quotes included in this article have been translated into English.

⁴ We consider neoliberalism to be a flexible model which, since the late 1980s, symbiotically assemblages state-led and trans-governmental mechanisms to endorse market hegemonies through the commoditisation of nature and the decentralisation of fiscal and administrative state architectures (Ban 2016; Peck 2013).

⁵ The position maintained by some of the most important ethnic organisations in the Agreement can be accessed here <http://www.afrodescolombia.org/capitulo-etnico/> and here <https://www.onic.org.co/comunicados-onic/3056-capitulo-etnico-en-el-acuerdo-final-de-paz> (last accessed 6 March 2021).

⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2018/01/28/noticia-colombianota-17es-colombia-activa-fuerza-tarea-conjunta-hercules-combatir-narcotrafico.html> (last accessed 3 December 2020).

⁷ Retrieved from <http://www.indepaz.org.co/lideres/> (last accessed 15 December 2020).

⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/militarizan-el-cauca-ivan-duque-envia-2500-miembros-de-la-la-fuerza-de-despliegue-rapido-fudra-4/638391> (last accessed 3 December 2020).

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