

A new start, an open end. The reintegration of individual demobilized combatants in Colombia

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This article is the result of a study carried out by IKV Pax Christi, a government programme that aims to demobilize combatants of the guerrilla and paramilitary and reintegrate them into Colombian society. The lessons learned during this research, regarding the failures of the government reintegration programme, have been of great use to the indigenous communities in northern Cauca. As a result, these communities have decided to start their own reintegration programme at the community level with an indigenous approach. This article summarizes the difficulties they encountered, and the lessons they learned.

Keywords: child soldiers, Colombia, former combatants, individual demobilization, reconciliation, reintegration

Five decades of violence in Colombia

A bloody internal armed conflict has ravaged Colombia for over five decades. In the 1990s, the conflict between the guerrilla groups Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the paramilitary faction United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), and the national security troops came to a head. The guerrilla groups involve unarmed citizens in their conflict – sometimes under duress. This phenomenon is intensified as the war is entangled with the drugs trade, kidnapping, and extortion. The guerrillas and paramilitaries then use the proceeds to finance the conflict. This violence takes the

lives of 20 000–30 000 Colombians every single year. Almost two million citizens have fled their homes in the past ten years.

In 2004, president Uribe Velez initiated negotiations with the top AUC leaders. The majority of the paramilitary leaders resolved to demobilize. For over 30 000 men there was no other option than to take part in this collective demobilization process. The combatants, against whom no formal legal charges have been brought, are granted amnesty for their political crimes.¹ This is certified by CODA, the Operating Committee for Giving Up Arms. Once these former combatants have been given certification, there is nothing to prevent them from joining the government reintegration programme. They generally tend to return to their family or village. For 18 months they are entitled to an allowance and training. For the 3000 paramilitaries against whom legal charges have been brought, the government has introduced a legal framework: ‘The Justice and Peace Law²’. Under this framework, the suspects may be sentenced to imprisonment for a maximum of 8 years.

Analogous to the collective process is an individual demobilization process, involving combatants from the FARC, AUC, and ELN, who have decided to leave the armed groups and report to the authorities of their own free will. Since 2002, more than 10 000 people have deserted the armed struggle, a third of them minors. The deserters are passed on to the Ministry of Defence. Their records and

background are checked in this phase. They are also encouraged to provide the ministry with information for which, in some cases, they receive payment. If no legal charges have been brought against them they can, after a few weeks, join the reintegration programme of the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. Once on this two-year programme, they receive bed and board (or an allowance), training, psychosocial care and healthcare access.

The study

The scale and scope of the collective and individual demobilization processes became clear in late 2004. [*Editor's note: The research for this paper was completed before Anaya's article was published. See this issue.*] There was little information at the time about how the reintegration process was actually working, since the government only released general data. Media attention focused mainly on the alleged rearming of former combatants. Civil society and the international community saw the reintegration process as a matter for the government, and they did not wish to get their fingers burned by becoming involved. At the same time, it was perfectly clear that, were the reintegration process to fail, the consequences for Colombia would be catastrophic. IKV Pax Christi decided to start an independent investigation that could shed light on how the reintegration process was working and might make some contribution towards improving the situation.

At the same time, the partner organization ACIN (Association of Indigenous Authorities in Northern Cauca) informed IKV Pax Christi that more and more deserters are reporting to the traditional indigenous authorities. These, often very young, deserters live in hiding in their communities. The ACIN asked IKV Pax Christi for support to develop their own reintegration programme for this particular group of young former combatants. Although we

were willing to support this hazardous project, we did not have the answers to their many questions about the government programme. Our investigation, therefore, could also contribute towards the development of the indigenous reintegration project.

In December 2004, IKV Pax Christi assembled a Colombian research team, consisting of a coordinator and three researchers, qualified sociologists or political scientists. IKV Pax Christi formulated the objectives and guidelines of the one-year research in the so-called 'Terms of Reference'. After one year, it was decided that this period was to be extended for an additional six months, until May 2006. The central goal of the study was to establish the extent to which the individual demobilization process resulted in the former combatants being fully integrated back into Colombian society. The research touched upon the following themes:

- the profile of the individual demobilized combatants;
- the performance of the government programme for individual demobilized combatants;
- the experiences of former combatants from the armed factions;
- the psychosocial and physical situation of individual demobilized combatants;
- the training and choice of study of individual demobilized combatants;
- the relationships of individual demobilized combatants;
- the involvement of individual demobilized combatants in society and community;
- the way individual demobilized combatants spend their leisure time;
- the dialogue and reconciliation between former combatants and victims.

The study concentrated on Bogotá, because at the time of the survey the majority of individual demobilized combatants lived in collective hostels in the capital³. The

researchers put together a permanent group of 90 respondents, who were a good reflection of the participants taking part in the government programme. Eleven people of this group of respondents had already completed the programme. Eleven people had already left the programme, or did so while the investigation was taking place. Furthermore, the team contacted yet another 30 individual demobilized combatants on an ad hoc basis, and were in touch with 16 people with professional involvement in the government programme. So, the total number of permanent respondents was 90, while another 46 respondents collaborated on an ad hoc basis. Following an initial interview, the respondents' details were recorded on a filing card. The researchers then conducted a minimum of five lengthy personal interviews with each respondent. There were also many informal meetings in between.

Problems and challenges encountered

Numerous obstacles had to be overcome, both prior to and during the survey. In the first place, permission had to be obtained from the Ministry of the Interior and Justice for the research team to gain access to the hostels. The government feared that the investigation would be used to support unilateral criticism of the government. Permission was finally given after numerous talks between IKV Pax Christi, the research team and officials. The hostel managers had then to be approached personally. Some of these managers – who had a contract with the ministry – were not interested in being 'hassled by troublemakers'. In the end, 11 hostels allowed the research team to conduct their investigations.

The research team was subsequently confronted with the problem that law forbade questioning under-aged participants in the government programme. For this reason,

involving former child soldiers as respondents in the investigation served no purpose. In order to have the topic of child soldiers still included in the investigation, it was decided to involve respondents who joined the programme as minors, but who were, at the time of the investigation, 18 years old.

The researchers hoped to broach many sensitive topics, but the desired depth of interview could only be reached if the respondents had confidence in the objectives of the study. The researchers explained the research objectives to the respondents several times, and told them about both IKV Pax Christi and themselves. Each respondent was allocated at least one regular researcher in order to help create a bond of confidence. The discussions were preferably held in more informal places, i.e. parks, cafes or cultural institutions.

Important in the building of this confidence, the chairman of IKV Pax Christi, the Bishop of Rotterdam Van Luijn, visited a number of the hostels during this time. He was greeted with great enthusiasm, by the respondents, and they became convinced that IKV Pax Christi was a serious international peace organization with a long history of working in the field.

Possibly the most important challenge was the continuity of the investigation. The respondents took part voluntarily in the investigation and received nothing in return. Their motivation was generally that they wanted to contribute towards improving the government programme. Others simply wanted to express their feelings about their situation. After a while, some of the respondents quite simply lost their motivation to take part. Furthermore, the government programme was in a state of flux. Also, in December 2005, the individual demobilized combatants relocated to independent housing, so that it became much more difficult to maintain contact with the respondents.

Due to the additional effort required to maintain contact, the research team invested a lot of time in counselling the respondents with their social, medical and financial problems. They also provided support in cases of family problems. IKV Pax Christi made modest funds available to cover some of the costs of the participants. This approach seemed to work. More and more respondents approached the research team and participated enthusiastically in the investigation. A disadvantage of this approach was that the researchers became too involved in the ups and downs of their respondents' daily lives. A final obstacle was the interviews themselves. The research team had the impression that what the respondents had to say did not always reflect the whole truth. Sometimes their memories let them down. Some respondents refused to talk about certain things out of a sense of shame, or because they were punishable offences. However, the most important reason behind their reticence was that lying and making up stories had become second nature to them during their time with the illegal armed groups. This had helped them survive for years in an atmosphere of mutual distrust. Indeed, if you infringe internal regulations, then your fellow combatants are your fear. The internal court martial metes out tough punishments. A number of respondents had even witnessed summary executions. The problem was overcome as far as possible by returning time and again to the same topics during the discussions, and by pointing out inconsistencies to the respondents. The subjects of guilt and reconciliation turned out to be very difficult to talk about. In the end these subjects were covered in some depth with only 19 of the respondents.

Results

On the basis of the interviews, the research group has drawn up a profile of the respon-

dents. A good majority of respondents (65%) joined the illegal armed faction as minors. Almost half the respondents considered they were misled during the recruitment process. There were extravagant promises about salary, sexual adventures and protection from abuse perpetrated by family members. Clever use was also made of the fact that young people find uniforms and weapons an attractive proposition. After a short stay in barracks, the recruit is no longer able to leave. One fifth of the respondents stated they had been coerced into joining. A good quarter joined because of family problems, usually to avenge the death of a family member. Only 7% of the respondents joined the armed faction for ideological reasons.

Particularly significant is that in the first interview none of the respondents said they had joined the faction because of the situation on the home front. Even more significant is that, with the exception of two people, all respondents initially denied having experienced any form of domestic violence at all. However, with time the discussions revealed that a good 70% of the respondents had, in their youth, been victims of mental or physical abuse, or both⁴. However, they did not view their experience as abuse, because to a certain extent they saw domestic violence as normal. Escaping from the home situation appears to play an important role in recruitment even though the respondents themselves would not necessarily see this as being the case.

The motives for leaving the armed faction are, on the hand, unequivocal. It is generally a well-considered decision, and they are very much aware of the risks. During their combatant years, almost all the guerrilla combatants witnessed the execution of a fellow combatant for desertion. The majority of respondents left the armed group as a young adult. This is the age at which the respondents start to have

serious doubts about a number of matters, which until then they had assumed were matter-of-course. They were often fed up with the hard and tedious life of a soldier, yet they were powerless to change their situation. They felt they had lost control over their lives. A majority of the respondents (53%) indicated they fled because they were disillusioned. Their disappointment was often related to the false promises that were made when they joined. The wish to be reunited with their family, or even to start a family themselves, also played a role (11%). A group of 14% were forced to flee because the internal court martial had pronounced sentence on them.

Scars on body and soul

The study showed that all respondents could, to a greater or lesser extent, be considered to be mentally or physically damaged, or both. This is attributable not only to their war experiences, but also to their youth. The families the respondents came from were highly unstable. In rural Colombia, fleeting affairs tend to be the norm rather than the exception. Fathers play hardly any role in their children's upbringing. However, parenting tasks may be temporarily carried out by step-fathers, grandparents and aunts. Seventy per cent of the respondents have in some way been involved in domestic violence or sexual abuse. Moreover, their stories lead one to believe that from a very young age they were expected to carry out (extremely) heavy physical work. Once a member of an armed faction, the respondents endure even more severe hardships. They go on long marches with heavy kit. Most respondents have neck and back problems and injured joints. Similarly, malnourishment and poor hygiene also take a very heavy toll on undeveloped bodies. This manifests itself for example in bowel and internal organ problems. In addition, some of the respondents' symptoms are the result

of the poor medical care available in the armed groups. Common illnesses that are not diagnosed at all, or too late, include malaria and chronic eye infections. Moreover, half the respondents had been wounded in skirmishes and military confrontations. They suffer gunshot wounds (32%), injuries caused by landmines (10%) and wounds from shell splinters (10%).

There are many different reasons for the respondents' mental damage. It can be attributed to the traumatic experiences during armed confrontations, feelings of guilt as a result of atrocities against citizens, the deep mutual mistrust between the combatants, and the use of alcohol and drugs. The latter problem increases if the former combatants come into contact in Bogotá with very cheap and fast-working narcotics.

Additionally, combatants have many painful experiences in terms of relationships. In principle, the guerrillas only allow short-term sexual contact between combatants. Lovers are usually separated. Many *guerrilleras* (female combatants) are also forced to undergo abortions. Sometimes they are sent back to their family to give birth, and are then expected to return to the armed faction without their child.

Throughout their entire lives, respondents have had to adjust to the most extreme of circumstances. Their strategies for survival have been effective, but have come at a price. The respondents manifest a number of behavioural characteristics that hamper their integration in civil society. Most respondents are fearful, suspicious, and uncommunicative. Approximately half the respondents are also very short-tempered. They are no longer used to running their own lives, or to feeling responsible for their own actions. They often do not stick to their appointments, and shirk their obligations. This means they often have conflicts with friends, relatives, and employers.

In addition to behavioural disorders, the respondents also display psychiatric symptoms and disorders. Nearly all of them suffer from insomnia. This has become a structural symptom, particularly among the women. Approximately half the respondents have a form of depression, which is acute in 15% of them. Almost half the respondents have problems with minor paranoia, which, for a small number, has developed into a serious illness. They hardly ever go outside.

When they join the government programme, the respondents are given a superficial medical examination, which does not reveal their latent mental and physical symptoms. The former combatants seldom recognize their own symptoms, and therefore do not ask for help. They often look for other causes for their symptoms. For example, some respondents say they are bedevilled or cursed. Many do not take the basic psychosocial support in the programme seriously. The frequently inexperienced psychologists are often unable to breach the passive attitude of the respondents. Furthermore, the sessions are far too short to provide any serious personal counselling.

The situation changes drastically the moment the respondents leave the government programme. Their relatively protected life with a guaranteed income, housing, and training comes to a definite end. The toughness of their daily existence seems to overwhelm many, as a result of which latent medical disorders come to the fore. At this stage, half the respondents admit to having mental and physical symptoms, and to being in need of medical care. However, the cost of psychiatric care in Colombia is not covered by the normal medical expenses insurance. The treatment of physical symptoms (except sexually transmitted diseases) is generally covered. However, the problem here is diagnosis. Many forms of medical examination – for example blood tests – are prohibitively expensive.

The honeymoon period

The respondents enter the government programme with enthusiasm. After all, it was they themselves who decided to desert. Furthermore, they are very happy when, after a number of weeks,⁵ they can work towards building up a new existence. The respondents want to start immediately. Over 95% of them are from the countryside, and are used to hard physical work and military discipline. But the programme offers little opportunity to channel this enthusiasm. A lack of training and work experience means they are unable to find work in the formal sector, which is why they are obliged to follow a training course. Apart from that, few demands are placed on them. For many the programme is a bit like a *'luna de miel'* or honeymoon period.

The respondents only fill half their time in study. In their leisure time, the respondents tend to become more and more apathetic. An expression they often use to describe their boredom is *'rasking ball'*, meaning a person who stands around with their hands in their pockets. The respondents are all too easily distracted by life in the city. As a result of the culture shock they experience in Bogotá, they tend to be insecure, anxious and somewhat disoriented in the first months. However, in the long run, almost 80% of the respondents become fascinated by what modern life has to offer, and by urban pleasures such as Internet, mobile phones, cheap brothels, gambling halls and binge drinking. Many of the respondents, who in the early stages were so motivated, are no longer able to prepare for their future while taking part in the government programme.

True reintegration of the demobilized combatants only starts once they have left the programme. The respondents are, at this stage, barely able to cope with the toughness of their daily lives. In the beginning they

live on the starting capital provided by the programme, the purpose of which is to help them build up a life of their own. However, these small businesses are seldom successful⁶. Those who purchased a house make a more sustainable investment, but they also get into financial difficulties very soon. The participants gain little or no work experience during the programme, and their training hardly ever meets the needs and opportunities on the labour market. This is why respondents have considerable difficulty finding work on a labour market that is very tight for people with little education.

Respondents see crime as an attractive alternative to unemployment and money worries. Their prior experiences give them excellent qualifications for the illegal labour market. However, levels of recidivism among former combatants are hard to establish, and the official governmental data and the figures of the (inter)national organizations vary a lot. However, it is to be expected that recidivism will grow considerably, once the majority of demobilized combatants have completed the programme in 2008. The results of our investigations indicate this tendency. Of the seven respondents who had lived for over a year without government support in 2006, three have, in the meantime, received a custodial sentence.

Dialogue and reconciliation with family and community

Members of the guerrilla group may, in principle, have no contact with their family while inside the group. The guerrilla group is their new family. This is less strict among the paramilitaries, but in practice contact is difficult because it may put their family in danger. This privation seems to be a source of considerable suffering among all respondents. When joining the government programme they want nothing more than to renew contact. In a good

80% of cases contact is actually achieved. The first meeting is moving and emotional. However, in the long run it appears that it is difficult to make up for lost time. Arguments and conflicts often stand in the way of forging close family ties. One of the reasons is that respondents often fail to come to terms with things that have happened in the family. The demobilized combatants' tendency to be short-tempered and aggressive also, often, plays a part. Therefore, the majority of respondents have (telephone) contact with their family only a few times a year.

Similarly, social contact with neighbours and other citizens is also difficult. As a result of their poor social skills, the respondents find it difficult to make contact with people. They hardly ever participate in local clubs, ecclesiastical societies, political organizations, or sports clubs. They also often feel, rightly or wrongly, rejected and stigmatized by society. For this reason, they tend to keep quiet about their past, and to avoid contact beyond the group of other former combatants. Unfortunately, the government programme does not include a component of social reintegration.⁷

While still participating in the programme, the respondents hardly talk about their military past, and even less about the victims their military actions produced. Any attempt to broach the subject meets with resistance. The respondents restrict themselves to saying that they did what they did because their commanders ordered them to do so. They see their departure from the armed faction as a symbolic payment of their debt to society.⁸ Nearly all respondents stated that they are not plagued by feelings of guilt or remorse. However, what does emerge from the discussions is that some respondents are troubled by nightmares and anxiety, which can be attributed to (subconscious) feelings of guilt. Some respondents see themselves as

victims rather than as perpetrators. Those respondents who have completed the government programme do, generally speaking, exhibit feelings of guilt. While in the programme, they hardly meet with regular citizens and mainly socialize with former combatants. After having finished the programme it is more difficult to avoid direct contact with other people, and even with victims of violence. This contact seems to often bring about a gradual realization of what happened in the past. Parenthood also means they start to see their acts of war in a different perspective.

It was possible to talk about the theme of reconciliation with only 19 respondents. These respondents do consider that the victims are entitled to some form of redress, but they do not see themselves as having to play a part in it. Only one respondent was prepared to participate in some form of symbolic reconciliation. It is actually quite striking that the group does not even consider the idea. They are, however, not alone. The government programme does not incorporate any element of reconciliation, and nor does civil society. Social organizations think that former combatants, in contrast to the victims, receive too much support. An oft-repeated complaint is that *'it is more worthwhile to be a perpetrator than a victim'*. When asked, the respondents tend to agree that too little government support is given to victims.

ACIN and the indigenous deserters

IKV Pax Christi has, since 2003, been active in the north of the department of Cauca, and supports here, among other things, the national organization *Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca* (ACIN).⁹ The ACIN (founded in 1994) is a regional association of traditional authorities and represents 110 000 indigenous peoples, the majority of

them living in reservations. As a *'special public organization'* the ACIN is authorized to run the region in line with their own customs and traditions, to speak out, to draft new legislation, and to manage the funds transferred to them by the state. The indigenous population in northern Cauca has acquired an international reputation with its local peace initiatives, which they lump together as *'resistencia civil'*. These initiatives involve peaceful resistance by citizens against the violence of the armed groups, prevention, and emergency programmes to respond to humanitarian crises.

In Cauca, about 140 young deserters live in hiding in the reservations, the majority of whom are from the ranks of the FARC. Over half of them are girls and young women. Having fled, the deserters reported to one of the *cabildos* (the indigenous authority), and asked for help. Both the deserters, and the community receiving them, risk reprisals by the guerrillas. Moreover, the deserters can be arrested at any time by the army or the police. After all, they do not have the status of a demobilized combatant, and are therefore still officially seen as members of an illegal armed faction.

The indigenous deserters from northern Cauca do not want to participate in the government programme. They do not feel represented by the national government, and manifest a deeply held distrust towards state institutions and programmes. The idea of having to live for the rest of their lives in an urban environment is very unattractive for these deserters, as their identity is clearly defined by their indigenous roots, their rural background, and the local community of their youth. They won't even consider living in an indigenous community in another department. They go into hiding, and live – sometimes for many years – with family members. They are also forced to move

regularly on to a different residence and host family, and they obviously do not go to school. The *cabildos*, confronted with relatively high numbers of deserters, have asked the ACIN for help.

In early 2006, the board of the ACIN was, in principle, prepared to start its own two-year reintegration programme. The general feeling is that indigenous people who have become involved in crime or the war are entitled to return to their community as fully-fledged members. The deserters are seen as indigenous people who have lost their ethnic values. This is why the ACIN has decided to give the project the working title: *'homecoming'* or *'return home'*. The idea is that they will be able to close the military phase of their life, and then focus on a new phase, embedded within their communities. Furthermore, there is a hope that the project will have a preventive effect, and will combat the recruitment of indigenous young people by armed groups.

The settlement of the legal status of the deserters has been a very delicate subject from the start. The records and background have to be checked by the Ministry of Defence, and during this procedure the deserters are encouraged to provide the authorities with strategic information. The local commanders of the FARC have made it absolutely clear from the beginning that they would not respect the programme if their former combatants had to go through this procedure. This implied that the ACIN had to start negotiations with the national government regarding the legal procedure for adult former combatants. The ACIN decided to start the programme with the minors. Child soldiers are considered victims of the conflict and, independent of their records, can obtain their legal status as a demobilized combatant without interference from the Ministry of Defence. The ACIN started the programme for minors in January

2007, while volunteers were supporting the adults until their legal status was solved.

Furthermore, support within the communities had to be found to implement the programme.

There was a lot of resistance within the communities. The *cabildos* that do not have much to do with deserters are much less willing to invest in the programme. The population is afraid that the project will be a threat to security. Young people also complain. They consider it unfair for former combatants to receive support for a two-year period. They comment that *'It's obviously more beneficial to be involved in the war than to stay on the straight and narrow'*. The project team worked for 18 months on the acceptance aspect of the project in the communities. The work involved lectures and public discussions that also cover the content of the project. It was May 2007 before these basic conditions had been met, and the project with the minor former combatants could actually start.

The research and its contributions to the ACIN reintegration project

There was, in early 2007, still no clear-cut idea of the likely shape or form the project might take. It was not possible in Colombia to learn from indigenous precedents, because there were none. Also, very little was known about how well the government programme worked. The research conducted by IKV Pax Christi offered help in that respect. Workshops, lectures and conferences shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the government project, and discussions on the likely content of this particular project have begun. In addition, the members of the project team participated in specific training courses, and IKV Pax Christi fostered the necessary contacts for the

indispensable international support for the project.

The government programme is obliged to receive large numbers of demobilized combatants in a short space of time. This means the programme has to be standardized. Following the first meeting with the researchers, the ACIN decided that the indigenous project must meet the wide diversity of the participants. In addition to a basic programme, they will also follow their own individual programme, which will include education, skills training for the labour market and psychosocial counselling. This decision goes to show just how extensive and labour intensive the programme will be. A spokesman from the ACIN human rights department observed that *'People were initially extremely idealistic, but the first meetings with the research group were particularly useful for bringing them back down to earth.'*

The ACIN decided to draw up profiles of all the participants giving details of their backgrounds. Questions were asked about family circumstances, the motives behind joining and leaving the armed faction, education and hopes for the future. The project team put considerable time and effort into developing a personal bond with the former combatants and their family members. The profile was put together only after several meetings, which diminishes the risk of inaccuracies and disparities.

The picture that emerges from the profiles exhibits many similarities to the profiles of the respondents in the study conducted by IKV-Pax Christi. Particularly striking is the high number of young women who participate in the ACIN project. Their hopes for the future are clearly different from those of their male counterparts. A decision was taken to actively involve the women's section of the ACIN in the project. In addition, the profiles would seem to indicate that the

situation at home is one of the reasons for their recruitment. This insight means that domestic violence is something that can finally be discussed within the ACIN.

Another important research conclusion for the ACIN is that those participating in the government programme have far too few obligations, and too much leisure time. The lack of physical activities means that, among other things, the participants lose motivation. The ACIN does not want its programme to be seen as a *'honeymoon period'*. It was initially decided that the participants were to be accommodated in collective farms, where they can be cared for 24 hours a day. Yet, after a while this idea turned out to be somewhat too dangerous. There is always a chance that the armed groups will retaliate, so for that reason alone it is preferable for the participants to be spread out over the communities. The participants can finally lodge with family members. The programme takes up the best part of their day, and consists of study, physical work, internships, group meetings, individual sessions, community work and sport.

The local indigenous authorities combat the feeling that there no obligation on the part of respondents within the programme by telling potential participants that they are still not fully-fledged members of the community until they have completed the 'resocialization' programme. Participating in the two-year programme means that they will be under the direct supervision of the *cabildos*, and that they have to sign a formal agreement, including their obligations and rules to which they must submit. If they do not meet the expectations of the *cabildos*, family and community, then they must withdraw from the programme. This means that they forfeit their opportunity to return to the community. A number of participants have protested against this decision. They

experience being under supervision and the many obligations placed upon them as an alternative punishment, and feel that their freedom is being eroded. However, they have no choice but to accept the decision.

On the basis of the investigation, the ACIN is convinced that good psychosocial counselling of the former combatants is indispensable. As a result, they opt for a two-track approach. On the one hand, the programme team has been trained by the Colombian youth care for under-age participants in technical psychological skills. Also, participants will be counselled directly by psychologists from the general mental healthcare sector. On the other side, the programme also includes an important component of traditional indigenous mental health care. Local religious leaders will counsel participants and the traditional rituals should lead to psychological cleansing. Traditional values, such as respect for 'mother earth', peaceful coexistence, and the *cosmovision*,¹⁰ will also be taught. From the outset, family members are involved in the psychological and social support to the participants. This is essential because the participants live with family members for the duration of the programme, and grief from the past often weighs heavily on their relationships. These tensions become manifest especially in cases of child abuse, or when parents feel resentment because of the recruitment of their child.

The educational programme of the reintegration project is also to have a much more personal approach. When they embark on the programme, each participant will, with guidance, draw up a personal *life project*. This means that, in order to achieve the future life plans of their project, participants will have to make certain choices at an early stage about study, apprenticeship and future occupation. The range of studies on offer will

be aligned to the rural background of the former combatants. The programme will also include much agricultural work. The *cabildo* involved will make land available that will give the participants minimum resources to forge an existence on the reservation.

The government programme has no room for any form of reconciliation between the former combatants and the community. In contrast, the ACIN considers that reconciliation must be given priority because it is necessary to create support for the project within the communities. Furthermore, reconciliation is essential because the former combatants live in small, closed communities, where contact with victims of violence is inevitable. Reconciliation with the communities is done through symbolic collective reconciliation gatherings. There is also an element of symbolic reparation, whereby the participants are obliged to do work for the community, such as preventive information meetings at primary schools.

The open ending of the indigenous reintegration programme

There was, from the outset, considerable doubt about the feasibility of this risky project. However, permission was obtained from the national authorities to start the programme with minors. The legal status of the adult former combatants has not been solved yet, although the contacts with the state authorities give rise to optimism. Nevertheless, the security risks are still very high. The guerrilla forces are closely watching how the programme develops. Rearmed former paramilitary soldiers have entered the largest town of the region and have threatened former *guerrilleros* through pamphlets. This implies that the freedom of movement of the participants of the programme is still quite limited.

Important advances have been made in regard to technical and financial support for the programme. In 2007, several international organizations decided to support the programme in specific areas such as education, prevention and psychological support. Also, the Colombian youth care department has decided to get involved and has designed a specialized programme for the support of minors. The official state programme for the reintegration of former combatants showed great interest in supporting the programme economically and technically, and the ACIN is considering the conditions of such support.

The ACIN has been able to apply some important lessons of the IKV Pax Christi study to their own programme. First of all, they opted for a tailor-made programme, including intensive individual projects during the two years of its duration. The former child soldiers receive special educational and social attention that meets their future (rural) expectations. The working groups of indigenous women of the ACIN give female participants special attention. From the outset, ACIN tried to avoid giving the programme a free character. Although initially this met with some resistance from the participants in the programme, they all agreed to participate and to adhere to the conditions set by the programme. This includes community work, reconciliation acts, and an active participation in educational and social activities. The fact that the ACIN makes such high demands on the participants of the programme has positively influenced its acceptance within the communities. As far as prevention from recruitment for indigenous youngsters is concerned, the ACIN took the – almost historical – decision to start a programme to fight family violence in the communities.

¹ Political crimes include being a member of the illegal armed factions, and being involved in related crimes. These do not include crimes against humanity, murder, kidnap, the drugs trade, genocide and terrorism.

² Ley de Justicia y Paz, Ley 975, 2005.

³ There were 70 of these hostels in the capital, and three in Medellín.

⁴ This percentage corresponds with other investigations into child abuse in rural Colombia.

⁵ The deserted combatants are, after their first contact with the local authorities, passed on for a number of weeks to the Ministry of Defence. This is the phase when it is established whether they qualify for the legal status of demobilized combatant and can join the reintegration programme.

⁶ After two years the government programme participants receive about € 3,500. Of the 25 small businesses and projects that respondents started up, only four still existed in August 2006.

⁷ In its own particular reintegration programme, the municipality of Medellín has, in a number of different ways, encouraged contact between former combatants and neighbours.

⁸ CODA certification is then physical proof of this.

⁹ Association of Indigenous Cabildos (traditional local authorities) of northern Cauca.

¹⁰ The Cosmovision of the Nasa communities encloses their integral vision of the human community, the world and the universe as a whole. The most important aspects of this vision are: respect for human life and nature, harmony between people and nature, and collectivity. This last characteristic implies that the Nasa recognize the traditional collective possessions (such as collective land titles) and carry out collective community works (minga). The cosmovision is also expressed in the Nasa language and traditional rituals.

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