

Growing Sustainable Peace: Starting at the Roots?

A case study on the influence of grassroots leadership and top-down infrastructure interventions on local peacebuilding processes in Medellín

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Summary

"One type of peace is that of the bourgeoisie, another one is that of the people and the two will never be reconcilable. Peace for the bourgeoisie is that there can be external investment, that one can move freely on the highways, that you don't get kidnapped [...]. But peace for us is peace with a surname; a peace with social justice [...] not just the silencing of the guns of the FARC [...]. I mean, how can there be peace without decent housing? How can there be peace without public facilities [...]? How can there be peace without the mitigation of risks? How can there be peace when people are dying from hunger? How can there be peace if public transport is more expensive than lunch? How can there be peace if the people are insecure because the 'combos' control the area? What type of peace are we actually talking about?!"

(Interview community leader Comuna 8)

After various failed peace negotiations during the past half-century, the final peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla movement would have been one of the most symbolic achievements of bringing two warring parties together, would it not have been repudiated by the Colombian people during the plebiscite on the 2nd of October. Nevertheless, the Government and the FARC are only two of the many actors that have been responsible for all types of rights-violations and violence in the country through recent decades. In order to promote sustainable peace, countless other issues need to be addressed, ranging from the existence of illegal armed groups, on-going drug-trafficking, forced displacement of people and high levels of inequality. This study focussed specifically on the meaning of the word 'peace' in the urban context; a context that has not been given much attention during the peace negotiations in Havana. Starting from the idea that peacebuilding processes can only be effective and sustainable if they are inclusive and focused on meeting the needs of the affected population, it was analysed how both *high-* and *low-level leadership* could affect peace at the local level.

In the case of Medellín, Colombia's second largest city, the long history of violence and drug-trafficking has left its scars. Comuna 8, the research location of this case-study, is one of the most marginalized districts of Medellín in which some of these scars are clearly visible. Besides the lack of basic services and adequate infrastructure, it has been plagued by violent disputes over territorial control ever since the 1980s. Furthermore, the geographically higher parts of the district are overwhelmingly populated by displaced populations, that often live in precarious circumstances. Over the last four years, however, the territory witnessed some noticeable changes: the construction of so-called 'megaprojects' has changed the landscape of the district and the area is not considered to be as dangerous as before. These *megaprojects*, regarded here as the outcomes of *high-level leadership* (Lederach, 1997), aim at upgrading the physical environment through large-scale interventions in some of the most marginalized parts of the city. While it has been shown that the construction of megaprojects, such as library parks, public transportation facilities and tourist attractions, can lead to a reduction of direct violence –especially homicides– (Cerdá *et al.*, 2012) the sustainability of the type of 'peace' that is created through these types of interventions remains questionable.

In order to understand the meaning of *sustainable peace* and how it can be promoted in this particular context, this study focussed on the ways through which local organizations and inhabitants, especially community leaders, have tried and still try to support it through everyday activities. While the role of civil society –*mid-level leadership*– has been found to be important in supporting the sustainability of peacebuilding practices (Lederach, 1997; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Peake *et al.*, 2004; Pearce, 1997), the potential role of *grassroots leadership* to contribute to sustainable peace has remained under-researched (Peake *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, it is considered that *grassroots* or *low-level leaders* (Lederach, 1997) can occupy a special position in society, as they are not necessarily bound to fixed rules and can be relatively free in their actions –especially when they work on a voluntary basis (Reychler and Stellamans, 2005). Existing research on peacebuilding leadership, however, has usually focussed on personal characteristics of 'peacebuilding leaders', but has insufficiently explicated the tools that those leaders might use to promote peace. Therefore, this study focused on the *actions* and *strategies* that are used by *grassroots leaders* –either intentionally or not– to support local peacebuilding processes.

Simultaneously, this bottom-up approach to peace was complemented with an analysis of the possible influences of the (top-down) megaprojects on peace at this local level, as well as their possible influences on the peacebuilding capacity of grassroots leaders. Combining the foregoing ideas, the research question was stated as follows:

How can the actions and strategies of grassroots leaders, as well as high-level leadership –expressed in the elaboration of large-scale urban interventions– influence and contribute to sustainable peace in Comuna 8, Medellín?

The objective of this thesis was to contribute to the 'local peacebuilding' debate and its practice. It explored the under-researched role of grassroots leaders in local peacebuilding processes, while also taking into account the interaction with high-level leadership –expressed in the form of large-scale urban interventions– and aimed to better understand how the two types of leadership can affect peace at the local level. Throughout the research, it is proposed that peacebuilding practices can only be sustainable if they are focussed on meeting the needs of the affected population. Consequently, it is deemed essential to first understand how peace is perceived and experienced by those who have suffered considerably from violent conflict, such as the displaced populations of Comuna 8.