



10 YEARS EMBRACING DIALOGUE: LESSONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY FOR PEACEBUILDING

This Policy Brief collects the reflection and analysis on how civil society can contribute to peacebuilding processes, based on the experience of the transnational organisation Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD) in Colombia over the last 10 years.

This briefing has been prepared by **Laura Acosta Hankin**, member of Rodeemos el Diálogo and PhD candidate in Security, Conflict and Human Rights at the University of Bristol, UK. The author participated in the events related to the 10 year anniversary of ReD including the conference “10 Years Embracing Dialogue: Lessons from Civil Society for Peacebuilding” held at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, Colombia on 3 March 2023 in which the themes covered in this brief were discussed.

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Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD) is a transnational civil society network that supports a comprehensive and inclusive peace through strengthening the culture of dialogue.

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On 3 March 2023, civil society organisation Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD), together with Chevening Alumni Colombia, the Institute for Political Studies and International Relations (IEPRI) of the National University, Colombia, and the University of Winchester's Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace, United Kingdom (UK), held a conference to unpick the lessons for peacebuilding based on ReD's 10 years of working for peace and reconciliation mainly with sectors of unorganised civil society. The conference was an opportunity to reflect on the role of civil society across three themes: culture of dialogue; implementation of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla; and the Total Peace policy of the current administration (see Annex 1).

ReD has evolved as a peacebuilding initiative since its emergence in September 2012, soon after the Colombian government announced the beginning of formal peace negotiations with the FARC-EP. Almost ten years to the day of the 10-year conference, on 13 March 2013, an inaugural conference was organised at the London School of Economics,

UK, to show support for the unfolding negotiations and to better understand the peace talks and lessons from other contexts. Since then, ReD has grown into a transnational organisation focused on supporting a negotiated solution to Colombia's armed conflict, including the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC-EP.

The conference and four internal workshops held to mark these ten years have been opportunities to reflect on civil society's role. This policy brief considers its agency across three themes: culture of dialogue, implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, and 'Total Peace'. It champions civil society's patience, humility, curiosity, creativity, and collective action as key elements that the Colombian state and the international community must strengthen for civil society to become a key player in the current stage of peacebuilding. This could help overcome three obstacles: enduring distrust, moral superiority, and wishful thinking.

CULTURE OF DIALOGUE

While it has become fashionable to talk about dialogue, spaces such as the regional and national dialogues held to feed into the National Development Plan of the Petro Administration, and the current negotiation efforts with armed groups framed as peace dialogues, are something different. They may be for negotiation, mediation, strategic communication, or consultation, but these are not the same as dialogue. Rather than changing opinions or reaching a consensus, dialogue is a space to be with the other, to be open, to listen. Dialogue has the power to humanise by connecting different groups and generating understanding between them. Dialogue is a transformative experience that leads to something new within ourselves and others. It offers a means of examining how ideas are formed and how assumptions and prejudices limit ways of thinking.

ReD members have discovered the power of dialogue in peacebuilding. Participants in the 300 peace breakfasts held in affluent Chapinero, Bogotá, other cities in Colombia and abroad, and online, and those in non-workshops in schools, universities, private companies, and community settings, have experienced dialogue as an opportunity to question their own thoughts about peace and to think together with others on everyday actions that contribute to peacebuilding. In these spaces, FARC-EP members, victims, young people,

former combatants of other illegal and legal armed groups, Afro-Colombian and indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, artists, entrepreneurs, academics, activists, state and international community bureaucrats, journalists, and teachers have met and nurtured their curiosity. Being in the same space and being able to look the 'other' directly in the eyes is challenging, but it is also humanising and healing.

This is possible through the concerted effort and dedication to build a safe, respectful space of solidarity for sharing and listening to those with diverse views and experiences. Creating safe spaces for dialogue requires patience to build trust, and creativity to adapt to the fragile, sensitive contexts within which they take place. This feeling of safety allows participants to show humility and be open to empathetic listening. Curiosity and practice are the key for success; regularly, ReD members tested and critically reflected on facilitation methodologies, and trained facilitators in a robust yet flexible methodology.

Embracing Jean Paul Lederach's idea of serendipity - the wisdom of recognising and then moving with the dynamic flow of the unexpected - ReD has organically developed and distilled the concept of the culture of dialogue into six principles: *honesty* to share thoughts and feelings authentically; *respect* to listen to others; *solidarity* to feel with others; *generosity* to give the

best; *self-criticism* to nurture humility; and *co-responsibility* to acknowledge our shared role in society. These six principles form the cornerstone of a culture of dialogue, providing a moral compass and framing every peacebuilding activity. They also go beyond this, guiding conflict transformation at the personal level that can then spiral into families and friends. From there it can grow into the larger societal transformations that we seek.

A culture of dialogue is a pillar for peace through promoting new ways of being and interacting with others. This is where civil society organisations such as ReD have a role to play. The peace breakfasts and other dialogue-oriented spaces have allowed for exchange across generations, disciplines, social class, political divides and between those from different territories. They have nurtured the peacebuilding efforts led by ReD in Bogotá, Valle del Cauca and Nariño, in Colombia, and in London, in the UK, the empowerment and development of young people as leaders for peace, and the creation of new communities and networks to help stop the cycle of violence.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2016 PEACE AGREEMENT

A critical opportunity in Colombia's journey to peace has been the 2016 Peace Agreement. According to the [Kroc Institute](#) for International Peace Studies, the first five years following the signing of a peace agreement serve as a foundation for the subsequent five years of significant transformation. After almost seven years, Colombia has made considerable progress but serious challenges remain.

Civil society's role has primarily centred around victims and the call for justice, truth, and structural change in the country. During the negotiations, national forums allowed input into the discussions at the negotiation table. The direct participation of victims helped ensure the inclusion of Point 5 of the agreement dedicated to victims and human rights. Massive street demonstrations following the defeated 2016 peace referendum had a key place in safeguarding the essence of the negotiated approach.

ReD has been an active participant in the activation and mobilisation of unorganised civil society. The voluntary nature of member participation in ReD, and creating a shared and non-violent narrative that allows for concrete impactful actions, have been fundamental to protect the peace agreement and its implementation. A key strand has been peace education, with ReD promoting

an emotional understanding rather than a plain 'Yes' in the aforementioned referendum. The success of the 'No' vote demonstrated the value and need for greater peace education. This focus has extended ReD ['non-workshops'](#) in schools across Colombia. The aim of these non-workshops is to open the space to critically reflect on the 2016 peace agreement, its implementation, and conflict resolution more generally. Point 2 of the agreement emphasises citizen participation and ReD has learnt that the 'non-workshops' and dialogues are not just about education, but also empowerment and helping communities participate in shaping the future of their country.

A key component of the 2016 agreement is the Comprehensive Peace System comprising the Truth Commission, Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit for the Search for the Disappeared. Understanding these three institutions and ensuring their capacity to carry out their work has been critical for civil society. When the Colombian government cut the Truth Commission's budget allocation, ReD used its influence internationally with the British Parliament to exert pressure and help prevent cuts. It has also worked closely in support of the Truth Commission with youth projects, listening to victims in exile, and the ongoing education workshops focused on the legacy of the final report. ReD has published short ['snapshots'](#) to help the public understand the work of these institutions and share developments. These 'snapshots' have

also extended to the reincorporation process. ReD has opened up spaces to listen to and understand the experiences of former FARC-EP members. These actions highlight the power in listening to those ignored, improving understanding of developments and being creative in finding a way out of violence.

Bridging public and private spaces, organised and unorganised civilians, individual and collective efforts, allowed ReD to play a fundamental role in creating and sustaining new communities such as ['Generation V+'](#) and [the Community of Educational Practices](#), key pillars of today's national peacebuilding infrastructures.

Some sectors have questioned the ongoing commitment to the FARC-EP agreement, but the 2016 peace agreement remains a priority for the Petro Administration, and must continue to be so for the next administrations. Its implementation serves as the foundation for peace efforts with other armed groups. The funding and political will now exist, but it is critical to find an appropriate way forward that works within the current and evolving realities across the different regions. Civil society's determination for the peace agreement's implementation has been fundamental and today holds the key for its success.

TOTAL PEACE

President Gustavo Petro's ambitious 'Total Peace' policy not only includes negotiations with the traditional armed groups in the conflict, but also other so-called high-impact organised criminal organisations. It also aims to bring about the structural changes needed within the country. The challenges are considerable. The legal and illegal economies as driving forces behind the conflict are complex international webs. Armed actors continue to believe or convince themselves that they speak for the civilian population, taking away civil society's voice. Civil society has also been instrumentalised, such as with the ELN's delaying tactic by offering to lay down their arms if the government implements what civil society is asking. The changes needed are not achievable overnight - economic elites and illegal mining and drug kingpins are not willing to give up their benefits easily - but substantial progress can be made on ending the armed conflict.

ReD's experience to date shows the important and proactive role that civil society can play. It was part of the civil society delegation invited to Quito, Ecuador, for previous negotiations with the ELN in 2018. ReD has also sought to focus resources and initiatives of the British government to meet the needs on the ground, and ensure support for humanitarian initiatives, such as the Humanitarian Agreement of Catatumbo. The organisation has issued statements,

snapshots, and written letters directly to those at the negotiating table to advocate for resolving tensions and maintaining talks. ReD's constant support for peace dialogues is not shared by everyone, but ReD believes that non-violence is the most effective way to end the armed conflict. Previous negotiations show that the participation of civil society is critical if they are to be successful.

The peace processes with armed groups under the Total Peace policy are dynamic, with each one unique, but there is an opportunity for communities to have input into what is happening at negotiation tables and in different regions. The fragility and complexity of holding various negotiation tables simultaneously highlights the importance of educating Colombians on the progress made and encouraging their involvement. These are processes that require emotional intelligence, patience and creativity. They need spaces for dialogue that allow for prejudices and imperfections to be understood through humility and curiosity, different positions to be shared, and a more holistic understanding gained. Over time, this will allow a shared vision for the future to be constructed for collective action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Post-agreement Colombia has new conflict dynamics that reflect the non-linear path to peace and the challenges in bringing about sustainable change. Peace requires a deep and complex transformation. This is a task not only for the national government, but one for those in the different territories of Colombia with the participation of civil society and the support of the international community. The following recommendations are made to harness past experience, bringing creative solutions to the violence and challenges of the present, as well as continued momentum to the peace initiatives already underway, so that a different future is possible for the next generations.

For the international community:

- **Maintain financial and political support for the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement.** Moments such as the slashing of Article 8 in the National Development Plan that granted the responsibility of state institutions to implement the recommendations of the Truth Commission show the need for international pressure to realign peace efforts.
- **Be flexible in funding policies to allow for real investment in communities.** Partnering with civil society organisations could avoid the loss of resources to

intermediaries. Policies should allow for creative projects that are constructed by those in the territories rather than imposed from outside, listening to the needs of communities and promoting collective action that empowers and builds capacity.

- **Promote opportunities for dialogue.** Bring together experts in conflict resolution and peace practitioners, policy makers, victims and former combatants in Colombia and other contexts, to provide perspective and new ideas for the ongoing challenges to peace. Conflict is not limited to Colombia and lessons can be learnt and shared beyond its borders.

For the Colombian State:

- **Ensure adequate allocation of resources for the implementation of the agreement and peace education initiatives.** The agreement can only be implemented successfully with sufficient funding, but education that both informs and allows for critical reflection on the process is fundamental for its sustainability in the longer-term. Here, civil society is an important and effective partner.
- **Develop capacity for dialogue facilitation amongst public officials.** Rather than instrumentalising dialogue, genuine spaces must be opened with all sectors of society, across

the generations, that allow for listening and transformation, and which lay the path for constructing a shared vision.

- **Encourage and support non-state led dialogues amongst communities.** Being humble, recognising that the use of local capacity and knowledge is vital, enhances the possibility of regional, local and partial peace initiatives, such as those required for 'Total Peace'. The role of civil society must be valued and its participation encouraged within peace initiatives.
- **Assume an active role in the broader 'Total Peace' initiatives through collective action.** Take advantage of the spaces within the negotiations to participate; participate in ceasefire monitoring mechanisms, report violations of human rights; promote a positive stance towards peace; and use previous experiences to propose grounded solutions to the reality of violence in the present.

For civil society:

- **Strengthen the culture of dialogue within civil society.** The six principles identified by ReD are a useful starting point to develop experience and set the example of how to prepare and create spaces for dialogue that allow for listening, vulnerability, and the rebuilding of trust.
- **Monitor and advocate for the implementation of promised projects within communities.** Make use of the participation mechanisms that such entities as the Monitoring, Promotion and Verification Commission of the Implementation of the Final Agreement possess, ensuring that the experience of communities and victims inform the work of the institutions involved and oversight of the process.

ANNEX 1:

Agenda for Conference: 10 Years Embracing Dialogue: Lessons from Civil Society for Peacebuilding

Date: 3 March 2022

Time: 8:00 am - 1:00 pm

Place: Hemeroteca Carlos Lleras Restrepo,
National University of Colombia. Bogotá

Welcome:

(8:00 - 8:30 am)

- George Hodgson (HM British Ambassador to Colombia)
- Camilo Younes Velosa (Deputy Rector, National University)
- Andrei Gómez-Suárez (Senior Fellow, Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace, University of Winchester, cofounder of ReD, and Chevening Alumni)
- Karen Arteaga-Garzón (Director ReD-Colombia)
- Ricardo Peñaranda (Director Institute of Political Studies and International Relations- IEPRI)

Session 1:

**How can civil society contribute to building Total Peace?
(8:30 - 9:45 am)**

Panellists:

- George Hodgson (HM British Ambassador to Colombia).
- Alirio Uribe (Congressman, Historic Pact)
- Socorro Ramírez (Professor, Institute of Political Studies and International Relations- IEPRI)
- Andrei Gómez-Suárez (Senior Fellow, Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace, University of Winchester, cofounder of ReD, and Chevening Alumni)

Chair: Ricardo Peñaranda (Director Institute of Political Studies and International Relations- IEPRI)

Break: (9:45 - 10:00 am)

Session 2:

What has been the contribution of civil society to implementation of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP?
(10 - 11:15 am)

Panellists:

- Angela Ramirez (Colombia Barometer Manager, Kroc Institute)
- Elizabeth Dickinson (International Crisis Group)
- Karen Arteaga-Garzón (Director ReD-Colombia)
- Rodrigo Granda (Commission for the Monitoring, Promotion and Verification of the Implementation of the Final Agreement- CSIVI)

Chair: Andrés Ucrós (Chevening Alumni)

Break: (11:15 - 11:30 am)

Session 3:

What is the importance of the culture of dialogue to peacebuilding and what has been and can be the contribution of civil society?
(11:30 - 12:45 am)

Panellists:

- Steve Hedge (Director United States Institute of Peace, [USIP](#))
- Peter Cousins (ReD Cofounder, PhD Candidate University of Granada)
- Jorge Parra (Researcher University of Essex, Chevening Alumni)
- Lucía Mesa Vélez (ReD member, Chevening Alumni)

Chair: Maria Teresa Pinto (Lecturer Institute of Political Studies and International Relations- IEPRI)

Close (1pm)



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Culture of Dialogue: *Honesty* to build trust. *Respect* to build on differences. *Self-criticism* to re-evaluate our prejudices. *Generosity* to give the best of ourselves. *Solidarity* to support each other. *Co-responsibility* to work together for the non-violent transformation of armed conflicts.