

# The unexpected consequences of the peace

While the National Government denied that the murder of social leaders was a systematic phenomenon and the media published shallow information, a group of academics from the universities of Rosario and Columbia (United States) was assigned the task to study the evidence. The result was as follows: The reason was the change in balance of power in the areas left by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc). Following this “line of thought,” they found other facts.



By Juliana Vergara Agámez

Pictures Alberto Sierra, Milagro Castro, Leonardo Parra

In the year 2018, after seeing the increasing and systematic statistics of the murders of social leaders in Colombia, especially considering that the analysis of the media was falling short in investigating the causes thereof and those responsible, Juan Fernando Vargas, a professor at the Faculty of Economics of Universidad del Rosario, decided to study the phenomenon.

His purpose was to contribute to a rigorous analysis of an issue that was limited to “affairs” for the Defense Minister in duty and only a news record for the media because they were limited to describing facts in isolation. A group of researchers led by Vargas relied on periodic reports from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) *Somos Defensores*, which centralizes information from more than 500 national NGOs in charge of monitoring the aggression situation against social leaders in the country. After delimiting the study period between 2011 and 2017, the Rosario team coded the variables by date and by municipality to start the investigation.

## Searching evidence

In early 2018, when murders and threats against social leaders filled the headlines, it was assumed that this phenomenon was directly related to the implementation of the Peace Agreement between the National Government and the guerrilla members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Farc (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), which had been completed for little more than a year. However, for the researchers, the correlation between this phase of the peace process and the increase in murders did not seem so clear, given the information that was available.

The reason? Since the beginning of 2015, a year and a half before the signing of the agreement, the number of murdered leaders had already increased. However, it was necessary to identify the detonating factor. Thus, the group of researchers started looking for background information. A first hint was found in December 2014, when the then Farc announced that they were entering a permanent ceasefire. A determination that, with a couple of exceptions, Vargas clarifies, was fully met. After the signing of the agreement, in 2016, came the definitive disarmament that signified a milestone in the history of Colombia.

From this first event, Professor Vargas highlights two facts: One, the Farc showed a real commitment to the Agreement of Peace; two, the guerrilla organization demonstrated centralized command (which some sectors questioned). However, additionally, “the ceasefire was also considerably important because the balance of power changed in areas where the Farc was the *de facto* State: Strategic territories that other illegal armed groups (such as the National Liberation Army and criminal gangs) wanted to control,” explains Juan Fernando Vargas.

The targeted killing of civilians (in this case, social leaders) shows something in this phase that political science has already shown: It is a strategy used in irregular conflicts to control disputed territories. Since civil leaders mobilize communities toward common goals, without them, it is possible that those who want to take over territories by imposing fear among populations can do so.

Vargas points out the lack of clarity on why the Government did not occupy these areas with a military presence and institutions,



← The Peace Agreement brought an increase in enrollment and other schooling indicators, including a decrease in the number of dropouts and improvements in the *Saber* test outcomes in municipalities that used to be controlled by the Farc.

which would have prevented the murder of social leaders. The researcher argues that going by these reasons, he can only speculate.

“The researcher sees the facts but not the motives or intentions that lead to those facts. So, the answer to the question is more in the field of speculation in which three scenarios can be considered: One, the Government did not think of or did not want to listen to those who made suggestions; two, it was anticipated by the Government, but there was no political will, and it decided that the political consequences of that decision are assumed; or three, the lack of budget and administrative capacity did not give the Government space to respond,” he says.

What is clear for the researcher, after two years of demanding academic work, is that the ceasefire is key in this murder story because it changed the balance of power. This fact was accentuated by two determining factors: The peace process in Colombia has been incomplete as it only included one of several illegal armed groups, and incentives were generated to dispute strategic territories that were previously controlled by the Farc.

Similarly, the State’s lack of presence also had an influence as, by not reaching those regions, it allowed illegal armed groups to increase their dispute for territorial control.

The conclusions of the investigation were shared by Professor Vargas, Mounu Prem, and

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Andrés Felipe Rivera from the Universidad del Rosario, and Darío A. Romero from the University of Columbia (United States), in the document *Civilian selective targeting: The unintended consequences of partial peace*, published in 2018, with a second version revised in 2019.

The scholars aim to contribute to the country as well as to public policy through the interpretation of evidence, which, in this case, shows that the murder of social leaders is related to not only lawsuits, land restitution, or the substitution of illicit crops, as has been recorded in the media, but also to the struggle for political balance, a power vacuum, and the lack of state presence. Therefore, these scholars consider it important to have a dialog between scholars, decision makers, and the media.

#### Deforestation and education, other discussed topics

Juan Fernando Vargas points out that the change of power in territorial balance has caused other unfortunate events, such as increased deforestation. Since the second half of 2015, this situation has occurred throughout the country but intensely in municipalities that were controlled by the Farc.

From high-quality satellite images, large territories where human hands have made an impact have been identified, in other words, huge patches of deforestation. He considers that the phenomenon cannot be explained away, attributed to the return of farmers who go back to work their lands for pacification, as, if this was the case, small spaces of deforestation



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would be found, associated with the exploitation of small parcels. Instead, the levels of deforestation that are observed have more to do with agro-industrial businesses and economic interests that reached the territories occupied by the Farc.

“What we are witnessing is an accelerated and unsustainable increase of deforestation and the lack of state monitoring. It is the result of unregulated activities,” indicates Vargas.

Although these situations have occurred, the professor states that the Peace Agreement “is the most important political event in the history of the country.” It was an event that, of course, brought particularly good news to Colombians, such as increased enrollment and other schooling indicators, including a decrease in the number of dropouts and improvements in the *Saber* test outcomes in municipalities that used to be controlled by the Farc—facts that had been also been studied by the researcher.

The professor does not hide that he is a restless academic, unable to resist investigating every good idea that comes across his mind. Although he has many ideas at the same time, he believes that he will continue investigating this line of unexpected consequences of the peace, from which there is still much to explore and analyze. ■

## Research that contributes to national debates

Some papers or academic documents account for the interest of Professor Juan Fernando Vargas and colleagues such as Olga Namen, Mounu Prem, Daniel Mejía, Santiago Saavedra, Darío Romero, and Andrés Rivera in providing evidence to the debate and the subsequent decision-making in public policy in the context of the period after the Peace Agreement. Among them are the following:

### Social leaders:

#### *Selective Civilian Targeting: The Unintended Consequences of Partial Peace*

Peace agreements can inadvertently increase targeted violence against civilians when these agreements are incomplete in two key dimensions. First, only a fraction of the existing armed groups participates in the agreement. Second, the legitimate government fails to establish an institutional presence in areas previously controlled by those who do participate. Under these two conditions, the resulting power void can attract active armed groups that engage in a targeted civil victimization to gain control.

<https://tinyurl.com/ya4dq46y>

Status: in evaluation

### Deforestation:

#### *End-of-Conflict Deforestation: Evidence from Colombia's Peace Agreement*

This document studies the effect of the recent peace negotiation in Colombia between the Government and the insurgency of the Farc on the country’s forest cover. Using data on deforestation from annual satellite images and a strategy of difference-in-differences identification (a technique used in econometrics that measures the effect of a treatment on a certain period), it is evident that the areas controlled by the Farc before the declaration of a permanent ceasefire experienced a differential increase in deforestation after the start of the ceasefire.

<https://tinyurl.com/ybll6k6b>

Published in *World Development* (specialized scientific journal)

### Coca cultivation:

#### *The Rise and Persistence of Illegal Crops: Evidence from a Naive Policy Announcement*

The document shows that the recent unprecedented increase in illicit coca crops in Colombia was the result of a naive and inopportune policy announcement that occurred during the peace negotiations between the government and the guerrilla members of the Farc. In May 2014, the peace delegations of the parties issued a press release announcing that coca producers would receive material incentives for voluntary substitution of crops once they reached a final agreement. Coca plantation levels remained high even after the implementation of the incentive scheme was announced.

<https://tinyurl.com/yco28kn7>

Status: In evaluation

