

16 February | Colombia: peace at last?

While the Colombian government and the FARC are negotiating a peace deal, academics, students, politicians and representatives of NGOs came together in the Hague to discuss Colombia's prospects for a durable peace. Experts on Colombia Jenny Pearce (University of Bradford) and Daniel Gómez Uribe (PhD candidate University of Amsterdam) joined the debate to share their experiences on Colombia's socio-economic structure and political climate. Central to this debate were the following questions: what are the future implications of the peace accord and why is a peace agreement now in hands reach?



Imagining peace

Gómez Uribe started off the debate by making an intriguing remark on Colombia's history: the civil war was grounded in an insurgency started by "the death". As a consequence, "the living" never got any reference points whatsoever of what living in peace could be like. Peace, as a dream that would come true, would be the ultimate celebration for the Colombians. However, a peace-accord in a society characterized by mistrust, polarization, injustices and socio-economic inequities comes with a great degree of uncertainty. According to Gómez Uribe, the peace agreement is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for ending the violence. Reflexivity is the key to create open and inclusive dialogues and through this a means for changing the dynamics of the nation. The foundations of the Colombian society need to be re-invented in order to bridge socio-economic and political gaps and transform pre-determined behavioural patterns of violence.

Gómez Uribe: "While physical and psychological violence develops there is no time to think about what we are doing. We haven't had the chance to think. We just reproduce the violent conditions that were left by those in the past"

Can the "formal" and "real" Colombia reunite?

Pearce highlighted the underlying complexities of Colombia by summing up the major paradoxes existing in its society, and the ultimate paradox: the recent peace talks in Havana. The "formal" Colombia was steadily making progress, the once dismissed terrorists from the FARC were making political concessions and the pragmatic modernisers from the divided elitist groups won ground and pressured for peace. However, the illegal economic activities and the violent dynamics of the "real" Colombia continued. Pearce sees the peace accord as the beginning of a new phase. In order for peace to be lasting, the FARC needs to translate its military might to substantial political power, and an economy which fosters peace-building should be developed. Pearce suggested in this regard that as elites had paid for a tax for war under President Uribe, could they not pay a tax for peace now.

Prospects for peace?

Both speakers believe a positive vibe is taking over Colombia: a special tribunal will be established and also the military will be subjected to the law, something Pearce defined as extraordinary. Additionally, the underlying causes of the conflict need to be addressed by policy-makers. The creation of historical reference points, the eradication of socio-economic inequality and the development of a political economy for peace need to be given priority on the post-war agenda. However, as the price of oil plummets, the political economy of peace becomes more vulnerable. Pearce stressed that young men in particular, need to be persuaded that there are real opportunities in the peace economy rather than the war economy. Aggravating the situation, is the high degree of mistrust in the Colombian society. The outcome of the upcoming referendum will show if the Colombians put their trust in the peace-process.

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