

Peace and Beyond



**Building peace: all for
one and one for all**

Juan Manuel Santos Calderón

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It would have been a great pleasure for me to join the Peace and Beyond conference in Belfast in April 2018. Twenty years ago, this date marked what may have seemed an improbable agreement between enemies; in doing so, it returned hope to Europe and the whole world. And as it did 20 years ago, the world today applauds the perseverance and determination that made that Good Friday/Belfast Agreement possible.

The commitment to the construction of a stable and long-lasting peace is paradigmatic for us, because after two decades it has not lost its vigour; to the contrary, it is increasingly alive day after day in the actions and in the hearts of the British and the Irish people.

Northern Ireland's peace process was one of my main sources of inspiration when I made the decision to negotiate with the now-extinct FARC guerrillas. Experience had taught me that it is much more popular to wage war than to pursue peace, but it was also clear that the Colombian people could not be condemned to another half-century of death and suffering.

It was a long and difficult process. However, we dared to be audacious and innovative, and that is why – for the first time ever in the history of armed conflict resolutions – the victims and their rights were at the core of the agenda and the solution. Furthermore, and again, for the first time, an agreement was reached to create a transitional justice system, thereby ensuring that there would be no impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

And, fulfilling the purpose of every peace process – that is to swap bullets for ballots – the FARC is now a political party that is championing its ideals in the playing field of democracy.

The benefits of the process continue to unfold. We are no longer the second country after Afghanistan in number of victims of anti-personnel mines. Thanks to peace, we have managed to decontaminate 3,800,000 square metres since 2016, because we can now reach remote areas where access used to be impossible. Our goal is to clean up the whole national territory by 2021.

And we are rediscovering our territory, and finding new windows of opportunity. Ecotourism is booming, renewable energies are gaining strength, and we have even found new fauna and flora species thanks to scientific expeditions into places that the conflict had made inaccessible for decades.

I believe that building peace is like building a cathedral: difficult, complex and time-consuming. You have to lay brick by brick. The process is slow, and in Colombia, we are just beginning. Yet we have been careful to ensure that we are building on sound foundations. The thousands of lives that have been spared are a signal for us, showing that we did the right thing and are on the right path.

The support of the international community in building that architecture of a different Colombia, without the burden of war, has been essential. Having the encouragement and the experience of countries such as the United Kingdom motivates us to persevere in the face of the difficulties yet to come.

That support has been exemplified by the British Council. On its 75th anniversary, I said:

'If the British Council helped us thrive amid violence, we hope it will continue to accompany us in building peace. The challenge of achieving a lasting and sustainable peace necessarily means strengthening our culture and education. And who better than the British Council to support us in this mission?'

I am delighted to see its work continue as a promoter of bonds of understanding between peoples, through culture and education, and this endeavour is even more valuable and necessary at this stage in our history. And I am thrilled to see the British Council reflecting on how its work can promote and support the building of long-lasting peace.

Peace and Beyond placed intercultural dialogue, international partnership, and the sharing of global knowledge and experience at centre stage. These efforts must continue in order to face one of the biggest challenges that lie ahead of us all: to change the culture of violence for a culture of coexistence, inclusion and tolerance.

For, at the end of the day, we are one world. We are one people and one race, which is called humanity.

**Juan Manuel Santos Calderón GColIH GCB
was President of Colombia from 2010 to 2018.
He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016**

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