

Peace and Beyond



**Third parties: when
and how do they make
a difference in conflict
interventions?**

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On 1 October 2015, the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Vice-President (HRVP) Federica Mogherini, appointed me as the EU Special Envoy for the peace process in Colombia. Announcing my appointment, she said: 'Mr Gilmore's direct involvement in the Northern Ireland peace process makes him an ideal envoy. It is a signal to the Colombians that the EU is standing by their efforts to put an end to one of the longest-running and most murderous conflicts in the world.'

For the past three years, I have been travelling regularly to Colombia, and especially to its conflict-affected territories, as well as to Havana and Quito, the venues for the negotiations with the FARC and the ELN respectively. I have been meeting with government leaders and officials, negotiators for the guerrilla organisations and opposition figures, as well as representatives of civil society and others.

I have been liaising closely with colleague envoys from the UN, USA, Norway and Cuba, as well as many other representatives from the international community, as we work collectively to help Colombia build a lasting peace.

Colombian conflict

Apart from four years in the 1950s, Colombia has been a continuous democracy since its independence from Spain in 1819. It was Latin America's first constitutional government, and it abolished slavery ten years before the USA. It is one of the world's longest and most enduring democracies.

But it has been plagued by violence, throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. In 1948, the assassination of the Liberal Party's presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, triggered a period of conflict, known as 'La Violencia', between supporters of his party and those of the Conservative Party. This civil war, which claimed the lives of 180,000 Colombian people, was ended after a short period of military rule, when the two parties agreed to rotate the presidency and executive power every four years.

This arrangement, however, was seen by many marginalised people in the territories as a deal between the political elites based in Bogotá, and one that did not address their need for land reform in the rural areas. The agitation for land eventually led to renewed violence, the emergence of the FARC and other movements, and to a guerrilla conflict which has lasted since 1964.

More than 220,000 people have been killed, and 40,000 people are still missing. More than six million people have been displaced from their homes. Over the 54-year life of the armed conflict, there have been many guerrilla and paramilitary actors, including the ELN, the EPL, M19 and a variety of armed groups that had been formed either in response to guerrilla violence, or arising from the illegal drugs trade or other illegal economies. The biggest actor by far was the FARC-EP commonly referred to as the FARC formed in 1964, and which at its peak had a full-time army of 20,000. Even at the end, when it laid down its weapons, it had over 7,000 full-time combatants.

Colombia's peace process

Successive Colombian governments tried to end the conflict. Every Colombian president since 1980 attempted to either defeat the FARC or to make peace with them. In 1985, an attempted peace agreement ended in failure when, according to the FARC, 5,000 members of a new political party (Unión Patriótica), which they helped to establish, were assassinated, mainly it is said, by right-wing paramilitaries.

In this century, President Álvaro Uribe (2002–10) pursued an aggressive policy of 'democratic security' and attempted to militarily defeat the FARC. The Defence Minister who, for a time, managed this strong security policy in the Uribe administration was Juan Manuel Santos, who was elected president in 2010, and re-elected in 2014. He decided to attempt peace negotiations with the FARC. Initially, this involved a two-year period of informal, exploratory contacts with the FARC through civil society, church and some international back-channels. This informal phase resulted in the construction of a six-point agenda for formal negotiations, which were then hosted in Havana by the government of Cuba.

The negotiations in Havana lasted for four years and resulted in a 'final agreement' in August 2016. This 'final agreement' was formally signed by President Santos and the FARC leader, Timochenko, at a ceremony in Cartagena on 24 September 2016, but was narrowly rejected by a small margin (49.8 per cent in favour and 50.2 per cent against) in a plebiscite which was held a week later on 2 October. Several factors contributed to this unexpected result, including opposition to perceived leniency for the FARC in new forms of transitional justice, and the reserving, for a time, of unelected seats for the FARC in the Senate and Congress.

Following the rejection of the peace agreement in the plebiscite, President Santos invited opponents, including former President Uribe, to participate in a national dialogue, and the government and the FARC negotiating teams returned to Havana to renegotiate the agreement. A 'revised agreement' was concluded, and approved by the Colombian Parliament in December 2016, despite continued opposition from former President Uribe, and his Centro Democrático party. As was subsequently confirmed by the Constitutional Court, a referendum or plebiscite had not been constitutionally required in the first place, and parliamentary approval was sufficient.

Implementation began on 1 January 2017 and, in July the FARC completed the laying down of arms and subsequently transitioned from an armed guerrilla movement to a political party. They contested their first parliamentary elections in March 2018.

While there was considerable international third-party involvement in the negotiation of the peace agreement, the process itself was essentially Colombian. The agreement was negotiated directly between the government of Colombia and the FARC. There was no mediator, no peace-broker, as there had been, for example, in Northern Ireland, where Senator George Mitchell chaired the talks which led to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

In Havana, each of the two sides had a six-member negotiating team, led for the government of Colombia by former Vice-President Humberto de la Calle, and for the FARC by Ivan Marquez. This 'main table' was supported by sub-commissions which addressed each of the six points of the agenda: (1) comprehensive rural development; (2) political participation; (3) end of the conflict; (4) solution to the problem of illicit drugs; (5) agreement regarding the victims of the conflict; (6) implementation and verification mechanisms. In addition there were separate sub-commissions to address important dimensions such as gender. The membership of these commissions varied, depending on the issues being considered at different times, and they also drew on voices from outside the negotiating teams themselves. For example, representatives of civil society organisations, of victims, and of Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples were invited to participate in the Havana process from time to time.

Normally, the outcomes of the detailed negotiations in sub-commissions were reported to the main table and, if agreement were signed off there, a joint statement was then issued to announce that agreement had been reached on this particular point, or sub-point, of the agenda. All of this, however, was subject to the proviso that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. But the periodic joint statements served to build confidence between both sides, and to communicate to a sometimes sceptical public that progress was being made.

Press and public access to the peace talks were quite different in the cases of Colombia and Northern Ireland. The talks in Belfast took place in private, but the press was a constant presence outside the venue, regularly interviewed the participants as they went in and out, and were clearly well briefed, by all sides, on the progress of negotiations. Therefore, the public was contemporaneously informed of the difficulties being encountered, and of the compromises which were being made. The talks in Havana were at some physical and communication distance from the Colombian population, who were often surprised by the content of the periodic announcements on points of agreement.

No formal mediators

Unlike in Northern Ireland, the Colombian peace process was not a formally mediated peace agreement, but both President Santos and the FARC have stated many times that it could not have been achieved without international help. The 'guarantor countries', Norway and Cuba, were involved from the very beginning. Norwegian diplomats facilitated some early informal discussions. The decision by Cuba to host the talks was essential, first because these talks could not be held in Colombia itself, and second because the FARC negotiators and leadership felt that Cuba provided a safe and understanding home for the talks.

Both Norway and Cuba appointed experienced diplomats (Dag Nylander and Rodolfo Benitez respectively) as their envoys. They stayed close to the direct talks throughout, and although they were not formal mediators, they performed a de facto mediating role throughout. This was recognised at formal, public events to announce progress in the talks, when Nylander and Benitez were asked to read out the agreed texts, before they were signed by the principals.

Chile and Venezuela were nominated as 'accompanying countries' for the talks, and their ambassadors and embassies stayed close to the talks and were an important source of regional support to both sides.

The United Nations supported the talks process from the beginning, and played an essential and imaginative role in implementation. Addressing an EU event on 31 May 2018, former Assistant Secretary-General of the UN Jeffrey Feltman said that initially the UN had not envisaged an active and direct role in the Colombian peace process, but that eventually the UN would perform a very central and necessary role in implementation. As that critical role became apparent and inevitable, the UN Secretary-General appointed an envoy, Jean Arnault, who played a key role in Havana, and who was later appointed by the Secretary-General as his special representative, leading the successive UN missions on implementation.

In 2015, and as the Havana talks were approaching their final stages, both the USA and the EU appointed special envoys (Bernard Aronson and myself respectively). Germany appointed Tom Koenigs as its envoy, and I worked closely with Tom to bring the European perspective to the process.

The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean State (CELAC) provided overall American and regional support. Jonathan Powell, the former Chief of Staff of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and who had an intimate knowledge of the Northern Ireland peace process, advised President Santos. At different stages of the negotiations, expert international assistance was sought from those involved in peace negotiation in several countries, including South Africa, Ireland, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Although there was a large cast of international and other third-party supporters and advisers, the government and the FARC, as the principals in the process, never ceded control. Instead, they drew on the best from the experiences of other peace processes, and from the advice and expertise of all those accompanying the talks. This is reflected in the wide range of international bodies which were requested by the parties to accompany the implementation of many key parts of the agreement (Chapter 6 of the agreement). Both the government and the FARC maintained their own separate contacts and dialogues with the third parties. There was no formal co-ordination of the third parties, but informal contact and communication was maintained by the international third parties, particularly by those of us who attended in Havana.

The UN

The most important was (and still is) the role undertaken by the UN. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, a tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mission (MVM) was established to oversee the laying down of arms by the FARC. Its three component parts were the UN (in the basis of a Security Council Resolution) the FARC and the government of Colombia. The mission comprised 500 unarmed personnel, mostly military, drawn mainly from South American states. It functioned at national, regional and local levels, where it oversaw the movement of FARC former combatants into 26 'zones', where, over a six-month period, they laid down their weapons, with the arms registered and stored in secure containers for destruction. The MVM also oversaw the identification and the taking control of over 900 arms dumps throughout the country. The MVM functioned as a tripartite mechanism at all levels, with a UN officer, a Colombian army officer and a FARC representative comprising the triumvirate, including at the level of the zones.

The MVM was succeeded by a second, somewhat smaller, UN mission, whose function was to oversee the security commitments in the agreement in the early post-conflict period. This mission was also tasked with joint monitoring of the bilateral ceasefire between the government of Colombia and the ELN from September to December 2017. The second UN mission is intended to last for an overall period of three years, renewable each year by Security Council Resolution, following a request by the government.

The EU's role

The peace agreement itself allocated accompanying roles on implementation to different parts of the international community. 'The FARC-EP and the National Government have agreed that the international accompaniment of the following countries and international organisations shall be sought for the implementation of the Agreements, in each of the items in the General Agreement to End the Conflict' (6.4.2).

Accordingly, the EU was asked to provide international accompaniment in three areas:

1. on Chapter 1, dealing with rural development, along with the FAO, the International Peasant Movement (La Via Campesina), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
2. on Chapter 3, in relation to the reincorporation of former combatants into the political, social and economic life of the country. Also asked to accompany this objective were UNESCO, UNDP, the Latin American and Caribbean Continental Organisation of Students (OCLAE) and the Organisation of Ibero-American States (OEI)
3. on Chapter 3, in relation to the establishment of a Special Investigations Unit to address criminal organisations which are targeting social, political and human rights activists. The USA was also asked to accompany on this matter.

The EU willingly accepted these three accompanying roles, and indeed, had been preparing for them for some time. The relationship between Europe and Colombia is long and deep. The EU itself has been working with Colombia on development and humanitarian issues for more than two decades. Much of this work has had a peacebuilding focus, such as EU support for Peace Laboratories, which assisted community-based efforts to build peace in the territories. Since 2000, the EU as a whole, including its institutions and its member states, have committed over €1.2 billion to peacebuilding projects in Colombia.

Over the past decade, the relationship between the EU and Colombia has deepened. A free trade agreement was made between Colombia and the EU in 2013, and in 2015 Colombian visitors were given visa-free access to the Schengen Area. On international issues, the EU and Colombia consider each other to be important partners. EU support for peacebuilding in Colombia therefore is an integral part of the wider relationship between the country and Europe. There is a similar context for the support for the Colombian peace process from every other donor country and international organisation.

In the case of the EU (and I highlight this only because I am most familiar with it), financial support for the peace effort was provided through the EU's Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI), the Instrument Contributing to Security and Peace (ICSP), DEVCO in relation to development funding, and ECHO on humanitarian needs. In 2015, it was decided to establish an EU trust fund to financially support the implementation of peace in Colombia. That fund of approximately €100 million is supported by 19 of the EU's member states and is principally resourced through DEVCO. In addition, the European Investment Bank has made available €400 million in loan finance and has recently opened a regional office in the EU delegation in Bogotá. On 31 May 2018, the HRVP announced a further €15 million to support reincorporation, bringing to over €600 million the total amount of EU funding for the implementation of the Colombian peace process. In addition, many of the EU member states are providing bilateral support, or additional funding through the UN. Norway, Switzerland, the USA and Canada are all providing financial support.

Finance, while important, is not the only way in which countries express their support. Diplomatic and political support is expressed through the embassies in Bogotá, through visits to Colombia by ministers and officials from many countries. In the case of the EU there have been visits by several commissioners, Commission and EEAS officials and by the European Parliament, as well as my own regular visits as special envoy.

On my appointment in 2015, the HRVP described my role as follows: 'Mr Gilmore's mission will be to relate to all parties in Colombia and to facilitate the co-ordination of actions and initiatives in support of peace, thus contributing to the smooth implementation of the future peace agreement for the benefit of all parts of Colombian society. He will also liaise closely with other key actors at the regional and international level.'

At that stage, it was envisaged that negotiations would conclude by 23 March 2016, the date set by President Santos when he announced the final stage of the talks September 2015. However, a final agreement was not reached until August 2016, so I travelled on several occasions to Havana to meet with the negotiators from both sides, other special envoys and the representatives of the 'guarantor' and 'accompanying' countries.

At those meetings, I conveyed the EU's strong support for the talks process, including the unanimous support among the EU's 28 member states, and the strong support expressed in resolutions of the European Parliament. I also discussed how the EU could contribute to implementation, and the three 'accompanying roles' which were eventually identified, arose from those discussions.

Those discussions in Havana also enabled me to develop working relationships with government and FARC negotiators, and with international envoys, many of whom would occupy key positions in the implementation phase. The meetings in Havana also provided a means to talk with the FARC, who at that stage were still listed by the EU as a terrorist organisation and against whom sanctions applied. They were also (and still are) listed by the USA. By talking with their negotiators in Havana, both Bernard Aronson (the US envoy) and I were able to assure them of the considerable international support for the peace process, and to encourage them to reach agreement with the Colombian government. I believe that this international support and interest, which we were able to convey in person in Havana, helped to build confidence, which in turn helped in the reaching of agreement.

Building confidence: delisting and demining

A particular issue that was raised with me, at an early stage of my discussions in Havana, was the possibility of the FARC being removed from the EU's terrorist listing. I explained what I believed would be required from the FARC before delisting could be considered, and then the procedures which would have to be followed within the EU for the Council to make a decision by unanimity. When the final agreement was concluded in August 2016, the 28 member states, in the Council, decided to suspend the sanctions which applied to the FARC, effective from the signing of the Agreement in Cartagena on 24 September. This decision was to be reviewed by the Council six months later, which period would coincide with the timetable for disarmament. That timetable was disturbed by the defeat of the agreement in the plebiscite on 2 October, so the initial six-month review extended the suspension of sanctions for a further six months, by which stage the FARC had disarmed, and had committed to pursuing their political objectives by peaceful and democratic means. At that point the EU agreed to remove the FARC from its list of terrorist organisations.

Another confidence-building measure, which the EU had agreed to finance, was also the subject of my discussions in Havana. This was a project on demining that was piloted in Santa Helena, Meta and in Orechón. A large part of the lands of Colombia had been contaminated by landmines throughout the 50-year conflict. Many of these mines were crude hand-made devices, which had been planted by guerrillas at various times. The locations of these explosive devices were unknown or at best uncertain, but they had the potential to kill and maim long after the conflict was ended, and their presence resulted in large tracts of land being unusable for normal purposes. The random lethality of the landmines was made tragically clear at the very moment that the final agreement was being signed in Cartagena, when in a different part of the country a young boy chased a football into a wooded area, stepped on a landmine and was killed.

The demining projects required officers of the Colombian army to work jointly with commanders of the FARC-EP, in order to map and identify areas of land which were contaminated with landmines, and then to work together in the difficult and dangerous tasks of removing the devices from the ground and neutralising them. These early demining pilot projects, which were carried out while the talks were still taking place in Havana, resulted in three main achievements.

First, they developed the model for more extensive demining activity after the peace agreement was concluded. According to the message from President Santos to the Peace and Beyond conference in April 2018, Colombia has now dropped from the second most mined country in the world to tenth, and the target is to have the country completely free of landmines by 2023. Apart from the lives and limbs which will be saved, Colombia will also benefit from additional land that can be put to productive use.

The second achievement was the confidence and trust that the pilot demining projects brought to the talks process. Even though there were often difficulties in the talks, and disruptive incidents on the ground, the fact that army and FARC personnel were now working together in joint projects, enabled the military and FARC representatives in Havana to make progress. It also paved the way for the subsequent excellent co-operation between the FARC and army in the UN MVM.

The third achievement was the much-needed urgency which it helped bring to the talks process towards the end of the long four years. A key requirement for successful demining is to identify the locations where explosive devices were planted. Only those who planted them know those locations. Even in the best of circumstances, it is difficult to retrace. Devices were sometimes planted in the confusion of battle; the physical appearance of terrain changes over 50 years; recall can become unreliable and device planters may now be reluctant to admit responsibility. But mapping mined areas becomes almost impossible if those who planted the mines are already dead. With the passage of time this was becoming an increasing problem. There was therefore no time to be lost in reaching the final agreement and developing a comprehensive map of mined lands.

It had been expected that the negotiation phase of the Colombian peace process would end with the final agreement in August 2016. However, the unexpected rejection of the agreement in the plebiscite on 2 October resulted in renegotiation. President Santos sent his negotiators back to Havana to meet with the FARC, and he and former President Uribe agreed to meet in the commencement of a national dialogue. The international community played an important role at this critical time. All encouraged the government and the FARC to renegotiate, and encouraged opponents of the agreement to accept reasonable compromise. The HRVP asked me to return to Havana and to join other envoys in supporting efforts at renegotiation. The timely announcement that President Santos was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize not only encouraged him to continue his efforts, but also communicated to the Colombian public that peace in Colombia mattered to the wider world. The renegotiation was successful and achieved in a remarkably short period of time.

Patience and persistence

The negotiation of any peace agreement is difficult and takes time, patience and persistence. In both Northern Ireland and Colombia, the period of formal negotiations lasted for about four years: in Northern Ireland from the first IRA ceasefire in 1994, until Good Friday 1998; and in the case of Colombia, the Havana talks lasted from 2012 until 2016. In both cases, the formal negotiations were preceded by informal contacts, and by earlier unsuccessful efforts at negotiating an end to the conflicts. In both cases, implementation proved to be as difficult, if not more so, than negotiation. Northern Ireland has encountered institutional stalemate (even as it marked the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement), and Colombia is also facing many challenges in the implementation of its agreement.

Much has been achieved in Colombia in the relatively short time since the end of 2016. The FARC has disarmed and transitioned to a political party. Negotiations are taking place with the ELN, offering the prospect of a final and full end to all politically motivated violence in the country. Most of the legislation to give effect to the agreement has been enacted, albeit some if heavily amended. The main institutions, including the truth and transitional justice architecture, have been established, and have started to hear evidence and examine cases. The Constitutional Court has upheld the agreement in successive judgments. The process of implementation is under way. The country has just held its most peaceful elections in decades.

But there are big challenges. Although violence and killings are well down on the height of the conflict, the past year and a half has witnessed killings of social leaders, political activists and human rights defenders. There has also been a high level of violence in territories vacated by former FARC combatants and in areas where armed groups are battling for control of the illicit drugs trade and other illegal economies. In many parts of the country there is still very little presence by the state, and scant police or army protection for local communities. The deteriorating situation in Venezuela is also impacting on Colombia. They share a long border and, over the past year, more than a million refugees from Venezuela have entered Colombia, mostly in areas which are already challenged, giving rise to a growing humanitarian crisis.

The peace agreement is an opportunity for Colombia. The country's reputation is greatly improved and there is unprecedented international interest in the country. These are ideal conditions for increased trade and investment, which will bring jobs and increased prosperity. This in turn can be used to address the social, regional and economic inequalities in the country that have been the source of guerrilla activity in the past. The end of guerrilla conflict will also give the state a better opportunity to tackle organised crime and criminal armed activity, much of which is linked to drug production and trafficking.

Continued international support for peacebuilding in Colombia is very important at this time. I travel to Colombia every six weeks or so. On these visits, I normally meet with senior government figures, with representatives of the opposition, with the FARC, with members of the Senate and Congress, with civil society organisations and church leaders. I also travel out of Bogotá to visit areas affected by the conflict and to see projects which are being funded by the EU and our member states. I co-ordinate with the ambassadors and embassies of EU member states, and countries such as Norway, Cuba, Canada, Switzerland and others that are closely supporting the peace process. In particular, I meet and liaise closely with the UN mission, led by Jean Arnault, and with the substantial UN presence in the country, through Resident Co-ordinator Martín Santiago. I also work closely with the OAS, which brings crucial regional understanding and support for the process.

Northern Ireland experience

From the experience of Northern Ireland, I know the importance of international support for a peace process. The role of US Senator George Mitchell in chairing and moderating the multi-party talks, which led to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, has been well documented and acknowledged. Senator Mitchell and President Bill Clinton, who appointed him to the role, were deservedly honoured with the Freedom of the City of Belfast in April 2018, marking the 20th anniversary of the signing of the agreement. But they were not the only international third parties in Northern Ireland. We should remember too the work of Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, Cyril Ramaphosa (now President of South Africa), General de Chastelain of Canada, and others, who monitored arms decommissioning and accompanied implementation of the agreements. There were individuals such as Richard Haas and Senator Gary Hart, both US envoys, who have done excellent follow-up work in recent years, particularly in relation to victims and to the past.

The role of the European Union in supporting the Northern Ireland peace process is often overlooked, or taken for granted. In fact, the EU was the biggest international financial supporter of the peace process in Northern Ireland. To date, the EU has contributed €1.5 billion to fund projects to support peace in Northern Ireland. It is currently on its fourth successive round of peace funding; the continuation of such funding will, no doubt, be a subject for settlement in the consideration, now under way, of the EU's next seven-year multi-annual financial framework.

The EU's contribution to peace in Northern Ireland was also more than financial. Less than a year after the UK's embassy in Dublin was burned down by an angry crowd protesting the 'Bloody Sunday' killing by British soldiers of 13 unarmed civil rights protesters in Derry/Londonderry, the UK and Ireland both acceded to the EEC in January 1973. These were very difficult times for relations between the UK and Ireland. By working together in Europe, Irish and British politicians and civil servants developed a collaboration, and sometimes friendships, which created the space for discussion about Northern Ireland. This gave rise to the attempts at settlement, and eventually to the joint approach of the two governments which resulted in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

Indeed, the content of the agreement itself was made possible by the fact that both countries were member states of the EU (in 1998, there was not even a remote prospect that either Ireland or the UK would ever leave the EU). For example, the central question of national identity could be resolved because both countries shared membership of the EU, with a shared European citizenship and shared laws over much of our lives. This applied to everybody, whether British or Irish. Brexit has unfortunately put the seams of this and subsequent agreements under severe strain.

Comparisons

The Northern Ireland and Colombian conflicts were very different. The Northern Ireland conflict had its roots in national identities, overlaid by religious affiliation, whereas Colombia's conflict had its origins in social inequality and exclusion, especially in rural areas, and in access to land. The scale of the Colombian conflict was much larger and its duration longer, although proportionately, Northern Ireland was arguably more intense. But the paths to negotiated peace settlements were remarkably similar. Both began with informal exploratory contact, both took four years of formal negotiation, and both used international third parties, although in different ways.

In the case of Colombia, a third party (Cuba) hosted the talks with support from Norway. The Northern Ireland talks took place in Belfast. The Northern Ireland talks were chaired by a mediator (Senator George Mitchell). This was necessary because of the three strands: (1) internal to Northern Ireland, involving ten political parties, some of whom were linked to the armed organisations; (2) north-south, between Northern Ireland and Ireland; and (3) east-west between Britain and the island of Ireland. Negotiations were complex, involving two sovereign governments and ten political parties.

The Colombian talks were directly between the government and the FARC. There was no mediator, but there was an international presence: from the guarantor countries throughout the process, and from others, including the USA and EU, at a later stage. In both cases, the nature of international involvement was political, diplomatic and financial. Apart from EU funding, the Northern Ireland peace process was supported by the International Fund for Ireland to which the US, Australian and New Zealand governments contributed. The amount of the funds contributed was less important than the signal of international support.

In the case of Northern Ireland, support from successive US presidents was crucial when difficulties arose in implementation. The parties to the agreement, and the two governments, repeatedly turned to US presidents and their administrations to encourage their partners to honour the agreements and to resolve differences in interpretation and implementation. St Patrick's Day events in Washington often provided the opportunity for these interventions. In Colombia, the international community played a similar role in the immediate aftermath of the plebiscite in 2016.

One significant difference between the two cases relates to the role of the UN. It had no involvement either in the negotiation or implementation of the peace agreements in Northern Ireland. In the early stages of what is sometimes referred to as 'the Troubles' (immediately following Bloody Sunday, for example), Ireland sought to involve the UN, but this was emphatically rejected by the UK, which at that time regarded Northern Ireland as an exclusively internal concern. By contrast, the UN has played an essential and innovative role in the Colombian process. The UN was actively involved in the design of parts of the agreement; and subject to UN Security Council Resolutions, the UN led the MVM on disarmament and is now almost halfway through a second three-year monitoring mission in the country.

International support: when and how?

The experiences of both the Colombian and Northern Ireland peace processes demonstrate, first, that international intervention in conflicts do make a significant difference. Almost all of the participants in both processes attest to this. But when and how? And perhaps just as important, who?

The Northern Ireland process was itself international. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was not confined to the relations between the communities and the political institutions within Northern Ireland. It had two further interconnected strands, covering the relationship between north and south and the relationship between Britain and Ireland. The Colombian agreement was about the internal affairs of Colombia. But both agreements were shaped by international third-party involvement and by international experience. In both cases too, the international community, in differing forms, provides a range of supports for the maintenance and implementation of the agreements.

A session at the Peace and Beyond conference of April 2018 addressed this question. As session chair Fionna Smyth put it: 'Drawing on three case studies, this workshop will explore the extent to which international third parties have shaped and underpinned settlements, and the extent to which they complicate or even obstruct settlement through their own international interests.'

The examples of Northern Ireland and of Colombia are both strong examples of 'shaping' and 'underpinning'. So too was the case study of South Africa set out by Reverend Dr Liz Carmichael, who drew on her experience as a doctor working in a hospital in Soweto, where she had co-led contact and reconciliation programmes. She also talked about her work as an ordained priest, especially in spirituality and theological education, and in serving on local and regional peace committees under the national peace accord.

Dr Byron Bland, who had over 25 years' experience in Northern Ireland and 15 years' experience in the Middle East, and who is now applying what he has learned to conflict situations within the US, spoke of his relevant work at Stanford University. He identified four key questions in negotiations where third parties are 'brokers':

1. The question of a 'shared future': are the parties willing to envision a future for the other side that it (the other side) would find minimally bearable?
2. The question of trust: how can the parties trust each other to honour commitments?
3. The question of loss acceptance: how can the parties accept the losses that a settlement imposes so that they can make the concessions that it requires?
4. The question of just entitlements: how can the parties work together to alleviate the most egregious injustices?

Dr Bland also wondered if, in addressing the role of third parties in conflict intervention, the right questions are being asked in the first place. 'If practitioners knew what researchers knew, what would they find interesting? And if researchers knew what practitioners knew, what would they find interesting?'

Discussion

The discussion that followed raised a number of and cautionary questions:

- Third parties can intervene in several ways, such as in supporting negotiations, building policy frameworks or implementation in the aftermath of a peace agreement.
- There is, however, a vast difference between conflict termination and conflict transformation: after a ceasefire commences or a peace deal has been signed, peacebuilding initiatives need to be put in place to transform the society. What role do third parties have in this process, and how long should they stay engaged?
- There is much emphasis now on engagement with 'civil society', including social, community and religious leaders. But can one person or group validly claim to represent everyone from that particular constituency? How do we ensure that there is a plurality of voices? How do third parties choose who is consulted and who is to be involved?
- Why is it expected that some interests, for example women, should unite in peacebuilding as if they are heterogeneous? There are always differences to take into account, and third parties need to be careful not to 'flatten' voices in the peacebuilding space.
- This, in turn, raises the need for third-party convening spaces that allow for time and dissent when bringing together local civil society actors, building trust between them and ultimately putting forward a positive voice in negotiations.
- Who gets a seat at the table? Local peacebuilders or the INGO representatives? The one who is better resourced and therefore sometimes best placed to tick the 'we have consulted civil society' box?
- Being an 'honest broker' and engaging helpfully in complex, emotive and often polarised contexts requires skill, experience and peacebuilding intelligence. A clumsy intervention can do more harm than good.
- Be aware of the power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South.

Final observations

The Peace and Beyond conference marked the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. It rightly recognised the important contribution of third parties, including international third parties who helped negotiate the agreement and to sustain peace in Ireland. I was honoured to have had the opportunity to contribute my experience of the Colombian peace process in the hope that it will add to our collective knowledge of peace agreements and their lessons for future peacebuilding.

The discussion at the conference widened our understanding of the nature and role of and the potential for third-party interventions in conflicts. The traditional concept of a peace broker, who brings warring factions to the table and persuades or encourages them to sign a peace deal, is too narrow and simplistic. There is a role for third parties in creating the conditions for peace negotiations, even when there appears to be little prospect any adversary talking to the other. There is a role for third parties simply accompanying a talks process; a role for third parties in implementing a peace agreement; and certainly a role for third parties in the many circumstances by which conflict can be prevented.

The third party does not have to be a senior diplomat or politician, appointed by an international body, engaged in high-profile shuttling 'between the parties'. The third party can be a civil society personage, an NGO, a peace institute, a churchperson, a concerned citizen... In most cases, effective third-party intervention will probably be a combination of most or all of these.

Engagement by third parties does not have to be confined to seeking agreement between the warring parties. For peace to endure, victims must be able to find inner peace; people at every level of society should be enabled to live in dignity, free from fear and want; and human rights must be respected. That means engaging too with those who have consistently practised peace and not just those who are latterly preaching it.

Preventing conflict is a continuous and changing challenge; ending conflict is urgent; peacebuilding is slow. To those ends, the work of third parties is complex and bespoke to each different conflict. There are lessons to be learned from every experience and study, which help answer the question: when and how do third parties in conflict interventions make a difference? We can perhaps best answer that question, and indeed other questions about the making of peace, if we succeed better in combining, as Byron Bland wishes, the knowledge of the researcher with the experience of the practitioner. The Peace and Beyond conference has made a big contribution to that endeavour.

Let us do more of it!

Eamon Gilmore is the European Union Special Envoy for the Colombian peace process

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