Building a new society: peace in post-FARC Colombia

“What we are doing here is giving an opportunity to Colombian society to heal,” Álvaro Javier Riascos Gómez says. He had already collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) since 2015 within different initiatives, but it was in 2018 that he began to serve with the UNDP Country Office as a UN Volunteer. For almost two years, this volunteer was in charge
of monitoring the Reincorporation Process of former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) members in the Department of Cauca, in western Colombia. Álvaro served as a technical assistant and worked very closely with the governmental Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN).

The main goal of the initiative is to facilitate the integration of those who have declared their intention to reject violence, stop fighting and join the social, economic and political life of the country, as well as to promote the understanding of the local population and the reparation of open wounds within the civil society.

"This process entails many challenges for the Colombian people and for the government, and it is essential to have the support of all the actors involved," Álvaro shares. "At the same time, everything we did was also linked to other more general tasks of UNDP, such as the positioning of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda through training workshops for public officials and civil society organizations."

Such a complex scenario requires many factors to be taken into consideration simultaneously, and this is where the experience of the UN agencies and the skills of the volunteers can prove to be most useful. "A multi-stakeholder body called the Cauca Debate Alliance was created to promote dialogue, academic analysis, accountability and social control around strategic issues for the territory, such as the implementation of the Peace Agreement to end the armed conflict and build a stable and lasting peace," Álvaro explains.

"I participated in the reincorporation process in the department of Cauca, enabling collaboration between the institutional framework, academia, civil society and international cooperation bodies. Since its inception, the process has helped former FARC combatants join short and medium-term productive projects in the different Territorial Areas for Training and Reintegration. --Álvaro Javier Riascos Gómez, UN Volunteer with UNDP, Colombia"
As asked about the main challenges that he and the rest of his team faced during those two years, Álvaro acknowledges that it was not easy to get local communities to accept without resentment those who until recently wielded weapons. "To solve this, we carried out several recreational activities, group meetings and awareness workshops. In addition, it was important that we ensured that people who had been living on illicit businesses felt that they could make a living as civilians in the Colombian countryside, already heavily burdened by the lack of economic opportunities, the precariousness of health services and other long-unresolved problems," he says with a suddenly serious tone of voice, then continues. "From my point of view, the biggest challenge was breaking the FARC ex-members’ military mindset, getting them to stop thinking in those terms that made it very difficult for them to make their own decisions and accept how life out of their former organization works, due to the absence of collaborative vision and democratic values."

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc, and it may take years to regain ground in areas where huge strides had been made with great effort. "It is estimated that Colombia’s poverty index will grow this year, and we must adjust our goals to these new circumstances to try to recover from this pothole as soon as possible," Álvaro states. In the rural regions where this UNV serves, like Cauca, there is not much insertion of internet networks, and communication between the UNDP team and local authorities has been complex in recent months.

"We are working on innovative solutions, such as strengthening community radio stations, which people are used to and reaches very remote areas. Sometimes the best solutions are offline. -- Álvaro Javier Riascos Gómez

Along with this, coordination processes are being developed together with the government to support various projects aimed at landing the Development Programs with a Territorial Approach (PDET) in the municipalities. They are also joining efforts to prepare a comprehensive report that accounts for the status of the SDGs in the region and the effects of the pandemic on the achievement of the established targets.
Today, Álvaro is involved in other activities that UNDP is carrying out in the country. "Since May 2020, I have been serving as a territorial link within the ‘Alliances for Human Security’ initiative, which will be implemented in the municipalities of Tumaco and El Charco in the Department of Nariño and seeks to strengthen the human security agendas in these areas. “Our goal is creating value chains, as well as promoting community action and entrepreneurship as agglutinating actors to boost economic and social processes able to enhance the lives of people in these regions,” Álvaro declares with a smile. “We are assisting the government and the Colombian people in generating opportunities for all."

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- COVID-19 • Coronavirus

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals