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SNAPSHOT

## Land for Peace in Colombia

The Key to Ending Bogotá's War With the FARC

Oliver Kaplan and Michael Albertus

*OLIVER KAPLAN is Lecturer at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver.*

*MICHAEL ALBERTUS is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. Their research can be read [here](#) [1]. [1]*



*A FARC rebel monitors the delivery of released hostages from a cocoa plantation. (Jaime Saldarriaga / Courtesy Reuters)*

Even as Colombian troops face off against rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the jungle, negotiators from both sides have been making headway in peace talks in Havana. The issues on the agenda include the FARC's participation in the country's political process, drug trafficking, and the government's payment of reparations to victims of forced displacement during the armed conflict. For some months now, though, Colombian officials and FARC representatives have been focusing chiefly on land reform as the key to remedying Colombia's high levels of economic and social inequality -- a main driver of the conflict.

In an encouraging sign, the two parties are expected to announce the contours of a preliminary agreement on land

issues this month. But for this agreement to lead to a lasting peace, the parties should look to examples of past negotiations in Guatemala and El Salvador and focus as much on implementation as on the content of the deal itself.

Going into the talks, the FARC's position on land was less revolutionary than it had historically been. Previously, it had advocated confiscating all latifundios (large farms) and turning them over to the poor. The government, for its part, insisted on protecting property rights and mechanizing agriculture to increase food production, which would have meant more competition for small farmers. Although the FARC's rhetorical attacks on what it calls the "oligarchy" continue, the organization has limited its claims to only those latifundios that are unproductive. And those demands substantially overlap with new rural development laws that the Colombian Ministry of Agriculture has proposed.

On paper, then, the FARC and the Colombian government are not so far apart. That does not mean, however, that peace is assured. There are a few real sticking points. Whereas the FARC has noted its opposition to foreign investment in the countryside, the government sees foreign investment as a way to build on the success of the Free Trade Agreement it recently signed with the United States and to help develop Colombia's agricultural sector. But the FARC is wary that foreign involvement in agribusiness and extractive industries will lead to the exploitation and displacement of peasants. The government has demurred, claiming that foreign investment is outside the parameters of the current negotiating agenda. In return, the FARC has noted its intention to protect and expand special regions known as "peasant reserve zones," a program that the government originally created to support peasant collective farms but is now hesitant to expand for fear that such spaces will become ungovernable.

The FARC is right to bring up the foreign investment and peasant reserves now: Our research shows that, in the past, partial, incomplete land reforms have made conflict worse, not better. In the 1960s, for example, the town of Saravena in the northeastern department of Arauca was colonized by peasant farmers from other departments as part of the government's Arauca Project #1. Over 200,000 hectares were titled as plots for these settlers, who also received seeds and other items that would bolster their productivity, as well as public goods such as paved roads to help transport their produce to market. But reforms stalled in the 1990s, when the region's land manager lost the national government's support. The dead end frustrated peasant organizations and led to wider conflict in Saravena and nearby communities.

Implementation problems are not unique to Saravena. A recent illustration in *Semana*, a weekly Colombian magazine, portrayed Colombia's agrarian reform agency, INCODER, as being locked in a straitjacket. INCODER is sitting on a large backlog of unresolved land disputes, many of which pit peasant claimants against large landowners and criminal bands. The agency has clashed with other ministries and local judges and politicians, who have sometimes failed to cooperate in resolving land disputes. They have at times, for example, put in place unnecessary and even illegal administrative roadblocks such as requests for original deeds of sale. The graphic in *Semana* thus aptly underscored the belief among many Colombians that the institutions charged with implementing any land reform agreement will fail to deliver.

How, then, can both sides come together and agree to give small farmers access to land while also allowing responsible and fair foreign investment? Examples from other Latin American countries that emerged from civil conflicts rooted in land issues offer guidance.

In Guatemala, a brutal civil war sparked by the unequal distribution of land simmered for 30 years before the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, an umbrella organization representing the four strongest guerrilla groups, entered into negotiations with the government. The two sides finally reached a deal in 1996 after a decade of UN-brokered negotiations. The peace accords stipulated that land should serve a social function. To that end, the parties created a land agency, Fontierras, that would both ensure the rural poor's access to land and grant official land titles to rural landholders.

Today, Guatemala's land access program provides credits and cheap loans for peasants to buy land. The program also provides subsidies to rural communities to help them capitalize their farms. Between 1998, when the program started, and 2010, a total of 94,251 hectares of land were transferred to peasants. And when conflicts over land have arisen, the Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs has mediated disputes and even purchased land for displaced peasant communities. Although Guatemala still suffers from violence due to drug cartel activity, it has not relapsed into civil war. And although Fontierras receives less funding than it needs, and only marginally improves inequality, it has helped alleviate pressing land disputes that could be tinder for wider conflict.

Land reform played a similar role in El Salvador's civil war, which raged for 12 years before a negotiated settlement ended the fighting in 1992. As part of the deal, ex-combatants from both sides as well as civilian supporters of the country's main guerrilla group received land. The land transfer program combined government and market forces. Private owners and cooperatives with space for more members voluntarily sold off plots. El Salvador's national Land Bank served as broker. During the first six years after the peace accords, ten percent of the country's agricultural land was transferred through the program to applicants. By 2000, there were over 36,000 beneficiaries. The program was far from perfect, but levels of violence in El Salvador are lower than during the civil war, and violence is now concentrated in urban areas rather than in the countryside.

The experiences of Guatemala and El Salvador show that market-based reforms are a viable option for gaining consensus among negotiating parties and getting land to the tiller. Although such reforms do not guarantee decreases in rural inequality, their demand-driven approaches ameliorate the most destabilizing factors of land conflicts -- namely, widespread land invasions and property disputes. The shortcomings of Guatemala's and El Salvador's reforms are equally instructive. Without sufficient monitoring, resources, and mechanisms to broadly enforce an agreement, land reforms will likely be incomplete and lead to renewed conflict. So for the FARC to sign on the dotted line, the Colombian government will have to persuade the group that it is ready and capable of faithfully implementing any agreement.

To ease a bargain, the government should allow the FARC to save face. The group should be able to take credit for government proposals even though some of them might already be part of the government's own plans. That will help gain the support of guerrilla group members to back a deal. By the same token, the FARC should tone down its calls for "revolutionary agrarian reform" to simply "agrarian reform." This subtle but substantial shift would make the demand more acceptable to the Colombian middle class and elites, who would, in turn, also back the deal.

To ensure that the promises of implementation are credible, the international community should step in. Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela, Mexico, the United States, France, Norway, Spain, the Organization of American States, the European Union, and the United Nations have all spoken out in support of the negotiations, but so far there has been no clear roadmap for how they might contribute. One option is for them to develop an international

verification mechanism to track the progress on the titling of land, the restitution of land to victims of forced displacement , and aid to the rural sector in the form of agricultural inputs, credits, and investment in infrastructure. The structure could be modeled after existing development programs and efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants back into society. Such a verification system would help hold the government accountable for implementation of land policies in the eyes of both the Colombian public and the international community. Donors, meanwhile, could match the Colombian government's own investments in land purchases and loans.

A lasting peace is within reach, but only if the final agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC is credible and enduring. It may not be revolutionary, but it could be transformational.

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