PLAN COLOMBIA Defeating the FARC-EP

Engaging Indigenous and Traditional Society and Governance Republic of Colombia

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Pueblo Indians of the northern Amazon Jungle Basin

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Advanced Social Science R&D *for Non-Lethal*
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Psychological Anthropology

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Abstract: This research study employs the use of participatory action research (PAR) as a modality of civil-military engagement that is aimed at the resolution of violent intrastate conflict. The use of PAR as a means of engagement to counter the ongoing narco-insurgency of the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Front's southern block was a departure from the kinetic based praxis of standard counterinsurgency operations. The research study is based on a 14-month partnership between an American combat advisory team, a host nation social development agency called *Acción Social*, and the national security forces assigned to the state of Caquetá, in southern Colombia, South America. The partnership was funded by Plan Colombia, a multibillion-dollar aid program funded by the United States Congress to fight terrorism, drug cartels and stabilize the society of Colombia (Johnson, 2001). The American combat advisor team was supplied by the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) based at Fort Bragg, NC.[1]

Qualitative Field Research – United States Army Special Operations Command, United States Combat Advisor Mission in Caquetá, Republic of Colombia 2006 - 2007

[1] This research report was first written as part of the Defense Intelligence Agency's LREC program, while teaching and researching at the National Intelligence University, Department of African Studies, Ambassador Cindy Courvile, PhD, Department Chair.

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Introduction

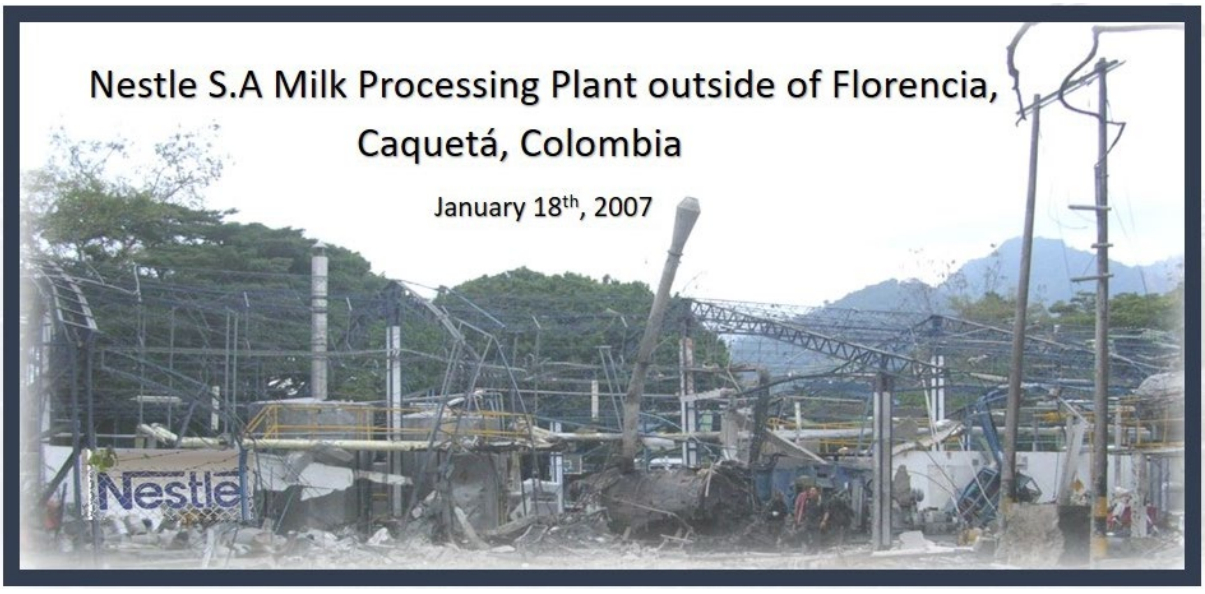
The United States Departments of Defense and State rely on civil-military teams of trainers, planners and advisors to assist friendly foreign nations with their internal defense. These men and women are often key components of our national foreign policy strategy to mitigate or reduce intra-state violence. The research methods or models that these teams use to implement and adjust their strategies during their mission are often inadequate or ill-suited to meet their needs. Teams use a combination of empirical and post-positivist research to assess their tactics or strategies against the expected development of the host community. Despite limited success at meeting their assigned goals, most teams continue to repeat their pre-planned approach to advising or training irrespective of success or failure until their mission time is complete and they return to their originating station[2]. These teams operate in unique biospheres where geography, geology, climate, cultural identity and historical narrative create conditions that directly determine the probability of success of any single approach. As well, the composition, mission and temperament of each team provides additional significant variables that are ignored at the risk of mission success and the public funding that made such a mission possible. This essay recounts a successful use of qualitative research that was used to shape and adapt one such team's mission in the provincial department of Caquetá in southern Colombia. Caquetá is one of three departments (or states) of southern Colombia that are within the Amazon Jungle Basin and are home to

[2] Based on personal experience on three continents and nine countries; such teams that have primarily a technical training mission such as maintenance, manufacturing or entry level skill sets have a considerably higher success rate than those assigned to whole of government missions required for countering insurgencies in under-governed territories.

the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Front's Southern Block (FARC)[3]. The war for control of the towns, municipalities and hearts and minds of the people of these states has lasted for nearly half a century. Their homes and farms are the battlefields of the longest running insurgency in the Americas. Against this magnitude of violent conflict, how does one team specializing in internal defense and development help to win the hearts and minds of a battered population and secure them from a ruthless narco-insurgency bent on maintaining the status quo for the next half century?

The Teófilo Forero Mobil Column & the Nestle Milk Plant

In the early morning hours of January 17th, 2007, insurgent fighters belonging to the FARC's Teófilo Forero Mobil Column (or TFMC) blew up the Nestle Milk processing plant in the village of El Doncello, Department of Caquetá, southern Colombia. The insurgent cell hijacked a milk truck, loaded it with explosives and drove it up to the plant docking platform. When it exploded, it destroyed Caquetá's primary milk processing plant and brought milk processing for the departments' dairy farmers to less than 30% of capacity. Sources confided to military and police investigators that plant officials had recently become confident enough in the security of the Department of Caquetá to begin refusing to pay the routine extortion demands of the FARC's 15th Front and TFMC's 3rd, 4th and 6th Companies operating in western central Caquetá. The destruction of the plant's facilities was accompanied by the wounding and killing of several plant workers



[3] The three states where the Southern Block operates are Caquetá, Los Amazonas and Putumayo. The latter two states together border the countries of Ecuador, Peru and Brazil.

who were on duty at the time. The destroyed milk processing plant occupied a central position economically for the department's dairy farmers. Nestle corporation established the plant and its subsidiary holding tanks throughout the department decades earlier to support the introduction of high quality lines of dairy cattle to the regions farmers. By the time of the attack, dairy farming and processing accounted for more than forty percent of the department's revenue producing industry. The loss of the plant was central in that without its ability to condense the milk produced by the regions' farmers, there was no way to transport the bulk product to refineries in the US and Europe. The resulting outcry over the bombing was substantial. Out of this anger over the targeting of the central economic lifeline of the region was the creation of a willingness to change on the part of social stakeholders within Caquetá. This change was to begin with the establishment of a long overdue public-private sector partnership for infrastructure security and the emergence of participatory governance deeper into the jungles of southern Colombia.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a method of inquiry that supports an intent to instigate and/or adopt change within sociological structures of human community. As a form of qualitative inquiry, PAR serves as a method of responding to sociological dilemmas where human systems of thought and action fail to achieve desired results (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The American advisory team until now had been working apply a model typology of support commonly known as Internal Defense & Development, or IDAD, that was generated in Washington DC as part of Plan Colombia policy formulation. With the destruction of the plant, the department's public and private leadership faced the specter of large scale unemployment and the resultant inroads of insurgent forces armed with cocaine funded payrolls. Keenly concerned among these leaders was the military commander of the 6th Colombian Division and the presidentially appointed director of *Acción Social*, a domestic version of a cross between USAID and HUD. The Colombian military commander, Major General Germain Galvis, was a recent deputy commandant of the Inter-American Defense College in Washington DC and was versed in modern methods of social development as a respite against insurgent violence. The Director of the Caquetá *Acción Social* was Diana Carolina Tamayo, a tenacious advocate of social stabilization and empowerment and a presidential appointee of Alvarez Uribe. These two leaders of security and development were to play an important role in the participatory action research that followed.

The American team was originally modeled to work as a combat advisor and training asset for the Colombian Army Division based in Caquetá, with an infantry and police brigade each in Caquetá, Putumayo and Los Amazonas departments (Christian, 2007a). Most research conducted in the field by such teams served the purpose of measuring training efficacy and operational success in kinetic operations against an armed foe. While development issues remained important to any counterinsurgency effort, the Colombian president's fielding of *Acción Social* and other similar organizations suggested that they grasped the fundamentals of social rebalancing. The bombing of the Nestle plant was considered a failure on different levels by the American team and most organizations in Caquetá precisely because of this fact. If the development side of IDAD was covered by advanced models of stabilization such as *Acción Social* and the defense side was covered by the American advisory team supporting US trained Colombian officers and soldiers, then how could the insurgents have succeeded so spectacularly? While just about everyone blamed just about everyone else, the fact that the insurgency destroyed such a vital piece of infrastructure made us all stop and understand that we had a much larger problem than just finding the responsible parties. The concerns of local military and police leaders over finding the culprits faded as layers of public and private leaders came to understand that the problem was deeply imbedded in the social order; the sociological discourse that served to give everything and everyone a place in time and space. The psychological sociological comforts of society were broken and only then were the participants willing to engage each other authentically.

Establishing the
Gran Comité de Caquetá Occidental

Colombian Army 6th Division G5 &
Acción Social:

The new beginning manifested itself shortly after the attack on the Nestle plant when the director of *Acción Social*, Diana Carolina, approached the American advisor team to discuss options for assessing the damage to the economy, social stability, perceptions of safety, and the emerging acrimony between government agencies and levels of government. In the living room of the American Team's station house in Florencia, we began exploring the dysfunctional lines

of communication and coordination in Caquetá as well as examining the underlying reasons. As the discussions between Diana's team and the American team continued, the military division's civil-military operations officers joined in and the conversation widened and deepened. Where previous such discussions focused on single solution hypothesis to discreet problems, these discussions centered on complex relationships and the need to study them in an ongoing process of planning, action, assessment and adaptation with a larger participating constituency.

Participatory Action Research as a Cyclical Process

> *There is no need to sally forth, for it remains true that those things which make us human are, curiously enough, always close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground … we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us —Walt Kelly, June 1953*

As with the rest of Colombia, everywhere in Caquetá that governance is responsive, effective and coordinated, the insurgency has retreated. Likewise, everywhere that governance is unresponsive, ineffective and uncoordinated, the insurgency has deepened its roots and taken control of the social, economic and political life of the people. This we discovered in the village of Puerto Rico where the FARC nominated a candidate for mayor and surprising to no one, the candidate won the election with better than a 90% majority vote. His first action was to demand removal of the state and federal police and military forces securing the town's north-south corridors against narcotics trafficking. With this action and the Nestle plant bombing, we had finally discovered the problem and the problem was us. We finally had to stop what we were doing and begin research on ourselves and how we were trying to build well governed sociological spaces free of narco-insurgents.

Our first act was instinctive; to find a way to bring formal and informal leaders together in what I thought of as a 'dirty forum' where people under stress of fear, uncertainty and loss could come together to create solutions. I, we felt that we needed to form a structure that would compact time and space sufficiently for us to research and understand the problems we were having with our communication, coordination, cooperation, and leadership decision making. The department of Caquetá already

constituted a sociological structure that covered the northern portions of the Amazon Jungle Basin. This structure contained a democratically elected departmental government and separate municipal governments of the towns of Florencia, Cartagena, Puerto Rico, Paujill, Montanita, San Vicente, and El Doncello. All but Puerto Rico was an elected government; Puerto Rico was now under military administration after the *Alcade* (mayor) was ousted for being on the steering committee of the FARC's Southern Block. In addition to the department and municipal governments, the 6th Colombian Army division headquarters, its 12th Infantry Brigade and a Brigade of Police operated throughout the department as security services battling the insurgency. Finally, a dense network of public and private assistance organizations spanned the socio-political spectrum from the leftist based *Fundacion Picachos* (indigent housing) to the *Camara de Comercio* (chamber of commerce). The size and complexity of the many sectors of public-private, security-development, and business-labor structures that continually competed with an underground insurgency kept us from seeing and understanding the problems that continued to cause us to fail in building sustainable governance. We needed a research and mediation structure that replicated in real life the actual participation, but reduced the space of travel and time of communication. A working group or committee with representation by every entity would allow us to bring together a diverse set of stakeholders and use that structure to ask questions, hypothesize ideas, initiate experimental action and evaluate results. A day of discussion and two days of follow-on meetings and telephone calls resulted in the joint announcement by the Governor of Caquetá and the Commanding General of the 6th Colombian Army Division of the establishment of the '*Gran Comité de cooperación de Caquetá Occidental*'.

The Circle of Participation

> *"the distinctive viewpoint of PAR [recognizes that the] domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production but also over the means of knowledge production, including... the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge ..."* (Rahman, 1985, p. 119)

If you draw a circle on any map that contains human life and activity, you will discover a sociological system of shared meaning. If you look deeply enough into that circle, you will begin to see shared methods of how the inhabitants communicate that meaning and of how they create activities that express that meaning physically. After a

while, this array of activity and communication will resemble stories. These stories form a vast and cluttered narrative that the inhabitants of the circle use to memorialize their existence and connect them back to their shared meanings. Prior to you ever looking into the circle then, there exist dense patterns of participatory activity that are the subject of participatory action research. Sociological discord exists when the participatory activity is in conflict; when the meanings of objects or ideas is disputed, or one person/group's story tends to overwrite another's, or the participants dispute the pathways of communication or even the structure of the sociological order itself. In such cases, the conflict and the resolution are within the sociological structure itself and solutions cannot be imported wholesale from without. How the participants think about how they communicate, interact, structure their narrative or share their meanings are phenomenological points of interest that can only be studied within the participant group while the group is participating.

Such research does not study the action of participation only, nor does it only study the motivation for the participatory actions, but also studies the psychological and emotive creation of the motivation for the action of participation across the entire sociological structure. And since the meaning is shared by the insiders across such a large segment of humans, their breadth of participation must be representative and proportional to the actual participation by all humans within the circle. The validity of the approach to this method of research is that research to sociological dysfunction occurs in the world of meaning, interpretation, and emotion. These are playing fields that no researcher can play in without an invitation as the external interpretation of meaning and emotion to action is an unstable research platform ethically as well as practically. To the contrary, it is less the researcher inviting the participants to the project as it is the participants who invite the collaboration of a trusted researcher.

Determining the participants to the *Gran Comité* quickly became the first of many challenges in the PAR case study. Every sociological structure has architects and engineers who created the base model. They are the original investors to use Weinstein's (2007) model of insurgency. The insurgents are newer investors offering an alternative sociological structure that would rebalance the fundamental system in a way that would possibly create an entirely new system of social ordering. The initial entrants into the *Gran Comité* tended to be the original investors who had the most to lose if the alternative version ever won the military battle for control of the circle. Such investors tended to include the chamber of commerce, the business community, the security

services, the elected governments (well, except for Puerto Rico), and the government sanctioned or owned development concerns such as *Acción Social.* These original investors feared that participation by later investors "in social actions and struggles, and the integration of research into these processes… implies that the change of the status quo becomes the starting point for a scientific quest" (Mies, 1983, p. 125). It was to these early investors to determine where to draw the lines of inclusion versus exclusion in forming and staffing the *Gran Comité*, and they attempted to do so as restrictively as possible. Most of these original investors viewed the insurgency and those individuals and groups left of center as inflicted with a disease of Marxist-Lenninist-Communism despite the fall of that type of political ideology for some time. Their alternative position was one of guilt and innocence, a powerful dominant discourse in sociological structures deeply immersed in Catholic dogma.

The debate was never for full inclusion, but rather for sufficient inclusion to ease the burden of cordoning off too large a chunk of society that once expelled, would be left without any choice but the full alignment with the hardcore narco-insurgency. The opposing argument was for a more restricted inclusion out of a fear of losing control over the process of sociological structure redesign as the original investors. Along these lines of thinking, if the participation of such leftist organizations as *Fundación Pichachos* were allowed, they might rebalance the sociological ordering to some central position that would have the effect of lessening the value of the original investments. These arguments normally came out as security issues such as information security and the like. Against the objections of devaluing original investments in sociological structure was the growing awareness of lost time and the theory that 50% of something was far better than 100% of nothing.

These original investor participants in the *Gran Comité* were beginning to understand that the least vested participants in the circle could devalue the sociological investment indefinitely. What changed was the arrival of human rights, multi-cultural social protections in the constitution and the power of television and the digital camera to reduce most of the shadows available to extra-judicial activities. The possibilities of what could be accomplished by the *Gran Comité* was no longer dependent upon the artificial sociological construct maintained by the original investment society or "on the application of methodological rules, but on its potential to orient the processes of praxis towards progressive emancipation and humanization" (Mies, 1983, p. 125). The emancipation and humanization within an adaptive version of the original Colombian social model finally became preferable to the continuation of exclusion that provided the insurgent alternative with its labor, fighter and intelligence pool.

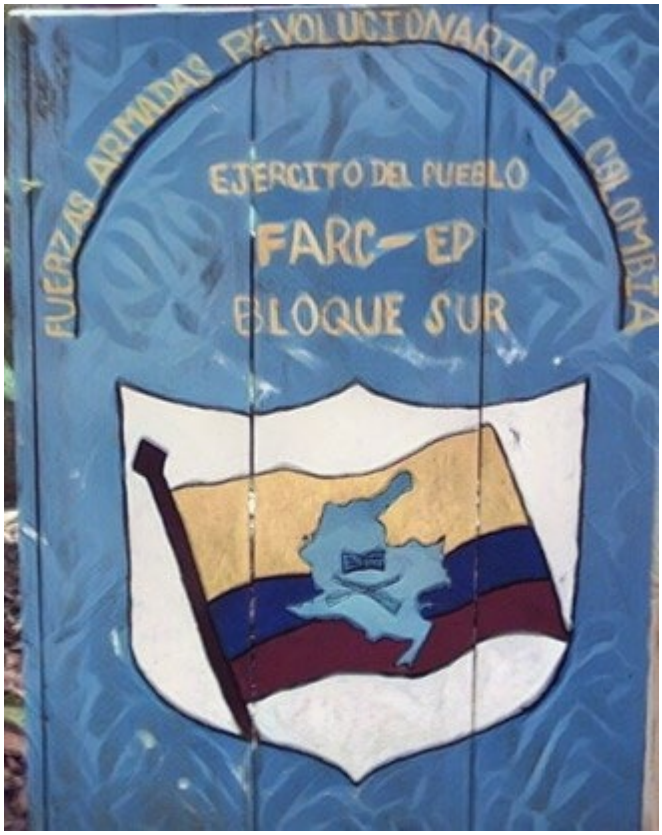
This did not however, end the debate over the ethics of the participatory structuring of the *Gran Comité*. The fear of information security by the police and military services was echoed by some of the more at risk left wing participants who feared exposure of their survival networks to the security apparatus. As well, the American advisor and *Acción Social* members faced subtle accusations of national, regional or international agendas that were not in harmony with those of the local or departmental. Similarly, members of the Catholic clergy, long grown suspicious of the helping hand of American imperialism struggled with accepting the participation of the most at risk social elements that the church had been safeguarding at the risk of their own lives and freedom.

Manzo & Brightbill (2007) note that "Participation will not, in and of itself, make research 'ethical'; the approach can be deployed to support a researcher's pre-existing agenda, or to further the interests of a particular group" (p. 39). This warning was clearly relevant as the American advisors and *Acción Social* worked to move participants into positions where they would at least have a chance to engage each other in dialogue.

As American advisors operating in violent zones of conflict, we rely on participatory action research as an approach to the advisory process. In this approach, we "pursue research and other activities with communities (or traditional research 'subjects') as collaborating partners, with the primary goal of working towards positive changes on issues identified by the collective (Kindon et al., 2007)" (Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007, p. 305). Issues identified by the collective *Gran Comité* included abatement of kidnappings,

bombings, political assassinations, and conversion of the economic structure away from supporting the production, security and transportation of cocoa base to markets in Venezuela and Ecuador.

The ethical discussions that raged within the American advisory team and between elements of the original investors were "messy, behind-closed-door conversations [to] negotiate the ethical quandaries" (p. 305) of our approach and objectives. These conversations weighed the balance of suffering against the possibilities of future social development with the participant stakeholders as parties to conflict fighting for balance and inclusion. The American advisors as would-be mediators sought ethical sanctuary in unbiased support for balanced defense and development. Often the balance between acceptance and rejection; inclusion or exclusion rested on the meaning of being Colombian, or Spanish, or Catholic, or Pueblo, or peasant farmer versus urban businessman. It was this interpretation of meaning that most often left us in silence reflecting on the possibilities of the narratives in conflict that lay before us.



Finally, the lines of participation in the *Gran Comité* were drawn that included most, but not all the possible participatory candidates that we had offered for consideration. This compromised charter of acceptance and exclusion left the Colombian security and development services to negotiate the rights and participation of the least vested members of the circle. Of course, the problems did not end even for those segments that made the inclusionary cut. Invitations to participate came with high minded refutations of integrity and petty refusals to sit next to each other that continued to threaten the fragile experiment in participatory action research. As the program of the *Gran Comité* got underway, sub-committee assignments were divided up amongst the participants to begin the process of researching poverty, homelessness, attitudes of inclusion versus the humiliation of exclusion, alienation and the attendant

shame that generated combat support for the *Teófilo Forero* Mobile Column and the 15th Front.

The Action within

> *The challenge for PAR researchers who are serious about social change is to think through how to effectively provoke action by research that engages, that reframes social issues theoretically, that nudges those in power, that feeds organizing campaigns, and that motivates audiences to change both the way they think and how they act in the world* (Cahill & Torre, 2007, p. 205)

Action research is at its most powerful and at it most precarious in its focus on change at the personal and collective level. I suggest that these two adjectives that describe action research are necessarily linked because the power to improve is directly correlated with the power to corrupt. Participatory action research intends to cause action as part of the research endeavor. Cahill & Torre (2007) assert that "if PAR is to make a meaningful contribution to social change, beyond an 'armchair revolution' (Freire 1996), the impact of our research – action! – is of critical concern" (p. 204). Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge (2007) push further by suggesting that participatory action research can be a form of social activism that can address critical theorist views on power relationships and the forcible movement of social segmentation. Where such participatory action research is conducted as part of the ongoing internal dialogue between social segments or cultural sectors of the political state, the change that ultimately results would be no less valid than political action research conducted by the major political parties of a modern democracy. Participatory action research offers unique advantages to other types of research.

One such advantage is that the actual learning processes and decision-making cycles of those whom such research would ostensibly most benefit are a working part of the knowledge development. Such upfront and intimate collaboration can ensure that the research data and conclusions are culturally attuned to the direct needs of the individuals involved. Given the involvement of American advisors working primarily on behalf of internal defense and development, one might be tempted to argue that PAR in this case was not research at all but an example of government consultancy. Such consultancy might use the term research to "provide its proponents with a cover of legitimacy and credibility that hides the highly subjective nature of its design, data collection and analysis" (Dover, 2008). But the basis of distinction for the use of PAR as

a research methodology must be the depth and efficacy of the knowledge learned, synthesized and created as a means of stabilizing society and reducing disabling conflict.

The reality of participatory action research on the ground can lead to conclusions that such methods are difficult and have uncertain cost-benefit ratios of effort to result. Most such projects have a disparate ratio of effort to apparent success and the informal rubric is that 20 pounds of effort yields 2 ounces of positive results. Additionally, the ethical considerations that plagued the organizing original investors of the *Gran Comité* continued throughout the life of the American advisor team's association with the group in Caquetá. The earlier attempts by participants at narrowing the sectors of participation transitioned to attempts at controlling information, restricting activities and investigating participants who had become too vocal. Cooke & Kothari (2001) suggest that participatory action research may harbor deeply fallacious assumptions that serve to ultimately transform this type of action research into a new form of tyranny.

Disadvantaged participants induced to participate in action research can quickly find themselves in a situation of relative power imbalance. Such an imbalance can remove them from access to decision making regarding the allocation of research subjects and tasks and the editing and publishing of results that favor the status quo or those participants able to control the forum. The weaker-power participants in the *Gran Comité* faced an additional hurdle related to their representation of the mass of unemployed or underemployed campesinos; they possessed little stake in the ongoing social order that the government was trying to reform as well as protect. Their entry card into the *Gran Comité* by the original investors was the very real and continuing threat of their membership's recruitment into the various elements of the ongoing narco-insurgency. This made them a simultaneous source of research

information for the development side of the *Gran Comité* as well as a potential vein of intelligence for the defensive side. As both research base and intelligence source, participants representing the poorest base of Caquetános found themselves in a position of having to alter or mask information on an ongoing basis so as not to open themselves up to charges of criminal support of the insurgency even as they attempted to lay out their developmental needs and the possible consequences of failure to engage them before the FARC recruiters did.

Cooke & Kothari outline the purpose of participatory approaches to development as a process of centering the population in the developmental process by "encouraging beneficiary involvement in interventions that affect them and over which they previously had limited control or influence" (p. 5). In an ongoing insurgency, this process of centering the population is synonymous to military campaigns that seek to 'win the hearts and minds' of the at-risk population. This is a double-edged sword however because the very impetuous that pushes the original investors to consider expanding their hold over society and including additional segments of society is the same impetuous that they seek to eliminate by force.

Assembling the Participants to Collective Action

For all elements of Colombian society, the growing rule of law that was accompanying social rebalancing efforts was both protection and threat when dealing with social elements that may be tainted by an illegal narco-insurgency. Even the development lead, *Acción Social* had to be ever cautious as they could not afford to have information flowing to them that would place them in a conflict of interest position vis-à-vis the Colombian government and the recruiting base of the FARC insurgency. In what Guijt & Shah (1998) call a myth of community, the department of Caquetá masked complex arrangements of social segmentation and power position driven by intimately crafted discourses on ethnic and cultural identity. Open violation of this discourse by privileged members of *Acción Social* would likely be thought of as betrayal and dealt with accordingly regardless of the protections of the office of the Presidency.

The only participant members of the *Gran Comité* not subject to prosecution by Colombian officials was the American advisory team. As such, they found themselves in the default position of screening routine information that passed between those social sectors closest to recruitment by the FARC and the *Gran Comité*. This seemingly harmless action research placed them in the window of interest of several intelligence

vectors even as they remained closely allied to the federal security services. It was a cautious game, and not one to be played lightly, or for very long. Examples of this action research might consist of accompanying public welfare organizations to interview the residents of existing and future neighborhoods to determine their status and needs; encouraged to talk by the presence of the de facto neutral parties on the *Gran Comité* – the American advisors. Research information gained in this manner might, for instance, implicate the motives of the chamber of commerce in trying to switch undesirable public lands designated for business development (well outside of town) for other public lands designated for housing and subsistence farming lots much closer to municipal services.

These neutral personnel however had informal bounties by the FARC Southern block that made security a serious issue[4]. The team's security (called an *escolta)* was made up of 3-4 members of a local company of *Agrupación Fuerzas Especiales Urbano y Rural* (AFEUR) or Colombian Special Forces that the team had trained. Meetings with many of the development side of the *Gran Comité* members quickly became problematic in that they would not meet with us if we were accompanied by our *escolta* or otherwise followed by Colombian intelligence for fear of raids or reprisals. Ultimately, the team had to protect itself and operate with extreme caution which militated against efficacy of its other operations[5].


Teteye, Putumayo, southern Colombia – USSOF team with Escolta

While all of this suggests that the participatory action research conducted by the *Gran Comité* was possibly problematic, a broader perspective demonstrates otherwise. Several important factors led to the decision to use participatory action research within Caquetá, especially changes at the international, national, regional and local levels of

[4] At the time there were already three American's being held hostage by the FARC's Central Committee in Northeastern Caquetá in a jungle river hideout. They were rescued in a daring raid in 2008 shortly after the events related here.
[5] This is not to suggest that the American advisor team was in any danger whatsoever from the Colombian government organizations, but rather our requirements to forego their security protection created security issues as we attempted to conduct the participatory action research with local public service organizations.

government and society. The first factor is attitudes towards the conflict in Colombia. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the opening of China to the world economy, international fear of communism as a successful ideological alternative eased. Also, as former international financiers of armed Marxist-Leninist movements ended subsidies, such insurgencies either negotiated settlements to their differences or sought alternative funding streams to replace the lost funding. In the case of the FARC, the central governing committee turned towards the existing narcotics production and trafficking cartels as their funding stream replacement[6]. Another factor was the new Colombian constitution passed by the national assembly in 1991 that changed Colombia's cultural identity towards multiculturalism, multilingualism, and participatory governance at the lowest levels of social ownership. Finally, political evolution of governance with the presidency of Alvarez Uribe changed the process of political access into a broadened sector with multi-party elections at the lowest levels of administration in Colombian society. Such structural, social and political changes were necessary before introducing participatory action research specifically because of the possibilities for the tyrannizing effects of participation that Cook and Kothari (2001) describe in participatory rural development (pp. 1-6). While the danger remains even for enlightened researchers planning for recognizing and restructuring process and procedure to avoid cooptation of the action research, the changes to structure, politics and society in Colombia made the use of PAR possible:

> *The requisite structural conditions for the transformative participatory process include a state that is responsive to its citizenry. The preference is for a civic republican state and innovative mechanisms for citizen-state engagement. With this in mind, it is acknowledged that the work of the pro-poor development worker should not always be with (or on) the poor, but building accountability to citizens in governmental and other social or political structures, with the intersection of participation and accountability as a focal point* (Christens & Speer, 2006).

[6] With the death of Manuel Marulanda in 2008, his successor, intellectual and committed communist Guillermo León Sáenz Vargas, alias 'Alfonso Cano' was forced to rely heavily upon the Eastern Front Commander, Jorge Briceño, infamously known as 'Mono Jojoy' who controlled the largest cocaine fields in Eastern Colombia, rivaling those of the Southern Block.

As the sociological structure of the department of Caquetá emerged from the absolute grip of the FARCs Southern Block in the early part of the 2000's, it found itself balancing between two counterinsurgency imperatives; defense and development. The integration of these two imperatives was a critical concern of the department's security services and its development organization as well as the elected governments of Caquetá and its eight municipalities. Even as the American advisory team worked to refine the kinetic based capabilities of the security services, the ability of those same security services to broaden their role into civil infrastructure identification, analysis and defense fell short. Pinpoint attacks on that same infrastructure by the insurgents only highlighted this shortcoming and disillusioned key parts of the economic sectors responsible for employment growth, a central part of the demobilization program. Within the security services, participatory action research yielded positive benefits when we established a series of interagency working groups consisting of the Federal Police, *Fiscalia* (like US Attorney General's Office), CTI (similar to US FBI), and the 12th Brigade of the 6th Infantry Division assigned to Caquetá. The participants had hitherto used assumptions and speculation regarding the seams of roles and responsibilities between their organizations and much lawlessness fell through these cracks. Their interagency coordination meetings served to establish mechanisms to coordinate their investigations; establish unified lists of suspects and cross level evidence sharing to build cases against key insurgent leaders and their collaborators within the municipalities. Action research allowed the participating members of the collective to propose methods or procedures specific to their department that provided for the greatest interoperation without loss of fidelity to their respective missions. For instance, when the Fiscalia became involved in the past was often a matter of accident. This resulted in their being unprepared to assemble the evidence in a timely manner to bring the case to court. The CTI, Federal Police and the 6th Division's Caquetá Anti-kidnapping and

Extortion Unit would also routinely investigate cases without coordination that at least once resulted in friendly fire incidents. By using research forums to explore and align common methodologies, the participants were able to propose, initiate and test solutions to aligning the missions of their various agencies.

Rebuilding the Nestle Milk Plant

The success of interagency PAR amongst the security and justice services operating in Caquetá quickly led to the development of a much broader action research organization; the *Gran Comité*. The formation of this organization was of such importance that the office of the Presidency dispatched representatives to observe several of the research forums and invited the United States Charge de Affairs to accompany him. The action research of the *Gran Comité* consisted of the 40 or so collaborators creating and presenting their organizations goals, objectives and obstacles to the success of their mission. When several of the collaborators had presented in succession, leaders of the defense and development sectors led the collaborators in discussion on the possibilities of integration and coordination and/or the need for additional research. As a collaborative body that was voluntarily assembled, there were significant attempts at collegiality even for participants whose world views were attuned to opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. As a collaborative body working in the home space of the longest running insurgency in modern history, the participants reflected towards each other the most refined aspects of segmented social conflict. Discussions between presentations involved claims and refutations of rights, responsibilities and obligations versus the lure of modernity or the return to lawlessness. At its best, the process of the *Gran Comité* was a dynamic mechanism for engagement between the interests of citizen and state, public and private, defense and development. Even the problem of the destroyed Nestle milk plant was addressed by the PAR forum. The representative from the Chamber of Commerce prevailed upon the plant's Director General to agree to meet with the dairy farmers in a series of working groups designed to negotiate processes and procedures to collate the base dairy product at the key sites around the department. The departmental governor worked with the military and police commanders to create

secret timetables for patrols between the farms, the milk collection sites and the main processing plant. Farmers would be able to time their movements of product to these patrol times which created continuous armed convoys that would elude continued FARC attacks on the milk industry. The timetables were produced weekly and distributed to the farmers and security services by the *Gran Comité*, ensuring tight control over the information to avoid IED placements against them.

As the police, military, farmers and PAR members of the *Gran Comité* evaluated the success of the security measures against the economic efficacy of milk distribution, continuous adjustments made by the participants involved continued to integrate protector and protected in what Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) call the action research spiral (pp. 564, Figure 23.1). Their model consists of a cyclical spiral of planning, acting & observing, reflecting followed by revised planning in a continuous process. The US military follows a similar process of planning, assessing and executing based on qualitative and quantitative indicators, albeit for a more direct-action approach to fieldwork (United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011). Kemmis & McTaggart stress that the participatory action research conducted by the participants during this cycle of plan-act/observe-reflect-revise plan model produce a pedagogical realignment of relationships between power holders and non-power holders based upon the action of successful practice rather than forced ideological prescription:

> *Through participatory action research, people can come to understand that – and how – their social and educational practices are located in, and are the product of, particular material, social, and historical circumstances that produced them and by which they are reproduced in everyday social interaction in a particular setting.* (2005, p. 565)

This suggests that a fundamental difference between PAR and governments' standard approach to internal defense and development is the acceptance and defense of the status quo of the power holders, even in sociological structures under stress of internal conflict. Internal defense and development schemas by the United States, European Union and even the United Nations have inherent avoidance complexes of non-interference in local matters even though their very presence is interference in local matters precipitated by their host's inability to resolve violent conflict. This avoidance complex often results in extended support to the very sociological alignments responsible for the conflict in the first place. By deepening the process of participatory action research to the inculcation of pedagogical processes of sociological power transformation based upon the cycle of plan-act/observe-reflect-revise plan, the

community under fire can create conditions that change the psychological basis for the original conflict. This is the inherent strength of participatory action research; it recognizes that the sociological structure is the basis of the research and cannot be overlooked if the research is to claim validity.

For the *Gran Comité*, changing the power balance was a difficult challenge fraught with fear on one side over loss of generational memory inherent in changing historical narratives and attacked on the other side as the bedrock of relative deprivation. One thing was sure; any attempts at pushing change too quickly as a condition of political expediency was doomed to failure. The success of the *Gran Comité* as a participatory action research vessel is of course relative to their progress without PAR. Issues of unemployment, fatherless households due to war casualties, lack of education, abandoned villages, economies centralized around too few industries, insufficient infrastructure, growing populations (due to medical advances) and a dying insurgency fueled by explosive profits from cocaine production are not simple problems to quantify or qualify much less resolve even with PAR. Each issue has roots within others and often any success only comes when the participants to action research figure out how to operate collectively against multiple fronts simultaneously. One such example of how the *Gran Comité* used PAR to do this was in regard to the issue of resettlement and return of refugees to their war-torn homes.

The dynamic of power in participatory action research

De Oppresso Liber

An imbalance of power plagued the participatory action research within the *Gran Comité* as the participants struggled to seek a balance between the social, political and economic segments within Caquetá. The participants who represented these population segments and their interests on the *Comité* were well matched in terms of education, experience and dedication, but their dialogue was mixed in with, and served as part of a larger discourse over, this balance between interests nationally. As part of its development, the *Gran Comité* conducted research not only within and between the social-political-economic segments of Caquetá, but within the *Comité* itself as a way of measuring attitudes and flexibility. The internal research consisted of communications and attitude surveys by the American advisors and *Acción Social,* designed to measure existing communication channels and blockages as part of mapping out the power dynamic within the *Comité* (Christian, 2007b).

These surveys demonstrated that remote as Caquetá was from the national capital of Bogota, the debates between labor and business; central control verses decentralization; and pure blood versus mixed blood continued to dominate the discourse through all levels of society. The contention amongst the participants on the *Gran Comité*; the alignment and realignment of members depending on the issue and on influences from the national discourse and the pressing of need from the constituents they represented constituted in itself a research dynamic of social and political practice. Within the public sphere, action research can serve the collective developmental interests of society in a practical manner when the balance of participation and agreement on the public good is already established, but the mechanism is failing. In contrast, participatory action research that calls for critical emancipatory action seeks a rebalance of social power and meaning within the public sphere:

> *Participatory action research aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination. Participatory action research aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints embedded in the social media through which they interact – their language (discourses), their modes of work and their social relationships of power in which they experience affiliation and difference, inclusion and exclusion* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 567).

Ubiquitous Statue of a Caucasian Angel Gabriel killing an indigenous colored Satan – found on most COLAR bases

This is dangerous, yet exciting research not to be underestimated in the volatility within the planning, action, observation or assessment processes. For instance, the new 1991 Colombian Constitution proclaims the Republic as a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-racial nation of equals. Yet the discourse remains aloof from such radical changes as evidenced by a statue at the entrance to the headquarters of the 6th Colombian Army Division in Florencia. A large statue of the Angel Gabrielle stands poised with his sword to slay the devil staring up in terror under the angels' left foot. In this statue, mirroring local and national discourse, Gabrielle is a white skinned Spaniard and the Devil is a black Afro-Colombian. The irony of white Spanish power structure trying

to lure nonwhite segments of Colombian society into the fold while continuing to frame the psychological sociological discourse in white superiority was not lost on the American advisory team but went entirely unnoticed by the members of *Acción Social.* Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) offer several cautionary notes for the PAR researcher that we found to be highly valid in our work in Caquetá. Among these were expectation management of what PAR could achieve; the role of the outside members of the PAR team and the requirements for a balance of power within the community as a necessary precondition for critical emancipatory action in PAR.

First, expectation management refers to acceptable rates of change. Psychologist Arnold Beisser (2006) suggests that adaptations of historical narratives sufficient to effect change in the psychological sociological structures of communities of people can require several generational cycles to acculturate the change without breaking historical memory and avoid violent resistance. While we have found that the actual time lengths necessary for introducing non-violent change varies considerably with the type of change, type of society and their ripeness for changes as solutions to their present dilemmas, the PAR researcher must understand that the changes envisioned often require the adaptation of many layers of (often hidden) historical narrative and generational memory to accommodate them. This assertion is based on the idea that the historical narrative we speak of is not actual history, nor is it simple narrative. It is instead a dream made real, a "parable" (Goldschmidt, 1977, p. 297) that cannot be easily pulled apart and rearranged:

> *Each history tells how the past, present, and anticipated future are of a fabric woven of the same cloth, how persistence of the immutable theme is assured in the face of endless variations. Every history offers instruction into how heroes are born and/or made, who qualifies as a culture hero, and the nature of heroism itself. History commemorates a people's victories, defeats, aspirations, disappointments, hopes and dreams. Events of even the remote past are personally experienced as though they had been directly branded on the human spirit in the present. A sense of history everywhere plays a monumental role in human affairs, so much so that history is rarely experienced as a sense but as inexpugnable fact in reality* (Stein, 1994, p. 173).

Within the participants collectively working in the *Gran Comité* the historical narratives constituted dreams-in-conflict and any changes had to be gentle renegotiations based upon balances of power that required mutual adaptation; mutual acceptances of both the changes wrought and the new positions that such changes

called the participants into. The heroic *mestizo guerilleó* resister of white Spanish colonial domination had to be reconciled with the heroic death of Second Lieutenant Gomez German-Alonso, both of whom are memorialized as sacrosanct symbols of historical identity (Christian, 2007a). Such delicate adaptations of the cultural dreams of two communities in conflict can only possible because of the discovery of ubuntu (Tutu, 1999), or the indelible interconnectedness of the two communities and their mutual dependency on each other for identity definition and memorialization. Ubuntu however is realistically dependent upon power balances as a condition for conflict ripeness for mediation and action. The power laden party to a conflict can only envision change when their hold over power is tenuous and slipping or they come to realize the possibilities of cultural and identity growth that are evident within the embrace of ubuntu. While none of the participants serving on the *Gran Comité* were in fact FARC insurgents, several participants represented those segments of the population that harbored sheltered and made possible the FARC's existence. The conflict was further ripened for acceptance of PAR by the combined participants when the American advisory team socialized economic presentations and forecasts by similar Brazilian communities just across the border. Such possibilities represented the very real securitization of each side's historical narrative and large group identity for themselves and for their children necessary for transmission of existential generational memory (Attias-Donfur & Wolff, 2003).

As neutral party members, the American advisory team could not try to represent one side to another without inculcating confusion over their role. Nor could they straddle the impossible divide of "research-activism dualism, with research seen as dispassionate, informed, and rational and with activism seen as passionate, intuitive and weakly theorized" without alienating one or both sides of the power balance equation. Instead, they had to represent each side back to itself in a reflective practice[7] of intimate collaboration where the power-realities of the 'other' was reinforced and the possibilities available to the 'intimate' were explored in trusting, heartfelt sessions of dialogue. The neutrality that is possible for those members of the PAR circle who are not vested in the large group identity of either side have both responsibilities and advantages. Such members have the responsibility to remove themselves from the PAR circle when those in power both assert dominion and dialogical control over the participation and action of the research. Self-removal serves as not only a valid measure

[7] See Robert Gerber (2011) Steps for using reflective practitioner action research methodology, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa

of voicing disapproval, but serves to illustrate the falsity of participation in the action research. The mere willingness by the American advisors to withdraw from the PAR circle provided a needed illumination and warning to the weaker members of the circle regarding the State's domination and control over their participation and action. While the establishment of the *Gran Comité* did not itself accomplish the task of rebalancing the sociological structure of the department, the organization of representatives from the various segmentations of society did serve to deepen the democratization of the corporate body of Caquetá with the illumination of process and procedure. This was to have major consequences for a small village in Western Caquetá.

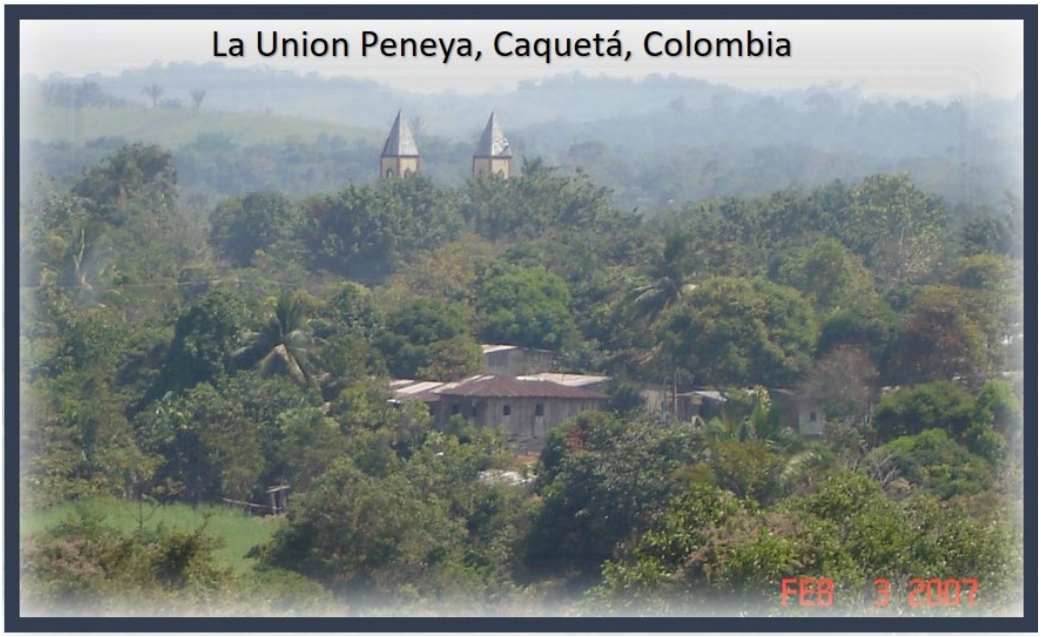
The balance of power in intra-state conflict determines or at least shapes the possibilities inherent in the use of participatory action research. Against the backdrop of an ongoing civil war, the mask of society's structure and power is stripped away. Civil opponents engage each other in an intimate embrace of violence as they contest the order of that structure and the balance of that power. The mask that falls reveals not the face of truth but the reality of yet deeper dramas that play out in the midst of the violence. These deeper dramas consist of the continuing struggle over political order and social justice. Where the loss of the political order in civil war "destroys the psychosocial mechanism of self-sanction that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct (Bandura 1990:161)" (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 57), the loss of social justice unhinges the social compacts that bind a society together even in seemingly uneven layers of strata (Scott, 1985).

Together these paired dramas sustain and deepen the conflict into intractable loss until leaders of the political order fighting to retain the status quo and those of social justice fighting for change arrive together cognitively and emotionally at the mediation table. As in most intrastate conflicts, those opposing the existing social order do not always carry guns and bombs and carry out militia attacks. Many others provide sanction, acceptance, and logistics that allow the insurgency to sustain itself against a vastly superior government force. They are the sea that Mao Zedong's (1833-1976) insurgent fish swim within, secure in their anonymity from government eyes and guns. Just as these social leaders participate in the sustainment of the guerrillas, they have also the power to withdraw sanction, acceptance and logistics without which, the insurgency will eventually diminish. The withdrawal of this support from the insurgency however does not come free or cheap – for either side. The social leaders' withdrawal of support from the guerrillas places them squarely in the gun-sights of insurgent fighters

desperate to regain their support at any cost, even if that means killing them. Under such costs, social leaders are little inclined to transfer allegiances based upon vague threats, promises of future change, or resorts to violent action equal to that of the insurgency. Only the hard currency of real change in the balance of the social order will convince them to take the very real risk of withdrawing sanction, acceptance and logistics from an active insurgent force in the field. In short, social leaders in an intractable intrastate conflict have power. It may not be the most desirable form of power, but it exists nevertheless. Such power can also incline the forces of political order to create a place at the table of participatory action research where the tyrannical mask of participation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) will be moderated or at least negotiated by those who've nothing remaining to lose.

The Second Task: Resettling Los Desplazados de La Union Peneya

One such social leader in Caquetá was a peasant farmer named Heriberto Sanchez Barbosa, president of the *Los Desplazados de La Union Peneya*.[8] The village of La Union Peneya (formerly of approximately 2000 inhabitants) in western Caquetá was abandoned in January of 2004 when government troops from the 12th Brigade and FARC Forces fought for control of the town. During fierce fighting between government forces and insurgents using the town as a base of support and operations, significant portions of the town sustained damage including the hospital clinic, church, both the elementary and high schools as well as many of the resident's homes. As the fighting grew, the inhabitants (led by the town's catholic priest) who were not active members of the FARC insurgency



[8] Displaced peoples of La Union Peneya

relocated to homes of relatives in nearby villages and municipalities.

After eliminating FARC resistance in the Municipality of Montanita where La Union Peneya is located, the military forces assigned there established a company sized outpost in the hills overlooking the town. For the next three and half years the village of Union Peneya remained abandoned as it lay, moldering in ruin and guarded by government forces; until the election of a FARC mayor of the village of Puerto Rico in northwestern Caquetá. The abandoned village of La Union Peneya combined with the political change in Puerto Rico created a north-south axis of free-movement for the 15th Front of the FARCs Southern Block that the 6th Division's 12th Brigade was unable to successfully interdict. The requirements for the 12th Brigade to guard the abandoned town south of Puerto Rico bled the commander of badly needed troops to try to sort out who in that north-south corridor was carrying arms, ammunition, and cocoa base powder which had replaced the Colombian Peso as the accepted currency in FARC controlled towns. The forces of political order now needed to resettle the dispersed refugees from La Union Peneya and they needed the *Gran Comité* to help them figure out how to accomplish that task in some manner palatable to both ends of the political and social spectrum. The worst fear within the military and departmental governorship was the possibility of repopulating the town only to drive it back into the hands of the FARC.

The Power of Participation in Action Research

Quien espera, desespera

The first task of the *Gran Comité* in trying to assist in the resettlement of the town was to enlarge the participatory base of research. Some of the additions were uncontroversial and yet others were complicated. Of the former, the secretary of education for Caquetá Dr. Francisco Javier Montes Tangarife was important because both the secondary and high school in Caquetá were in states of disrepair and the student population of *los Desplazados* had only increased in number. *Acción Social's* program manager for displaced population, Claudia Patricia Gallego Ramirez was selected to lead the research team into reestablishment of basic services and the 12th Brigade's *Acción Integral* (similar to civil

Heriberto Sanchez, (CENTER) president of the Los Desplazamientos de La Union Peneya with USSOF Advisors

Heriberto Sanchez (center) with US SOF Advisors

affairs) Lieutenant Colonel Herman Romero led the research into reestablishment of security internal and external to the town. Other key players would be a bit more controversial, including the elected president of the displaced persons of La Union Peneya association, Heriberto Sanchez, and the Archbishop of Caquetá whose authority over the residents of the department rivaled that of the elected governor, Juan Carlos Claros Pinzon. The bishop was not eager to be publicly drawn into political activities as they were considered a neutral party to both sides of the insurgency. The security services and formal elected officials were not eager to set precedent for working with Heriberto Sanchez, despite his election to represent the officials. While no specific charges were leveled against him personally, he represented a collective that had harbored and safeguarded elements of the 15th Front until their expulsion in a bloody and brutal battle that had nearly reduced portions of the town to rubble. With Claudia Gallego and Herman Romero leading respective development and defensive research teams, the *Gran Comité* got to work putting a plan together that would satisfy the governor's requirements for public services, the archbishop's requirements for safety and the resident's demands for a balanced social order.

Underneath these seemingly reasonable requirements and demands were competing interests in maintaining the status quo of the pre-war political order or a rebalance of power, economics and control that reflected some of the gains advocated by the insurgency. For instance, much of the arable farm land, businesses and infrastructure of the village were owned by corporations or private owners' landlords living in Florencia or even Bogota. Just prior to resettlement, these holdings were without value. With resettlement by the economically weakest part of the population, those same holdings would regain value relative to the effort that the inhabitants infused into rebuilding the town. This valuation re-growth would occur despite the reality that these absentee owners would never share in the dangerous risk of trying to resettle and rebuild a town in the middle of a violent insurgency.

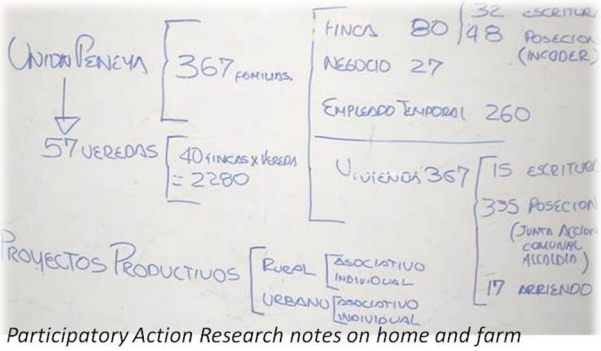
The fight over rebalancing of political and economic power and social reordering would continue throughout the process of participatory action research. Initially, however, the participant members of the *Gran Comité* simply continued their work on researching the issues that both led to conflict a half century before and which would continue to prevent the transition of the town and its inhabitants to peaceful existence. The planning and conduct for resettling the town of La Union Peneya had become a contest within Caquetá of the participants' ability to craft a basis of modern governance.

With press exposure and the interest (and physical presence) of United States Embassy officials responsible for reporting Colombia's ability to translate the promise of U.S. taxpayer funded Plan Colombia into reality, the town's resettlement had become a test for political and social legitimacy in a Department still heavily contested by the FARC.

As a resettled town, La Union Peneya had some of the most difficult problems facing any state and county level government. The problems associated with this town crossed every public and private agency operating in the municipality and department, including those belonging to national level offices. For every problem that one public or private agency member of the *Gran Comité*'s PAR team began dealing with, the resolution trail quickly ended in another agency or a tangle of laws, regulations or conflicting interests. Their frustration level over the complexity of the town's problems was exceeded only by the frustration of the townspeople who struggled with daily existence. Some of the problems the participants of the action research faced involved critical elements of social stability: land ownership, employment, and education opportunity. As the PAR team labored to gather data and plan the needed support to

the *Desplazados,* the resettlement began. The first returnees arrived in La Union Peneya on the 25 of January 2007 and the opening ceremonies occurred over the weekend of

Saturday and Sunday the 3rd & 4th of February 2007. In a two-day extravaganza for these battered inhabitants, a host of Federal, Departmental, and Municipal agencies as well as Colombian Military and Police forces provided a wide range of services such as Orthodontic and dental care, medical diagnostic and vaccinations, clothing and shoe repair, haircuts, and provisions of child nutritional supplements. As the families flowed into the town, military engineering units used bulldozers and tractors to clear streets and yards of the debris of war. Demining units had already searched the town using bomb sniffing dogs and metal detectors to reduce the possibility of accidents from remaining explosive residue.



Participatory Action Research notes on home and farm ownership in La Union Peneya, Caquetá, Southern Colombia March 2007

Meanwhile, PAR research by the *Gran Comité* found that only 15 of 367 families that were in the process of returning to La Union Peneya possessed an official title or legal permission to live in the house (*vivienda*) they were moving into or occupying. Of the remaining families, only 17 were able to show evidence of a legal rental transaction and 335 families were in the process of moving into homes whose ownership could not be verified and were thus in the category of squatters. The situation with arable farm land was equally problematic. Called *fincas,* these plots of land ranging from a few acres to several hundred and constituted the agricultural survival of the resettled town. Other than farming and animal husbandry, the region was ill equipped to feed unemployed populations. Only 32 of 80 established small farms were in the hands of owners who could offer a clear title to the land.

The remaining 48 were occupied by squatters who would soon be improving them daily and would subsequently try one day to lay claim to them against their legal owners. As part of the action research, the participants of the *Gran Comité* worked to research the land and home ownership titles to hundreds of properties with historical paper trails up to a century in age. For some absentee owners, word spread fast and either they or their hired representative turned up with paperwork supporting their legal ownership to land or property that the Colombian government was ensuring secure access to. The greater balance of absentee landlords however, did not show up and the returning residents pressed the government employee members of the *Gran*

Comité conducting the PAR to consider the possibilities of public seizure followed by a fair auction to returning residents with the caveat that only by continuous presence on or in the property did the new owner prevent forfeit back to the municipality. Such schemes created a flurry of claims and counterclaims by both the established business-political-social order and the portion of Colombian society that the government was desperate to lure back to the legitimate fold of civilized society allegiant to the Federal Constitution and the Department Charter; both of which were democratic institutions.

At work in the practice of this exercise in participatory action research then, was a balancing act of trust versus change. The balance of trust was between those social segments who had never (openly) abandoned South America's second oldest democracy in favor of a leftist-communist insurgency against a government trying to rebalance the social order. The balance of change was the offering of delicate shifts of economic, political and social power from elites to peasantry by Colombian society in the

expectation that those segments of the population that supported the insurgency would return to the body politic. For some, any change in either direction constituted a breakage of either trust or promise of change. The *Gran Comité*, backed by the elected mayors (*alcaldes*), department governor, and ultimately, President Uribe through his Director of *Acción Social,* sought the middle road to garner the largest possible public acceptance of their schema. Only because the relative balance of power was equal between the existing political-social base and the alienated society that held out the possibility of reducing the FARCs footprint in Caquetá did the PAR work without having a tyrannizing effect. Some changes were relatively easy to effect, yet had great significance to the population. Exclusive business and economic concessions that were sold within a village or municipality by the Federal or Departmental government to companies or elite business owners were nullified. This was easy to effect because they had de facto gone into default anyway. The announcement that they would not be renewed provided assurance to the campesinos that they would not be strong-armed out of a business concern by returning business elites – at least not legally.

As the *Gran Comité* conducted it cyclical research process, it found that by the end of the first 6 months of resettlement efforts, 27 retail or service shops were operating in La Union Peneya. But their ability to succeed depended upon the cash flow into the town from exports to the municipality, department and beyond. As issues such as this one became illuminated, other members of the *Gran Comité* were brought into the PAR cycle. In this case, the director of the Chamber of Commerce for Caquetá became part of the business research team working to tie the newest resettled town back into the economic plan for the department. Elements of this action research sought to help the new farmers and business owners plan production of crops, livestock and products for inclusion with the larger forecast of the department's business community. Given that many of the *Desplazados* were semi-illiterate; doing so required laying groundwork beyond business advising. Buoying hope, the PAR researchers found that by the fourth month after the initial resettlement, an additional 260 members of that town possessed temporary or part-time employment. However, a survey of

the work by researchers determined that those jobs did not increase the amount of money circulating through the economy of La Union Peneya and again, the *Gran Comité* reached out to bring in additional volunteers to research solutions to support the social reorganization of the municipality.

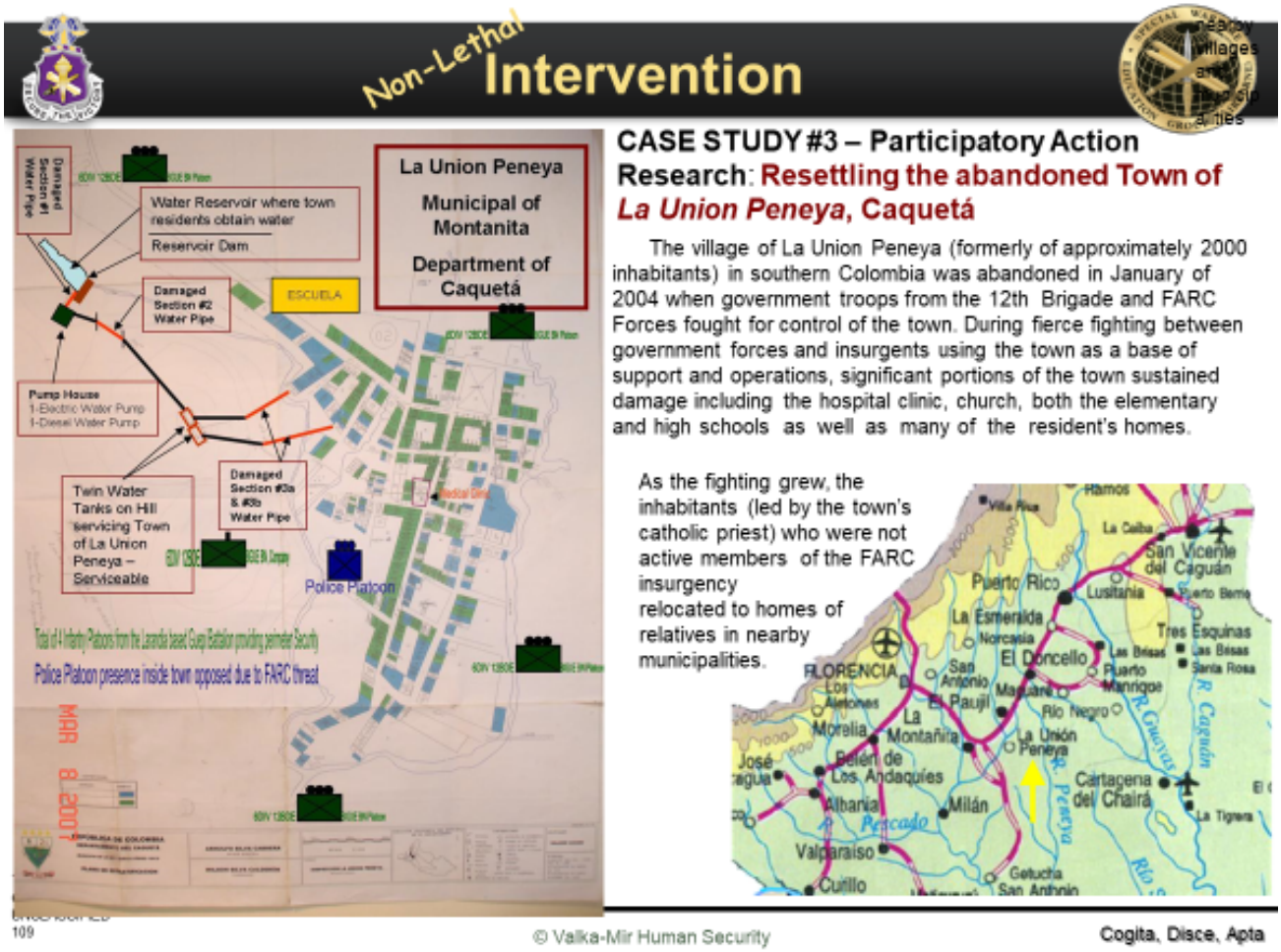
Recovering dignity with participatory action research

Gonogobeshona or people's research…helps us to rediscover the existential dignity of people - (Guhathakurta, 2010)

One such project involved the partnering with the few returning residents with medical and dental training with existing medical/dental professionals in the clinic at Montanita and the hospital in Florencia, the seats of the municipality and the

department respectively. These PAR teams focused on epidemiology, the state of dental and medical care of the returning Desplazados, and the state of the town's medical and dental infrastructure. With the 6th Army Division's hospital in their base in

Florencia partnering with their civilian counterparts, the first and second part of the PAR team's focus were accomplished in short order. Making the town self-sufficient medically and dentally however would take some additional research and action by even more participants. During a call to action by the towns informal leadership and support structure, townspeople of various abilities came together to assess and begin repairs to the dental and medical clinics which were devastated by the fighting and subsequent looting. Open to the elements for several years, only the building's shells where salvageable, and some stainless-steel shelving. The villagers paired with departmental volunteers to assess damage and create lists of required supplies and equipment needing replacement. Still other villager teams organized by the PAR team set out to restore the buildings with window and door replacements, cleaning and repainting the walls, floors and repairing the plumbing and electrical system. The *Gran Comité* ensured that the PAR teams working inside La Union Peneya were led and staffed by returning Desplazados to ensure the ownership of the process and the outcome. As well, liaisons from the municipality, department, *Acción Social*, security



services and the American advisor team provided constant coverage and advisory training support to the PAR teams engaged in the resettlement.

The rehabilitation of the schools became a significant issue as the returning villagers could not possibly transport their children the two hours each way to the nearest school in Montanita. As well, that town's school was not large enough nor had sufficient staff for such an increase in students. The secondary school and high school at La Union Peneya would have to be restored if the town were to remain viable. Caquetá's education secretary worked with his counterpart in Bogota, and the *Gran Comité*'s American advisor members sought help through the financial channels of Plan Colombia. Eventually, the international community, astounded by the work that the *Gran Comité* and *los Desplazados* of La Union Peneya had already accomplished, provided several hundred-thousands of dollars to refurbish the schools. Meanwhile, the villagers cleaned what parts of the schools they could and reestablished classes with assistance of the archbishop of Caquetá.

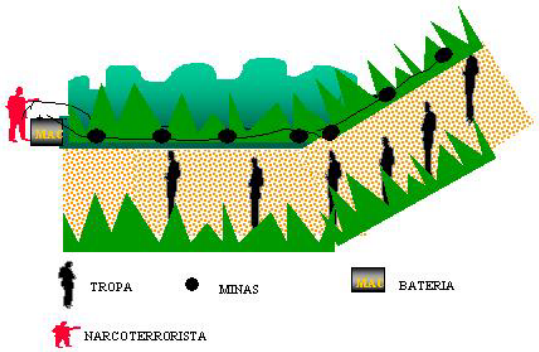
From left to right: Governor Juan Carlos Claros Pinzon, Acción Social Director Diana Carolina Tamayo, los Desplazados president Heriberto Sanches and members of the Desplazados participatory action research team discuss issues of survival and allegiance

The real civil-military work occurred during 8 hours of hard negotiating between members of the civil-military coordinating team led by the Governor of Caquetá and President Uribe's *Acción Social*. Their efforts were supported by the 12th Brigade Commander and the Municipality of Montanita. In an atmosphere that ranged from conciliatory to accusatory, the parties argued the relative merits of the suffering and hardship endured against the backdrop of scarce funding, limited resources and the

ever-present threat of hunger and attacks by the FARCs 15th Front which operates in the area. Many of the Governor's messages dealt with patience, and he appeared to have deep support for his message. Many of the returnees were familiar with him and the towns returning residents nearly mobbed him while he passed out health and education booklets to the residents.

Epilogue

Unfortunately for the governor and the residents of La Union Peneya, their struggle for survival began soon after they arrived and continued long after the *Gran Comité* moved on to other pressing problems. The night of the second day of opening ceremonies, the 15th Front detonated a cylinder bomb less than a kilometer outside of the town. Despite military fortifications and security outposts located in all directions by a company of the *Guepi* Battalion and the 87th Counter Guerrilla Battalion, the 15th Front managed to make its presence felt in the 2 months following the resettlement. The FARC leadership clearly understood the stakes in permitting the return of elected civil governance to La Union Peneya. Such gains by Colombians in their quest to build legitimacy of governance could cause the FARC to increase its efforts to penetrate the security buffer protecting this fragile experiment in resettlement. In the weeks following the resettlement, government troops securing the village were repeatedly engaged by FARC forces trying to slip past them as they tried to attack the village. At one point, two FARC guerrillas were killed in action as they tried to lay a minefield (of 9 anti-personnel mines) along the outskirts of the town. Had they been successful, this one act might have been sufficient to demonstrate to the returnees that their government could not protect them.



As the damage all around the cleaned-up areas of La Union Peneya attested, bringing peace to this town against the will of the FARC remained an uphill battle. The newly formed *"Gran Comité* may be the only way this town will survive a concerted effort to wrest it from civilian control. The working group's ability to coordinate humanitarian relief, infrastructure security and the reestablishment of its supporting farms, dairies and ranches seems to be the only way ahead for the department of Caquetá's ongoing struggle for the hearts and minds of the Caquetános of southern Colombia.

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