International Journal of Peace Studies, Volume 20, Number 1, Summer 2015

Zones of Peace in Colombia's Borderland

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Abstract

Based on data from qualitative fieldwork, documents and secondary literature, this article lays the groundwork for a better understanding of "zones of peace" in Colombia's borderlands. It builds on two empirical cases: Samaniego in the department of Nariño that borders Ecuador, and Las Mercedes in the municipality of Sardinata, Norte de Santander, at the border with Venezuela. "Zones of peace" are understood here as territories in which local communities have attempted to persuade armed actors to abide by certain rules to mitigate the effects of the armed conflict locally. We begin by briefly discussing zones of peace as local peacebuilding initiatives in the context of the Colombian armed conflict before focusing on how the location of zones of peace in Colombia's borderlands can impinge on their emergence, evolution and contributions to peacebuilding. We find that such a location can both constitute an incentive and a barrier for the emergence, evolution and peacebuilding contributions of these peace zones. Two aspects, in particular, need to be taken into account in the study of such peace zones: their distance from the political and economic centres, which has resulted in the marginalization of these territories and their use by violent non-state actors for drug trafficking, as well as the transnationality of borderlands, which provides communities an opportunity to interact with citizens of neighbouring countries at peace.

Introduction

This article aims to enhance our understanding of zones of peace in Colombia's borderlands by building bridges between three concepts that are fundamental to grassroots peace efforts in Colombia: borderlands, zones of peace and local peacebuilding. We follow geographers and political scientists such as Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymackers (2013) in their approach to borderlands and analyse them as geographical spaces that comprise unique socio-economic and political dynamics (cf. Idler (2015: 59)). For this study we adopt the following definition of borderlands, put forward by Annette Idler (2015): borderlands are "regions situated on the edges of states which straddle an international border", "whose economic and social life is directly and significantly affected by proximity to an international boundary" (Goodhand, 2008: 228; Hansen, 1981: 14). This definition reflects both the transactional character of borderlands and the importance of the influence of the borderline on phenomena occurring in these spaces.

Transnationality is not the only characteristic feature of borderland dynamics. As Martínez (1994: xvii-xviii) points out, borderlands are shaped by their distance from the political and economic centres of the state. Indeed these two characteristics – being traversed and thus influenced by an international border and being distant from state centres make borderlands a universal concept (Idler, 2015: 59). Borders "divide and unite, bind the interior and link with the exterior, [as] barriers and junctions, walls and doors, organs of defense and attack" (Strassoldo, 1989: 393). For this reason, Eskelinen, Liikanen and Oksa (1999) suggest that understanding borderland dynamics requires analysing how the international border affects the life of the borderlanders. Also Korf and Raeymaekers (2013) contend that "borderland dynamics [have to be considered] not just as outcomes of diffusing statehood or globalization, but also as actual political units that generate their own actions and outcomes". By taking such a territorial approach to borderlands we do not neglect that borders (rather than borderlands) are social constructs, and create zones of ambiguity that influence borderlands, as put forward by anthropologists or social theorists (see, for example, Anzaldúa (2012)). However, this political scientist analytical lens allows us to conceptually bridge borderlands with the territorial space of zones of peace.

Living at the margins of the Colombian state both physically, yet also politically and socio-economically, certain communities in Colombian borderlands have made considerable efforts to transform the territories in which they live into "zones of peace" guided by the principles of impartiality and nonviolence. Having emerged amidst an internal armed conflict that became particularly intense in the borderlands from the 2000s, the contributions that these initiatives have made to peacebuilding have been mixed, with variations across time and space. Nevertheless, the commitment of the local communities has been remarkable, and sometimes too the endurance of these endeavours against multiple odds.

Against this backdrop, we ask how the location of zones of peace in Colombia's borderlands is relevant for the emergence and evolution of zones of peace and how such a location can influence the contributions of these initiatives to peacebuilding. In order to do so we analyse two empirical cases: the peace zone of Las Mercedes, a village (*corregimiento*) located in the municipality of Sardinata in the department of Norte de Santander that borders Venezuela, and the peace zone of Samaniego, a municipality in the department of Nariño that borders Ecuador.

Norte de Santander, and particularly the region of Catatumbo, has been affected by the Colombian internal armed conflict for decades. The first major outbreak of violence in recent history was initiated by farmers in the 1950s, followed by violent clashes between state forces and guerrillas in the 1970s. In the mid-1990s paramilitary groups carried out brutal massacres in the area, seeking to wipe out guerrillas (Idler, 2013a). The rates of violence peaked in the years after 1999 when such groups ruled in Norte de Santander (Cañizares Arévalo, 2010: 38-39). Finally, being a strategic location on the trafficking route towards Venezuela, the department more recently became attractive to guerrilla groups and new armed groups that have emerged after the demobilization of the paramilitary umbrella organization United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Las Mercedes, in particular, is located in a strategic drug corridor and is said to be currently a stronghold of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas (interview with civil society leader, Cúcuta, 2012; various interviews, Bogotá, 2014).

Similarly, Samaniego, located in the department of Nariño, lies on a strategic trafficking route to the Pacific Ocean and is host to both the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas. It became an ELN stronghold at the end of the 1980s, and, as of 2014, the ELN exerted control over the urban centre and nearby areas. Meanwhile, the FARC maintained a presence in the rural areas of the south of the municipality (Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, 2009; Vásquez, Vargas, & Restrepo, 2011: 283-284). Furthermore, from the years 2000 Nariño became host to a variety of paramilitary and criminal groups, and, after the conclusion of the demobilization of the AUC in 2006, of multiple new armed groups. One such group, the Rastrojos, reportedly conducted limited operations in Western Samaniego in recent years.



Map of Colombia

We selected the cases of Las Mercedes and Samaniego for mainly three reasons. First, as will be explained below, both peace zones constitute bottom-up approaches that emerged from civil society or local authorities rather than being imposed by external actors. Second, both Samaniego and Las Mercedes have been affected by the presence of multiple violent non-state actors, as well as by operations of the Colombian state forces. Finally, both territories lie on strategic drug corridors and are embedded in the context of a shadow economy based on cocaine production.

Drawing on these two case studies, we develop our argument as follows. First, we discuss zones of peace as local peacebuilding initiatives in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Second, we explain why it is important to take into account geography in the study of zones of peace in Colombia's borderlands. Third, we discuss how the location of zones of peace in borderlands, far away from the political and economic centres of the

country, can impinge on their emergence, evolution and contributions to peacebuilding. And, finally, we examine the potential implications of the transnationality of borderlands for the two peace zones. The data collection for this article is based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation carried out during fieldwork by one author in Nariño and Norte de Santander between 2011 and 2012, and by the two other authors in Bogotá and Nariño in 2014, as well as on literature review and the analysis of documents from and about Samaniego and Las Mercedes.

Zones of Peace and Local Peacebuilding in Colombia

Before analysing the relevance of the location of zones of peace in Colombia's borderlands on their contributions to peacebuilding, let us briefly explain what we understand by "peacebuilding". The concept of "peacebuilding" was introduced by Johan Galtung in the 1970s and is inseparable from "conflict transformation". Both refer to complementary processes to achieve sustainable peace (Lederach (1999); see also Mouly (2004)). While conflict transformation focuses on the transformation of the conflict per se in order to overcome its contradictions and violent expressions, peacebuilding attempts to establish peaceful alternatives to the violence that underlies conflict. This double process of conflict transformation and peacebuilding meets "the challenge to change that which tore us apart and to build something we desire" (Lederach, 1999: 33). In order for this process to be sustainable, direct, structural and cultural violence have to be confronted simultaneously (Galtung, 1990). While some authors use the concepts of "conflict resolution" and "conflict transformation" almost interchangeably (e.g. Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (2011)), in this article we follow authors, such as John Paul Lederach (1995), Kumar Rupesinghe (1995) and Diana Francis (2002), in distinguishing both concepts and advocating for the use of "conflict transformation" since it does not suggest that conflict can be eliminated, but that it can be transformed to reduce the violence that underlies it.

In our view, and in accordance with authors, such as Lederach (1997), peacebuilding has three main characteristics. First, it is a process that seeks to address the symptoms and root causes of violent conflict, and is particularly suited to contexts of internal armed conflict, such as Colombia. Second, it can take place at different levels of society and in multiple spheres. Both our cases are examples of grassroots peacebuilding, but are influenced by actors at different levels, including international organizations and the national government, among others. Third, it is a long-term process that does neither have a clear-cut beginning nor end: peace can be built before, in the midst or after an armed conflict. We will take into account these three characteristics in our analysis of the peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes.

In the Colombian context Esperanza Hernández categorizes local peacebuilding initiatives into those attempting to deepen democracy, those seeking to resist the actions of armed actors, and those opposing structural violence and dominant economic models (Hernández, 2004: 24). These three types are not exclusive, but often one of the three predominates. In the case of the Colombian zones of peace, it is non-cooperation with armed actors – both state and non-state ones. "Zones of peace" are understood here as territories in which civilians attempt to persuade armed actors to abide by certain rules to limit the effects of armed conflict (see Mitchell and Allen Nan (1997) and Hancock and Mitchell (2007)). This broad definition builds on a variety of experiences in which people have sought to mitigate the effects of war in their territory so as to live peacefully (García, 1997; Hancock & Iyer, 2007).

By making their territory a zone of peace, local inhabitants of Samaniego and Las Mercedes hence tried to limit the effects of recurrent fighting between opposed armed groups, the sowing of landmines and forced recruitment. In the case of Samaniego, for instance, orange insignia were posted on civilian buildings to enforce international humanitarian law that prohibits their targeting by combatants. Further, armed groups were requested to stop obstructing the flow of basic goods and cease hostilities in cultural places (see, for instance, Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris (2009) and Méndez (2010)).

In Colombia a variety of initiatives fit our definition, even though most do not use the term "zone of peace". Moreover, several communities deliberately opted for other terms in order to avoid being targeted by armed groups (both legal and illegal), given that a "zone of peace", in the light of many actors involved in the armed conflict, implies an unacceptable restriction to what they consider their right to exert control over territory and fight against their enemies. This is the case of some so-called "peace communities", who live in territories that could be called "zones of peace". We nevertheless use the term, for it has already been well established in the field of peace and conflict studies and allows for comparisons between initiatives in different settings. Further, the "space" dimension is important in this study, as we argue that the proximity of peace zones to the border matters in examining their emergence, development and contribution to peacebuilding.

Two principles generally guide peace zones: impartiality and nonviolence. Thus, weapons are commonly prohibited in the territory and no collaboration with armed actors is permitted, including recruitment and the

facilitation of services, such as "food, supplies, refuge, transport and information" (Alther, 2006: 280). Nevertheless, even when armed actors are not allowed to enter these zones, violent confrontations sometimes occur, violating established rules (Rojas, 2004). Further, organized criminal groups usually do not respect such agreements and have openly defied them by threatening or assassinating community leaders. This happened in both Samaniego and Las Mercedes, constituting a serious challenge for the implementation of the zones of peace.

Several typologies of peace zones have been developed. For instance, Christopher Mitchell and Susan Allen Nan (1997) distinguish between two types: those stemming from the bottom up and those mainly promoted by external actors, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of the American States (OAS) or national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes both belong to the first category. The peace zone of Samaniego was officially declared in 1998, after the mayor asked the local population to participate in this process (Mitchell & Ramírez, 2009; Rojas, 2004), while in Las Mercedes the joint action of various local actors (including the mayor and teachers) led to the creation of the local organization "Friends for Peace" in 2005 and a communal plea to armed groups not to involve the community in the war, announced publicly through a communiqué.

Esperanza Hernández (2002) uses another typology, discerning those peace zones that originate directly from the grassroots from those established by local authorities, such as mayors and governors, and, finally, those instigated by international and national NGOs. Mauricio García Durán (2006) makes a similar distinction regarding the origin of peace zones in Colombia, but specifies the particular case of the displaced communities that declared themselves as peace communities – a distinction also made by Christopher Mitchell and Sara Ramírez (2009). The peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes were essentially locally driven and would fit into the first and second categories of Hernández's typology. Indeed, while local youth, teachers, the Catholic church and other civil society actors played a key role in both, local authorities were crucial too. Interestingly, marginalized social sectors, such as peasants, indigenous people, people from African descent, and particularly women and youth, often play a significant role in peace zones that stem from the grassroots (Alther, 2006; Hernández, 2004), which has been the case in Samaniego and Las Mercedes.

Additionally, although the two peace zones under study were essentially locally driven, they also received external support in their formation and further development. The peace zone of Samaniego thus greatly benefitted from the accompaniment of the NGO REDEPAZ (Colombian network of initiatives for peace and against war) that implemented an European Union (EU) funded project called "One hundred municipalities of peace" (later "three hundred municipalities") (Rojas, 2007). Meanwhile, the peace zone of Las Mercedes received the accompaniment of the OAS and, subsequently, the UN. Various authors emphasize the importance of such a backing (e.g. Gray (2012) and Valenzuela (2010)). Valenzuela (2010) states that international cooperation has contributed to reducing the level of threats and has enhanced the visibility of peace zones. Further, the long-term assistance and recognition given by international organizations and international judicial bodies have helped them to sustain their endeavours over the years (Gray, 2012). Without such a support, several peace zones may have collapsed.

Mitchell and Allen Nan (1997) also point out that there are as many kinds of zones of peace as there are different conceptions of peace. Thus, in places where direct violence prevails, peace often refers to the satisfaction of the immediate need of survival, while in places where the intensity of armed conflict is lower, peace can acquire a broader meaning, including an end to structural violence. Some zones of peace therefore focus exclusively on protection, while others seek to foster social inclusion, especially through participatory politics in the form of so-called "local constituent assemblies" (e.g. Gómez Serna (2008)). In the latter, members of civil society establish a governance system in order to fill the government void and foster independent institutions instead of those established by armed groups (Valenzuela, 2010). This is the case of Samaniego, where the creation of a zone of peace sought not only to limit direct violence but also address the weak and corrupt state governance system and promote social justice.

Territory is at the centre of the Colombian armed conflict insofar as violent state and non-state actors seek to control it for political and economic interests. Caught in the midst of the fight for territorial control, civilians often have few choices: to flee in order to save their lives, to collaborate with one of the armed actors present in their territory, or to resist. Hence, according to Vanessa Gray, the establishment of zones of peace is a form of collective resistance that has two chief objectives: to protect civilian lives and to avert displacement. Furthermore, it permits not to take sides and serves to avoid the stigmatization and risks of collaborating with any of the violent actors. Gray (2012: 45) argues that many rural civilians "are convinced that the quality of the lives and their children's prospects will worsen if they relocate, especially to an urban area" – a comment echoed by a human rights expert, who explained the choice of many inhabitants of Las Mercedes to remain in their village or temporarily relocate to

nearby areas, rather than moving to the departmental capital or Bogotá, where they would find it difficult to make a living (interview with human rights expert, Bogotá, 2014). In this way, zones of peace can be conceived as strategies of resistance in the face of prevailing violence to avoid forced displacement and reclaim one's legitimate right to land (Restrepo, 2006). In some cases they can also seek to overcome confinement, that is, curtailed movement in a specific area and limited access to information, food, fuel, medicine and other essential goods (Valenzuela, 2010), for instance, as a result of landmines sown by rebel groups to deter military operations by state forces.

While violent state and non-state actors fight for the control of territory, civilians may decide to distance themselves from a war that is not theirs and take action to redeem their right to live peacefully. According to García Durán, the social tiredness of accumulated violence over the years can push people to "overcome the fear threshold" from passive acceptance of violence to clear opposition and resistance to it (García Durán, 2006). When this process takes place, local actors can become empowered and experience a transformation from "victims" to agents of peace, who can "foster conditions for reconciliation and resolution of the conflicts in their own terms" (Rojas, 2004: 72). The establishment of zones of peace is therefore an exercise of autonomy that openly challenges the power and interests of conflict parties and, as such, entails risks for local communities (Valenzuela, 2010).

Conflict parties not only strive for territorial control, but also population control (Kalyvas, 2008: 406). This explains why in recent years many such initiatives were targeted by state and non-state armed groups alike. Indeed, the state needs to assert its control over territory as a matter of sovereignty, but at the same time requires the support of the local population to be granted legitimacy. Similarly, guerrilla groups require the support, if not social recognition, of the local population in order to sustain their fight against the regime (interview with university lecturer, Bogotá, 2014). The non-recognition of this legitimacy and the community's withdrawal of support by nonviolent means challenge the power of armed actors over the territory and population. Therefore, "[r]esistance can be costly. Armed actors who are vying for territorial and socio-economic control deny the validity of non-violent 'third options'. Members of peace communities have been threatened, falsely accused, detained, blockaded, displaced, and assassinated" (Alther, 2006: 280). During the government of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), for instance, the state did not recognize any zone of peace, considering itself as the sole warrantor of security in the national territory and rejecting any initiative that would represent what Valenzuela describes as a "fracturing" of the nation and the "imposition of limits to the territorial action of the public force or the justice system" (Valenzuela, 2010: 26). A former mayor of Samaniego, for instance, was summoned by President Uribe not to make any deals with the ELN guerrillas or otherwise risk prosecution (interview with former mayor of Samaniego, 2014).

In this context how can we appraise the contributions of peace zones to peacebuilding? According to Craig Zelizer and Robert Rubinstein, the contributions of this kind of initiatives can be appraised according to two dimensions: (a) the success or failure in fulfilling their stated objectives in terms of peacebuilding, and (b) their contributions to peacebuilding at large (Zelizer & Rubinstein, 2009). In our two cases the first dimension takes precedence given the local scope of these experiences and the distance from national political decision-making centres that results from their location in Colombia's borderlands. Nonetheless, some aspects of the peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes could potentially scale up their local impact. These include limited connections with other levels of peacebuilding (see Lederach (1997)) and other similar initiatives, often thanks to the support of external actors, like REDEPAZ. Further, in the case of Samaniego, over which the ELN exerted a significant influence for some 20 years, the initiation of peace negotiations between the state and the FARC guerrillas prompted the community to formulate a local proposal for peace aimed at the ELN guerrillas and claim a role in peace negotiations with this insurgent group, should these take place.

Why Geography Matters

Geography matters when studying local peace initiatives in Colombia's borderlands. It is crucial for the peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes not least because the border areas in which they are located are differently affected by the armed conflict than other regions. These areas were drawn into full-scale war in the mid-1990s as a result of a "centrifugal conflict dynamics" and henceforth experienced some of the fiercest combats between armed groups (International Crisis Group, 2011). Geography is also important because, as a result of the crossing of an international boundary through their territory, borderlands manifest distinct social, political and economic structures (cf. Hansen (1981: 19), Zartman (2010: 1-5) and Höhne and Feyissa (2013: 56)). This phenomenon can be subsumed under border effect: the intervening variable arising from the location of borderlands away from state centres and transnationality, which acts onto, and at times alters, processes and outcomes of social, political or economic phenomena in borderlands (Idler, 2012b). In this study we explore how such an effect has an impact on the context in which the peace zones of Samaniego and Las Mercedes are embedded, and how this is relevant for understanding their appearance, evolution and contributions to peacebuilding.

Pasto, the capital of the department on Nariño, for example, greatly depends on cross-border transactions. Ecuadorians sell commercial goods in Pasto and businessmen from Pasto trade their goods on the Ecuadorian side of the border (interviews with UN staff, local NGOs and local inhabitants, Pasto, October-November 2011). Nearby Samaniego is influenced by similar dynamics. Likewise, cross-border commercial relations are vibrant in Cúcuta, the capital of Norte de Santander, which is shaped by its immediate proximity to the border with Venezuela. Though Las Mercedes is located in a more remote, rural area, its citizens are nevertheless influenced by these dynamics, for example when visiting Cúcuta to buy and sell products.

The local context conditions the breadth of borderlands (Idler, 2015: 60). According to Goodhand (2008: 228), "where the borderland periphery ends and the state-controlled centre begins may be conceptualized as a mobile, semi-permeable, internal frontier – a zone of transition from low to high administrative intensity and where the 'border effect' has become less significant than the 'state effect'". Thus the size of borderlands depends on the extent to which cross-border transactions, including flows of people, goods or information, reach into areas more distant to the borderline. Therefore borderlands can be "quite narrow, huddling close to the boundary, or [...] may extend for many miles in one or both directions from the dividing line" (Morehouse, Pavakovich-Kochi and Wastl-Water (2004: 30); see also Vorrath (2010: 86)). Samaniego and Las Mercedes are both about 60 km away from international borders. Despite this distance, the residents from both localities typically interact more intensely and frequently with people from the other side of the border than with their fellow nationals from Bogotá (interviews with residents from Norte de Santander and Nariño, various localities, 2011-2012; see also Ramírez (2011b: 225)).

Further, the breadth of borderlands is not static. The study of borderlands requires acknowledging their dynamic nature, both with regard to the spatial dimensions and the constant changes in the influence that the borderline has on borderland life (Idler, 2015: 61). As van Schendel (2005: 46) notes, "there is nothing passive about borders; in borderlands, the spatiality of social relations is forever taking on new shapes". Therefore, Zartman (2010: 2) posits that "borderlands need to be understood, not as places or even events, but as social processes". In the case of Las Mercedes for example, the conditions of the road that lead from Las Mercedes to Sardinata, and further from Sardinata to Cúcuta, which adjoins the border to Venezuela, influence greatly the extent to which Las Mercedes is perceived as a borderland site. Under good conditions, this road facilitates legal and illegal cross-border activities in which the residents of Las Mercedes may be involved as commercial entrepreneurs or smugglers. Yet under bad conditions, that is, when the road is damaged through heavy rainfall and landslides, Las Mercedes becomes an isolated territory within the country.

Having conceptualized borderlands as a universal phenomenon, let us now examine borderlands located in contexts in which state capacities and responsiveness are deficient, such as the municipalities of Samaniego and Sardinata, which have not only been traditionally marginalized but have also felt prey to the influence of violent non-state actors for the past decades. Under such circumstances, the distance of borderlands to the political and economic centres of the states, and their transnationality yield three outcomes that shape borderlanders' lives and make these areas attractive to non-state armed groups: (i) weak state governance systems; (ii) a low-risk, high-opportunity environment; and (iii) a proneness to impunity (see Idler (2013b)).

The first outcome is a direct result of the limited capacities and responsiveness of the state in these regions. Their remoteness to the political and economic centres of the states that share the border makes them "sites where the state's presence has somehow been limited and its monopoly of violence and political authority is finite, unravelling, or subjected to severe contestation" (Donnan & Wilson, 1999: 7; see also Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013). This marginalization of borderlands raises many challenges, in particular their exclusion from national decision-making processes and the national economy for lack of infrastructure and communication channels that connect the periphery with the centres (Clement, 2004: 54).

The second outcome stems from the transnationality of borderlands, which generates a low-risk, high-opportunity environment (Idler, 2015: 86-87). Borderlands are beneficial for economic activities because the decline or increase in value at borders promotes exchange (Clement, 2004: 50-51; Goodhand, 2008: 235). However, this is also an advantage for those involved in illegal activities, such as drug traffickers, so that borderlanders and other actors often engage in illegal economic interactions with those beyond the borderline in order to benefit from high-profit margins (Martínez, 1994: 14). Another factor increases the comparative advantage of illegal cross-border activities: borderlands do often not effectively take part in the national economic system. This neglect explains why what is illegal for the state may be legitimate in the borderlanders' eyes because it is the only means to make a living (Idler, 2015: 87). This is the case in Samaniego and Las Mercedes, where local farmers grow coca to make a living, one of the few profitable crops in these areas, given their distance from centres and lack of adequate road access to market locally-produced goods, as will be discussed in more detail below.

In the Colombian context, guerrilla groups, paramilitary groups and criminal outfits have coveted borderlands for decades, taking advantage of the limited presence of the state and the low-risk, high-opportunity environment, as well as the possibility of escaping from law enforcement authorities by crossing over to neighbouring countries. Additionally, they have used them as strategic corridors to pursue their economic interests, and have partly achieved to supersede the state's authority there and be granted social recognition by local communities (Idler, 2013b). Further, the military and economic advantages that control over these territories provide to these groups have generated recurrent fights as well as fragile and quickly changing alliances between them, making several of these areas extremely violent (Idler, 2012b). This is the case of the municipality of Sardinata, where 1888 people were forcefully displaced as a result of armed conflict in 2012 (Pérez, n/d). Likewise, although with a lesser intensity, fighting between FARC and ELN guerrillas in Samaniego in 2007 induced the displacement of 140 families (Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, 2007). According to Mitchell and Ramírez (2009: 260), this is important since the creation and continuation of a zone of peace in a territory that is "in contention" between different armed groups is more complex than in one that is "stably controlled" by one armed group. In addition, armed groups are likely to react differently to the attempt of a local community to refrain from getting involved into the war, depending on whether they are challenged or not by other armed groups in the territory (Mitchell & Hancock, 2007; Mitchell & Ramírez, 2009).

How the Distance of Borderlands to the Centre Matters

As outlined above, the distance of Colombia's borderlands to the political and economic centres of the country translates into weak state governance systems in these regions. This, together with the specifics of local armed conflict dynamics, has undoubtedly an influence on the emergence of peace zones. These factors can foster an active role by civilians in seeking alternative ways to survive, make a living and, more generally, get organized locally to address issues that affect the community. The ensuing establishment of local governance structures is conducive to the emergence of peace zones in places where this is seen as one of the few possible strategies to mitigate the effects of surrounding violence.

Yet, structural factors, such as the socio-economic and political marginalization of a community, are not enough to explain the emergence of a peace zone, as exemplified by the fact that communities adjacent to Samaniego and Las Mercedes did not undergo the same process. Agency also matters for understanding why not all communities exposed to similar conditions of direct, structural and cultural violence engage in acts of resistance (in fact, a rather small percentage). As Gloria Restrepo (2006) rightly states, the establishment of peace zones results from a combination of both structural factors and agency.

This explains why weak state governance systems in Colombia's borderlands have only been conducive to the creation of peace zones under specific circumstances. In regions where violence affects people's daily lives for a long time, people often normalize violence rather than resisting it, as it is the case in various areas near Samaniego and Las Mercedes (see Idler (2012a; 2015: 142, 184)). Such contexts render collective action more difficult, for people no longer question surrounding violence. Further, it yields a gradual erosion of the social fabric, especially when local leaders are forced to flee to other areas of Colombia or neighbouring countries, when they are not silenced by armed groups altogether. Collective action is not only crucial for the appearance of peace zones, but also for their durability and ability to influence the behaviour of armed actors. As Oliver Kaplan (2013) indeed argues, civilians must organize collectively to efficiently "nudge" armed actors into compliance with norms of international humanitarian law. Likewise, Mitchell and Ramírez (2009: 255) found in their in-depth analysis of eight peace zones in Colombia that "the durability and overall success of peace zones and communities are likely to be connected to the degree of involvement by all the community's various groups and sectors in the community's organization and operation."

In Samaniego civil society efforts coalesced with the will of municipal authorities to facilitate the emergence of a local peace zone. These efforts built on existing social organization, such as the strong local teachers union, which played a key role in promoting peace in the municipality, undertaking marches for peace and implementing peace curricula in schools, among other initiatives (see, for example, Narváez (2010)). Two other significant actors were the mayors elected in 1997 and 2004 respectively. The first one was kidnapped by the ELN during the electoral campaign and later released as a result of pressure by the community. Upon taking office, he announced his intention to work with the community to make the municipality a peace territory (Mitchell & Ramírez, 2009). The second one was also held by the guerrillas at different points in time. He gave new impetus to the peace zone when he assumed office, taking advantage of privileged contacts with ELN guerrilla commanders to enforce the decision to keep the population at bay from the armed conflict (interviews with local inhabitant and human rights expert, Nariño, 2014).

Similarly, in Las Mercedes teachers, supported by the Church and the OAS among others, played a significant role in having their community declared a peace territory. The case of Las Mercedes also illustrates that the end of agency may be destructive to peace zones. In 2007 two leaders of the peace zone were assassinated, and another one was displaced, resulting in the collapse of the local "Friends for Peace" organization that had played a key role in the process (various interviews, Bogotá, 2014).

As discussed above, the distance of Colombia's borderlands to the political and economic centres of the country may induce local civil society efforts conducive to the establishment of peace zones. However, this distance can also prove to be an obstacle since it usually results in a lack of adequate protection of local communities by state institutions. This is illustrated by the harm produced by the location of police stations amidst populated areas. In many border villages, such as Las Mercedes and Samaniego, a police station was established in the centre of the village. According to the official discourse, particularly in the context of former president Uribe's Democratic Security Policy, this is to demonstrate the presence of the state institutions right in the villages. However, those critical of this policy claim that the underlying reason for this location is to protect the police station from attacks by the insurgents through the proximity of schools, churches and other civilian infrastructure. Yet insurgents are not necessarily deterred from carrying out attacks, as exemplified by the case of Las Mercedes, where the FARC guerrillas repeatedly attacked the police station and forced the people who live in the centre of the village to leave their homes at the end of every day to sleep in other areas for fear of attacks (La Opinión, 2013; interview with human rights expert, Bogotá, 2014, interview with displaced man and with victim from Las Mercedes, Cúcuta 2014). Despite a sentence from the Supreme Court of Justice summoning the police station to be relocated, as of October 2014, locals continued to leave at the end of every day (Castañeda Guerrero, 2014; interview with human rights expert, Bogotá, 2014, interviews with civil society representatives, Las Mercedes 2014). Further, this situation, combined with the geographic features of Las Mercedes, contributed to people's confinement and affected their livelihoods.

Having discussed the relevance of the distance of peace zones to state centres for understanding the emergence and evolution of this type of initiatives, we now consider how this specific feature of borderlands can impinge on the contributions that peace zones can make to peacebuilding. According to Lederach (1997, 2005), grassroots peacebuilding is guided by a survival mentality, given that the direct effects of armed conflict often prevent people at the grassroots from meeting basic needs. The case of the community of Las Mercedes, which has been traditionally marginalized from the central state, owing mainly to its location in Colombia's borderlands, is a case in point. Many local farmers left traditional crops to grow coca because traditional crops did not yield sufficient income to feed their families and were seduced or pressed by armed groups to do so (Las Mercedes, 2005). The municipality of Sardinata, where Las Mercedes is located, thus became one of the municipalities with the largest area of coca cultivations in Norte de Santander (the cultivated area of coca crops in Sardinata, together with that in nearby Tibú municipality, represented 54.5% of the production in the department in 2011) and one of the FARC coca production centres, according to a 2013 report from the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (2013). Las Mercedes and many other villages located in Colombia's borderlands indeed lack proper road infrastructure for the transportation of locally grown products to the market. If farmers cultivate coca, this is no longer a problem, since crops are picked up directly at their farms and are sold at a higher price.

Likewise, the Southern rural area of Samaniego comprises large areas of coca, and, to a minor extent, poppy cultivations. This is due to both the limited ways of access to and from the municipality, as well as the intense aerial spray operations by state forces against illegal crops in neighbouring Putumayo department that started in the 2000s as part of Plan Colombia, which resulted in cultivations shifting westwards towards Nariño department (Idler, 2012b; Lázaro, 2010). According to María Castañeda (quoted in Lázaro, 2010), Samaniego is not only home to coca and poppy cultivations but also laboratories which process drugs.

Yet, while the cultivation of coca and poppy may constitute a better strategy for farmers to make a living, it has also enmeshed local communities into the armed conflict. The declaration of Las Mercedes as a zone of peace at the end of 2005 recognized the cultivation of coca as one of the main factors that had spurred violence locally and as one of the obstacles that needed to be overcome for the community to live peacefully. In the words of local inhabitants, "We have taken up the task to reflect on the causes of our situation and we have found that illicit crops, together with the limited presence of the state and corresponding social services, as well as the lack of community organization, are the main factors of violence" (Las Mercedes, 2005). In order to assess the contributions of peace zones located in borderlands to peacebuilding, it is necessary to take into account this context, where socio-economic marginalization has been one of the root causes of direct violence. Hence it is not surprising that among the six points made by the community of Las Mercedes when declaring itself impartial towards warring parties was

the commitment to formulate local development plans aimed at enhancing people's socio-economic conditions (Las Mercedes, 2005; Peñaloza, 2006).

Having said that, redressing the structural inequalities that have traditionally relegated borderland areas to the margins of the state may seem to be more a utopia than a goal that such initiatives can realistically achieve. Furthermore, the drug business often had a significant impact on local economies, making it ever more difficult to break the vicious circle of dependence on illicit cultivations. In Samaniego, for instance, coca growing initiated as early as the mid-1970s, and the drug business generated a surge in the prices of basic goods, while trade displaced agriculture as the main economic activity in parts of the municipality (Lázaro, 2010). In such a context, the fact that peace zones, such as Samaniego and Las Mercedes, have raised local people's awareness to the need to find ways to sustain a living that do not fuel armed violence and have been accompanied by local participatory processes to discuss the best ways to promote local development may therefore be already a significant achievement. In addition, in places characterized by ongoing armed violence, priority is often placed on reducing the violent effects of conflict, rather than addressing its root causes, as revealed by the common strategies developed by various peace communities to convince armed groups to exert restraint in their territories (Mitchell & Ramírez, 2009).

How the Transnationality of Borderlands Matters

As explained above, the transnationality of borderlands in Colombia translates into a low-risk, high opportunity environment and a proneness to impunity. These features make Colombia's borderlands extremely attractive sites for multiple violent non-state actors because they constitute important drug and arms corridors and allow such actors to escape law enforcement authorities by crossing the border. The large presence of these multiple actors makes it difficult for local communities not to be drawn into the conflict. Supporting one actor automatically leads to stigmatization by others. This dilemma is likely to be behind the desire of the communities of Samaniego and Las Mercedes to remain impartial and not to collaborate with either one or the other actors – the basic principle of peace zones.

Samaniego is situated relatively close to the road that connects Pasto with the harbour of Tumaco on the Pacific Coast, which constitutes an important starting point for international cocaine trafficking routes via Central America to the United States. Similarly, Las Mercedes is close to the road that connects Ocaña with Cúcuta and northern Catatumbo, and thus lies on one of the most important trafficking routes that link the heartlands of Colombia with the borderlands, and ultimately neighbouring Venezuela from where illegal drugs are shipped to the Caribbean or via West Africa to Europe. Both Samaniego and Las Mercedes are thus strategic transit areas for the illegal drug business in which several violent non-state actors are involved.

While the presence of multiple armed groups arising from the strategic location of the peace zones in borderlands constitutes a significant incentive to remain impartial, this very strategic location also constitutes a challenge for peacebuilding. When calling upon their right to live peacefully and deciding not to collaborate with any armed actor, the communities might simply be ignored, owing to the economic motivations behind the operations of armed actors. In the eyes of the violent non-state actors, a zone of peace can simply constitute a hindrance to increasing their economic profits because it impedes the use of the territory for coca cultivation and processing or for transporting important drug shipments. It might be for that reason that they often respond with violence rather than with respect towards such initiatives, making void any contributions to peacebuilding. Similarly, state authorities considered peace zones to be placing unacceptable restrictions to their sovereign right over strategic territories during former President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy (Mitchell & Rojas, 2012).

Nevertheless, the transnationality of borderlands can also have a positive impact on the peace zones located in these regions: the belonging to a trans-border community that includes people that live in peace and others that suffer from ongoing violence. This becomes clear when considering the different perspectives from which borderlands can be studied, depending on whether one focuses on individuals, systems or relationships (Idler, 2015: 60-61). First, referring to individuals resident in borderlands, Martínez (1994: xviii) highlights that within borderlands some people are more affected by the border than others. Those whose livelihoods rely on the border because they are engaged in cross-border trade, work as customs officials, or have family members living on both sides, for instance, have a distinct border experience and differ more from individuals living in the heartlands than others who are little engaged in trans-border activities.

Second, Korf and Raeymaekers (2013: 5) highlight the coexistence of several systems with state practices on the one hand, and rules and norms arising from transnational processes on the other hand. They argue that this confluence in the margins produces distinct dynamics that in turn characterize the ways in which the periphery and the centre are linked with each other. Third, Donnan and Wilson (1994: 8) and Baud and van Schendel (1997: 219) point to the relationships that people have with each other. Relationships between residents of each border zone,

between borderlanders and individuals residing in the heartlands, between borderlanders and the state, as well as between borderlanders and local elites are all shaped by the transnationality of borderlands.

In the cases of Las Mercedes and Samaniego the perspectives on systems and on relationships are particularly insightful. The proximity to Venezuela and Ecuador where, although public insecurity may be high, armed conflict as such is absent, means that the residents of Las Mercedes and Samaniego experience state practice guided by policies designed for peace rather than war, which often includes more positive state-society relationships based on civilian institutions rather than relationships in which the state tends to be represented by military forces alone. Regarding relationships, the residents of Las Mercedes and Samaniego have personal interactions with people from Ecuador and Venezuela who share peaceful experiences, which arguably reinforces local people's will to live in a territory of peace. In Samaniego, for example, many people have neighbours and relatives who migrated to Ecuador (Lázaro, 2010) and indigenous communities share many ties with communities residing in Ecuador, providing them with the opportunity to know the situation on the other side of the border. Hence, it is not surprising to encounter a number of local civil society efforts that contribute to peacebuilding in borderland areas, including binational initiatives (Ramírez, 2011a). Likewise, in the 2014 run-off presidential election, which opposed a pro-peace candidate to a candidate more inclined to a military option, the pro-peace candidate won in 16 out of 20 border departments, demonstrating the significant clamour for peace in border areas (CINEP, 2014: 19).

Conclusion

In this article we laid the groundwork for the analysis of the emergence, evolution and peacebuilding contributions of peace zones located in borderlands, taking into account both structural factors and agency. We explored the various ways in which the geography of borderlands can influence the establishment and evolution of peace zones, as well as their contributions to peacebuilding. In this regard the weak state governance systems, the low-risk, high-opportunity environments and the proneness to impunity that Colombia's borderlands experience make them vulnerable to the presence of multiple violent non-state actors, which, in turn, leads to military operations by state security forces, with local communities caught in the crossfire. The resulting violence can cut two ways. On the one hand, it can demoralize communities, who may often feel that they have little choice but live passively under current circumstances or flee. On the other hand, at times critical agency can encourage the local population to resist what will henceforth be considered "unacceptable" levels of violence and may foster the emergence of peace zones. At the same time, the absence of a functioning state governance system is conducive to local governance structures established by civil society actors, which often go hand in hand with the establishment of peace zones.

As the case studies of Las Mercedes and Samaniego illustrated, the transnationality of borderlands and the distance of borderlands to the state centres can generate incentives for the emergence of peace zones, but these characteristic features also raise a number of challenges that may hamper the establishment and maintenance of these initiatives, as well as their contributions to peacebuilding. First, being located on strategic drug corridors, armed actors are reluctant to agree to neutrality in these areas. They have a vested interest in these territories since they translate into lucrative economic benefits. Second, owing to the weak state governance systems in such marginalized areas, legal economic opportunities are scarce, prompting many poor people to engage in illegal economic activities, particularly coca cultivations and even drug processing. This makes them dependent on the violent non-state actors and hence unable to maintain impartiality towards warring parties or to renounce these activities. At the same time, it distances the local community from the state authorities, which tend to stigmatize the communities as a consequence of their engagement in coca cultivation. Finally, the distance from the state centres entails the absence of attention and therefore support from without the local communities, making it difficult for them to sustain their activities.

All this could explain why peace zones located in Colombia's borderlands may find it difficult to achieve structural change that could yield positive peace, and their contributions to peacebuilding may be limited to more immediate, local forms of "crude" protection. However, the belonging to a cross-border community means that there is potential for more. Ultimately, whether this opportunity can be seized does not depend on the peace communities alone. Residents on the other side of the border have a stake too, and, should they wish to, they could help foster peace transnationally.

Notes

This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association in Toronto, Canada, on 26 March 2014. The conceptualisation of borderlands is based on Idler (2015: 59-62, 86-87). The research for this article was funded by a grant from FLACSO-Ecuador. All translations from Spanish to English are unofficial translations by the authors. All interviews are confidential.

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