Background

The Republic of Colombia, led by President Alvaro Uribe Velez, is in northern South America and is surrounded by Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador. Colombia consists of four geographic regions: the Andean highlands, the Caribbean lowlands coastal region, the Pacific lowlands coastal region, and the eastern plains. Colombia’s total area is 440,839 square miles and includes Isla de Malpelo, Roncador Cay, and the atoll of Serrana Bank. The capital of Colombia is Bogotá, and other major cities include Barranquilla, Cali, Cartagena, and Medellín. Colombia is rich with natural resources, including petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, nickel, gold, emeralds, copper, and hydropower.

Colombia’s population is 46.1 million, with almost 50% of the population falling below the poverty line. The GDP (official exchange rate) in 2008 was $249.8 billion (US), the per capita GDP was $9,000, and the unemployment rate was 11.8%. Colombia exports a number of agricultural products, including coffee, bananas, rice, tobacco, corn, sugarcane, and cocoa beans, and is the world’s largest cultivator of coca, which is used to make cocaine. It is the main supplier of coca to the U.S. drug market.

Colombia first declared independence from Spain on July 20, 1810, but it was on August 7, 1819, that the Spanish army was conquered, guaranteeing independence. Both dates are celebrated as national holidays. Colombia has historically had a
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constitutional government, and its two main political parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, have been in existence since the mid-1800s. Political tensions between the two parties have led to violence on numerous occasions. The year 1948 marked the beginning of *La Violencia* (The Violence), a decade-long conflict triggered by the assassination of a presidential candidate from the Liberal party. *La Violencia* in turn led to the start in the 1960s of a major conflict between government forces, left-wing insurgents and guerilla groups, and right-wing paramilitaries. This conflict wages on today, and continues to have an enormous impact on all aspects of social, economic, and political life in Colombia.

Colombia’s intrastate conflict is not one that can be attributed to a defining cause, as it “does not revolve around a single clearly defined polarity, with a specific core of economic or ethnic conflicts.” Some scholars believe that the conflict continues to be fueled by the political disputes that raged between Liberals and Conservatives during *La Violencia*, while others claim that the dispute is purely territorial. The conflict seems to have been bred out of peasant demands for political power and recognition along with equal access to land and resources, as the vast majority of Colombia’s wealth was, and remains, in the hands of a relatively small group of elites. Colombians themselves have had difficulty agreeing on the roots and nature of the conflict, and hence have been unable to find durable, sustainable solutions.

Many rural poor have chosen to participate in guerilla and paramilitary forces, thereby acquiring territorial control and access to an abundance of exploitable natural resources. For some Colombians living in poverty, participation in paramilitary and guerilla groups can provide economic stability that is not offered by the job market. However, in this fight for land and resources, much of the poor population has been displaced—forced off of their land by those seeking to exploit it. Today there are anywhere between 2,649,139 and 4,361,355 internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom represent indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups and giving the country one of the largest populations of IDPs in the world. In 2006 Afro-Colombians represented 30% of this displaced population.

The most powerful combatants in Colombia’s conflict are leftist guerilla groups. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are estimated to have between 9,000 and 16,000 members and are operating in roughly one third of the country. The National Liberation Army (ELN), with around 3,000 members, operates mainly in the northeastern part of the country. These two groups have similar ideologies, and cooperate in some regions, but have clashed in others. Another powerful actor, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), consists of right-wing paramilitaries whose goal is to protect land, business, and political interests through the demolition of leftist groups. Many Colombian government officials have been linked to these paramilitaries, as have multi-national organizations. Although the government reports that paramilitaries no longer exist, many observers believe that they do, although they have diminished in size. All of the guerilla and paramilitary groups have engaged in kidnapping, displacement of indigenous communities, narcotrafficking, the recruitment of child soldiers, and massacre of civilians. Colombia’s national security forces, often working in collusion with paramilitaries, have been accused of numerous human rights abuses.

**Current State of Coexistence**

Due in large part to the extremely violent conflict that has continued in Colombia for nearly five decades, Colombians have had few opportunities to exist in harmony. Social stratification based on race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic location plays a significant role as a driver of conflict, and coexistence cannot truly be achieved until all groups are provided equal voice, respect, and access to resources.

Colombia’s people come from a vast diversity of backgrounds. There are nearly 800,000 indigenous Colombians, representing 82 ethnic groups, and over a million Afro-Colombians, whose ancestors were slaves brought from Africa by the Spanish colonists. A majority of the population (58%) is mestizo (mixed-race) and 20% is white, while 14% is mulatto, 3% is mixed black-Amerindian, and 1% is Amerindian. Catholicism is Colombia’s most popular religion, with around 90% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic; the remainder practice non-
Catholic forms of Christianity, Mormonism, Islam, Judaism, anism, and syncretic forms of belief. According to UNHCR’s 2008 Report on International Religious Freedom, discrimination and societal abuses based on religion are not a major problem in Colombia. While Spanish is the official language, there are 80 other languages spoken across the country. Minority groups often have native Amerindian, English-based Creole, or Palenquero (Spanish-based Creole) as their mother tongue.

Historically, colonial hierarchy gave Spanish-born Colombians (whites) elite status, and to this day it is those of Spanish descent who remain at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. Mestizos (mixed white/Indian) experience more social mobility than mulattos because of their lighter skin. When a person is considered mestizo, his or her cultural identity is linked to that of the elite whites, while mulattos are linked to black culture, which tends to be less respected. Afro-Colombians have experienced some upward mobility in the last two decades as they have begun to move out of peripheral regions and into the mainstream, where they have taken advantage of increased educational and employment opportunities. Indigenous Colombians remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, with the least access to political representation, healthcare, and educational and agricultural resources. According to the National Organization of Indigenous Peoples, 32% of Colombia’s indigenous groups are at risk of extinction.

The divide between rural and urban Colombians is significant. There is less state involvement in the rural areas in which much of Colombia’s non-European population resides, and the “level of extreme poverty in rural areas is three times that of urban areas.” Urban families in 1995 earned 4.5 times more than rural families. A 2005 World Bank report found that in Colombia’s rural Pacific Region, only 18.5% of black students finished secondary school. There is no institutional mechanism for monitoring access to education, and the allocation of educational resources tends to discriminate against some geographic regions where indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations reside. More than three million of Colombia’s school-aged children lack access to education.

Gender roles play an important part in Colombian society, and contribute to social stratification. The role of machismo is evident within both the public and private lives of men and women, especially in rural regions. Machismo requires “separate male and female roles in economic life and consumption, the reliance of women on men, and distinct sets of life goals for men and women.” Women are expected to put the wishes of men before their own, and leave bread-winning and household decision-making up to men. While middle and upper class women take part in social and political activities but rarely work outside the home, rural women are more likely to hold jobs or work in the fields in order to keep food on their family’s table.

As many as 41% of women in Colombia experience violence perpetrated by their significant others, and 5.3% have been victims of sexual violence. Women rarely report these acts to authorities, because although there are laws criminalizing this behavior, it is viewed as a “private matter,” and victims of sexual violence face stigmatization because of “cultural notions that link the family’s honor to a woman’s sexuality.”

### Policies and Initiatives

There are a plethora of policies and initiatives at all levels of society to address the needs of Colombia’s people in the face of continuing conflict. In reviewing examples of these, it is important to take a complementary approach, acknowledging that there is no singular cause of the conflict, and that the conflict permeates and plagues Colombian society in a multitude of ways. Effective policies and initiatives will address conflict transformation and coexistence in ways that involve all sectors of society and work to fulfill the unmet needs of all groups of citizens. Currently most do not, although some are paving the way by taking a more holistic approach to peace building and coexistence.

#### Initiatives for Peace

Since the 1950s, there have been numerous attempts at creating peace between conflicting parties in Colombia. The first negotiations took place between liberal and communist guerilla groups, prior to the founding of FARC. Under the leadership of Presidents Barco (1986-90) and Gaviria (1990-94) there were national peace processes that resulted in some success, leading to the demobilization of several small guerilla groups by providing them with channels for forming political parties. These successes led to the enactment of the 1991 Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to peace. Governments since have had little success in reaching agreements with larger guerilla groups, such as FARC and ELN. Experts such as Georgetown professor Marc Chernick believe that FARC is unlikely to agree to take part in serious negotiations unless broad structural issues such as agrarian reform and rural development are addressed. Chernick states, “[FARC] will only accept a [negotiations] model based on reforms and sharing of power in some way. They will insist on an amnesty.”

At local and regional levels, peace initiatives are providing hope to Colombians. According to Ricardo Esquivia, general coordinator of the Red Asvidas of Montes de María and Sincelejo, more than 30,000 peace initiatives exist throughout the country. Many local negotiations with conflict actors have proven successful, and in some cases indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups have been able to secure the release of hostages, maintain their autonomy, persuade FARC to lift armed blockades, nonviolently face down paramilitaries, force drug
Children in Colombia have been incredibly innovative and active in the peace movement. In Apartadó, the student council discovered that the nation’s constitution provided a right to form a local government of children. They did so, and began holding discussions about how they could promote and create peace. As more and more youth began organizing in this way, the “Children’s Movement for Peace” was born. Children have taken part in national workshops with adults, formed local Children’s Councils for Peace, organized and run cabildos (town meetings), and voted in a special election in 1996 called the Children’s Mandate for Peace and Rights, in which they chose the right to peace and the right to life as the most important rights for themselves and their communities. In both 1998 and 1999, 2.7 million child participants in the “Children’s Movement for Peace” were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Education**

While Colombia has policies and guidelines that address the importance of adjusting educational systems to meet the needs of ethnic groups, there is little evidence that programs are being initiated that promote coexistence awareness between cultures. Schools have abandoned the study of aboriginal languages, despite recognition in the 1991 Constitution of minority languages as co-official languages with Spanish in the areas in which they are spoken. Although there is a requirement of bilingual education in such areas, even bilingual schools utilize mostly Spanish due to lack of teacher training and resistance on the part of teachers. However, students in Colombia are being empowered to take part in peacemaking through a number of exciting initiatives.

*Aulas en Paz* (Classrooms in Peace) has created a curriculum to develop social and emotional competencies in hopes of promoting peaceful relationships among youth. Students in grades two through five engage in citizenship competencies and language classes in which topics such as bullying, aggression, conflict resolution, listening skills, and anger management are the focus. Families are involved in the program through home visits and phone calls. This innovative curriculum is based upon the Colombian Ministry of Education’s Program of Citizenship Competencies, which was designed and implemented in 2003 to “foster the peaceful resolution of conflict, promote the understanding of differences, and involve young people in mutual decision making and democratic engagement in schools.”

The program seeks to provide young people with tools for living peacefully in a pluralistic society through the development of “cognitive, emotional and communicative abilities, knowledge and attitudes that together enable each citizen to act in a constructive manner in a democratic society.” Peace Games, based in the United States, was the first international organization to receive funding from the Minister of Education for a program to implement national citizenship competencies, and has provided training to teachers and school administrators so that students can receive weekly lessons in peacemaking.

Both international and local NGOs are supporting Colombia’s schools as they begin to adopt peace education curriculums. With the backing of UNICEF and the Red Cross, 45,000 children and adolescents have been trained to promote conflict resolution, health, safety, and landmine awareness during weekly classroom sessions. *Fundación AlvarAlice* works to “increase understanding of tolerance and peaceful coexistence through the arts” and focuses on “achieving, strengthening and solidifying peace and the peaceful resolution of conflict” by implementing participatory discussions and activities in schools. Through Catholic Relief Services, the Jesuit Escuela de Paz y Coexistencia (Mobile School for Peace and Coexistence Program), founded in 1996, provides peace-building training in communities across Colombia, adapting curricula to the specific needs and cultural realities of each community it serves.

**Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Communities**

Colombia has a history of recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, including territorial rights, rights to collective land, and the right to self-govern. Its constitution, rewritten in 1991, recognizes the status of the country as multi-ethnic, and contains laws to support the fundamental economic and social rights of the indigenous Amerindian population and the Afro-Colombians, along with smaller minority groups such as the “Riazales,” who inhabit San Andres and Providencia Islands, and the Roma (gypsies). The 1991 Constitution protects the rights of indigenous peoples to raise their children using their native language and in accordance with traditional values. Also, they may utilize traditional medical practices and systems of community leadership.
boundaries of ancestral communal properties. The majority of Colombia’s indigenous people live on resguardos—homelands that are independent legal and sociopolitical institutions. Resguardos make up over a quarter of Colombia’s national territory.42

Afro-Colombian communities were granted land titles and the right to manage the resources within them in 1993. However, “the implementation of such projects have been associated with brutal forced displacement, mass violence and selected killings of Afro-descendants and their leaders by both legal and illegal armed groups usually at the behest of the government and international and private capital interests.”43 Despite the government’s stated commitment to the rights of indigenous and minority groups, efforts by such groups to exercise autonomy have not been fully supported by the government, and rural Colombians remain in poverty without equal access to social services, education, or healthcare. According to the UN Gini Index, by the year 2000 Colombia had the ninth most unequal distribution of wealth in the world.44

Culture

Through the National Program on Negotiation, Colombia’s Ministry of Culture “supports projects in the public interest to develop cultural and artistic processes, and to help provide space for meeting and coexistence in communities.” Colombia’s Plan Nacional de Música para la Convivencia (National Music Program for Peaceful Coexistence) offers trainings, tools, educational materials, and information to students, teachers, community organizations, and professional musicians, and engages in research about the role of music in Colombian culture. In addition, it supports community music organizations, music schools, and events such as the National Orchestral Project, which brings professional and amateur musicians of all ages together for two days to play, learn, and engage in dialogue about the intersection of music and coexistence.45 Colombia’s National Plan for Culture, created in 2001 with the participation of over 25,000 people, embraces the recognition of a multicultural society and focuses on the importance of “remembering”—acknowledging that cultural heritage can contribute to a culture of peace when space is provided for self-reflection, cultural development, creativity, and research.46

In 2006 and 2007, Medellín, Colombia, was the host of the first annual Meeting of Art and Poetry for the Peace of Colombia. During the 2007 conference the 1,210 participants penned a letter to the public, eloquently calling for peace and solidarity:

Indignant and hurt by the war that devastates our country…the artists and intellectuals assembled in Medellín for the Meeting of Art and Poetry for the Peace of Colombia, want our voice to be heard in the midst of the turmoil of war…. The artists, writers and intellectuals summon all to form a resistance in behalf of a culture of life, tolerance and justice. If the confronting armies want peace, let them stop fire and an engage in an honest dialogue, facing the country and the international community.47

Human Rights

Colombia has held the spotlight of international human rights organizations for years because of the inhumane tactics of guerilla, paramilitary, and government armed forces. In 2005, the Colombian government passed the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975), aimed at demobilizing paramilitaries and investigating human rights abuses. The law granted concessions to paramilitary commanders upon disarmament, shielding them from serious punishment or extradition on drug charges to the United States. But both Colombian and international human rights groups have maintained that the Justice and Peace Law—as well as 2003’s Decree 128, which grants amnesty to illegal armed groups not under investigation for human rights abuses and provides legal and economic benefits to demobilized paramilitaries—are inadequate. These groups maintain that these laws provide amnesty to, and perpetuate the impunity of, perpetrators of human rights abuses, and do not expose Colombian security forces, government officials, and private citizens who have supported paramilitary activity. Further, they believe the laws fail to create an independent judicial process to oversee demobilization, and disregard the rights of victims, reinforcing the dynamics of inequity that contribute to continuing societal tensions.48 Many facets of the Justice and Peace Law have been deemed unconstitutional by Colombia’s own Constitutional Court. Since 2006, the International Centre for Transitional Justice office in Colombia has been working to support a number of initiatives related to the implementation of Law 975, focusing its efforts on truth-seeking initiatives, reparations, prosecutions, and communications and outreach, in collaboration with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the Supreme Court of Justice, the National Reparations and Reconciliation Commission (CNRR), the Museum of Antioquia, and the European Union.49

The UNHCHR office in Colombia has been collaborating with the embassies of Spain and Sweden and the UN Development Program to support the government and civil society in forming a National Action Plan on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. In early 2008 the office reported that there had been “encouraging results in the definition of criteria for a methodology for agreeing on content and stages for substantial progress in 2008.”50
Complementary Approach

The Colombian Government’s Peace and Development Program along with the Peace Laboratories seem to be a step towards a truly complementary approach to facilitating coexistence by addressing multiple issues and levels of society and creating avenues for collaboration between differing fields. The mission of these programs (translated from Spanish) is to “Strategically support and promote conditions of peaceful coexistence, facilitating interaction among the various actors in the regions, and to channel resources to vulnerable communities in order to seek progress on the construction of collective peace and development in the territories of Colombia.” They seek to implement agreements for the development of peace, create areas of peaceful coexistence, and boost economic and social development through the use of alternative development methods based on productive growth, institutional strengthening, and the development of infrastructure. The programs have regional initiatives, adapting projects to best meet the needs of local people, and work in collaboration with the National Planning Department, the National Economic and Social Council, the European Union delegation to Colombia, and the World Bank.

The Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation, which houses the Peace and Development Program and Peace Laboratories, is also working in conjunction with other agencies to foster coexistence through a number of social development programs:

- Learn provides services and support to displaced populations;
- Care for Victims of Violence provides assistance to victims and administers reparations;
- Families in Action provides monetary support to needy families subject to the fulfillment of commitments by those families;
- Habitat Management and Housing promotes cooperative solutions to housing needs and provides services and support to address housing needs;
- Together assists families in overcoming poverty by providing access to educational, healthcare, housing, counseling, and employment services, among others;
- Presidential Program Against Illicit Crops seeks to rid the countryside of illicit crops and provide viable income alternatives to those who are willing to eradicate crops from their land;
- Infrastructure Programs replace or rehabilitate physical infrastructure in impoverished areas and in areas destroyed by bombings and violence.

These initiatives support the well-being of all Colombians by aiding in the creation of an equitable social infrastructure conducive to coexistence. In reviewing these many initiatives, it becomes apparent that the Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation acknowledges the importance of attending to the needs of Colombians in a diversity of ways. The Colombian Government receives significant international support for these and other programs that fall under the objectives of Development Plan Colombia, which is endorsed by a number of nations, international regional organizations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

The Colombian government also provides training, counseling, and financial assistance programs to ex-combatants so that they may develop the skills to lead successful lives. Forty thousand former fighters from both paramilitary and rebel groups are taking part in the reentry program, which receives financial support from the U.S. government. The program provides participants with a monthly stipend of $200 if they show up for classes and counseling sessions and take part in community projects and periodic psycho-social testing. Through participation in the program ex-combatants not only gain the skills necessary for creating sustainability in their lives, but also learn to coexist with classmates who were once enemies.

Conclusion

Because of the vast array of policies and initiatives aimed at the promotion of peace and coexistence in Colombia it seems that there is good reason to be hopeful. However, in order for Colombians to peacefully coexist changes need to occur on all levels of society and the country must directly address issues of discrimination, inequity, power imbalance, and human rights. Most importantly, the government must begin to acknowledge its own role in the perpetuation of human rights abuses in Colombia, begin implementing policies to prevent the abuse of power by troops and police, and demonstrate a true commitment to peace by adopting and committing to the use of nonviolent methods for conflict transformation. The government must adhere to the provision of rights granted to indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations in the 1991 Constitution. Also, it is essential that funding be provided to increase access to basic resources such as education and healthcare for rural Colombians.

Colombia is a nation with a rich cultural heritage. Building upon the work already being done by the Ministry of Culture would benefit all sectors of society, as art in all of its forms has an immense capacity to bring people together in peace.
despite their differences and can be a powerful tool for reconciliation and healing. Based upon the current success of peace education curricula being implemented by civil society organizations in Colombia’s schools, the creation and implementation of a national peace education curriculum would further promote intercultural awareness, nonviolence, and connection not only between Colombia’s children and youth, but also among all of those whom they influence.

Reconciliation is a key to the creation and sustainability of coexistence in Colombia. While government and civil society organizations already sponsor some initiatives towards this end, more needs to be done on every level. The use of restorative justice practices could significantly aid this process, giving all parties impacted by the conflict safe spaces in which to express their pain without being punished. Also, increasing services and support for victims of violence is essential, and providing them with opportunities to have a role in the transformation of the conflict could be deeply empowering.

Coexistence cannot fully exist until the conflict that has been perpetuating divisions between people for nearly five decades comes to a peaceful end, and all Colombians have equal access to services, employment, resources, land, and political involvement. Achieving this goal will take creativity and dedication. The Colombian government has demonstrated some commitment to pursuing peace and promoting coexistence, but there remains a long road ahead. Collaboration between the government, international parties, civil society organizations, community leaders, conflict participants, victims, people of all ethnic backgrounds, elders, and youth alike is destined to be what ultimately creates sustainable peace in Colombia. When all of these voices are invited to the table to speak and be heard, the path towards peaceful coexistence will inevitably become much clearer.

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About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?
Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series
In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

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