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Replacing bullets with balls: Sport for Peace in the FARC demobilization and reincorporation camps.

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Biography:

I am a Teaching Fellow in Latin American Studies at the University of Leeds, having completed my PhD thesis at the University of Sheffield. I have had articles published on various aspects of my research on Colombian football history, politics and society by the Bulletin of Latin American Research, the Journal of War & Culture Studies and Movimento, and chapters included in books published by CLACSO and Iberoamericana Vervuert. My own book entitled 'The Only Thing that Unites Us: Football and Nation-building in Colombia during the Presidency of Juan Manuel Santos' is due to be published by Liverpool University Press in autumn 2022. I have been invited as a guest speaker by the Colombian Olympic Committee and by the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira in conferences on Sport and Postconflict and Sport for Development and Peace, as well as by the Colombian Interior Ministry for a special meeting of the Technical Commission for Security, Comfort and Coexistence in Football. I have been interviewed regularly on my research and as a Latin American football expert on several radio stations and podcasts in Europe and Latin America,

including being the resident expert on the ‘South American Files’ series on the These Football Times podcast.

Abstract

On 24 November 2016, President Juan Manuel Santos and the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) Rodrigo Londoño, signed the historic peace agreement aiming to end the longest civil conflict in Latin America. The ex-guerrillas moved to 26 rural transition zones to begin the demobilisation and reincorporation process. An important element of this stage of the post-conflict scenario was the project of the Colombian administrative department for Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation, Coldeportes,¹ to send coaches to the transition zones. This project provided opportunities for (re)encounter, re-identification and coexistence between the former guerrillas and local communities through sport and recreation, and was another example of the Santos government use of sport for its national unity programme. This article analyses this Coldeportes project, based on interviews with the coaches and former FARC combatants involved with the programme, observation of training days for the coaches, and media reports and documentaries from the FARC camps.

Keywords:

Sport for Development and Peace; FARC; Football in Colombia; Latin American Sport; Colombian Peace Process; Sport and Post-conflict; sport and nation

¹ Coldeportes would be promoted from an administrative department to being a full Ministry on 11 July 2019. As this occurred after the events analysed in this article, I have referred to Coldeportes rather than the Ministerio del Deporte throughout this article.

Introduction

On the 24th November 2016, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Rodrigo Londoño, signed the peace agreement that ended the longest civil conflict in Latin America. This was the culmination of peace negotiations formally announced by Santos on 4 September 2012, that continued over the next four years despite considerable opposition led by former President Álvaro Uribe. Santos needed to find ways to 'sell' his peace project with the FARC to Colombians and the men's national football team provided a propitious symbolic time and space for this discourse project (see Watson, 2018; 2021). The run-up to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, which coincided with Santos' presidential re-election campaign, provided ample opportunities for Santos to make the successes of *la Selección* metonymic of the peace process and ideal of a 'New Colombia', stressing national unity and all Colombians being supporters of the team. The inclusion of the FARC within this in-group - an imaginary from which they had been long excluded (Watson, 2020) - occurred in presidential speeches before the World Cup and the 2015 Copa América (Watson, 2020: 410), as well as in adverts with the slogan 'Guerrilla, don't miss the World Cup; demobilise, I'm saving a seat for you'. These featured Colombians from all over the country, police, armed forces and former footballers, patting an empty seat next to them, inviting FARC guerrillas to watch the World Cup together (*Ministerio de Defensa*, 10 June 2014). The FARC took this opportunity to legitimize themselves as football fans, with their negotiators in Havana wearing football shirts on match days and releasing public statements of support (Watson, 2020:412-413). Jackson-Schebetta notes that football 'represents a viable way to participate (or re-participate) in a national

identity and to slough off their pariah status' (2020: 84); these types of statements were an initial way in which this was attempted, though many Colombians rejected this attempt.

Football, therefore, had already been extensively deployed by both sides during the peace negotiations, and would serve both again in the immediate post-conflict period. In compliance with the agreement, the FARC decamped into 26 transition camps located in rural areas in 14 of the country's 32 departments, first known as Zonas Veredales Transicionales de Normalización (Transitional Pathway Zones for Normalization – ZVTN), and then as Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación (Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation – ETCR²), where the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process occurred. This article discusses how football was utilized as part of the post-conflict process in the ETCRs. It defines three distinct phases: 1) January-May 2017, when the FARC used football to promote their adherence to the peace accords and resignify themselves to a domestic and international audience; 2) May 2017-January 2018, the duration of the project by the Colombian administrative department for sport, physical activity and recreation, Coldeportes, in the ETCRs and nearby local communities; and 3) a post-Coldeportes project phase centred around Colombia's participation in the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Each period saw the football's potential convening power controlled and shared by different actors in the Colombian post-conflict, being used a site for (re)encounter, re-identification, reconciliation, inclusion and coexistence.

The Colombian Conflict, Peace Processes and Previous Demobilization

There is not sufficient space to give more than a brief overview of the Colombian conflict.

Colombia has been afflicted by regular outbreaks of violence, originally between Liberal and

² These camps shall be referred to as 'ETCRs' throughout this article.

Conservative factions, the most spectacular of these being the period known as *La Violencia* that began with the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on 9th April 1948. This led to around a decade of murder and counter-murder of supporters of the two political factions, mostly in rural areas. Uprimny argues that ‘Modern Colombia starts with a negative myth of the Violence, a myth that results in the depoliticization of Colombian life, in the distrust of politics (which itself is a symptom of violence, in the precariousness of collective action’ (2001:46). In the aftermath of *La Violencia*, rural self-governing enclaves known as ‘Repúblicas’ such as Marquetalia in Tolima, were established by communist groups excluded from politics by the National Front pact that saw Conservatives and Liberals takes turns in government. The Repúblicas drew the attention of the Colombian government and US allies worried about the spread of communism, and Marquetalia was attacked in May 1964. Survivors formed a guerrilla organization officially named as the FARC in 1966. The next five decades saw a complex multilateral conflict between governmental forces, guerrilla organizations including the FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army – ELN), paramilitary forces such as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self Defence Forces of Colombia – AUC), drug cartels and other criminal organizations. The conflict was responsible for the deaths of 218,094 people between 1958-2012 and the forced displacement of 5,712,506 Colombians between 1985-2012 (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, 2012). Colombia’s Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) noted that the length of the conflict and banality of violence generated a rupture in the social fabric in society, particularly in territories that suffered violence for prolonged periods (*Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización*, 2018: 45).³ The result is a situation of fear and suspicion between communities and demobilized former combatants generated by the asymmetrical power relationship between armed bodies

³ quotes from the original Spanish have all been translated by the author.

(whether belonging to government, guerrilla or paramilitary forces) and local community (Salgado Cajales, 2013:21), representing a formidable obstacle in any Colombian DDR process, and particularly the peace process with the FARC (*Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización*, 2018:46). Various governments attempted peace processes with the FARC unsuccessfully, though Uribe did reach an agreement for the demobilization of the AUC between 2003-2006.

Academics working on DDR in Colombia have studied the demobilization and reincorporation of former paramilitary members and guerrillas of the FARC or ELN who have demobilized individually. Academics have focused both on DDR from a macro perspective, analysing the wider impact on politics and society (Porch & Rasmussen, 2008; Nussio & Howe, 2012; Vianna de Azevedo, 2014) or at a micro level analysing issues affecting demobilised former combatants and local communities (Theidon, 2007; Denov & Marchard, 2014; McFee, 2016; Kaplan & Nussio, 2018; Rhyn, 2019). Articles highlight difficulties in processes and outcomes of previous disarmaments; some argue that they have ‘merely transitioned, rather than terminated, violence’ (Porch & Rasmussen, 2008: 521), underlining the state’s inability to enforce agreements and the lack of articulation between state institutions at national, departmental and municipal level (Porch & Rasmussen, 2008: 531). This lack of effective presence and institutional coordination has continued with the FARC as the ARN acknowledges (2018: 46). Another feature of previous work is that it analyses DDR processes in an urban environment, though Nussio & Howe note that any peace process with the FARC will need to have a rural focus (2012: 59). As the ETCRs were established in rural areas, often near communities that had suffered due to the conflict, this presents different challenges. In cities, former combatants can retain a greater degree of anonymity, an individual hidden among the masses. This differs in the ETCRs, which

became a visible and potentially unnerving presence near to local communities, with the FARC initially remaining together and maintaining group structures. Restrepo Plaza highlights this potential community anxiety, citing a 2016 study that found that 45% of interviewees did not want to live near former members of armed groups (2019: 126), given the potential security risk that they present (Nussio & Howe, 2012: 60; Kaplan & Nussio 2018: 133; Rhyn 2019: 196).

The stigma associated with membership of an armed group and the difficulty ridding oneself of this identity is a common research area (see, Nussio & Howe, 2012; Denov & Marchard, 2014; Vianna de Azevedo, 2014; Rhyn 2019;). McFee argues that ‘strong identification with past illegal armed groups can undermine the formation of a new citizen-based identity’ (2016: 53). Overcoming this stigma has led to community-based DDR approaches gaining importance in Colombia (Derks et al., 2011: 35; Rhyn, 2019: 196), with community reintegration included in the ARN’s strategic goals for 2015-2018 (Rhyn, 2019: 199). A 2010 study by the National Planning Department showed that ‘approximately 97% of ex-combatants in Colombia feel they need to be an active part of their communities in order to feel completely “reintegrated”’ (Nussio & Howe, 2012: 60), and therefore the focus has increasingly been on creating projects that ‘contribute to a change in the narratives’ and ‘create opportunities for positive interactions between ex-combatants and community members’ (Rhyn, 2019: 203). Kaplan & Nussio underline the importance of ‘participatory communities’, finding that ex-combatants able to engage with community activities ‘have an easier time with social reintegration’ (2018: 132) and Rhyn argues that a ‘community with a common interest, which is able to adapt a reintegration programme to fit that interest, is more likely to accept ex-combatants’ (2019: 200). This is where sport, and football in particular, emerges as a strong option. Kaplan & Nussio mention that sports events have been a regular

option for promoting reintegration and social acceptance (2018: 138) with sport being the most common type of group activity in which former combatants have participated (ibid.: 140). Rhyn also speaks of football as beneficial for working towards a common goal as a team (2019: 208) and an ex-combatant being able to ‘introduce themselves with their new identity first – be it that of a teacher, a parent, or a passionate footballer’ (ibid.: 211). The ARN report analysing the on-going DDR process found that in former FARC members, 71% of men and 29% of women were interested in being trained in of culture, recreation and sport (2018: 65).

Football is widely understood as one of very few national symbols capable of uniting Colombians (Dávila Ladrón de Guevara & Londoño, 2015: 194; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019: 54; Watson 2020: 404). It facilitates national re-encounter in a polarised, unequal society riven by enduring divisions (Jiménez Duzán, quoted in Larraín, 2015: 194), and is an escape from daily troubles and traumas (Jiménez Garcés, 2014: 86; Dávila Ladrón de Guevara & Londoño, 2003: 126;). The belief in football as a ‘site in which Colombians place faith in future possibilities’ (Jackson-Schebetta, 2020: 87), endowed with mythopoetical transformative attributes for society was measured by the Power of Football survey conducted by the Colombian Interior Ministry. It found that 94% of Colombians believed that football was either important or very important, and that 96% considered that the national men’s team was a symbol of integration (*Ministerio del Interior*, 2014b: 22). The survey concluded that football consolidated and creates closer links in communities, regions and the country as a whole, is a powerful tool for social integration, and that it increases social capital and mutual confidence (ibid: 17). This survey was part of the Ten-Year Plan for Security, Coexistence and Comfort in Football 2014-2024 (*Ministerio del Interior*, 2014a), a public policy empowering football to be used towards social transformation around the professional

and recreational game. This increased awareness of football's power for development and peace was also present in the Coldeportes strategic development plans, discussed later, and was more evidence of President Santos' strategy of deploying football for national unity (Watson, 2018: 2020; 2021).

SDP – a perfect option for Colombian DDR?

Practice of and research into Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) projects has become increasingly common (Kidd, 2008: 370; Cárdenas, 2013: 25), with projects across the world being promoted by powerful global institutions such as the UN (Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011: 379). The UN stated that sport should be seen as an important tool for development and peace in 2003, created the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDP IWG) taskforce to study and promote best practice, and announced that 2005 was the Year of Sport and Physical Education, endeavouring to strengthen SDP projects across the globe. In 2008, the SDP IWG published 'Harnessing the Power of Sport for Development and Peace: Recommendations to Governments', a document referenced in Colombian sports-related public policies such as the previously mentioned Ten-Year Plan for Security, Comfort and Coexistence in Football 2014-2024.

SDP projects are categorised in various ways by academics, relating to the methodologies (Kidd, 2008: 376; Darnell, 2012: 6; Coalter, 2007: 71; Coalter, 2010: 1375, desired outcomes (Levermore, 2008: 185-186) and those carrying out the activities. Giulianotti categorises the latter as 1) transnational corporations carrying out corporate social responsibility projects; 2) national and international government institutions; 3) 'third sector' agencies such as NGOs; and 4) new social movements, grassroots community groups and radical nongovernmental organizations (2011: 212). The overwhelming tendency for research in this field is that it has

focused on NGO projects. All the types of projects that Giulianotti lists are present in Colombia; in this article examining SDP in the ETCRs, the focus is on a combination of groups 2, 3 and 4 of those mentioned above, in the shape of Colombian government institutions (principally Coldeportes and the ARN) and UN monitoring groups, the NGO Fundación Tierra Posible contracted to run the Coldeportes project, and the FARC. Höglund & Sundberg also argue that there are four processes for sport for reconciliation, namely 1) symbols and symbolic acts; 2) application of sport policies; 3) breaking down of stereotypes and negative attitudes and 4) individual development (2008: 806). These again are all present in the projects discussed in this article.

In Colombia, where football is a national passion understood as a unifying symbol, and where there has been an increased emphasis on community participation in DDR processes, it is unsurprising that SDP has presented itself as a strong option in the FARC post-conflict scenario. Sport is a 'politically palatable, non-threatening and/or effective tool for bringing together diverse people' (Darnell, 2012: 3). It is an easy and cost-effective option (Coalter, 2007: 22; Höglund & Sundberg, 2008: 811; Schulenkorf et al., 2014: 374) that represents a neutral space and form of cultural property (Richards, 1997: 14; Lea-Howarth, 2006: 19; Van der Niet, 2010: 56-57) where people and communities can meet around a common interest to create spaces for dialogue, share new experiences, and rebuild relations (Lea-Howarth, 2006: 19; SDP IWG 2008: 207-208; Höglund & Sundberg 2008: 811; Schulenkorf 2010: 289; Cárdenas 2013: 27). Scholars have used social identity and social change theory to discuss the impact of SDP projects (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008: 812; Schulenkorf, 2010: 276-277; Krasniqi & Krasniqi, 2019: 147), arguing that sport can create new identities for former combatants that can facilitate their reincorporation. Academics caution against seeing sport as some kind of panacea with mythopoeic impact (Coalter, 2007: 1; Sugden, 2008: 406;

Schulenkorf et al., 2014:374). Sport cannot function alone and requires a political settlement with the continuing, visible implementation of negotiated peace agreements (Sugden, 2006: 238; Schulenkorf, 2010: 291; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011: 386), something that has been a problem under the Duque government that succeeded Santos in 2018. SDP processes based around symbolic moments such as World Cups can be transitory and reliant on national team success, providing only brief moments of togetherness (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008: 808). Although sport has been able to stop fighting temporarily (Van der Niet, 2010:56), it can also foment combat and rivalry (Salgado Cajales, 2013: 26) given the very nature of a sporting contest where winning and losing may matter and where pride may be at stake. The most important aspect is to analyse how and why sport can be 'good' or 'bad' (Patriksson, cited by Coalter, 2007: 23). To ensure greater success, academics highlight the importance of the project needing to 'locate itself carefully within complex networks of peace building institutions and agencies' (Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011: 391) and are 'needs and asset-based' on the requirements of former combatants and communities (Kidd, 2008: 377). The voices of all must be heard as part of the design and on-going implementation of any SDP project, which must be tailored to specific local requirements, experiences and cultural particularities (Galtung, 1998: 86; Lea-Howarth, 2006: 14; Spaaij, 2009: 1109; Giulianotti, 2011: 765; Schulenkorf et al., 2014: 375). This is especially relevant in Colombia, where ETCRs were often located near Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities with specific cultural identities and practices. Additionally, SDP projects should endeavour to be sustainable and capacity building (Lea-Howarth, 2006; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2011: 386; Schulenkorf et al., 2014: 384), ensuring the needed infrastructure is built, and that training and resources are provided to the local community so that they can take ownership should the original coordinators abandon the project. This issue of resources, suitable facilities and

infrastructure has been an enduring issue in many Colombian rural regions, given state absence and the conflict.

Esteban Reyes, a director of the NGO Tiempo de Juego, commented that ‘whenever you go to work in remote communities in different parts of Colombia, the more you find that there’s always an organization doing social work through football’ (personal interview, 19 October 2017). As Cárdenas (2013) describes, SDP projects in Colombia originated in the mid-1990s, when a project was launched in Medellín by Alejandro Arenas and Jürgen Griesbeck following the murder of the Colombian defender Andrés Escobar after the 1994 World Cup. They developed a football for peace methodology, used and adapted extensively and successfully by various NGOs and state projects such as Golombiao⁴ in Colombia, and then in other continents by the Streetfootballworld project founded by Griesbeck in 2002. NGO work and initiatives by national and transnational bodies have mushroomed across the country since then, as sport during the Santos presidency also became an indispensable tool for social development for the Colombian State (Cortés Díaz, 2015: 79; Watson, 2018; 2020; 2021). Despite this commonality of SDP projects, there remains a disappointing lack of critical research into the Colombian experience, a deficit first noted by Cárdenas (2013: 28). There has been work on methodologies of urban NGO projects by Sobotová et al (2016) and Oxford, the latter focusing on SDP from a gender perspective (2017, 2019; Oxford & Spaaij 2019b). The Golombiao project, run by Colombia Joven (the Colombian Youth administrative department) alongside UNICEF and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) from 2003, has only been analysed from a theoretical perspective by Duarte Bajaña (2017). Duarte Bajaña argues that:

⁴ For details of the Golombiao methodology, adapted from the Football for Peace Methodology, see Mena Tamayo (2006).

Golombiao can be understood as an inclusion venue, where differences should be included instead of being integrated, in the understanding that integration requires the ongoing adaptation of the participants to a set of beliefs, norms, values or hegemonic principles, whereas inclusion fosters pluralism in the context of a common social project which keeps changing shaped by the needs of the population (2017: 370)

Golombiao is a project that, according to Adriana Rincón, one of the project coordinators at Colombia Joven, was implemented in municipalities in all 32 Colombian departments (personal interview, 17 November 2017). In fact, some coaches working for Coldeportes in the ETCRs had worked on Golombiao projects, giving them valuable experience in SDP methodologies that could be adapted to the post-conflict scenario.

Despite the lack of critical attention, by at least 2015 sport was being considered as a valuable tool for the post-conflict process as the peace negotiations advanced. Calderón & Martínez highlighted that a role for sport was included as part of the negotiations for points three and five of the agenda, point three relating to the end of the conflict, and point five to victims of the conflict (2015: 11). They see sport as being key for the reintegration process, envisaging a role for sport in keeping demobilized FARC soldiers entertained in the camps, for removing their military identity, creating new balanced relationships with local communities, and as part of activities which promote coexistence (2015: 11-12). However, they also highlighted issues which could hinder the implementation and success of any such project: 1) the lack of sufficient resources to finance sport programmes; 2) the lack of facilities and infrastructure for coaching and playing sport; and 3) failing in inclusion and programme coverage, as the programmes that do exist do not reach the whole population. These issues were common to each of the six Colombian geographical zones (Caribbean, the East, Amazonia, the North, the Coffee Zone, and the Pacific), though to different degrees

(Calderón & Martínez 2015: 14-17). All of these would present significant challenges to the effectiveness of the Coldeportes project in the ETCRs, as well as any SDP programme carried out in areas that historically have lacked state presence.

This role for sport articulated as a motor for peace was promoted discursively by Santos, but was also gaining traction in the Coldeportes Strategic Action Plans and specifically in the Deporte Social Comunitario (Social and Community Sport) section of Coldeportes (Watson 2020: 414). The Coldeportes subdirector Afranio Restrepo confirmed this increased emphasis:

Sport as a tool for coexistence and peace is important for the current government. If one does a detailed analysis of the National Development Plan, the government instrument for the four-year planning of its actions, the significance that sport has had in the two periods of government is clearly evident [...] There is a greater emphasis on sport as a tool for reconciliation and resocialization due to the historic opportunity that opened for social transformation (personal communication 31 January 2018).

Although the developmental aspect of the provision of sport, recreation and physical activity has been part of Coldeportes' responsibilities since its foundation in 1968, this marks a change of emphasis, or, at least, a rebalancing of priorities. Coldeportes had tended to focus on elite sport given its potential for political instrumentalization and entertainment, prioritizing economic values over social ones (Cortés Díaz 2015: 80). Calderón & Martínez agree with this assessment, suggesting that sport has been seen as a product of, rather than an engine for, development and peace (2015: 20). Members of the Coldeportes Centre for Investigation acknowledged this shift, with Omar Becerra commenting 'since the new administration of Clara Luz [Roldán]⁵ there is a special interest nationally in having a clear

⁵ Clara Luz Roldán, Director of Coldeportes from 2016-2018

focus on a culture of peace and sport' (personal interview, 13 October 2017). The change in emphasis is evident in Coldeportes' Mission Statement, approved by the Directorial Committee on 5 March 2013, which now reads:

To lead, formulate, direct and evaluate public policies for Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity, and to conduct the Inspection, Supervision and Control of the National System for Sport, with criteria of inclusion and social equity, contributing to the coexistence, peace and prosperity of all Colombians (Coldeportes, 2018: 4).

Alongside Santos' 'Democratic Prosperity' plan, there was an emphasis on coexistence and peace included in the Coldeportes Strategic Action Plan 2010-2014. In 2012 this became a Department Programme, which gained further momentum with the 2014-2018 National Development Plan, 'Everyone for a New Country'. In strategy 4, an objective is 'the training of citizens for peaceful coexistence through the promotion of reading, building life projects around culture, sport and the development of recreational and ludic activities' (Coldeportes, 2018: 9). The resulting vision in the Coldeportes Strategic Action Plan 2014-2018 is 'to position Colombia as a global sporting power and to be the global leader in the development of environments for coexistence and peace, through the creation and implementation of policies for sport, recreation and physical activity, with a focus on inclusion' (Coldeportes, 2014: 3). The Deporte Social Comunitario section was at the forefront of this increased focus on sport's developmental role. Deporte Social Comunitario is understood as being:

The different spontaneous manifestations and practice of sport which involve the whole community, without discrimination due to age, gender, physical condition, ethnicity, race or social background, which contribute to people's relaxation, amusement, integration, healthy coexistence, the promotion of values and good habits, and potentialising their creativity, which will enhance personal and social

development, and, therefore, the improvement in the quality of life of the whole population (Coldeportes 2018: 43).

This section was in charge of the project in the ETCRs, as well as other SDP campaigns. However, as we shall now see, Coldeportes were not the first to use SDP in the ETCRs.

Phase 1: The FARC and football: January-May 2017

Prior to the Coldeportes coaches arriving in the ETCRs and local communities in May 2017, the FARC had already taken the opportunity to use football, marking a significant example of a former anti-state actor (a group rarely analysed in SDP literature) using sport to attempt to resignify itself in the national and global domain, as well as to create spaces for meeting and reintegration with local communities. They exploited the domestic and international media interest that accompanied their arrival in the ETCRs as a way of reducing the ‘narcoterrorist’ narrative imposed upon them by the Uribe government since 2002, a narrative they had been previously unable to contest publicly. Their new visibility meant that they could display a new identity and ‘humanise’ themselves, and football was one of the principal ways in which this was managed. This occurred through organizing symbolic matches and tournaments, sometimes with local communities, inviting national and international journalists to report on such events and life in the camps, and self-promotion of these events through their own newly created social media channels.

Perhaps the most significant of these events was the ‘Tournament for Peace’ near to the La Elvira ETCR in Cauca in February 2017. The matches were played between members of the FARC and former professional footballers of two of Colombia’s biggest clubs, Atlético Nacional and América. These included two members of Colombia’s 2001 Copa América-winning squad, Jersson González and Freddy Grisales, and national team legend Faustino

Asprilla, a player with a global profile following his exploits in Italy and England. This was reported in various national and international newspapers, including *El Colombiano* (Quintero, 21 February 2017), which showed a team photo of the former footballers together with FARC combatants such as *alias* 'Walter Mendoza', a principal target of the Colombian government before the peace negotiations.⁶ Football is a 'channel for legitimacy' in Colombia (Watson, cited in Jackson-Schebetta, 2020: 84), and the significant mediatization of this event helped legitimize the FARC; a process of 'de-othering' (albeit brief and inconclusive) takes place as the enduring military /terrorist identity is replaced temporarily with that of being a footballer accepted by national footballing heroes such as Asprilla (Watson 2020: 415). The sight of players of two teams that represent one of Colombia's most bitter rivalries also contributes to a narrative of reconciliation.

Journalists from Spanish sports newspaper *Marca* were also present. Several articles were published on its Spanish and English websites from 17-27 February 2017 about life in the FARC camps, with the ubiquity of football being a central aspect. Former guerrillas were interviewed about their hobbies, which provide a point of connection and horizontal comradeship to the reader through a shared enjoyment of sport, fandom and knowledge of football, as well as how the war has impacted on them as a person, a potential shared experience with victims. For example 'Comrade Jonathan' said 'I follow Deportes Tolima, but Barcelona plays exceptional football. I really like Iniesta' and 'Comrade Miller' said 'football is our favourite hobby in the jungle, and for a short time we forget about the fighting, the shooting, the rifles, the death, and the fear, everything' (Torres & Navarro, 18 February 2017). Football is said to be 'one of the symbols of union that civil society and the

⁶ 'Walter Mendoza' became the FARC's sport spokesman, but in August 2019 he abandoned the peace process.

guerrillas are using to promote peace' (Torres & Navarro, 17 February 2017) The message of FARC being committed to the peace process and fulfilling their obligations comes across in statements and symbols such as the names of the tournaments and facilities (the sports centre in La Elvira is called Polideportivo por la Paz Nicolás Fernández), events arranged and images included in news reports and social media. For example, the Martín Villa ETCR in Filipinas, Arauca hosted an event in April 2017, news of which was reported on their own YouTube channel (Martín Villa 19 April 2017). Peace is a constant message from the start with the 'Martín Villa: Vamos todos por la paz' message (Let's all go together for peace), followed by a 'la paz está en nuestro corazón' (Peace is in our heart) slogan underneath FARC-EP with an image of a heart composed of shaking hands. The soundtrack is 'Un paso hacia la paz' (A step towards peace), a song released by various Colombian artists including Carlos Vives, Toto la Momposina and Juanes, to promote the peace process. The contents of the video are similarly coordinated and directed towards a patriotic message of peace; the men's and women's teams sing the national anthem proudly with hands across their hearts, everyone shakes hands before the matches, t-shirts worn by the referees have hearts on in the colours of the Colombian *tricolor* flag, a male and female participant give messages about the benefits of sport for peace and the FARC implementing the peace agreement, and the video finishes with the men and women players congregated in a heart shape, filmed from above, releasing yellow, red and blue balloons. The only jarring misstep is the kit of one of the men's teams, which resembles camouflage uniform with FARC-EP emblazoned in red on the back, reminding watchers of the FARC's military identity. This video, authored by the FARC present in their ETCR, is highly structured, propagandistic and overtly symbolic in its political message, but football does at least represent a channel for reidentification and the prospects of peace.

The Martín Villa ETCR was not the only camp to have its own social media production. A video from the Urías Rondón ETCR in Macarena, Meta, had previously been published, covering a football tournament, again for both men's and women's teams, between former FARC members (ETCR Urías Rondón, 24 February 2017) This was a FARC strategy to produce their own narrative, and continued with the creation of the Nueva Colombia Noticias YouTube channel⁷ which reported activities and events in ETCRs across the country, including football tournaments involving FARC and local communities. Videos include an event at the Caño Indio ETCR in Tibú, Norte del Santander (NC Nueva Colombia, 17 April 2017) and at the ETCR Heiler Mosquera in Puerto Asís, Putumayo (NC Nueva Colombia, 25 April 2017). In the latter, following a match against a local team from La Carmelita, a former FARC soldier, Wilmer Guerrero, says 'Hopefully we will have the chance to share more with them, because they will realise who we are, not like the state who always speaks badly about us. We are all children of the same people, and we love each other like brothers (ibid). This appears to be having a positive re-identifying effect; in the same video, local inhabitant Andrea Quintero says 'we see them as normal people just like us, who deserve and have the same rights as any other citizen' (ibid).

These football events are propagandistic, symbolic and managed, but are also preparing the terrain for re-encounter, resocialization and reidentification. The FARC used football to establish themselves in their communities, underline their commitment to the peace process and create a more socially acceptable side to their identity. Although the message is carefully controlled, football is advanced as a potential neutral terrain for meeting and social progress at this very early stage in the post-conflict scenario, most significantly by the anti-state actor

⁷ NC Noticias home is <https://www.youtube.com/c/NCprensa>

previously viewed as ‘other’ to the nation. FARC would continue to broadcast these messages using their social media channels in the coming years.

Phase 2 - Coldeportes in the ETCRs (May-December 2017).

The Coldeportes project in the ETCRs and local communities began in May 2017, several months after the FARC had arrived. Despite this delay, they were the first government institution to have presence in every ETCR (Coldeportes 2018: 117), via the original 27 *monitores* and 22 *promotores*⁸ (a number that would increase to 66 with the employment of former FARC members trained as sport coaches) who were sent to work in the 26 camps. Following academic and UN best practice recommendations, all the coaches came from the areas where they worked. According to Gisela Gómez, a contractor for Deporte Social Comunitario, the attributes required were experience in community projects, experience in sport and recreation coaching, leadership, to be local and well known (personal interview, 10 November 2017). For instance, Jefferson Vidal, coach in the Caldono campo, located near a Nasa indigenous community, spoke the Nasa language, and his fellow coach, Alexandra Ipia also lived locally (Mesías Chamorro & Portocarrero Hurtado 2017: 17). This local experience helped overcome suspicion from FARC camp commanders, some of whom did not originally allow the coaches into the camps, worrying that the coaches were infiltrating them for the government (Mesías Chamorro & Portocarrero Hurtado 2017: 26; Genyer Rojas, personal interview 23 October 2017). The coaches attended a two-day training workshop in Bogotá aimed at preparing them to work in the camps and communities, though Omar Becerra thought that there was insufficient time to give full training on SDP methodologies (personal interview, 13 October 2017). There was a reliance on previous experience, but some coaches such as Jhon Tarifa (coach in Charras, Guaviare) had worked on Golombiao and were

⁸ henceforth referred to as ‘coaches’

therefore accustomed to football for peace methodologies. In October 2017 the coaches returned for another two-day workshop,⁹ aimed at hearing feedback from the coaches on their experiences, problems and successes, and discussing ideas for improving their work for the remainder of the project. Prior to the project commencing, meetings were held with the Colombian High Commission for Peace, FARC commanders and local community councils in order to negotiate local requirements, with football being the sport most requested sport (Mesías Chamorro & Portocarrero Hurtado, 2017: 18).¹⁰ As discussed earlier, this consultation, involvement and consensus of those involved is an important facet for potential success.

The objectives of the project were to: 1) create spaces for the practice of sport and recreation; 2) strengthen human development; 3) improve institutional cooperation and provision of opportunities and facilities for the practice of sport and recreation; and 4) create an institutional presence in the territory contributing to creating links of solidarity and generating social values through sport and recreation (Restrepo, no date). Unlike the FARC use of football, there was greater use of SDP methodologies; Golombiao-type practices were deployed in camps and communities, Gisela Gómez stating that previous campaigns such as Golombiao were taken into account when designing the project and training coaches (personal interview 10 November). Camilo Montaña commented that activities in the two days a week that he worked in the FARC camps and with communities had a transformational ideal, and were adapted to teach values and principles such as supporting others, solidarity, friendship, working together and gender respect (Fundación Tierra Posible,

⁹ The author was invited to observe both days of the workshop. The second afternoon was also attended by the Coldeportes director Clara Luz Roldán and other Coldeportes leaders.

¹⁰ Other sport and recreation equipment was provided, including balls for various sports, mini football goals, volleyball nets, frisbees, bingo, cards, dominos, chess and table tennis tables and bats (Coldeportes, 2018: 49).

19 January 2018). Jhon Tarifa and Juvenal Tangarife, from Llanogrande, Antioquia, also stated the importance of integration and helping former combatants and communities prepare for the post-conflict period with the ability to reconcile and coexist (personal interviews, 23 October 2017). Although the coaches would continue the FARC practice of organizing symbolic tournaments and matches with local communities, Coldeportes brought different sports and activities based on sport-for-peace methodologies aimed at individual and community development.

In the two-day workshop and interviews, coaches highlighted various practical problems, including the difficulty of accessing and transporting the sporting equipment to the camps, the kit not being sufficient or pointless if the area lacked facilities, and poor facilities frequently ruined by inclement weather. A former FARC combatant, contracted by Coldeportes to help in one camp, was scathing about the lack of local facilities. They had to prepare the ground for a football pitch prior to Coldeportes arriving, clearing mud and digging drainage canals, but heavy rain still wrecked the pitch, and without any hard-court facilities playing other sports was futile (anonymised, personal communication). Some communities, despite being pleased with the recreational activities, complained that these were not a priority given the infrastructure lacking in their area. Personal difficulties and stress were experienced by coaches, and there was one instance of a death threat. Many coaches referred to the difficulty of overcoming local tensions and anxiety, though all commented enthusiastically about the significant improvements in this aspect. The former guerrilla contracted by Coldeportes also reported that in some communities they visited to play football ‘people spoke badly about us’, although he said that they had ‘reconciled and socialized with many communities’, listing 18 with whom they had played football or shared other activities (anonymised, personal communication). Another problem was the community

worry that although the state had been present, they would be abandoned again as soon as the project finished (Jhon Tarifa, personal interview 23 October 2017). This is, in effect, what happened, with little improvement in facilities and the non-continuation of new equipment provision, although some former FARC members had at least been trained and involved with Coldeportes to enable them to continue projects. Some sport projects have been started by former FARC, for example in Las Brisas, Carmen del Darién in Chocó, though they have since had difficulty gaining financial support, a situation exacerbated by the Covid pandemic (*El Espectador* 24 March 2020; 23 September 2020).

The coaches spoke enthusiastically about the successes of the project, particularly the impact of football tournaments when FARC and community had participated together. Tournaments between men's and women's teams from the FARC, local communities, the police, army and UN monitoring organizations had become a tradition (Mesías Chamorro & Portocarrero Hurtado, 2017: 24, 30). The sight of former enemies sharing these spaces had a powerful impact. There have even been teams made up of the best players, according to Bibiana Graciano from Llanogrande, Antioquia:

Organizing a championship where there is a police team, an army team, a civil community team and a FARC team, all of them are sharing the pitch, and that the tournament ends with no problems at all, for us that tells us that something important has been achieved. Furthermore, this zone has a football team that's participating in a tournament in the biggest town of the area. That team is made up of police, civil community and FARC, all wearing the same uniform [...] It's something really new for everyone to see. It's really amazing (personal interview, 23 October 2017).

Such events have helped to shift prevailing identities and remove stigmas from former FARC members. Paulo Martínez, from Miranda, Cauca, said that tournaments had 'helped to break

that paradigm of people saying “No, it’s that they used to be *guerrilleros*”, and so there has been a lot more unity’ (personal interview, 23 October 2017). These sentiments were echoed by Johnny Barón, coach in Vista Hermosa, Meta:

The most important thing coming from this experience was sharing things with people who for us used to be dangerous ... I’d never had dealings with former guerrillas before. Now they aren’t that any more. We realized that they were people, human beings with lots of problems, with a different political philosophy of course. But we learned that we are all one, we are Colombia (Ministerio del Deporte 31 October 2017).

These opinions were shared by former FARC and community members, describing sport as opening opportunities for socialization, communication and reconciliation. Former combatant Eduardo ‘the Goalkeeper’ said that ‘the role of sport in this process has been fundamental, because it’s united people and united friends. We’ve been in different schools, playing football with students, doing other activities, and that’s important. They’ve come to the camp as well. There’s been a real connection with people’ (Fundación Tierra Posible, 19 January 2018). Edinson Camayo, a Nasa community leader in Caldono, Cauca said that he could see benefits for the town. Although there was still some apprehension, there was greater calmness and confidence in the area, more displaced people returning, and more economic activity as victims and the FARC talked and played together, shared stories, and opened their hearts (Fundación Tierra Posible, 19 January 2018). The previous relational imbalance between armed insurgent and community has been levelled, as community and FARC participation and inclusion have occurred through sporting encounter. An additional benefit was the state finally fulfilling some of its responsibilities towards citizens, including, as Jhon Tarifa recounted, helping to support traditional indigenous activities of the Nukak and Sikuni communities which were enjoyed by former FARC combatants and local people. One aspect

lacking, perhaps, was an organized media campaign to help visibilize such events for a national audience. Gisela Gómez admitted that Coldeportes had not contemplated a media strategy and therefore the public was largely aware of the project, acknowledging that the FARC had been more active through NC Noticias (personal interview, 10 November 2017).

Phase 3: The 2018 World Cup: June-July 2018

Colombia's participation in the 2018 World Cup in Russia opened a further opportunity for sport as a site for unification. Football mega-events facilitate the strengthening of emotional and psychological connections between citizens and nation through their footballing representatives performing on an international stage for national pride. Santos reiterated the narrative of 'One Sole Country, One Sole Fangroup', emphasizing unity and all Colombians being fans of the national team (Watson 2020; 2021). The tournament also provided an opportunity for the FARC and those working on the implementation of the peace process to arrange events uniting former enemies and their victims around national team matches in the tournament.

Though various news reports and videos were published showing the FARC and community watching *la Selección* matches in Russia together (for example, Torres, 30 June 2018), the event that most successfully captured domestic and international media attention was the 'Golpe de Estadio 2' event in Llanogrande, Antioquia, on 18-19 June 2018. It was organized by the Reincorporation Section of the Department of Antioquia, the Aulas en Paz NGO and the FARC from the Llanogrande ETCR, with support from the UN Verification Mission, the United Nations Development Programme, and the Municipal Sports Department of Medellín, marking an SPD project where three of the four of Giulianotti's categories of project organizers converged (2011: 212). The event was a reimagining and real-life reenactment of the film *Golpe de Estadio* (1998) directed by Sergio Cabrera, which features the FARC, local

community and soldiers organizing a truce to watch Colombia's 5-0 World Cup qualifying match vs Argentina around the only television in the area. In the 2018 event, Cabrera was present alongside former FARC, ELN and paramilitary leaders and representatives of victims organizations. The event included a screening of his film followed by speeches from those present, football matches featuring a composite team of former FARC combatants, police, army and citizens against a team of former footballers from the Medellín rival clubs Atlético Nacional and DIM, and finally everyone watching Colombia's 1-2 defeat against Japan in the World Cup group stage.

Jackson-Schebetta describes the event as a 'peace-building performance of the present for the future, as well as a recuperative healing performance, a (re)making of peace with the past' (2020: 82), highlighting the convergence of memories of Colombia's golden football generation imbued with memories of the conflict, a peace-building event constructed around the exceptional unifying national moment of a crucial World Cup game, and a vision of a potential future of peace. It is a message of a former dream becoming realized and potentialized. Cabrera said that when he started making the film 'imagining a peace process was a utopia. Imagining that guerrillas, police and paramilitaries would sit together in a room for a football match was just that, a utopia. For that reason, the words at the start of the film say "This isn't based on real life events. If only it were..." (Misión de Verificación de la ONU en Colombia, 21 June 2018). The performative aspect stands out as an SDP activity, given the overt symbolism throughout the activities included. In media reports and a documentary filmed to commemorate the occasion, national team shirts are ubiquitous, worn by representatives of the FARC, ELN, paramilitaries, victims and community, serving as a mutual site for inclusion and recognition (Watson 2020: 416-417). In the football matches, peace and national symbols combine in a highly visual demonstration of present and future

potential, with national flags, banners emblazoned with ‘Territory of Peace’ and ‘Never Again’ messages, the singing of the national anthem together, as the FARC, paramilitary and ELN leaders, plus army, police, victims and community all reaffirm their shared nationality. There is also a potent message of rivalries being overcome, embodied by the teams on the pitch, and presence of well-known leaders of the FARC (such as Pastor Alape and *alias* Isaías Trujillo), the ELN (Carlos Velandia) and the paramilitaries (‘Ernesto Báez’ and ‘Julián Bolívar’) and victims organization representatives such as Teresita Gaviria from the Mothers de la Candelaria Association, watching the match and celebrating together when Colombia score. The poignancy of football as an appropriate and potent site for encounter, reconciliation and inclusion is not lost on the participants, clearly speaking to the nation as much as to the local audience. Trujillo said ‘we all fit in this space, because it is a space for peace [...] and all here have the obligation and duty to ensure that this space does not disappear’. Báez recalled that ‘during the war, paramilitaries and guerrillas did not fit in the same country. It was us or them. One million 138 thousand square kilometres, there wasn’t a place for guerrillas or their family members to coexist with us. Today we are in a place measuring around 70 square metres and we all fit’ (Moreno, 25 April 2019). Such statements from leaders with a national profile endowed the event with a national sociopolitical impact, given the significant media attention. This attention and the potency of the event was only possible given the exceptional nationalism and ritual of the national team in the World Cup. However, this was but a brief symbolic performance, albeit one that continued the organization of sporting events and interactions between FARC and local communities. What lasting impact on reconciliation and reincorporation such an event actually has is debatable given its fleeting nature, though any symbolic ‘recharging’ of the peace process that felt jeopardized by Iván Duque’s recent victory in the 2018 presidential elections was welcome. Media attention dwindled following this event, though NC Noticias and other associations

monitoring the peace process would continue to release videos of football tournaments and suchlike, which were maintained by the FARC and communities as an ongoing ritual. Such leagues and tournaments at least continued to normalize encounters with and embed new identities of former FARC combatants.

Conclusion

The prominence of sporting activities, particularly football, in the ETCR camps marks a convergence of an increased tendency towards community participation and cultural activities as part of Colombian DDR processes, with the greater knowledge, practice and emphasis on SDP methodologies and activities in Colombia. Football, long imagined nationally as a potent site for integration and unity with the capacity to (perhaps briefly) overcome lasting divisions and create a sense of horizontal comradeship, was deployed by a variety of actors (State, international organisations, NGOs and former anti-state actors), often in collaboration, in the post-conflict scenario to enhance the reincorporation process. Football provided sites of socialisation, (re)encounter and integration, and began to shift prevailing identities and stigmas about the FARC, and indeed the State and armed forces, often held responsible by rural communities for massacres and failure to uphold their functions. The overcoming of suspicion and reducing community anxiety seems to have been a tangible success. These activities have been assisted by football being understood as a common point of interest, capable of attracting media attention which facilitates the diffusion of positive narratives of the peace process. There have been political goals in play as well as creating spaces for peace and coexistence; the FARC had a vested interest in reshaping narratives about itself and trying to gain influence as a political entity, and the Colombian State needed to assert a presence in areas once under the influence of the FARC. However, given cooperation in organizing football tournaments, football has been less of a contested site for

symbolic messages about the nation. Messages around football from State, FARC or other bodies, have predominantly reinforced a sense of optimism and potential for a peaceful future, though a stronger communication strategy publicizing such ‘good news’ stories would have been beneficial.

Although there have been positive outcomes in terms of bringing former enemies together, reducing the imbalance of armed insurgent over unarmed citizen and creating new identities and memories of social encounter, there have been problems due to a combination of practical and methodological reasons. It is arguable that the overtly symbolic nature of the tournaments and their media reproduction could be perceived as being more performative in nature, though, at the same time, tried and tested SDP methods and practice were also present for a significant period of time in the first year of the post-conflict scenario. These were judged to have had a positive effect by organizers and participants. The provision of sport and recreational equipment was insufficient and few lasting facilities for the permanent practice of different sports have been built. There has been some capacitation and training of local communities to continue projects, and indeed, some former FARC members have continued the momentum by organizing sports clubs combining sport, education and creating opportunities in peripheral communities, often using SDP-type methodologies. The establishing of footballing rituals and traditions (leagues, tournaments, watching matches together) to some extent mitigates for the Coldeportes project ending.

The remit of this article is not to analyse sport’s effectiveness as part of the wider peace process. There are greater problems present in Colombia that football cannot hope to solve; it cannot help with the implementation of the peace accords or attempting to remove the structural issues at the root of the Colombian conflict, which again seems to be transitioning

into a new phase. It can at least be argued that football served the various actors effectively as part of reincorporation processes, and provided a space for collective negotiation and cooperation towards shared interests.

(8356 words)

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