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Learning from Hardship: Colombia's Reintegration Process

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By Andres Lizcano Rodriguez of The Morningside Post

"This is my most important appointment today," said Alejandro Eder, the director general of the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR), who spoke to students and faculty at Columbia University on January 28th. Eder, a SIPA alumnus, was visiting his alma mater to discuss the Colombian program for reintegration of demobilized paramilitaries and guerrilla members, whose success has motivated collaboration with 22 other countries.

The current Colombian reintegration program, launched in 2002, represents a portion of one of the most complex Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes in the world. Since establishing its strategic importance as part of the Colombian Peace and Security policy with the creation of the ACR in 2006, the reintegration program has been characterized by its thoroughness: demobilized paramilitaries and guerrilla members enter the process for an average of seven years, compared to 6-18 months in similar programs elsewhere. The allocated annual budget -- most of it provided by the Colombian government -- is \$3,500 per person, totaling \$90 million per year.

The program advances in multiple steps. First, candidates must describe who their comrades were, name the front they were affiliated with, and, on occasion, even sing the F.A.R.C.'s anthem to verify their membership. They then embark on a three-part process: psychological stabilization, academic learning, and, finally, vocational training. Every participant receives a small subsidy and has to complete 80 hours of voluntary social service. Former paramilitaries and guerrilla members agree upon the nature of the service via discussions with victims of the

conflict. Eder asserts that this controversial measure is nevertheless essential to the reconciliation process.

The reintegration program is open to any demobilized guerrilla or paramilitary who has not been accused of crimes against humanity. Since 2002, [55,000 people](#) have demobilized. While the emergence of new illegal armed groups (NIAGs) and paramilitary successors has generated doubts about the long-term effectiveness of the program, participants to date are less likely to return to criminal activities (18 percent) than non-participants (25 percent).

Although the ACR periodically publishes reports, no critical assessment of its programs' performance exists on its website. The Organization of American States occasionally publishes critical comments in its quarterly report. Particularly, it has mentioned the confusion that arose among the demobilized population due to various changes in different aspects of the program. Other organizations, such as the "Fundación Ideas para la Paz," are conducting independent studies, and in 2010 the National Planning Department conducted the only existing evaluation. However, the ACR does not appear to have a thorough, ongoing evaluation policy. The agency justifies this reality by reminding critics that it only gained strong operational capacities last year, before which it served merely in an advisory capacity.

"The biggest challenge," Eder stressed, "is to get the society to give the demobilized an opportunity." The agency is therefore focusing its efforts on de-stigmatizing the demobilized population. The primary incentive for these former guerillas and combatants to return to criminal activities is the lack of economic opportunities. Many companies openly state that they would never hire a former paramilitary or guerrilla member. Thus, the 90 percent of the demobilized population that have found a job were only able to do so by concealing their past.

"The problem is that a former paramilitary who starts a business and sends his children to school is not newsworthy," Eder notes. "There are more successes than failures, but people don't get to hear them. The only reference they have is the bad press." To tackle this problem, the agency is launching an informational campaign. New legislation providing benefits to companies that hire demobilizers, in addition to cooperation from large corporations such as Coca Cola FEMSA and Electrolux, show promise as well.

To some, it may seem unfair to expend so much effort on former paramilitaries and guerrilla members while the victims themselves have yet to be sufficiently compensated. However, Eder emphasizes that "a reintegration process is not a social development policy. We search to attain goals in peace and security." Alternative solutions, such as continuing the war or convicting the demobilized population, would be more expensive and have proven to be less effective (especially as reflected in recidivism rates).

Traditionally in a post-conflict situation, the hardest part is the transition from signing a peace agreement to starting the reintegration process, and Eder warned against politicizing this progression. In Colombia, however, this process has started before the end of the violence itself. Once a peace accord with the F.A.R.C is signed in La Habana, Eder believes the benefits of the ACR's efforts will become even clearer.