Social Mobilization and Structural Racism in Colombia

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About the Grand Challenge

Inequality and exclusion are among the most pressing political issues of our age. They are on the rise and the anger felt by citizens towards elites perceived to be out-of-touch constitutes a potent political force. Policymakers and the public are clamouring for a set of policy options that can arrest and reverse this trend. The Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion seeks to identify practical and politically viable solutions to meet the targets on equitable and inclusive societies in the Sustainable Development Goals. Our goal is for national governments, intergovernmental bodies, multilateral organizations, and civil society groups to increase commitments and adopt solutions for equality and inclusion.

The Grand Challenge is an initiative of the Pathfinders, a multi-stakeholder partnership that brings together 39 member states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector to accelerate delivery of the SDG targets for peace, justice and inclusion. Pathfinders is hosted at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

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National strike of April 28, 2021 in Bogotá, Colombia, Photo by Byron Jimenez on Unsplash.

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Executive Summary

Following the announcement of new taxes as well as health care reform proposed by the government of President Ivan Duque Marquez, mass social mobilization took place in Colombia during eight weeks, from in April 28 to the second week of June. The mobilization and circumstances in which it took place showed the deep social crisis of inequality in the country, exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic and the lack of agility on the part of the national government to remedy the situation. The government's response to these social mobilizations was characterized as a violent and repressive—with the use of the national police force. While numbers differ, there were thousands injured and over fifty who died due to police force. The higher number of casualties from the country's Black and Indigenous communities demonstrated the structural racism that exists in Colombia. Cali, the third most important city in Colombia, where the crackdown was particularly intense, was proof of this.

This is not the first time that protests about racism have taken place. In 2017, a year after the signing of the Peace Accords between Colombia and the extinct Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) guerrilla, social mobilizations were held that lasted more than twenty-two days in Buenaventura. At that time the government of Juan Manuel Santos managed to reach agreements with the representatives of the strike. However, the lack of compliance with those agreements meant that Black and Indigenous people in Colombia continue to live in precarious conditions. More protest was inevitable.

This stubborn situation of structural racism and grievances has demonstrated that despite the different spaces for dialogue and intercultural construction that exist in Colombia, it is still necessary to generate more spaces for the construction of solidarity between ethnic groups that allow the protection of their individual and collective rights. While recent activities have demonstrated the strength and important role of civil society in raising awareness and holding the government to account, there is a need for government to follow up with efforts to improve the material conditions of the Afro Colombian community as well as enhance national dialogue.

Key areas of action include:

1   **Peacebuilding:** Due to the constant presence of illegal armed groups and violence in the areas of the country where Afro communities live, these communities have organized and created different work groups with which they seek to generate peacebuilding strategies in their territories. The national government must work hand in hand with the organizations and communities to integrate this type of strategy with the aim of establishing a peacebuilding agenda that is applicable and adjusts to the needs of the territory. A key way they can do this through the grassroots organization, National Afro-Colombian Peace Council (CONPA). CONPA is a coordination space for Afro-Colombian organizations created to structure a national peace proposal from an Afro-ethnic perspective in order to influence the negotiation and peacebuilding processes in the country. This is made up of ten Afro organizations from different regions of the country. CONPA has been considered the most significant organizational achievement of the Afro-Colombian people in recent years because it allows them to define a peace agenda from their organizations, which guarantees their social and political inclusion in the current peace and post-conflict process.

2   **Ensuring an annual budget of the National Development Plan:** Recent governments have committed to assigning specific economic resources aimed at prioritizing social and economic issues in Afro-Colombian communities through their National Development Plans. However, the budgetary allocation of these resources is never fulfilled, causing projects planned by grassroots and social organizations for their communities to not be fulfilled.

3   **Increase in land titling:** Although through Law 70 of 1993 organized Afro communities can access collective titling of their territories and some Afro communities in the Pacific of Colombia have been able to advance their titling process, in recent years the applications for collective titling in both the Caribbean region and in the Colombian-Pacific have been paused for long periods of time without any justification. Currently, the National Land Agency, the body in charge of advancing the titling process, has blocked several processes. For Black communities in Colombia, this is a red flag that is not adequately attended to by the government, and that due to its importance, should be an issue to be dealt with as a priority.

4 **Plan to mitigate COVID-19 in Black communities:** It is known that the consequences of the pandemic are more profound in Afro-descendant communities, especially in Afro-descendant women living in rural areas. For this reason, there is the need for a plan to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and for treatment in majority Afro territories. In addition, there must be an impetus to generate strategies to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

5 **Build solidarity across groups**: Contributions to the building solidarity between groups can be done in three ways: first, from an international approach, generating spaces and platforms for the exchange of experiences where communities from the Global South converge. Second, from a national perspective, there must be an effort to promote greater channels of dialogue between ethnic groups in which the different levels of government participate, mainly the national government. Thirdly, from a territorial approach, identify the academic, litigation, and communication tools, among others, that can contribute to the collective construction processes that already exist in the communities.

Cartagena, Colombia, August 2018. Photo by Ricardo Gomez Angel on Unsplash

1 The Context

In April 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, the government of President Ivan Duque Marquez in Colombia announced new taxes as well as health care reform. The proposals were not well-received in resulted in protests and mobilization starting on April 28 and lasting until the second week of June. For more than sixty consecutive days, there were social mobilizations demonstrating the discontent and disagreement that a great part of Colombian society, mainly young people, had with the policies and decisions adopted by the government.

Despite calls to the government to sit down and negotiate made by the young people made up the "frontline protesters" and the different groups and worker centrals that make up the strike committee, the government chose to first to respond with minimal dialogue, and police violence. The number of cases of people killed, disappeared, injured, and who suffered some serious damage to their health has no precedents in Colombia. A central feature of the repression was racism. The Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations were the main victims of violence and police repression during the protests. As such, the protests and the police response can be seen as evidence of the structural and systematic racism that exists, but is not yet fully recognized in Colombia.

1.1   Sixty days of social mobilizations

There were more than sixty consecutive days of protests and social mobilizations in Colombia. The protesters' demands related to claims surrounding the historical and structural debts that the state of Colombia has towards society. These debts can be translated into high levels of poverty and extreme poverty (which worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic), limited access to economic, social, and cultural rights; the growing number of social leaders and former combatants killed, without any investigations to find the culprits of these homicides; and ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination.

1.2   A dialogue with no way out

Although the demands of the Colombian people are legitimate, the
government's response to dialogue and negotiate with the protesters was from
from ideal. At first, the government opted more for police repression than for
dialogue. Then, amid police repression, the government tried to create tables
for dialogue and negotiation, which did not conclude as expected because
there was not adequate representation of the protesters in the dialogue
process.

This happened for several reasons: first, although the demands of the
protesters could be categorized into broad groups of demands, the truth is
that the variety of demands was very wide, making it difficult to coordinate an
agenda between the parties. Second, there was no clear representation or a
leader among the striking protesters, because although there was the National
Strike Committee—which brought together several workers' centrals—it did
not necessarily represent the interests of a large part of the protesters, who
were youth or members of ethnic and racial groups. Third, within the group of
mobilized young people were the frontline protesters, there were young people
who directly had demands on police reform, and demanded the government
provide guarantees such as access to free education and employment for
young people. In conclusion, both the demands and the protesters were widely
diverse and the Colombian government did not have the capacity to sit down to
dialogue and negotiate with in the midst of this heterogeneity.

1.3   The response

The government's inability for dialogue and negotiation made police repression
its main strategy. During the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
(IACHR)'s working visit to Colombia, they were able to verify that on June 24,
2021 there were fifty-four deceased persons and more than 1,140 civilians
injured during the protest. However, the civil society organization Temblores
announced that there were at least 4,680 cases of police violence, with eighty-
two suffering eye trauma. The same organization stated that twenty-seven
cases of sexual violence took place, eighteen corresponding to female victims
and nine to male victims.[1]

Additionally, the Washington Office for Latin American Affairs (WOLA) received
and published complaints made about cases of police violence against
journalists who have been covering the strike, highlighting that on June 10, 2021
there were at least 129 reporters, journalists, photographers, cameramen, and

other people working to provide the national strike media coverage who were also victims of police violence during the strike. Similarly, WOLA highlighted the participation of paramilitaries or armed persons not part of the Armed Forces of Colombia who participated in the demonstrations and responded violently against the participants of the marches, in complicity, in some cases, with the National Police.[2]

1.4 Structural racism and social protest

Finally, structural and systematic racial discrimination have been part of the response of the state and of civil society in relation to social mobilizations. In the report presented by the IACHR on social protest in Colombia, the Commission highlights that Colombia is in a climate of political polarization that is directly related, among other things, to structural and systematic ethnic-racial discrimination, with Black and Indigenous people having the worst living conditions compared to the national average, in addition to being the ones facing greater police repression and attacks by paramilitary groups during the demonstrations.[3]

The following sections will elaborate on the fourth point: structural racism in Colombia, solidarity across the different ethnic groups in Colombia, and the main recommendations for solutions.

2 Structural Racism in Colombia

The mobilizations by the Afro-Colombian peoples in Colombia to demand the vindication of their rights and the solution of historical problems by the state is not a novelty. In 2017, a year after the signing of the Peace Accords between Colombia and the extinct Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) guerrilla, social mobilizations were held that lasted more than twenty-two days in Buenaventura where the main seaport in the Pacific region of Colombia is situated, and in the region of Chocó, which is one of the regions with the highest rates of poverty and extreme poverty in the country, characterized by the fact that around 95% of its population is Afro or Indigenous.

Despite the fact that at that time the government of Juan Manuel Santos managed to reach agreements with the representatives of the strike in Chocó and in Buenaventura, the lack of compliance with those agreements—translates into the continuity of the precariousness of the living conditions of Black people in Colombia—has made Afro people take to the streets again to demand their rights over a number of these issues.

2.1 Systemic racism and historical debts

The Afro community in Colombia has worse living conditions than the average Colombian population. These conditions include:

— **Access to Essential Services**: Access to electric power coverage for the average of the Afro population is 92.6% compared to 96.3% for the national average, with Afro populations living in rural areas having the lowest percentage of access (80%). For access to the aqueduct service in homes, the gap between Afro-descendant people and the national average is much wider, where only 70% of Afro-community have access this service, while

the national average is above 86%.[4] Furthermore, the access to housing to Afro-decedents in rural areas is only 43%. On the other hand, access to sewerage in Afro-Colombian homes is only 54%, while the national average is 76%, and only 17% of the homes situated in rural areas have access to this service. Energy, aqueduct, and sewerage services are three essential services for family, particularly in the midst of confinement due to the global pandemic. These services are vital for families to be able to wash their hands frequently and prevent spread of the virus, and also be able to access the internet and energy sources to work and study remotely.[5]

— **Educational Opportunities**: According to the Colombian Ministry of Education, the illiteracy rate is higher in ethnic groups than in the rest of the population in Colombia, with national illiteracy levels at 5.2%, while the rate for the Afro community is 14%. During the pandemic, the educational gap widened further as social distancing measures have made access to education depend mainly on two factors: the level of internet coverage at home and having a computer and/or a tablet. As indicated by the 2018 Census, around 27% of the Afro population in Colombia have internet access at home, 16 percentage points below the national average.[6]

— **Discrimination**: On the other hand, it is important to mention that since COVID-19's global onset in early 2020, Afro-descendant women in Colombia have suffered from a triple pandemic: the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnic-racial discrimination, and gender discrimination. Structural and systematic racism, along with sexism added to the permanent marginalization of this group, resulting in an increase in their social, economic, physical, and mental health vulnerability.

According to an article published by David Murillo in April 2021, Afro women in Colombia have suffered greater consequences of the pandemic compared to the rest of the Colombian population, especially in terms of access and permanence in the labor market. Examples of this included having greater difficulties paying debts and bills and/or getting food or cleaning products, and with greater psychological effects.[7]

Another factor that has encouraged the social mobilization of Afro-descendant communities in Colombia has been the growing number of social leaders who have been assassinated in recent years, since these have occurred in the regions where this community lives in—mainly in the northern region of Cauca—where there has been a greater number of homicides.[8] After the signing of the Peace Accords between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrillas from the FARC-EP, and after the arrival of Ivan Duque's new government, Colombia became the country in Latin America with the highest number of assassinated social leaders. Nevertheless, the solutions implemented by the stat are scarce.[9]

3 Solidarity Across the Different Ethnic Groups in Colombia

It must be recognized that there is no public policy at the national level that has the objective to support policies and actions the national government can implement to build solidarity among the different ethnic and racial groups in Colombia. However, there are some public policies with a differential ethnic approach that has facilitated joint work and solidarity between ethnic groups. These types of projects have focused mainly on building peace at the territorial level and implementing mechanisms that seek to improve the quality of life of the communities.

One of these policies is the **Development Program with a Territorial Approach** (PDET, for its acronym in Spanish). The PDETs "are a special fifteen-year planning and management instrument, whose objective is to stabilize and transform the territories most affected by violence, poverty, illicit economies, and institutional weakness."[10] The PDET territories are organized into 170 municipalities that are grouped into sixteen sub-regions. It is estimated that around 36% of the national territory is involved in this project. Within the regions of the country that are part of the PDETs, there are territories where Indigenous people, Afro communities, and peasants converge.[11]

Although there are programs such as the PDETs generated by the national government that encourage solidarity between ethnic groups, there are also other projects created by the same community with this same objective. The difference between programs created by the government and programs created by communities is that the latter seek to restore the collective rights of ethnic groups in Colombia, rights the government has sometimes violated. These types of programs are more frequent in places where not only Afro-descendant and Indigenous groups converge, but also peasants, legal and illegal armed

groups, illegal economies, little presence of the state, among other factors that make these areas of the country the most impoverished and with the highest levels of violence.

Two of these regions are the north of Cauca and the Pacific coast of Nariño. These sub-regions of the country have been characterized by the fact that in recent years, after the signing of the Peace Accords and the Duque government's failure to comply with the Accords, levels of violence have increased. The number of forcibly displaced persons and assassinated social leaders and former combatants has increased along with the presence of illegal armed groups.

In the case of the Pacific of Nariño, over early 2021 there have already been six massacres,[12] resulting in a total of more than twenty-four deaths over January first and July of 2021.[13] Similarly, on July 4 of this year, in just one municipality in the region of Nariño, more than seven thousand (7,000) people were forced to leave their homes due to clashes between the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas, members of the Gulf Clan, and dissidents of the Revolution Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).[14] These confrontations were mainly due to the control of strategic drug trafficking zones.[15] The Ombudsman's Office classified June 2021 as the month with the most forced displacements and confinements in 2021 (as of July 2021).[16] This situation is even more serious given the context of poverty, lack of access to quality health care, and confinement due to the pandemic in which these people live in.

As for the north of Cauca, the situation is similar to that of the region of Nariño, since there is a presence of different illegal armed groups that dispute the territory with the aim of having the greatest possible control of the areas of influence of drug trafficking, generating as a consequence the forced displacement of ethnic communities and the murder of social and community leaders. As of July 2021, in the region of Cauca there have been eleven massacres, resulting in a total of more than thirty-seven people deaths.[17]

Regarding the programs and spaces for inter-ethnic dialogue and participation, these seek to generate joint actions in order to restore and/or protect individual and collective rights. An example of this is the "right to Prior Consultation" and the "right to Collective Titling." These types of rights have a particular characteristic which is that they are fundamental rights that allow Indigenous and Afro peoples to access other types of rights, such as the right to preserve culture, hence the importance of protecting and ensuring access to these types of rights.

May 2021. Photo credit: <u>Flickr user criollografico asesor</u>.

A clear example of an intercultural dialogue space is *La Minga*. *La Minga de Occidente* brings together three peoples: Indigenous people, Afro people, and the peasant people. "*La Minga* has focused on four axes: life, peace, territory, and democracy."[18] This group is made up of at least 8,000 people who share the complex context of being from the southwest of Colombia, which is characterized mainly by high rates of violence against ethnic peoples.

A second example of spaces and strategies for intercultural dialogue is the joint work that the Indigenous Guard has developed together with the *Cimarrona Guard*, with the aim of providing security and protection—through ancestral and non-violent mechanisms—of their territories and members of their communities. Both guards have been highly stigmatizatized not only by the national government, but also by civil society, as they are seen as illegal and violent groups.

4 The Solution Proposal

The solution proposal not only for the current social crisis experienced in Colombia due to social mobilizations, but also the historical crisis in Afro territories must consider dialogue and negotiation with the base communities. This dialogue must include four priority points in the social, economic, environmental, and political agenda of the Afro-Colombian community: **(1) Peacebuilding, (2) ensuring an annual budget of the National Development Plan, (3) increase in land titling, (4) plan for mitigate COVID-19 in Black communities, and (5) build solidarity across groups.**

4.1   Peacebuilding

Due to the constant presence of illegal armed groups and violence in the areas of the country where Afro communities live, these communities have organized and created different work groups with which they seek to generate peacebuilding strategies in their territories. The national government must work hand in hand with the organizations and communities to integrate this type of strategy with the aim of establishing a peacebuilding agenda that is applicable and adjusts to the needs of the territory.

A key way they can do this through the grassroots organization, National Afro-Colombian Peace Council (CONPA). CONPA is a coordination space for Afro-Colombian organizations created to structure a national peace proposal from an Afro-ethnic perspective in order to influence the negotiation and peacebuilding processes in the country. This is made up of ten Afro organizations from different regions of the country.

CONPA has been considered the most significant organizational achievement of the Afro-Colombian people in recent years because it allows them to define a peace agenda from their organizations, which guarantees their social and political inclusion in the current peace and post-conflict process.

4.2   Ensuring an annual budget of the National Development Plan

Recent governments have committed to assigning specific economic resources aimed at prioritizing social and economic issues in Afro-Colombian communities through their National Development Plans. However, the budgetary allocation of these resources is never fulfilled, causing projects planned by grassroots and social organizations for their communities to not be fulfilled.

Compliance with the government's budget commitments to the Afro communities should be another issue that should be discussed between the parties, since improving the quality of life of Afro communities in both rural and urban areas involve the allocation of economic resources that allows the implementation of the plans and projects that the communities have established for this purpose.

4.3   Increase in land titling

Although through Law 70 of 1993 organized Afro communities can access collective titling of their territories and some Afro communities in the Pacific of Colombia have been able to advance their titling process, in recent years the applications for collective titling in both the Caribbean region and in the Colombian-Pacific have been paused for long periods of time without any justification. Currently, the National Land Agency, the body in charge of advancing the titling process, has blocked several processes. For Black communities in Colombia, this is a red flag that is not adequately attended to by the government, and that due to its importance, should be an issue to be dealt with as a priority.

4.4   Plan for mitigate COVID-19 in Black communities

It is known that the consequences of the pandemic are more profound in Afro-descendant communities, especially in Afro-descendant women living in rural areas. For this reason, there is the need for a plan to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and for treatment in majority Afro territories. In addition, there must be an impetus to generate strategies to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

4.5   Build solidarity across groups

Contributions to the building solidarity between groups can be done in three ways: first, from an international approach, generating spaces and platforms for the exchange of experiences where communities from the Global South converge. Second, from a national perspective, there must be an effort to promote greater channels of dialogue between ethnic groups in which the different levels of government participate, mainly the national government. Thirdly, from a territorial approach, identify the academic, litigation, and communication tools, among others, that can contribute to the collective construction processes that already exist in the communities.

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