Corporate peace and the Green Economy in Colombia

The current situation in Colombia can be understood as a historic opportunity to try to overcome decades of armed, social and political conflict. Without a doubt, the end of the war through political negotiations with insurgents is an effort that should be broadly backed by all organizations, processes and social movements; and it should be on the general society's horizon for rebuilding the country. Yet support for these processes cannot ignore how the government of Juan Manuel Santos is brokering facets that directly contradict the institutional rhetoric of peace. These facets warn us of a government that—while outwardly showing strides in peace—is declaring low intensity war on the people, in a country increasingly affected and rocked by social injustice and the environmental impacts of its development model.

What the government presents as Peace is actually negotiations with one of the insurgent groups of the armed conflict – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, for its Spanish acronym) – and the prospect of negotiating with another – the National Liberation Army (ELN, for its Spanish acronym). However, peace building requires the participation of society as a whole, and achieving it concretely implies achieving social and environmental justice. Nonetheless, it appears the pursuit of justice, in its different manifestations, is not one of the government's objectives. On the contrary, this path is far-removed from the interests of a ruling class that continues to privatize public resources, establish laws and decrees for dispossession that facilitate invasion and transnational impunity in economic spheres, and—through regressive tax reforms—asphyxiate Colombians and gradually strip them of their rights. It seems to be, therefore, a nominal peace that the government declares in order to promote a transnational corporate model.

Among the many contradictions and fallacies of the current government, I want to make explicit the collateral environmental effects of negotiations with the FARC, currently moving forward in the Cuban city of Havana. The environmental and climate crises are undeniable manifestations of a development model designed and imposed with its back turned to environmental balance, and with a blind eye to participation and popular and sovereign decision-making on land use.

A good way to understand the analysis of the United Nation (UN)'s attempts to implement and impose green capitalism in Colombia can be found in the publication, Environmental considerations for the construction of a territorial, stable and lasting peace (Consideraciones ambientales para la construcción de una paz territorial, estable y duradera), initiated in September of 2014 and published in January of 2015, during which time Santos' second National Development Plan was being drafted (1).

The UN recognizes the problems associated with the FARC's withdrawal from regions where, thanks to this military presence, favorable environmental conditions have been maintained. It recognizes the contradiction that those places may be destroyed with the arrival of corporatism and the extractive

model favored by the government's "democratic prosperity."

In this context, the UN has developed hypotheses and proposals under a green economy framework. This is a double contradiction and a paradox: Avoiding potential destruction of lands using green economy schemes is a regressive return to a model that since the 1990s has deepened social and environmental injustice in Colombia—under the fallacy of sustainable development. Let's have a look.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) presented the green economy that is being sought as the environmental solution to implement in post-agreement Colombia, in the last UN Conference on Environment and Development in 2012 in Rio de Janeiro. Official documents state that the environmental problems and crises are the result of misallocation of capital in development projects, and thereby absolve the capitalist system of responsibility. In other words, instead of getting to the heart of the problem, this view leaves it intact. It presents corporate governance as one of the solutions to the global crisis, viewing state environmental and territorial administrations as weak, and corporations as saviors with the necessary technology and capital to address the problem. It ignores any rights perspective on the commons; favors privatization via public-private partnerships as the only way to manage the commons; and presents false solutions to the global environmental crisis (such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation -REDD- and Payments for Ecosystem Services -PES-).

Returning to Colombia, after pointing out the environmental contradiction that could occur in the post-agreement, the UN presented a series of proposals in four areas, namely:

a) **Land Use Planning.** In a post-agreement setting, there is a clear necessity to reconcile national and regional views with local views. It is an aspect that seems necessary, yet the UN later states that in order to accomplish this, it is important to recognize biodiversity in terms of *natural capital* (NC). The concept of natural capital seeks the mercantilization of nature. Yet nature is not equitable to capital, and in fact the capitalist system has caused its very destruction.

b) **Local development and sustainable production.** Rethinking 'rural' beyond agriculture is the UN's premise. It is an interesting approach, especially given the absence of the farmer as a subject throughout the whole document. 'Rural' is thought of as *a field without farmers*, reinforcing the government's attempts to clear the land. Additionally, there is a proposal to innovate in the "use of biodiversity," clearly through industrial rural development tied to transnational capital and control. The UN also discusses redefining the relationship between country and city, wherein social and sectoral co-responsibility is expressed as *payment for ecosystem services*. Payment for ecosystem services is a capitalist re(de)construction of the relationship between human beings and nature, and in Colombia could involve *eviction by administrative means* after five years of payment.

c) **Extractive activities in the post-agreement.** Appropriately, the need to rethink the notion of "public utility" and "general interest" arises, which in the case of mining and dams has meant displacement of people and destruction of productive, ancestral and traditional lands in Colombia. Yet the proposal discusses the pressing need to conduct *sustainable mining* in order to reduce environmental impacts, share the benefits of this activity, and create jobs for local communities, victims and former soldiers. In no way can mining be considered a sustainable activity. Sustainable mining is a contradiction in terms, since this extractive activity has unforeseen consequences and irreversible impacts.

d) **Institutions and governance.** Perhaps one of the most controversial and critiqued aspects of the

UN document refers to environmental institutions in Colombia and how to strengthen them. Even as it is acknowledged the dismantling of the National Environmental System and the corruption and politicking that has absorbed the Autonomous Regional Corporations, the document presents the possibility to strengthen these institutions economically *using funds generated by PES and REDD*. Colombian environmental institutions reliant on false solutions to climate change, like PES and REDD, will serve corporate capital and landholders that favor current governments, deepening the predatory model and the relaxation of environmental controls.

These ideas—erroneously emphasizing the green economy as a viable option in the post-agreement context—underpin the green growth concept that the Santos administration implemented as a cross-cutting feature of its 2015 National Development Plan. Yet, another contradiction in the discourse and application of Santos' model is the promotion of sustainable development while moving forward with extractive development. At best, green growth is nothing more than greenwashing of a National Development Plan developed by transnational interests and the oligarchy that Santos represents, and is based on privatizing the commons and destroying nature in all its forms.

Resistance and Social Proposals.

As organizations like CENSAT Agua viva – Friends of the Earth Colombia have pointed out, despite the onslaught of the neoliberal model with its discourse about promoting peace while imposing reactionary territorial policies that harm social welfare, many historic resistance movements remain strong; such as the U'wa ancestral peoples in the face of oil exploitation. Democratic alternatives have arisen also in popular consultations, which use participatory mechanisms to make decisions on land use and to autonomously exercise the right to territorial definition. New narratives have emerged, such as the Water Yes, Oil No movement from the Sumapaz paramo; the National Coal Workers Union's opposition to deviation of the Bruno Stream—by which transnational company El Cerrejón would initiate expansion of the coal frontier in the state of La Guajira; the construction of the Colombian Movement in Defense of Land and Peoples Affected by Dams – "*Ríos Vivos*", which has organized important resistance efforts such as that against the El Quimbo dam, jeopardizing transnational plans to exploit rivers; among many others.

These manifestations, supported by energy sovereignty proposals which in turn are grounded in concrete experiences with publicly managed energy production and distribution—by and for the people—are building and fostering an informed and critical discussion on "development." It is important to debate displacement from mega development projects as an issue in and of itself, and to discuss redefining categories like "affected peoples," as the *Ríos Vivos* movement has been doing. Many organizations, movements and territorial processes have also proposed a moratorium on energy mining in Colombia until an independent commission analyzes the titles and licenses given out for these projects—many of which are in violation of the law (2).

In the background, and in this crucial moment of negotiations to end the conflict, recognizing nature as a war victim is being discussed, since complete reparations to human victims is impossible without reparations to nature. In this process of negotiations with insurgents there are also requests for the creation of an environmental truth commission, which would also determine the responsibility of transnational structures.

Danilo Urrea
CENSAT Agua Viva -Friends of the Earth Colombia-
agua@censat.org

0. The document presented by the UN and German Cooperation can be viewed at: http://www.oidhaco.org/uploaded/content/article/1588248879.pdf
0. The mining moratorium has been discussed with the current national government of Juan Manuel Santo in the framework of dialogues at the National Agricultural Summit: Peasant, Ethnic and Popular. However proposals submitted to the government have not moved forward.
0. Roa Avendaño and Urrea. *La cuestión ambiental, un asunto clave en el proceso de paz. En: negociaciones gobierno – ELN, y sin embargo se mueve*. Victor de Currea Lugo editor. 2015.