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Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio:  
“a peace laboratory”?

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December, 2007



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- ▶ Miguel Barreto Henriques estudió Relaciones Internacionales en la Facultad de Economía de la Universidad de Coimbra, en Portugal, donde es actualmente candidato a doctorado en “Política internacional y resolución de conflictos”. Sus intereses en investigación incluyen los estudios europeos, la resolución de conflictos, los derechos de los pueblos indígenas y las relaciones Europa-América Latina. Para su tesis de doctorado está investigando el rol y el enfoque de la Unión Europea en la resolución del conflicto colombiano.

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**Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio:**  
**“a peace laboratory”?**<sup>1</sup>

WORKING PAPER CERAC NO. 6

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December 2007

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft version of a PhD thesis chapter.

## Abstract

This paper focuses on a very original and peculiar peacebuilding experience – the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio. Based on the civil society and located in a highly conflictual region of Colombia, it represents a peacebuilding from below initiative with the political and financial support of the European Union. The Peace Laboratory seeks new paths to peace and development and an alternative model of peacebuilding, in a country which desperately needs new and imaginative solutions and formulas to peace. Above all, what is at stake is to question if the Peace Laboratory is a real “peace laboratory” and where is it heading for.

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## 2. **Introduction:**

In a country involved in an enduring intractable conflict, Colombia has experienced in the last years several local peacebuilding activities. Based on the civil society, these have been an alternative to the national negotiations with the guerrillas, facing harsh difficulties and provoking high social and political frustrations.

Some of the most interesting, ambitious and groundbreaking of these peacebuilding experiences are the so-called Peace Laboratories. Located in a group of highly conflictual and violent regions, they constitute a joint attempt of the European Union (EU), the Colombian government and a number of Colombian social organisations to address the structural causes of the conflict in a local level.

In this paper we will focus on the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio, the first and original Peace Laboratory. We will examine and assess its potential in terms of conflict resolution within the regional and national Colombian framework. The objective is to investigate the model of peace it conveys and if it corresponds to an alternative form of peacebuilding. To some extent, what is at stake is to question if the Peace Laboratory is a real “peace laboratory” and where is it heading for. This will include an analysis of its concept, its objectives, its hypothesis and dimensions. Among its actors, mainly the role of the EU within the process will be studied, and framed within the EU’s peace and development aid policies. Its regional and historical context and its micro and macro level impact will be other aspects of the analysis.

This paper had, as preliminary work, not only bibliographic research and official documents analysis, but also some fieldwork in the region<sup>2</sup>. It sustains mainly on interviews, both in Barrancabermeja and Bogotá, with Peace Laboratory and PDPMM<sup>3</sup> former and current workers and beneficiary social organizations. Also particularly relevant and important for the research was the visit to a Humanitarian Space, one of the most interesting Peace Laboratory’s projects. This occurred on May 2007 to the village of Tiquisio.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank all the people who were kindly available for the interviews and so helpful for this research. My special thanks to Marco Fidel Vargas, from CINEP, for having facilitated and given so much help in the fieldwork in the region.

<sup>3</sup> Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio (Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio)

This paper also constitutes the first of two regional Colombian case-studies papers involving Peace Laboratories, being the other Cauca-Nariño.

## 2.2. The Magdalena Medio Region:

Magdalena Medio is a region located in the northeast of Colombia, with its axis on the river Magdalena<sup>4</sup>. It doesn't constitute an administrative region. It is composed by 4 departments – Santander, Bolívar, Cesar and Antioquia<sup>5</sup>, and by 27 counties. It is mainly a rural area, with only two important urban centres – Barrancabermeja and Aguachica (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 2). It has a population of 800.000 inhabitants (OPI, 2006: 8) and an area of 30.000 km<sup>2</sup> (CDPMM, 2001: 4).

It is a strategically important region in Colombia from the military and economic point of view. It is characterized by an abundance of natural resources, which include gold, emeralds, woods, tropical goods and specially oil. Colombia's most important refinery is located in Barrancabermeja. It is also a vital corridor for the drug and trade routes. It represents a point of confluence between the Atlantic and the Pacific coast of Colombia and Venezuela (Katz, 2004: 30).

However, this richness of the region, in terms of resources and income generation<sup>6</sup>, is contrasted by the poor panorama of the population and by the general underdevelopment of the region. The Magdalena Medio's model of development, centred on oil and extraction of natural resources for exportation, hasn't benefited the most of its population. The income generated by these economic activities leaves the region, creating low profit for the local inhabitants. There are deep social inequalities in Magdalena Medio and a high concentration of capital and land. Poverty and inequality have become a structural feature of Magdalena Medio. 70% of the population is poor, a number well above the national average. But there are even more critical cases in the region, such as Rio Viejo, where the percentage goes up to 90% (Katz, 2004: 30). There is a generalized lack of public services, facilities, schooling, health, employment and land (CDPMM, 2001: 5). The unequal distribution of land has, in fact, been one of the major issues and problems in Magdalena Medio. It is one of the most visible and problematic faces of poverty in the region and a historical cause of social struggle and armed conflict<sup>7</sup>. This trend has even experienced an increase in the last 30 years, due to the true "counter agrarian reform" which the paramilitary and extensive cattle farming expansion have instituted.

This economic scenario has pushed many peasants to the illegal economy, specifically to the coca growing. Though Magdalena Medio isn't a region of high production of coca leaf, it has important plantations in the south of Bolivar, with close links to the paramilitaries. The armed conflict has increased much the coca leaf production in the region. It is supposed to correspond to, at this time, between fifteen

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<sup>4</sup> Vide attachment n° 1

<sup>5</sup> Vide attachment n° 2

<sup>6</sup> The regional internal income is around 2600 million USD, 67% of which is generated by the oil refinery in Barrancabermeja (De Roux, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> The ELN has historically mobilized against a process of land concentration in the region, characterized by the dismantling of the peasant colonization and transfer of land to the great land owners (Bergquist et al, 1992)

and eighteen hectares (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 14). This has brought to the region a fumigation per year since 2000, due to Plan Colombia (Guerra, 2007).

Historically, Magdalena Medio has been an internal colonization frontier, remaining a peripheral region, with a weak and precarious presence of the state, both physically and in terms of social and public services (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 15). The territorial occupation of Magdalena Medio has never been followed by a presence of the state which fulfilled its role of territorial balance and social regulation and cohesion (Katz, 2004: 31). On the contrary, the state presence has been highly repressive and militarized, represented almost only by the army.

Therefore, much of this political space left by the state has been fulfilled by insurgent and counter-insurgent groups. Both the ELN<sup>8</sup> and the AUC<sup>9</sup> were born in Magdalena Medio. This is quite symptomatic of the importance of this region. It corresponds to a zone disputed by both guerrillas and paramilitaries. It is considered a “zona roja”, a hot spot. All armed actors are present in the region. The ELN, the FARC, the EPL<sup>10</sup>, and six battalions of the National Army are in Magdalena Medio (De Roux, 2001). Historically a zone of influence of the ELN<sup>11</sup> (Bergquist et al, 1992), it witnessed the political and military emergence and domination of paramilitarism in the 90s and especially in the 2000s, which diminished the influence of the guerrillas until nowadays. The AUC managed to control all headland municipalities of Magdalena Medio, forcing the ELN to “take refuge” in the *Serrania de San Lucas* and the FARC in central Magdalena Medio (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 14). This increased the violence in the region and inaugurated a new era of social terror, selective murders, internal displacement<sup>12</sup> and humanitarian emergence (Katz, 2003: 31).

All this configures a scenario of high intensity of violence. The political homicide rate is very high in Magdalena Medio comparing to other regions of Colombia and to the national average<sup>13</sup> (OPI: 2006, 19). The process of demobilization of the paramilitary hasn't diminished much either the violence in the region. A paramilitary control has remained in several areas and a new generation of paramilitary groups, such as the *Aguilas Negras* and *Manos Negras*, has appeared (Ibidem, 24).

Notwithstanding, it is a region with a strong historical background of social mobilization, which covers all twentieth century. The oil industry in Magdalena Medio allowed a strong proletarian organization to flourish. Not only labor struggles and strikes were common, but also peasant struggles for land and a general social and civic mobilization for public services, demanding what an absent state didn't or poorly provided to the population and to the region (OPI, 2006: 59). An important example of this was the *marchas campesinas* of the eighties, claiming not only for land, but for the right to life, the demilitarization of the peasant zones, basic public services for the population and the protection of the national resources (Velásquez, 1992: 275).

### 2.3. The origins of the Peace Laboratory:

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<sup>8</sup> Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)

<sup>9</sup> Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (Self Defence Units of Colombia)

<sup>10</sup> Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army)

<sup>11</sup> The ELN consolidated historically in Magdalena Medio, especially around the oil enclave of Barrancabermeja. During the eighties it specialized in oil pipelines sabotage and kidnapping of foreign company executives. Progressively, it lost much of its influence and territory to the FARC and, particularly, to the Paramilitaries (Bergquist et al, 1992: 317)

<sup>12</sup> Between 1991 and 2002 more than 40.000 people were displaced in the region. (Katz, 2004: 31)

<sup>13</sup> According to the Observatorio de Paz Integral (2006: 13, 14) Magdalena Medio has had 1730 political homicides from 1996 to 2004.

A number of trends and factors cross in the origin of the Peace Laboratories. Firstly, one must emphasize that Colombia has seen in the last twenty years the emergence of several civil initiatives of peace and civil resistance, such as the *Comunidades de Paz*, the ATCC<sup>14</sup>, *Justapaz*, or the *Mandato Ciudadano para la Paz, Vida y Libertad*.

One of the most ambitious and original of these initiatives would be at the base of the creation of the Peace Laboratory – the *Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio* (PDPMM). Created in 1995, it was originated by a shared concern of the Ecopetrol oil company, its labour union USO<sup>15</sup> and the Diocese of Barrancabermeja on the reasons why so rich a region had so much poverty and violence and what could be done, after fifty years creating income in Magdalena Medio, so that oil could be a real factor of development and peace in the region (Soto, 2007). This concern motivated a diagnose report to be asked to CINEP<sup>16</sup> and SEAP<sup>17</sup> on the causes of violence and poverty in the region and possible solutions and paths to it. The report was a wide, open and highly participative process, which involved more than 1500 people and workgroups on all the region's municipalities (Valderrama, 2007). The report's conclusions suggested the creation of a peace and development programme which would promote dynamics of peace and development in the region. The idea blossomed.

The project and proposal of a peace and development programme was presented to the World Bank for financing. The World Bank decided to support the process through a new instrument which at the moment was at its beginning – the Learning and Innovation Loan (LIL) (Arboleda, 2007). Two LIL credits of five million US Dollars were granted, being the Colombian state the interlocutor. Some financing was also conceded by Ecopetrol, UN Agencies, and European NGOs and governments (Katz, 2004: 33).

This process would attract the attention of the European Union. The EU got notice of the Programme and became interested in it. It realized it was an experience worth supporting. After some contacts and attending some meetings, the EU affirmed it wanted to collaborate in the process and support the experience. The idea of a “peace laboratory” based on the experience of the PDPMM was presented and accepted.

Several reasons can explain this European interest and involvement: In fact, the EU had started to develop peace-oriented policies towards Colombia in this period. After the implementation of Plan Colombia, and the European refusal to take part in it, due to its military predominance, it was politically imperative for Europe to give a response to it and develop its own peace policies and approach to Colombia. The EU intended to differentiate itself from the North American plan and develop its own proposal, according to its own vision of conflict resolution in Colombia. The Peace Laboratory would become one of its core elements.

Thus, the EU decided to create the Peace Laboratory based on the PDPMM after analyzing the opportunities it opened by the previous work it had done and fulfilled in the field and the previous experience managing international aid and structuring projects

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<sup>14</sup> Asociación de Trabajadores y Campesinos de Carare (Association of Peasants and Workers of the Carare Region)

<sup>15</sup> Unión Sindical Obrera

<sup>16</sup> Centro de Investigación Nacional para la Educación Popular

<sup>17</sup> Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País



of that staff. As Nicola Bertolini<sup>18</sup> (2007), former member of staff of the European Commission Delegation in Colombia, puts it:

“Magdalena Medio had been supported for seven years before the arrival of the Peace Laboratory by the World Bank and the United Nations. This combination gave us a certain guarantee of an installed capacity and a good capacity of analysis and intervention, which could receive numerous millions of euros of the EU [...] and guarantee effectiveness in the implementation of the programmes”<sup>19</sup>

The possibility of peace negotiations between the Colombian Pastrana government and the ELN in a demilitarized zone in the south of Bolivar, at the end of the nineties and beginning of this century, would also play an important role in this process and on the location of the Peace Laboratory in Magdalena Medio. The EU wanted to participate in the process and help supporting politically and financially the creation of this zone. At this time, European ambassadors paid visit to the region and spoke to the communities. The creation of the Peace Laboratory was therefore also an attempt of the EU to support a political negotiated solution to the conflict (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 7). Even though this zone would finally not be constituted, the EU still decided to structure instruments to create the conditions to peace in the region (Valderrama, 2007).

But to understand the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio, one has also to bear in mind and to take into account its historical and regional background. It arose in the mid-nineties in a difficult moment and context to the nation, in general, and to the region, in particular, characterized by economic recession, economic liberalization (with its inherent social costs), and an increase of violence and of the armed conflict intensity. This framework would underline a certain state failure and inability to face the crisis and would, against this background, give a boost to the civil society and push it to find alternatives. Numerous civil society peace initiatives were launched in this period in Colombia (Banfield et al., 2006: 58).

But the Peace Laboratory also has its roots on a historical dynamic of popular and social mobilization in Magdalena Medio. The PDPMM benefited from an accumulated experience of civil resistance and social protest in the region, which had on the labour and peasant struggles and on organizations such as the USO and the OFP<sup>20</sup> some of its more important expressions (Gutierrez, 2007).

So, all these elements were important in the creation of the Peace Laboratory in Magdalena Medio, institutionalized in February 2002 by the signature by the EU and the Colombian government of a special financing convention. A period of eight years and a financial package of 42 million euros were previewed for the Laboratory. A second and a third Laboratories would be created later on in other regions of Colombia.

#### **2.4. The Peace Laboratory within the framework of EU's peace and development aid policies:**

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<sup>18</sup> This is a personal view and does not reflect necessarily the European Commission position.

<sup>19</sup> “Magdalena Medio fue apoyada por siete años antes de la llegada del Laboratorio de Paz por el Banco Mundial y por Naciones Unidas. Esta combinación daba una cierta garantía de una capacidad instalada y una capacidad de análisis y de acción buena que pudiese recibir muchos millones de euros de la Unión Europea [...] y garantizar una eficiencia en la implementación de los programas”

<sup>20</sup> Organización Femenina Popular (Feminine Popular Organization)

The Peace Laboratory, although corresponding mainly in its design and origin to a Colombian civil society initiative, reflects and can be framed within the EU's peace and development aid policies.

Historically a peace project for the European continent, the European Union has been setting the external projection of peace and stability as a main political concern and as a crucial element of its foreign policy and external relations. As recognised by the European Security Strategy, in an era of global interdependence, the world's insecurity constitutes Europe's insecurity. Therefore, Europe has been developing peace-oriented policies, development and good governance for the rest of the world. It's both a matter of idealism and realism (AAVV, 2004: 10). Although focusing primarily on its neighbouring area, these peace policies also cover many other different areas of the world, as the EU aims at playing a global role. Latin America is naturally part of it and Colombia one of its regional priorities in this context.

These European peace policies configure what Stephan Keukeleire (2003) describes as a "structural diplomacy". According to this author, the EU establishes a structural diplomacy in its relations and partnerships with the rest of the world, based on the promotion of long term structural changes in these regions and states. At stake is the support and "transfer" of the ideological governance principles which characterize the European system, such as democracy, rule of law, human rights and sustainable development. It is a diplomacy that transcends the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the three pillars and principally the communitarian policies ran by the European Commission. It is primarily based on the EU's soft power instruments.

Development aid plays a large role in this dimension. In fact, the European development policies have been experiencing a political reform since the nineties. Above all, there has been a politization of the aid. Aid is no longer only centred on poverty reduction, but also on institutional building and political criteria. In this new aid context and configuration, peacebuilding has become a very important aspect of cooperation relations. The European Commission (2001: 10) argues that development aid represents the most powerful tool the EU has at its service to address the causes of conflict. So, elements like conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict peacebuilding were introduced in European development conventions, such as Lomé and Cotonou, and have become key aspects in the design of the aid programs.

The Colombian case, and the Peace Laboratory in particular, configure a clear example of this European development aid framework oriented to peace and conflict resolution. It is structured for and according to the specific social and political conditions of conflict of the country. Therefore, it represents an innovative and original European development approach by its marked orientation towards the objective of peace and the design of new peacebuilding instruments.

### **3. A "peace laboratory"?**

#### **3.1. The Peace Laboratory's objectives and philosophy:**

The Peace Laboratory has an ambitious program and multidimensional goals. But, clearly, its central guidelines are peace and development. It essentially intends to address two issues – the high level of violence which affects mainly the civilian population and the high levels of poverty and exclusion (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 27). Thus, the Peace Laboratory is sustained on two axes. That is quite evident in the

name of the Programme itself, but also in its components, projects and philosophy. The Laboratory has an integral approach and departs from the theoretical assumption that both elements are related. It is based on the belief that peace is multidimensional and that in order to be sustainable, it must have a social, economic, political and cultural dimension.

It intends essentially to build alternative models of peace and development at a local and regional level. It represents an attempt to create the social, economic and cultural conditions to peace at a grass roots level. What is at stake is fundamentally the construction of sustainable peace, through the recovery of the social tissue and the attack on the socioeconomic and cultural conditions which sustain and cause the conflict locally. The main objective of this experience lies thus in the elimination of the root causes of the conflict at a micro level.

It constitutes an attempt to find and build alternative paths to peace, in the middle of the conflict. It is an exploratory intent of peacebuilding, a “laboratory”. As Francisco de Roux (2005: 41), the director of the PDPMM puts it: “[it has in mind] to start to build regionally a process that shows that it is already possible in the middle of the conflict to find the alternative ways to live peacefully and with justice”.

The Peace Laboratory rationale is that it is not reasonable to keep waiting for a national peace process to take place and to be successful. One can start right away to seek to build peace in the regions in conflict, by other means and with other instruments (De Roux, 2001). The Peace Laboratory does not intend to be a substitute to national negotiations with the armed actors. Nevertheless, its perspective is that civil society also has a role in peacebuilding.

And this experience based on the civil society aims to have a demonstrative effect, to be a seed that can be transplanted, a process that can be replicated in other conflictual zones of the country. It intends to “show viable and efficient paths for overcoming the conflict which could be applied in other regions of Colombia” (PDPMM, 2007).

This process sustains itself on a participative methodology. The Laboratory’s formula is based on the people. It proposes to launch and develop processes with the historically excluded sectors of the population and to encourage these sectors to help building alternative social, economic and political proposals (Herrera, 2007). It intends to be a highly participated process. It aims at making citizens see themselves as masters and actors of its own fate, to develop human development through an economy controlled by the population and to achieve peace through the reorganization of political life and citizen control of the public resources (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 4, 5). This participative and collective methodology sustains on the “núcleos de pobladores”, a popular space of participation composed by the local social organizations of a municipality, whose functions are the definition of local development and peace proposals and the execution of projects (Katz, 2004: 32).

Therefore, this process seeks not only to empower and give expression to invisibilized and marginalized groups, as also to build a social and political actor, (Valderrama, 2007), one who acknowledges and defends its rights, who is favourable to peace and who takes part in public life with a new ethic, a democratic culture, a critical conscience and a capacity of participation.

As Libardo Valderrama, sub-director of the PDPMM asserts, “The Peace Laboratory does not intend to be an enterprise of projects. The projects are a means to build peace and sustainable development”<sup>21</sup>. A peace laboratory is not a wallet to

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<sup>21</sup> “El Laboratorio no se quiere como una empresa de proyectos. Los proyectos son un medio para llegar a la construcción de paz y al desarrollo sostenible”

finance development projects. It is a social, economic and political process. The peace laboratory attempts to build collectively a new society (De Roux, 2001).

The vision that sustains the Peace Laboratory is basically the creation of new forms of human relation through the perspective of non violence, dialogue and civil resistance (Pax Christi, 2006: 48). The logic of intervention is the implementation of a culture of peace, based on dialogue and respect for human rights, democratic governance, institutional strengthening, citizen participation and sustainable development (European Commission, 2005: 20). This philosophy is summed up on the following principles: “Magdalena Medio should be built with all, with no exceptions”, “development must be human, sustainable and for the people”, “life first”, “empowerment of the people” and “creation of social networks”<sup>22</sup> (PDPMM, 2007).

In fact, the Peace Laboratory is to a large amount an ethic proposal, with a strong utopian element in it. The Laboratory’s utopia is to show that another model of peace and development is possible, that structural changes are feasible and that there are alternative paths to conceive life, to structure economically and culturally the territory without exclusion, misery and fear. Nevertheless, it is a kind of utopia in practice, an utopia which structures itself in strategies and reflects itself in planning and precise projects (Vargas, 2007).

### **3.2. The Peace Laboratory’s components:**

The Peace Laboratory configures, in its components, a wide and multidisciplinary range of projects, programmes and initiatives. It represents a macro-project. It focuses on several aspects and elements of development and peace. It is based on an integral approach and on a broad concept of peace.

In its original plan and configuration, the Laboratory of Magdalena Medio officially structured four main components or strategic lines: culture of peace and integral rights, productive farming activities, social facilities and institutional building (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 8). The first component aimed at “implementing a culture of peace based on the strengthening of the peace dialogues, the respect for human rights and a dignified life” (Aguilar, 2006: 48). Line 2 referred to economic and agricultural activities. It intended to support a regional peasant economy threatened in the region by the agro industry and paramilitary economic projects, and to build a sustainable socio-economic development which will improve the life of the population in harmony with the environment. Line 3 sought to address the region’s lack of basic public services, such as water supply, health, sanitation and schools. The fourth component aimed at addressing one of the structural causes of the conflict, which is more manifest in Magdalena Medio, the precariousness of the state and of its institutions.

In its second phase, launched in 2006, the strategic lines of the Peace Laboratory were slightly modified. The first strategic line now refers to “Peace scenarios, concertation and human rights”. It intends to contribute to the consolidation of social and institutional dynamics which propitiate civil coexistence and the integral protection of human rights in the conflict scenarios of Magdalena Medio, through the

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<sup>22</sup>“El Magdalena Medio lo construimos entre todos y todas.” “Desarrollo humano sostenible, el desarrollo es la gente.” “Primero la vida” “Empoderamiento de los pobladores y pobladoras”, “Creación de redes sociales”

strengthening of humanitarian spaces, design and execution of strategies of protection of vulnerable groups and support to the democratic institutions (PDPMM, 2007).

The second line is composed by “Social, cultural and democratic governance processes”. It aims to potentiate social and political actors, in order to increment the democratic governance, by the means of strengthening civil society expressions and the transformation of the institutions at a local and regional level (Ibidem).

Finally, the third strategic line corresponds to “Productive environmental processes for equity and sustainable development”. It constitutes a strategy of development and sustainability, which intends to mobilize Magdalena Medio towards a peace economy, focusing primordially on its traditionally excluded sectors. It is conceived as a process of generation of life with dignity and without exclusions carried out, by licit means, by the people and in harmony of gender and with nature (PDPMM, 2007).

These components configure a large array of projects, which go from educational projects, increase of productivity programmes, expansion of crop cultivation, fishing, mining and trade, to the building of infrastructures, such as aqueducts, schools and routes, radio stations, food security, environmental projects, rural and urban development, and the creation of municipal councils of planning (CDPMM, 2001). On its first phase, the Peace Laboratory included 338 projects in 30 municipalities (Aguilar, 2006: 8).

Therefore, we can clearly identify various dimensions on the Peace Laboratory: it has a very strong productive component, perhaps even excessively dimensioned, taking into account its peacebuilding purpose. A large amount of the Peace Laboratory projects focus on the support to the cultivation of diverse goods, such as cacao, coffee, rice, yucca, fruit or african palm.

There is also a manifest cultural and educational dimension. An education for peace and human rights, using civic programmes and art activities, play a large role on the Peace Laboratory’s purpose and projects. The goal to build an integral structure of peace, in which it is included not only economic and political services and institutions, is at the stake, just like the people and the paradigms of thought (Marco Fidel Vargas (2007). Peacebuilding has a strong cultural dimension. The Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM are aware of that.

A concern with the environment is also very visible on the Peace Laboratory’s projects. Magdalena Medio has been experiencing severe environmental problems, facing an increasing pollution, contamination of the Magdalena River, deforestation and destruction of the ecosystems, mainly due to the coca economy and the oil and palm industries (CDPMM, 2001: 6). The Laboratory seeks, thus, to build, through its projects, a sustainable model of development which is in harmony with the environment.

But one must also underline the Peace Laboratory institutional dimension. It puts a strong emphasis on institutional building and strengthening, considered one of the most significant structural problems that the region faces. Historically, the state and its institutions have been highly precarious in Magdalena Medio, thus contributing to the region’s underdevelopment and violence. Through projects, such as of formation of local administrations on rights and public policies, the impulse to associations of municipalities, participative planning, and programmes of health and education strengthening (Valderrama, 2007), the Peace Laboratory has been trying to address this problem. A great concern for the Laboratory has been to involve the local administrations and institutions on its projects. It intends to draw near the social networks and the institutionality, to address the people’s mistrust towards the

institutions and the state and to increase the impact of the projects, by making them public policy. To a large extent, it represents a form of state-building at a micro level.

### **3.3. The Peace Laboratory: an European initiative? – The actors of the Peace Laboratory:**

The Peace Laboratory corresponds to a singular structure due to its open and heterogenic nature. It is a peculiar platform of actors. There are both endogenous and exogenous dynamics in the Laboratory. It is primarily a civil society creation, but it includes the Colombian state. It is mainly a Colombian initiative, but it works with international organizations. A triangle of dialogue and cooperation was formed by the Peace Laboratories. A 3B axis is drawn between Barrancabermeja, Bogotá and Brussels. It is a hybrid. Both social and state institutions are represented. It doesn't correspond to an NGO or a political organization. It is an inter-institutional organisation, an open institution, crossed by many dynamics (Gutierrez, 2007).

But the heart of the Peace Laboratory is clearly the Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio. If we analyse the Laboratory's documents, we'll realise that it does not correspond to a specific and originally European approach of peace intervention (Gonzalez, 2004: 5). It is rather part of a joint and cooperative development strategy with the Colombian government, with other international organizations, such as the UNDP<sup>23</sup> and the World Bank, and, above all, with the civil society.

In fact, the Peace Laboratory didn't start from zero. It was built on the base of an ongoing project and process in the region of Magdalena Medio – the PDPMM (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 4). The role of the EU's aid was principally to support the processes and dynamics already ongoing in the Colombian civil society (ibidem: 3, 8). So, to a large amount, the Peace Laboratory is a sub-programme or a complement to a wider programme called PDPMM.

Therefore, one can ask and wonder to what extent does the EU participate and structure the Peace Laboratory. Does it limit it to a financial role? To sign checks? Or does it reflect the EU's values, principles, approach and perspective of conflict resolution in Colombia? What differentiates the PDPMM from the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio?

The strategic and methodological conception of the Peace Laboratory is based on the original concept of the Peace and Development Programme of Magdalena Medio. Its design, development and implementation are mainly of the PDPMM. The process lies on the PDPMM. The Peace Laboratory is, above all, a European support to it. It corresponds to an amplification and deepening of the PDPMM. The role of the EU, and especially of the European Commission, is of a guide, a partner, a guarantee and a verifier, but not of an imposer of terms on the territory (Mojica, 2007).

This corresponds to a large degree to a new European aid philosophy based on facilitating the means for empowerment, emancipation and autonomy. One can criticise the EU for playing a small part in the process and for not being its leading force. However, it is positive that the process is made bottom – up and that Europe allows the Programme to keep its autonomy. The EU does not have to and mustn't give *diktats* of how to make peace. And it is politically relevant that the EU has supported this precise peace initiative.

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<sup>23</sup> United Nations Development Program

However, that doesn't diminish the political importance of the EU in the process. Even if the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM are not separate structures, nor projects, and even if the Peace Laboratory was born within the PDPMM framework, to a large extent, it also constitutes a European creation and peacebuilding experiment. It complemented the PDPMM with new objectives and considerations and with the specificities of the European view, idiosyncrasies, methods and priorities. The concept of a "peace laboratory" was a European proposal, for instance. Besides, the EU involvement has contributed to strengthen and consolidate efforts by the PDPMM and to expand its successful experiences and projects (PDPMM, 2000) by the injection of more resources. This has permitted to summon much more organisations, to reach a larger number of people and to build a stronger base (Valderrama, 2007).

Another important element was that the European involvement has amplified the political dimension of the PDPMM, which was more oriented to development and productive processes with the World Bank financing and projects. The European Union has given priority to peacebuilding elements. It underlined namely the need to have a closer work and articulation with the local administrations and institutions, and to produce agreements between the civil society and the armed actors, in order to reach peace (Bayona, 2007). But also other political projects were launched with the Peace Laboratory, such as the work with mines, with internally displaced people and the Humanitarian Spaces.

Some administrative processes have also changed with the EU participation (Wlaschutz, 2007). The European aid has brought new procedures and norms to Magdalena Medio. Yet, these have been criticized by many as being heavy, slow, inflexible, and highly bureaucratic. The EU imposed a complex and standardized normativity, which hardly adapts to the region's reality, characterized by its informality, fragmentation and poverty. This has provoked profound tensions and hard debates between the EU and the PDPMM (Valderrama, 2007). Under heavy critic is principally the European method of public convocation for projects, accused of putting in jeopardy the on-going social processes of the Programme and obstructing excluded social sectors to participate, due to its inability to organize themselves and to formulate projects. However, this methodology was relatively changed on the Laboratory's second phase, returning more to the Programme's experience of social participation based on the *núcleos de pobladores*. Notwithstanding, some have pointed out that the European methodology has brought more rigour, monitoring, systematization, accountability and technical capacity to the process.

In addition, the Peace Laboratory does in fact reflect the EU's peace approach to Colombia. The European peace policy to Colombia is based on two axis and objectives: on political and diplomatic efforts to facilitate a negotiated solution to the conflict and on a structural conflict resolution approach, based on addressing the root causes of the conflict, such as poverty, exclusion and inequity. To a large extent, this is what is being tried to be put in practice at a local level in Magdalena Medio and in the other regions with Peace Laboratories. It seeks to be an element of facilitation of peace negotiations and it attempts to address, on a micro level, some of the problems and root causes of the conflict. Therefore, both the PDPMM and the European approach fit very well. The Peace Laboratory corresponds to a "happy marriage" of interests and perspectives between the PDPMM and the European Union.

Besides the EU and the PDPMM, other actors play an important role in the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio. A central actor is the *Corporación de Desarrollo*

y Paz de Magdalena Medio<sup>24</sup> (CDPMM). The execution of the Laboratory was delegated to this organization. It is a private and autonomous entity, with legal personality, composed by the Diocese of Barrancabermeja and the Jesuit organization CINEP<sup>25</sup>. It is an autonomous structure, functioning as technical and administrative agent of the Programme, with power to prepare and execute plans and reports and which structures the projects with the local grass roots organizations, which receive and make use of the resources. There is a high component of decentralization on the Peace Laboratory's structure and functioning.

In other regions the executive entity of the Laboratories is composed by other organizations. The Laboratories search for strategic partners in each region (Luna, 2007). So, on Peace Laboratory II and III the partners and actors are different from those of Magdalena Medio.

However, in all Laboratories, and particularly in Magdalena Medio, a social actor is vital – the Church. There is a strong catholic and jesuit influence on the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio, namely by the presence and participation of CINEP, the Diocese of Barrancabermeja, *Pastoral Social* and several priests, such as the director of the PDPMM himself. In fact, the church plays a crucial role in the Laboratory. Without the church there would probably be no Peace Laboratory in Magdalena Medio. Not only was the Church very important for the PDPMM origin, by serving as a bridge between Ecopetrol and USO (Soto, 2007), as it has been vital for the PDPMM and Laboratory development and implementation. Church has a high capacity of summon in territories where the conflict is very intense and where there is a total polarization. All armed actors respect the church, its social work and its role in peace negotiations, albeit sometimes even the Church is in danger and under threat (Herrera, 2007). Its status and credibility has allowed the Laboratory to enter very difficult and violent zones and carry out projects in them. It has been functioning as a kind of umbrella for the process and the civil society. Moreover, even if the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM are not religious proposals, there is a certain philosophical Christian influence in them, namely by the Social Doctrine of the Church and the Liberation Theory concepts and views (Soto, 2007).

The other main actor of the Peace Laboratory is the state. The state can be considered a sort of both an internal and an external actor to the Laboratory. It plays a crucial role, given that the European Commission canalizes its resources through it. Its main beneficiary and direct interlocutor is the ACCI<sup>26</sup>, the Colombian International Cooperation Agency (Aguilar, 2006: 47). It is, in some way, a bridge and an intermediary between the EU and the PDPMM. It forms one of the sides of the triangle Civil Society – European Union – State. The Peace Laboratory marks, in fact, a first collaboration between the EU and the Colombian government in terms of a strategy of cooperation for a peace process (Maio-Coliche, 2005: 36).

However, some problems emerge by the state participation in the process. The state is one of the parts in the conflict. Therefore, its peace and development perspective and goals not always coincide with those of the PDPMM and of the EU. The current Uribe's administration denial of the existence of an armed conflict in Colombia and the use of rhetoric of "a democracy threatened by terrorists" is but an example (Herrera, 2007). Notwithstanding, the state participation contributes to facilitate some processes,

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<sup>24</sup> Peace and Development Corporation of Magdalena Medio

<sup>25</sup> CINEP is a Jesuit organization specialized on regional work, mediation and investigation on topics such as state, conflict, democracy, peace, education and human rights (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 67).

<sup>26</sup> Agencia Colombiana de Cooperación Internacional



to strengthen networks and the articulation with the EU and the civil society. Besides, the local and regional institutions have become an important target and a partner for the Laboratory's projects.

Equally important to the Peace Laboratory are the *Núcleos de Pobladores*. Ana Maria Mojica (2007), member of staff of the European Commission Delegation in Colombia, considers them "the soul of the Laboratory". They form the nuclear base and the driving force of the PDPMM. The central strategy of organization and social participation of the PDPMM sustains on the *Núcleos de Pobladores*. These local groups, composed by citizens and social and communitarian organizations, are responsible to formulate regional diagnoses and set development and peace proposals, expressed on the Municipal proposals. They define how the population sees the region, what are the needs of the region and what does the population want for the region. (Ibidem) It represents a fundamental tool of citizen organization and participation, through which strategic projects for the social and economic life of the municipalities are chosen, communitarian initiatives are prioritized, resources are canalized and the articulation with the local administrations is established (PDPMM, 2007).

Also very relevant is the role of the PDPMM director, the Priest Francisco de Roux, known in the region as "Pacho". Its leadership, personality and charisma, have been not only crucial for the PDPMM and Peace Laboratory origin, by the means of its personal regional, national and international contacts and networking, (Aguilar, 2006: 35), but it has also played an important role in giving visibility to the Programme and implementing it in difficult regional and national conditions.

Even though the World Bank and the UNDP don't participate directly on the Peace Laboratory, we should mention the importance of these actors in the process. There is an articulation and coordination between these international organizations. Joint missions and programmes have been put in place. The beneficiary regions and municipalities are the identical for the EU, the World Bank and the UNDP; the core staff for the implementation of the programs is the same in all regions (Arboleda, 2007). Colombia, and Magdalena Medio, in particular, have thus become a sort of an "international fair of actors". Not only the international organizations and the European Commission are present, but also, also bilateral aid from various countries.

Finally, we can also consider an indirect actor to the Peace Laboratory – the armed actors. As Luz Angela Herrera (2007), from CINEP, refers, "all armed groups have their eyes on the Programmes". They're clearly a pressure and a strain to the Laboratory. They have the power to influence the Laboratory's activities, to limit its impact or even to put in jeopardy its existence. Besides, the armed actors are, to some extent, interlocutors to the Laboratory's action. The Peace Laboratory deals with matters of peace and conflict in a region of high violence. Therefore, the relation with the armed actors is something it necessarily needs to deal with. All Laboratory projects require some degree of negotiation and agreement with the armed actors in the field, in order to be put in place and function (Ibidem).

In conclusion, all these different actors and partners who participate in the Peace Laboratory contribute to enrich it and make the Laboratory's processes and networks more dynamic.

### **3.4. The Peace Laboratory's hypothesis and theoretical assumptions:**

#### **3.4.1. The regional hypothesis:**

The Peace Laboratory departs from two hypotheses and is sustained on two theoretical assumptions, both debatable from a theoretical point of view: the first one is that “Colombia is a country of regions” (Vargas, 2007).

There is no doubt that the history of Colombia has shown the importance of the local. To a large amount the Colombian conflict and violence express themselves and are played on a local and regional level. The macro national conflict is composed by various different micro level conflicts.

There are historical reasons for that. Colombia has never truly built a nation-state. Historically, the state has been precarious. The national territory is poorly integrated. Not only Bogotá is very far geographically and institutionally from many zones of the country, as even the regional capitals sometimes are. There is what the Colombian historian Fernán Gonzalez (2007) calls a “differentiated presence of the state”. Colombia is a country which lives simultaneously at various speeds. It has a variable geometry. Different levels of development and institutionality coexist, sometimes side by side. Quoting the title of the book by Jean-Michel Blanquer (2002), there are at least “Two Colombias”. There is a democratic, developed, industrialized, occidental and urban Colombia, close to Europe or the US, and a poor, marginalized, rural, peasant, under-developed, without rule of law, fragmented, violent and uninstitutionalized Colombia, facing a Sub-Saharan African-like scenario or a XVII century temporality.

In this historical and geographical context, strong regional identities have been developed. The sense of territorial belonging is deep. *Being Paisa, Santanderian* or *Costeño* in Colombia is full of meaning (Herrera, 2007). The ethnic and societal composition of the country divides it into numerous regions, which could not be unified in a centralist regime which turned out to be artificial (De Roux, 2001). A nation-state in Colombia is still to be born.

This fact constitutes one of the structural causes of the conflict. The space left over or never occupied historically by the state has been filled in the last decades by guerrillas and paramilitary groups. These often not only control militarily the territory, but they also act as a true “para-state”, frequently substituting it in its functions and roles, such as in justice and public services.

Hence, the Colombian conflict has a different face in each region. It is fought differently in each region. Different relations between the army, the guerrillas, the paramilitary, the population, the landowners and the drug traffickers are established (McDonald, 2007: 7). Each region develops its own conflict particularities. There are regionally differentiated expressions of the conflict.

As Fernán Gonzalez (apud Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 11) affirms:

“Violence doesn’t cover in a homogeneous way or with the same intensity the Colombian territory. The armed confrontation is highly differentiated, following the internal dynamics of the regions in its settling, forms of social cohesion, its economic organization, its linkage to the national and global economy, its relation with the state and the political regime and consequently with the differentiated and unequal presence of the institutions and state<sup>27</sup>”

Therefore, the Peace Laboratory perspective is that conflict resolution in

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<sup>27</sup> “la violencia no cubre de manera homogénea ni con igual intensidad el territorio colombiano. La confrontación armada es altamente diferenciada siguiendo la dinámica interna de las regiones tanto en su doblamiento y formas de cohesión social, como en su organización económica, su vinculación a la economía nacional y global, su relación con el Estado y el régimen político y por consiguiente con la presencia diferenciada y desigual de las instituciones y aparatos del Estado”

Colombia must necessarily also pass by this micro level, by the diversity of the regions. The Peace Laboratories constitute an attempt to build peace at a regional level. It is a regional form of peacebuilding. The viewpoint is that the impasse on the national peace processes does not constitute an obstacle for regional agreements between the armed actors, the local administrations and the civil society be reached. As Manuel Bayona (2007), former sub-director of the PDPMM refers, the Peace Laboratory, and especially the Humanitarian Spaces “seek very much regional dialogues, as neither the paramilitary nor the guerrillas are a solid and unified block. There are huge differences between a front of a guerrilla in Sur de Bolívar, Antioquia or Putumayo. And the people know their leaders. They’re boys from the zone. [However], no government has had the will to develop regional dialogues<sup>28</sup>”.

Therefore, the Laboratory’s utopia is to build a nation in peace through regional development (Luna, 2007), and an integral focus on the regions. It intends to build a collective project of region, which simultaneously recognises itself as part of the Colombian nationality (Katz, 2004: 32).

#### 3.4.2. The development hypothesis:

To this regional hypothesis it adds a development hypothesis. The Laboratory’s focus is based on a concept of peace which sees poverty as one of the root causes of the conflict and a nexus between development and peace, poverty and violence.

For the Laboratory, the conflict was born, to a large degree, due to the model of development put in practice in Colombia, and specifically in the Magdalena Medio region. That is an extractive and exclusive model, which generates poverty and inequality (Vargas, 2007), even though the region is rich in resources and Colombia is a medium income country.

The role poverty and inequality play in conflict, in general terms, and on the Colombian case, is a controversial issue. It is object of a heated debate both politically and academically. There are different views on the matter. However, there is a general perception and acceptance on the academia that there is a correlation between poverty and conflicts (Gutierrez, 2001: 55). It is not an automatic relation, nor a deterministic one. There are other elements and variables involved. Poverty *per se* does not lead to violence. Above all, poverty implies a risk of violence. Peace can’t prevail where the economic and social conditions are not sustainable. Societies unable to meet the needs of its citizens are more vulnerable to collapse and to conflicts.

For the relative deprivation theory, which has in Ted Gurr one of its most central references, there is a particular factor that plays an important role in political violence – inequality. According to Sambanis (2004: 14), “Persistent inequality leads to anger and despair, which reinforces the demand for political change.” If there are important differences between groups in terms of economic and political power, “relatively deprived groups are likely to seek (or be persuaded by their leaders to seek) redress” (Stewart, 2002) to this conditions. In fact, poverty is often linked to power distribution. Poverty can be a strong root cause for violence, especially where its distribution overlap

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<sup>28</sup> “Los Espacios Humanitarios reclaman mucho los diálogos regionales. Por que los paras y las guerrillas tampoco son un bloque sólido y unido. Hay diferencias abismales entre un frente de la guerrilla que está en el Sur de Bolívar, Antioquia o en el Putumayo. Y la gente conoce a los líderes. Son muchachos de la zona. Pero en ningún gobierno hubo la voluntad de desarrollar diálogos regionales”.

with ethnic cleavages and power structures (Croissant, 2005). In that case, poverty becomes a mobilization factor, since it is part of an easily identifiable socio-economic or political structure to blame.

These theoretical standpoints are attested by much empirical data. Conflict and political violence affect mainly developing countries. In deed, there is a statistical link between poverty and conflict. Several authors and studies analyse and emphasize this empirical evidence. According to the *Armed Conflicts Report* of 2005, 47% of the countries with a low index of human development have suffered violent conflicts in the last decade. The same happens with 29.1% of medium development. There is a connection between underdevelopment and violence. The probability of an armed conflict affecting a state increases as its development index lowers (Project Ploughshares, 2005). The risk of a violent conflict erupting is four times greater in a Developing Country than in an OECD<sup>29</sup> country (Collier et al, 2003).

According to Mark Duffield (2005, 16), this link between development and peace is not a new one. There is a historical connection between peace and development. The notions converge. They're closely interconnected. Reaching one is seen as an essential element to reach the other. Development is impossible without stability and peace is not sustainable without development.

That is the theoretical perspective adopted by the Laboratory. The fact that Colombia is a country with high levels of poverty and inequity has made it more prone to violence (Gutierrez, 2001: 57). Therefore, the Peace Laboratory is also a development proposal. It is sustained on a development hypothesis. It seeks to find and build a different and alternative model of development, a more participative, inclusive and equitable one, thus contributing to address the structural elements that sustain the conflict.

So, the productive projects play a vital role on the Laboratory's objectives. It seeks to find solutions for the traditional economies and make them profitable. In particular, there is a strong support to *Finca Campesina*, the peasant property, through projects based on collective and associative work and organization.

To a large extent, what is at stake is to "take workforce out of war" (Bertolini, 2007). The Peace Laboratory's perspective is that "when you have a certain level of development it makes it more difficult to involve in war affairs and, besides, you have more elements to face the armed actors"<sup>30</sup> (apud Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 26). Even though the armed conflict concentrates itself territorially mainly on the richest zones of the country, where resources, such as oil, gold or cattle are concentrated and serve as means of financing for the armed groups, the recruiting of men for their causes is done principally in the poor zones, among the marginalized peasants (Bayona, 2007). Magdalena Medio includes and corresponds to both these realities. It is a zone where, due to its resources, all armed groups are present, and where poverty, unemployment and isolation constitute a means of mobilization and recruiting for the insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Therefore, creating development, employment and alternatives for the excluded in the region is, to a large amount, to take young men out of the armed groups (Herrera, 2007). If we consider that poverty is a structural cause of the Colombian conflict, to produce development is to produce externalities of peace.

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<sup>29</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

<sup>30</sup> "[...] cuando usted tiene esos niveles de desarrollo es más difícil que se involucre en asuntos de la guerra, y fuera de eso tiene usted más elementos para enfrentarse al actor armado"

### **3.5. The Peace and Development dimensions:**

The Peace Laboratory is a multidimensional initiative, but one that clearly sustains on two main axis and dimensions – peace and development. We will refer following in more detail to each one of them.

#### **3.5.1. The peace dimension: the model of peacebuilding of the Peace Laboratory:**

##### **3.5.1.1. The concept of Peace Laboratory:**

Considering something which intends to be a laboratory of peace, it is crucial to define and analyse what model of peacebuilding it conveys and what model of peace does it stand for.

One first clue can be found in its name. When looking at the Peace Laboratory, the first thing that pops up and comes to one's mind is its name. It is a quite relevant name. In fact, it does convey a concept and a message. It suggests an attempt to build something new. It implies an idea of exploration, observation and innovation, an experiment in the field of peacebuilding. And this aspects are indeed quite part of the Laboratory's philosophy and concept. It tries to explore new ways of building peace and development at a local and regional level. It is a process in construction with all the people and organisations involved and without a predefined or pre-established model. It doesn't intend to be a substitute to the national negotiations with the armed actors, but to serve as a learning process and a source of innovation in the field of peace (De Roux, 2001).

Moreover, it conveys a political message from the EU. It focuses on peace and bases its approach on peace. It is politically relevant that the name "peace laboratory" was chosen by the EU. The European Union had - by the majority of its members and institutions - opposed to Plan Colombia due to its military component. With the creation of the Peace Laboratories, in its own name, it transmits a concept opposed to the military, relating the pacific with Europe and the military to the US (Loingsigh, 2005).

The term laboratory also suggests an idea of reproducing something and one reality. Actually, this is one of the purposes of the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio. It aims at the reproduction of this experience of peacebuilding and development in other regions of Colombia and at the national level. And this has been done with the creation of Peace Laboratory II and III in other regions of the country.

However, one must bear in mind that we are not dealing with a real laboratory. This is not a scientific experiment. It cannot be easily reproduced and its variables cannot be isolated. There are no social laboratories. It is just a metaphor.

##### **3.5.1.2. The model of peacebuilding of the Peace Laboratory:**

One can identify at least four elements in the Peace Laboratory's model of peacebuilding: its placement and focus on the micro level, its peacebuilding from below character, its structural approach and its broad concept of peace.

a) *The Micro level:*

The Peace Laboratory was designed to work at a micro level. The experience is intrinsically local: it is born in the local; it is structured and designed for the local; it develops in the local. It assumes that the local and regional are extremely important for building a country in peace, especially in a place like Colombia. It seeks to address, at a micro level, the socioeconomic and cultural conditions which sustain the conflict regionally. The fact that national peace negotiations have suffered severe difficulties and shown hard political limitations amplifies the significance of these local peace initiatives (Roy, 2003: 19). Besides, as refers the president of *Vallenpaz*, "It is easier to build peace at a local level rather than at the national level. When you have a community where there are different armed actors (guerrillas, paramilitaries, army, peasants), it is easier to reach an agreement through concrete proposals for the improvement of the way of living of the people<sup>31</sup>" (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 34).

However, being in its essence a micro initiative, the Peace Laboratory intends to articulate this micro level with a mezzo and macro level. It seeks to have a national impact and to be a pilot experience which could be replicated and reproduced on other regional micro levels.

b) *A peacebuilding from below:*

To a large amount, the Peace Laboratory model corresponds to a peacebuilding from below. The Laboratory tries to build peace with the local grass roots organizations following a bottom-up dynamic. It sustains on a participative methodology which attempts to develop social, economic and political processes with the historically marginalized sectors of the population. It views the social actors as fundamental players of peacebuilding and argue that civilians must not be treated as passive or invisible actors. (Aguilar, 2006: 22). The Peace Laboratory defends that "peace represents a collective interest and shouldn't be handled exclusively from the government's centrality"<sup>32</sup> (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 34). In order to be sustainable, peace has to be built and created from the base. It follows the viewpoint that "those most affected by violence, who understand and have to live with its consequences, are likely to be best placed to find the most appropriate solutions to it" (McDonald, 1997: 2). It is based on a conception of peace as not just a matter of elites and as a result of peace negotiations between warring parties. It follows the principle that "Magdalena Medio should be built between all" (PDPMM, 2007), structuring this principle around the participative experience of the *Núcleos de Pobladores*. In fact, the complexity of the Colombian violence requires solutions which would go beyond negotiations between insurgents and the state. Peace can't absolutely be imposed top-down. Therefore, it must be followed by complementary and multilevel peacebuilding strategies (McDonald, 1997: 14).

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<sup>31</sup> "Es más fácil hacer la paz a nivel local que a nivel nacional. Cuando se plantea a una comunidad donde hay distintos actores armados (guerrillas, paramilitares, Ejército, campesinos) propuestas concretas para el mejoramiento de las condiciones de vida es más fácil ponerse de acuerdo."

<sup>32</sup> "la paz representa un interés colectivo que no debe ser manejado exclusivamente desde la centralidad del gobierno."

This is a perspective which has had an increasing importance and feedback both on conflict resolution theory and practice. Several authors have emphasised the peacemaking role of the local communities, underlining that “effective and sustainable peacemaking processes must be based not merely on the manipulation of peace agreements made by elites, but more importantly on the empowerment of communities torn apart by war” (Ramsbotham et al, 2005: 215).

In this respect, it is particularly relevant the work of John Paul Lederach. This author developed an analytical framework of conflict and conflict resolution based on a conflict pyramid composed by three levels of leadership and actors. Level 1 corresponds to political and military leaders of the conflict; level 2 to regional intermediate leaders; and level 3 to the grassroots leaders and the population exposed to the conflict. For Lederach, all three levels are equally important in order to build peace. All must be object of conflict resolution strategies and not only the top of the pyramid, as it usually happens regarding conflict resolution (Ibidem: 221). Peacebuilding is, thus, a multilevel task and the foundations of peace should start to be built on the base of the pyramid. The Peace Laboratory, trying to articulate local community leaders to the regional, national and international spheres, can be considered an attempt to gather these different levels of the pyramid.

But one can also mention Adam Curle. He too refers to the limits of conventional diplomacy. According to this author “solutions reached through negotiation may be simply expedient and not imply any change of heart. And this is the crux of peace. There must be a change of heart.”(apud Ramsbotham et al, 2005: 217). For that change of heart to be made, the role of the conflicting communities and of the civil society is essential.

### c) *Structural conflict resolution:*

The third element of the Laboratory’s model of peacebuilding is its structural dimension. The Peace Laboratory action, with its inherent long term logic and the fact that it is oriented to the elimination of the root causes of the conflict, configures what could be called as a “structural conflict resolution”. In fact, it aims to understand and transform, at the local and regional level, the structures which cause and sustain the conflict. It departs from the idea that “if there is a war in Colombia it is because there are structural factors which propitiate it”<sup>33</sup>, such as poverty and land concentration (Bayona, 2007).

A structural peacebuilding implies addressing the social structures of indirect violence, such as poverty, exploitation, misery, repression and human rights violations (Galtung, 1996). This is obviously a long term process, and the PDPMM is aware of that. But, as Francisco de Roux (2001) puts it, “without these [structural] transformations, peace is but a good intentions speech”<sup>34</sup>. Thus, the Peace Laboratory has a strong political, socio-economic and cultural focus. It pays particularly a high attention to the development issues, considered one of the main structural causes of the conflict and keys to solve it, but it has also a strong focus on culture of peace and peace education.

In fact, the Peace Laboratory structures several projects and programmes around that matter. Basically, it intends to build a collective imaginary favourable to peace, by the means of “peace schools” and a strategy of art for the divulgation of human rights (OPI, 2006: 64). There is an important pedagogical strategy within the Peace

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<sup>33</sup> “Se hay guerra en Colombia es por que hay factores estructurales que la propician.”

<sup>34</sup> “Sin estas transformaciones la paz es solo un discurso de buenas intenciones.”

Laboratory and the PDPMM. Schools are an important values referrals and a tool for conflict resolution (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 34). These peace schools intend to propitiate spaces for cultural exchange, to increment solidarity and to strengthen a public peace opinion (OPI, 2006: 65). But also a particular attention is made to art. As Libardo Valderrama (2007) tells, “if one listens to the songs of Magdalena Medio, one gets disturbed, as some are in favour of war, others of coca. It is an entire culture which we need to change”<sup>35</sup>. It is evident, in this subject, an influence on the PDPMM of the UNESCO’s concept and views on culture of peace, to which it resorts and refers explicitly.

This structural approach to peacebuilding has received the contribution of much theoretical literature. It has been emphasized by authors such as Johan Galtung, John Burton, Franklin Dukes, and Richard Rubenstein.

Galtung introduced the concepts of structural peace and structural violence, widening the field of peace and violence and underlying the importance of the social, political, economic and cultural structures in peacebuilding. The influence of the Norwegian author is notorious on the Laboratory’s concepts and model of peacebuilding.

John Burton’s (1990) human needs theory has been also an important contribute to a structural approach to conflict resolution. It portrays conflict has a product of unmet human needs, recognizing that, contrarily to interests, human needs cannot be negotiated, changed or suppressed. The Peace Laboratory’s emphasis on productive projects and development issues has much to do with a concern to address the unmet human needs of the population, viewed as a cause of violence in the region.

Another relevant author in this respect, Franklin Dukes (1999), describes conflict as structural phenomena, defending that systemic forces are at the origin of the conflicts and its dynamics. For him, peace, in order to build sustainable, has to be more than simple negotiation agreements, and conflict resolution must be more than a communication and negotiation technique. Conflict resolution must deal with the impact of the structures and understand the sources and root causes of the conflicts.

A similar perspective is showed by Richard Rubenstein (1999: 173), who portrays conflict as a product of social patternized relations that fail to satisfy the basic needs of the parts. For him, conflicts have structural causes and are not merely the result of failures of communication, incompatible objectives and confronting values. As a result, if conflict resolution intends to be more than conflict management, more than temporary agreements of elites, it requires a transformation of the structures which sustain the conflict.

In fact, much of the Colombian history provides evidence of this problem. On several occasions, periods of war, such as the Thousand Day War, from 1889 to 1902, or *La Violencia*, in the forties and fifties, have ended through elite agreements, ignoring and undervaluing the structural elements in the violence (McDonald, 1997: 3). Hostilities were ended, but the structures of violence and the culture of violence remained, continuing to burst repeatedly on several occasions.

In addition, the successive failure of the negotiations with the guerrillas has also much to do with the structural elements of the conflict. As Geraldine MacDonald (1997: 3) affirms, “Peace accords signed during the 1980s broke down repeatedly, partly because compromise “solutions” failed to tackle the root causes of the problem.” Therefore, even on the negotiation table the structural dimension of peacebuilding is

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<sup>35</sup> “Se se escucha las canciones del Magdalena Medio, uno queda aflicto por que algunas son a favor de la guerra, otras de la coca. Es toda una cultura que es preciso evolucionar.”



manifest. This is quite evident on the guerrilla's claims for political and socio-economic reforms, which have been not much taken into account in the negotiations so far, and have been one of the reasons for a constant failure of the peace processes. For the guerrillas, at least in its speech, if there is not a solution to the country's structural problems, there is no solution to the conflict.

d) *A broad concept of peace:*

Thus, the Peace Laboratory has and promotes a broad concept of peace and peacebuilding, one which implies much more than the silencing of the rifles (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 31). It follows, consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily, a peace approach that can be framed within a Peace Research focus, based on an integral view of peace and conflict, on an emphasis on structural factors and a on a strong link between the development and peace themes.

Johan Galtung's (1996) concept of Positive Peace is particularly relevant and applicable in this framework. According to this author, violence does not only mean physical violence and peace is not only the absence of war. That is a negative conception of peace. He opposes to this a positive concept of peace. For Galtung there is a structural and a cultural dimension in violence and peace, related to the social structures which sustain them and the cultural elements which legitimize them. To a large extent, and with explicit references on some of its official documents, the Peace Laboratory seeks to build and make possible a positive peace. To Christian Wlaschütz (2007), member of staff of the PDPMM, "the idea of positive peace is something very conscient within the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM. It is included on its lines of work". Besides, it constitutes a concern for the PDPMM's *Observatorio de Paz Integral* (OPI, 2006: 64), which has among its work areas the identification of peace initiatives in Magdalena Medio which can be framed within this concept<sup>36</sup>.

In deed, the Peace Laboratory expresses a concept of positive peace, portraying peacebuilding as a fulfilment of human rights of all generations (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 32). It conveys an integral approach. The peace Laboratory is not an organization of humanitarian assistance (Aguilar, 2006: 47). It goes way beyond that. The wide range of projects the Laboratory deals with is only comprehensive within this broad and maximalist concept of peace.

Notwithstanding, one must underline that the Peace Laboratory doesn't follow explicitly any specific model of peacebuilding. Due to the complexity of the Colombian conflict and the openness and integrality of the Peace Laboratory no theoretical model can really totally apply. It is something being searched and built on the field, even though it sustains on some theoretical concepts and assumptions. There is no predefined model on the Peace Laboratory.

### 3.5.1.3. **The Humanitarian Spaces:**

Some of the most important, interesting and ambitious projects of the Peace Laboratory in the peacebuilding field are the so-called Humanitarian Spaces.

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<sup>36</sup>According to the OPI one can identify a trend in the region of a growing social mobilization, which includes collective actions for peace of a reflexive and propositive type (OPI, 2006: 64).

They are fundamentally spaces of civil resistance to the armed groups and empowerment of the local communities. They were conceived as a form to “create favorable conditions to the life of the population in the territories with the highest impact of the armed conflict and the weakest presence of the state, and, therefore, with most vulnerability of the civilian population”<sup>37</sup> (PDPMM, 2007).

They correspond to places where the civilian population, facing a high and constant pressure by the paramilitaries and guerrillas, and sick of the state failure and incapability to protect them, decided to organize themselves and face the problem directly (Aguilar, 2006: 36). These are places where people said “no more” to war (Vargas, 2007). They chose not to join the armed groups, nor to be displaced. They took a third way – the way of civil disobedience and civil resistance.

The Humanitarian Spaces were introduced in 2003, for the second phase of the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio (De Roux: 2005: 42). They were planned and structured for 13 critical zones<sup>38 39</sup>, where the causes and effects of the conflict and of the economy of violence are more concentrated. These are the zones the most exposed to the sequels of the armed conflict, to blockades and territorial dispute. They’re characterized as being eminently rural and peripheral zones, which face situations of extreme poverty and marginality, violence, existence of coca plantations and weak presence of the state (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 18).

They seek to be what Sabine Kurtenbach (2005: 10) calls “islands of civility”. Their aim is to build a citizen alternative to the conflict, to generate spaces of dialogue (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 19) and collective symbols of solidarity and affirmation of dignity. They also intend to be zones free of coca plantations, one the major fuels to the armed conflict, thus focusing on alternative development. Their major fundamentals are the protection of life and territory, the development and peace of the communities, and the respect for work, education, human rights and Humanitarian International Law. In this respect, the application of the principle of distinction between civilian population and combatants and public goods from military targets has been crucial. The Humanitarian Spaces are, above all, social processes of defence of life and protection of the population. They attempt to lower the aggressions against civilians and against the social and productive facilities and seek the non intervention and presence of the armed actors (PDPMM, 2007).

One of the means the Peace Laboratory has used regarding this objective has been to impulse an institutional backing and articulation with the Humanitarian Spaces. These spaces correspond to territories of an extremely weak and precarious presence of the state, where the only institutionality the people has known is the army, often in a

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<sup>37</sup> “crear condiciones favorables para la vida de los pobladores (as) en los territorios de más alto impacto del conflicto armado, escasa presencia del Estado, y por tanto, mayor vulnerabilidad de la población civil.”

<sup>38</sup> These include: Proceso Territorial Comité de Integración de Comunidades Agromineras del Sur Sur de Bolívar- San Pablo; Espacio Humanitario de Bajo Peñón; Comunidades de Borrascaso Opón Landázuri; Proceso de paz y desarrollo integral de La India; Zona de Desarrollo Integral del Sur de Bolívar (San Pablo, Simití y Cantagallo); Comunidades Agromineras de la Serranía de San Lucas; Zona de Reserva Campesina de Morales y Arenal; Proceso Soberano Comunitario por la Vida, la Justicia y la Paz Micoahumado – Corcovado; Consejo Permanente por la Vida, la Justicia y la Paz del Alto Arenal; Proceso Ciudadano por Tiquisio; Proceso Territorial por la Vida, la Convivencia y el Desarrollo, parte Alta de Río Viejo; Espacio Humanitario de la Serranía del Perijá y la zona urbana de Aguachica- Malokas protegidas del sur del César; Zona rural de Santa Rosa y Simití. <http://www.pdpmm.org.co/FAQs.asp>

<sup>39</sup> Vide attachment n° 4.

repressive way. As the sub-director of the PDPMM refers, “people just know the face of war, not of health or education” [...] [The Humanitarian Spaces seek, thus,] “to make the people start to discover themselves as citizens, to find new forms of institutionality, and discover a new face of the State beyond the guns”<sup>40</sup> (Valderrama, 2007). In this respect, it has been particularly relevant the Peace Laboratory’s work with the *Defensoria del Pueblo*. This has instituted a process of dialogue between the communities and the institutionality, which has allowed people to be listened and to recognise themselves as citizens (Ibidem).

But the Humanitarian Spaces have also been trying to put in place processes of dialogue with the armed actors, to create conciliation tables. Despite the national peace process blockade with the guerrillas, and independently from its evolution, the Peace Laboratory’s perspective is that regional dialogues can be put in practice (Bayona, 2007), and local agreements with the insurgents and counter insurgents are possible, so that the life of the communities can be improved. And some agreements have been reached, mainly on the humanitarian field, but also concerning the demining of some areas (Paez, 2006). The role of the church as an interlocutor in these processes has been vital. More successful or unsuccessful these experiences may be, the Humanitarian Spaces demand beyond doubt a certain dialogue with the armed actors, due to the conflictual issues they approach and deal with (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 45).

In fact, the Humanitarian Spaces have been extremely important instruments of civility in the middle of the conflict. Even though they face very difficult conditions, they have helped to prevent forced displacement; they have reduced the population’s vulnerability; and they have contributed to strengthen and empower the local communities and to generate collective symbols of solidarity and dignity. These were marginalized and silenced communities which the Humanitarian Spaces have helped to make visible and empower (Mojica, 2007).

However, the Humanitarian Spaces are under heavy pressure. They face a great deal of difficulties and problems, from the political, military and organizational point of view (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 20). The conflict dynamics, as the local clientelist practices, are still very present and strong in these territories, despite the presence of the Humanitarian Spaces. This experience can’t be completely considered a success. Violence and human rights violations have remained very high on much of these areas (Mojica, 2007). However, not all Humanitarian Spaces show the same results. They don’t have grown and developed at the same rhythm (Bertolini, 2007). There are different outcomes, depending on the leaderships of the processes, on the local dynamics and the presence of the armed actors and the mafias.

This paper had as fieldwork the visit, in particular, to the Humanitarian Space of Tiquisio, officially called *Proceso Ciudadano por Tiquisio*<sup>41</sup>. Tiquisio is a municipality in the department of Bolívar, counting with 23.000 inhabitants. It is a remote place, lost in between mountains and lakes, far from the world, the state and even Barrancabermeja. It takes about eight hours to reach it from Barrancabermeja, even if the region is no more than the size of Belgium, travelling through the sinuous routes of the mountains and the brown waters of the Magdalena River. It is a deeply isolated zone, physically and institutionally.

As in the other Humanitarian Spaces it shows visible signs of poverty, violence and abandon by the state. It is mainly a peasant and mining zone, visibly lacking

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<sup>40</sup>“solo conocen el rostro de la guerra, no lo de la salud o educación [...] busca que la gente comience a descubrirse como ciudadanos y a encontrar otras formas de institucionalidad y descubrir que el rostro del Estado está para allá de las armas.”

<sup>41</sup> Citizen Process for Tiquisio

development and public services. Violence has also surrounded the area for long-time. The ELN has dominated militarily the territory for many years. Then the paramilitary took over, in a similar pattern as several other places in Magdalena Medio. The armed actors presence has to a certain point appeased in the last years. The Humanitarian Space has probably played a role in that. However, the sinuous routes which lead to Tiquisio are still filled with army, paramilitary and guerrilla checkpoints.

In the last years, the luxurious landscape and myriad of colours and species which surround Tiquisio have been followed by the new colours and élan the Humanitarian Space has brought to the zone. The *Proceso Ciudadano por Tiquisio* has been highly significant for its population. The peasants speak with a smile on their faces of the Humanitarian Space and its achievements, expressing its deep gratitude to the PDPMM and the European Union. People have learned to read thanks to the Laboratory, have been educated and trained culturally and politically, have become aware of their rights; a radio station has been created; facilities have been built; it allowed the community to organize and mobilize itself; and more importantly, it has been an important instrument of resistance to paramilitarism and forced displacement. As a peasant from the Humanitarian Space of Tiquisio said, “the Humanitarian Space did more for the population in 4 years than the Parish Council in twelve”.

All in all, the Humanitarian Spaces constitute an enormous dare for the Peace Laboratory. They represent the presence of the Laboratory where the war is (Vargas, 2007). A success in this field would be deeply meaningful. It would be a sort of flowers which blossom in the middle of the desert. For José Antonio Paez (2006), the Humanitarian Spaces are somehow the inversion of Che Guevara’s theory of the *foco*. Instead of trying to identify and to spread small *focos* of insurrection and liberation war, the Humanitarian Spaces attempt to concentrate in small territories affected by the conflict efforts to shelter the population and to accomplish minimal humanitarian rules. As in Guevara’s approach, this small intervention is expected to a positive example which can disseminate in a larger social framework and scenario. It corresponds, to some extent, to a humanitarian *foquismo*. According to Elise Boulding, cultures of peace can survive in deed in small spaces and pockets even in the most violent of conflicts (Ramsbotham et al, 2005: 217). Notwithstanding, it is a great challenge and an extremely difficult task.

### **3.6. The Development dimension:**

The second axis of the Peace Laboratory is its development dimension. On its structure, it corresponds mainly to the productive farming activities component. But it constitutes a transversal concern within the Laboratory’s objectives and projects. There is a strong focus on development within the Peace Laboratory, since it sustains on a “development hypothesis”, on a theoretical assumption and view which portrays poverty and the model of development in force in Colombia and in Magdalena Medio as a root cause of the conflict. Therefore, these two axes – peace and development, are intimately interconnected. They are not separate and independent components. And that constitutes one of the original and groundbreaking elements of the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM.

Fundamentally, the PDPMM has been attempting to reflect on a new model of development for Magdalena Medio, one which would contribute to address the structural problems of the region, to include the excluded sectors of the population and to address the social and armed conflict. It intends to build an alternative form of

development in Magdalena Medio, to sow seeds of an alternative economic model.

The Magdalena Medio's model of development has been centred in the oil industry and on extensive cattle cultivation and agro-industry recently. Despite creating, to a certain level, a high income to the region, this economic model has left the vast majority of the population - peasants mainly - in poverty. Magdalena Medio faces an absolute and relative high level of poverty and a manifest lack of social services, facilities and employment (CDPMM, 2001: 5). The problem lays essentially on the structures and model of production and on the income distribution, or in this case, on the lack of it. These economic activities are mainly of an extractive type. The income they generate benefits only a few, and definitely not the majority of the region's peasants and workers. There is a manifest socio-economic inequality in Magdalena Medio and a strong concentration of land and capital (Ibidem), which have been increasing in the last years. In fact, the peasant economy has been facing serious difficulties and threats, which menace its survival. First and foremost, it suffers an aggressive dynamic by the extensive cattle cultivation and the agroindustry. Its increase has been done through the abusive appropriation of large extensions of land backed by paramilitary and drug violence. This has provoked the forced displacement of thousands of families, an increase of rural unemployment and a threat to the region's and population's food security (Paez, 2006).

Struggling against this framework and trend, the Peace Laboratory seeks to support the peasant economy and build a more participative, inclusive and equitable model of development. This model sustains mainly on *finca campesina*, the peasant property.

*Finca Campesina* is a small property (generally a family agrarian unit) corresponding to an area around 10 to 12 hectares (Wlaschütz, 2007). It is characterised by its weakness and vulnerability in respect to the market, by a low access to credit, a peripheral geographic situation and an economic dependency (Loingsigh, 2005). The peasant economy follows a different logic if we compare it to the market or capitalistic agriculture (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 25). It doesn't necessarily have a logic of profit.

The Peace Laboratory focus on *finca campesina*, as an alternative to the large proprietaries (De Roux, 2005: 42) and the mega projects Magdalena Medio has been seen. This project is conceived as a program of transformation. It seeks a qualitative and quantitative economic boost for the region. The first thing it searches is to guarantee the self supply and food security of the region (Mojica, 2007). Furthermore, *finca campesina* and the productive projects, as they are conceived by the Laboratory, seek not only to fulfill the basic needs of the population, but also to have surplus, which allow them to improve their life conditions and have access to services, such as education and health (Valderrama, 2007). In addition, these projects intend to foster a rational use of the resources and a harmony with the environment.

In this field, one of the Peace Laboratory's main economic proposals is for the peasants to organise themselves collectively (Herrera, 2007). The Laboratory supports associative work in farm cooperatives and peasant reserve zones. Through this, it aims at promoting the stability of the small farmers, to neutralise the land concentration and to be an alternative to the large properties (De Roux, 2005: 42).

To a large extent, this is a means to try to relieve and address the fundamental problem of the peasant economy in Colombia – the lack of land. The land problem is one of the major structural causes of the Colombian conflict. It is a historically non resolved issue. As Marco Fidel Vargas affirms, “land is the key to solve the rural problem in Colombia. And the rural problem is the key to solve the Colombian

conflict<sup>42</sup>” (Vargas, 2007).

Magdalena Medio has been suffering an accelerated process of land concentration, motivated by a true “counter agrarian reform” carried out by the paramilitary and the drug dealers, but also by the economic pressure of the large proprietors. Thus, the Laboratory may structure some important and successful development projects, but land is a vital issue that is, to a large extent, beyond the Laboratory’s capacities. It is helpless to solve this affair and in this lays one of the major limitations of this initiative. Besides, a landless peasant can hardly manage to take part in the Laboratory’s programmes as it lacks a fundamental resource for participating in projects. The most excluded are, to some extent, also excluded from the Peace Laboratory. Therefore, the solution to the land problem constitutes, to a large degree, a pre-requirement to achieve in a sustainable way the Laboratory’s objectives (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 22).

Another important aspect of this development and productive dimension of the Peace Laboratory is its strategy concerning the illicit drug crops. The Peace Laboratory has launched a strategy to address the coca problem. It intends essentially to impulse an alternative development, to show, in places such as the Serrania de San Lucas, where coca is grown, that there are alternatives (De Roux, 2001). This isn’t done through a perspective of forced manual eradication, such as Plan Colombia proposes, but from an integral perspective of creating and enlarging the possibilities of development. Even though, at the national scale, Magdalena Medio isn’t one of the major regions of coca production, it has some important plantations, which fuel the armed groups and increase the dynamics of violence in the region. Therefore, it is undoubtedly an important economic, social and political affair to address.

The most controversial project of the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio in the productive and development field has been probably African palm. It is not only criticized by many instances, but it is not even a consensual project within the PDPMM.

Palm, in Colombia and in Magdalena Medio, is linked with the great land owners and paramilitarism. Large areas of land accumulation by the paramilitaries have been cultivating palm in the region (Loingsigh, 2005). Furthermore, the model of development which palm conceives and implies is also criticisable and controversial. Palm requires a great deal of capital, machinery and large properties, in order to be profitable. Besides, it is not an autochthonous good from the region and it produces negative environmental effects.

The most ferocious critics pointed to the Laboratory’s palm projects were made by the Irish journalist Gearóid Loingsigh. In a devastating article called “Laboratorios de Paz de la Unión Europea: El Plan Colombia de Europa?”, this author criticizes a supposed neoliberal model of the initiative, insinuates a relation of the PDPMM with the paramilitary, and denounces economic and entrepreneurial interests behind the European involvement.

Beyond the “theory of conspiracy tone” of the article one must look at these critics with some reserve. The PDPMM has involved with palm considering and taking into account its economic potential. Palm is a high productivity good, which disposes of a large exporting market. The PDPMM perspective was that palm would give the possibility to increase the income and the life conditions of the people in a traditionally poor zone. But it has tried to integrate this good on the characteristics of the Programme. The PDPMM has believed that palm is compatible with *finca campesina*, that a *palma campesina* is possible. That was also the perspective of many peasants,

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<sup>42</sup> “la tierra es la llave para resolver el problema rural en Colombia. Y el problema rural es la llave para resolver el conflicto colombiano”

who, in deed, were the authors of this proposal and the ones who requested the project. Palm projects would finally be accepted and developed, but within certain conditions. It would be based on peasant associative work and communitarian organization, and on the division of land and surplus (Bayona, 2007).

In fact, the palm model the Peace Laboratory defends and has put in place is quite different from the other and previous palm projects in the region. While one sustains on mega projects, involving large properties, much capital, and has, on many occasions, a paramilitary backing (Ibidem), the model which celebrates the PDPMM is supported by the peasants and the peasant organizations and is based on small cultivations and small peasant properties united in cooperatives (CDPMM, 2001:14). It is a model which directly supports the peasants. It intends precisely to be a containment measure against land concentration and forced displacement (Mojica, 2007). These are two well distinct dynamics which cross the same territory. They may have interconnections and similarities, but they are surely of a different nature. Notwithstanding, the large amounts of capital, land and machinery these projects require can make one wonder about its sustainability and applicability as a peasant model. Besides, its negative effects for the environment cannot be framed within the Peace Laboratory's proclaimed concept of sustainable development.

Concerning Loingsigh's second critic, the palm association with the paramilitary may represent an indirect and unwanted connection between the Laboratory and the paramilitaries. However, a link or association between the two is completely unfunded and untenable. The PDPMM and its staff are above suspicion of sympathies with the paramilitary. On the contrary, if there has been a great threat to the PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory's projects are the paramilitaries.

Regarding the supposed European entrepreneurial interest in Magdalena Medio it seems also not quite to match the Peace Laboratory's reality. An increasing European investment and economic interest in Colombia is undeniable and even explicit on the European Union's involvement in this country. Yet, it doesn't appear to be the primordial objective or driving force behind this initiative. The Peace Laboratory constitutes a European support to a peacebuilding Colombian experience. There are no major or relevant European economic interests at stake in Magdalena Medio. Besides, the economic model the Peace Laboratory is based on sustains on the region's peasant economy, not on a free market or free trade which could benefit the European companies and economy. However, as Manuel Bayona (2007). refers, "with or without PDPMM the region is attractive for the international capitalism; with or without PDPMM the mines of Magdalena Medio are attractive for the mining multinationals; with or without PDPMM the oil is important for the foreign companies"<sup>43</sup>. An entrepreneurial interest in Magdalena Medio is evident. There are even European companies involved in it. However, this initiative based on the PDPMM and supported by the European Commission serves different purposes rather than those. "The PDPMM has never been at the disposal of the foreign capital. On the contrary..." (Bayona, 2007). The primordial interest is peace, not new European markets.

In fact, the greatest interrogation concerning these development projects lays on its sustainability. Can these experiences survive in a globalization era? Are they sustainable facing the macroeconomic neoliberal policies of the country? Can a peasant traditional economy survive on these days? Is the Peace Laboratory economic model a real alternative? Is it feasible?

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<sup>43</sup>"Con Programa o sin Programa la región es atractiva para el capitalismo mundial; las minas, con PDP o sin PDP son atractivas para las multinacionales minera; con PDP o sin PDP el petróleo de la zona es importante para las compañías extranjeras"

From the economic point of view, one of the original and peculiar elements of the PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory lays on its peculiar mixture of tradition and the market, of peasant economy and capitalism. It is difficult to place it on a theoretical level. It is not a capitalistic model. But it is not a peasant model either, such as the FARC defends (Bayona, 2007). Between the excluding globalization model based on the multinational corporations and a fragile peasant economy, the Laboratory searches an intermediate model, a model where the peasants develop their development proposals (Vargas, 2007). The Laboratory seeks to try finding solutions for the traditional economies and to try making them profitable. For Bayona (2007), products such as rubber, cacao or african palm have shown that it is possible to continue with traditional cultivations and peasant farms and have a market which allows to have important incomes.

This configures a peculiar economic model for the Peace Laboratory. There is not a clear and explicit model of development within the Peace Laboratory. There are elements of different things. On some of its documents, namely by the support to traditional economy, it seems to suggest an anti-capitalist or socialist tendency. Yet, the Peace Laboratory doesn't deny profit and recognizes the possibilities of the market. There are also explicit critics to Neoliberalism within the Peace Laboratory and PDMM documents and staff. This could configure a sort of social democratic tendency within the Peace Laboratory concepts. But it certainly is not an explicit one.

The economic model of the Peace Laboratory is manifestly one which has another perspective rather than economic growth or the mere income creation. It is a conception of development as an ethical posture (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 25). As Christian Wlaschütz (2007) puts it, "what we defend is a development which allows to live with dignity, a development in which the peasants have their land and instruments to grow".

In that sense it has much to do with the concept of human development, as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines it. For the UNDP (2007),

"Human development is about much more than the rise or fall of national incomes. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means —if a very important one —of enlarging people's choices".

It is a sort of development which recognizes the human person as the central axis of development. The Peace Laboratory conveys a "development policy" built with the participation of the person, as beneficiary and protagonist. It is a development defined as a social, economic, cultural and political process (Katz, 2004: 30). It represents an integral view of development. It is based on "sustainable integral development, through integral projects" (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 26).

One can also identify in the Peace Laboratory's model of development a certain influence of the Nobel Prize for Economic Science Amartya Sen and his conception of "Development as Freedom". This Indian economist has emphasized a close link between freedom and the process of development. For him, political freedom and economic freedom are intimately interconnected. Sen (1999) views economic development and wealth as a means to extending freedoms rather than an end in itself. Development is portrayed as a qualitative enhancement of human freedoms and as the



expansion of capabilities. It goes way beyond income generation. But development is also described as an unlikely and unsustainable process in the absence of political liberty and democracy. The Laboratory takes much of this view. It constitutes a support to the people to develop its own capabilities and freedoms (Bayona, 2007). Furthermore, it is based on a perspective which underlines the political dimension of development and development dimension of peace.

Therefore, we are looking at a quite peculiar, curious and interesting model of development. Its concepts are new and alternative in the region. It represents a new and original economic proposal. However, one must emphasize that the Peace Laboratory finds essentially its value and importance on the concepts it proposes and on its alternative form of building development. The resources it leads with are few and, therefore, it can't have the pretension to truly impulse the development of the region. "Its contribution is on sowing a seed with a focus of an inclusive, sustainable and human development."<sup>44</sup> (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 28) The Peace Laboratory *per se* won't definitely change the region's economic structures.

#### **4. The articulation between the micro and the macro level: a national impact of the Peace Laboratory?**

Every local place develops itself in a interaction dialectic and in articulation with wider spaces, structures and levels (Garcia, 2007: 5). One of the crucial issues for the Peace Laboratory is the relation between its inherent micro level and a macro level. Its success depends to a large extent on its articulation with the macro level, that is, on its national impact and contribution to the conflict resolution. In fact, in order to survive, peace initiatives require a coordination between the high, the medium and the low level of peacebuilding (McDonald, 1997: 28).

The Peace Laboratory has explicitly a macro dimension in its logic and objectives. Despite being in essence a micro level initiative, it articulates and intends to articulate with the mezzo and the macro levels. The experience is intrinsically local: it was born in Magdalena Medio; it was structured for Magdalena Medio; it grew up in this region. Moreover, it concentrates essentially on the municipalities and has, as its driving force, micro units, such as the *núcleos de pobladores* and the peasants' communities. Nonetheless, the Laboratory logic is that there has to be an articulation between the local, the regional, the national and the international. The articulation is made by the different level actors that the Laboratory involves and includes and by the different level dynamics it creates and absorbs. There are local, regional, national and international organisations in the process, which go from local peasant organisations to the European Commission. The Peace Laboratory is simultaneously drawn between Brussels, Bogotá, Barrancabermeja and each of Magdalena Medio's municipalities. The levels cross and interlink. And they have two ways. They are both bottom-up and top-down dynamics.

This articulation is also based on the Laboratory's objectives. Placing itself on the micro level, it has macro level objectives. It intends to have repercussions on the macro level. It seeks to have a national impact. Fundamentally, the Laboratory of Magdalena Medio seeks to be an exploratory and pilot experiment at a local and regional level, which can be replicated at other regions of the country and at a national level.

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<sup>44</sup> "su contribución está en la siembra de una semilla con un enfoque de desarrollo incluyente, sostenible y humano"

To some extent, this has been done through the expansion of the experience of the Peace Laboratory and the Peace and Development Programme to other regions of Colombia. Following the successful and original experience of Magdalena Medio, several other Peace and Development Programmes have been created, covering presently most of the country. There has been a true boom of peace and development programmes (PDP) (Gutierrez, 2007). We can count 18 PDPs at the moment. Furthermore, a second and a third Peace Laboratory have been launched in the regions of Norte Santander, Oriente Antioqueño, Cauca-Nariño, Meta and Montes de Maria<sup>45</sup>, presenting similar objectives, methodologies and concepts.

Magdalena Medio has served as a model and school for the different other Programmes and Laboratories. It is the starting point of the philosophy which sustains the other Laboratories. Yet, whether this peculiar and original peacebuilding initiative born in Magdalena Medio is reproducible in other regions constitutes a main issue and interrogation.

In this context and framework, another national impact of the PDPMM and Peace Laboratory was the creation of *Red Prodepaz* in 2002 (Vargas, 2007). This is a national network which gathers the various peace and development programmes. It intends to be a space of exchange of experiences and articulation of processes and a place where the nation is thought through the light of the different regions (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 17). It is a highly important initiative in terms of the integration of the micro level with the macro level and a visible contribute to a national impact and dimension of the peace and development programmes.

But, above all, an actor is vital on the articulation between the micro and the macro level – the state. The Peace Laboratory constitutes, to a large amount, a space of dialogue between the civil society of Magdalena Medio and the state. It is a pioneer initiative in this field. The state ultimately represents the macro level. Therefore, its role is determinant.

Within this process the state has allowed this initiative to strengthen at a national level. It has empowered much of the processes. And it has facilitated the articulation and the international contacts with the EU (Herrera 2007). In fact, the state increasingly views with some sympathy the Laboratories and the Programmes (Gonzalez, 2007b). Evidence of this and of a success in terms of national impact has been the inclusion in the last years by the national government of a support to the Peace and Development Programmes in the National Development Plan<sup>46 47</sup>. Notwithstanding, this inclusion was made on the Chapter of Democratic Security, which caused some tensions and controversy within the PDPMM, as the Programme is highly skeptical and critical of this government policy.

In fact, this relation with the state is a source of some problems, issues and tensions. The state, although participating in it, and giving an important support and backing to the process, has not truly subscribed it. To a large degree, the Laboratory's proposals, concept and philosophy are incompatible and contrary to Uribe's democratic security policy and its macro-economic policies. It is difficult to implement a Peace Laboratory as the government, in its official speech, denies the conflict and reduces it to an action against terrorism and drug traffic (Campo, 2005: 48). As Eliecer Soto (2007) tells, "there were projects which "stayed freezed" for months because *Acción Social* refused to sign documents which spoke about social and armed conflict and

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<sup>45</sup> Vide attachment n° 3

<sup>46</sup> Plan Nacional de Desarrollo

humanitarian emergence”<sup>48</sup>.

It is also hard to put across an alternative development while macroeconomic policies of a much different kind run the country. While the Peace Laboratory focus on *finca campesina*, traditional production and small farms, the model of development conveyed by the state is centered on extensive cultivations, agroindustry, liberalization and neoliberal reforms (Bayona, 2007).

Thus, even though the state is an important part of the Laboratory its approach towards conflict resolution is manifestly of a different kind.

That configures one of the main limitations of the Laboratory. It is a vital issue for the process. It will determine, to a large extent, the Laboratory’s success and impact. The greatest challenge for the Laboratory is to pass from its micro level to the national level. It can have an extraordinary micro success. But, if the state does not assume the Programme, if the town halls don’t accept it, if it is not incorporated in the national planning, if the national and regional institutions do not provide alternatives, the projects will ultimately fail, because they are not integrated in the national development and the national policies (Gonzalez, 2007b). These experiences can only be sustainable if they are converted into public policies. If they are islands, they can easily be submerged. They need to be surrounded by an institutionality beyond the local and micro level, through the government, the ministries, the department governors, the Office of the Attorney-General. Otherwise, they remain very weak (Bayona, 2007). In fact, the state is one of the main targets and interlocutors of the Peace Laboratory. These are, to a large extent, proposals to the institutionality. That’s the reason why in its components and strategic lines, the Peace Laboratory gives a strong emphasis to institutional building and backing.

In this regard, the state attitude concerning the PDPMM and the Laboratory passed from a low interest and even a certain mistrust, at the beginning, to a growing involvement and interest. It realized a certain potential and usefulness in this initiative in terms of lowering the violence in the territories (Bertolini, 2007). For the government and *Acción Social* the PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory have become, to some degree, part of its strategy of intervention in the conflict zones. As Vice-President Francisco Santos affirmed, the PDPMM represents possibilities for building alliances between the state and the civil society in areas of conflict (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 49).

However, one must say that there are no visible signs that this initiative can have a true impact in Bogotá, that it can transform the government’s public policies in terms of peace and development.

Besides, the increasing governmental interest in the PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory entails a risk. There is a danger of cooptation of the dynamic by the state. The state has an interest in controlling the process and use it for its purposes<sup>49</sup>. It has attempted to impose its political criteria. It has pushed, for instance, the Peace Laboratory to support and canalize resources to its *familia guardabosques* program<sup>50</sup> and the DDR<sup>51</sup> process with the AUC. The PDPMM and the EU opposed to both, due to divergent perspectives on the matters and reserves concerning this governmental programs.

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<sup>48</sup> “Hubo proyectos que quedaron meses en la gaveta por que Acción Social se recusaba a firmar documentos donde se hablaba en el conflicto armado y social y en emergencia humanitaria”

<sup>49</sup> This tendency was mainly visible with the present Uribe Administration, rather than with the previous Pastrana government, which allowed more autonomy to the PDPMM, both at the political and financial level.

<sup>50</sup> This is a governmental anti-narcotic and alternative development program, which gives financial support to families to manually eradicate coca crops (Acción Social, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

Therefore, there are permanent tensions and a daily disputed dialogue between these actors. “What we have in Magdalena Medio is a product of a continuous process of discussion” (Bayona, 2007). The PDPMM struggles not to lose its autonomy (Herrera, 2007) and its leadership in the process. Yet, there is a certain preoccupation from its part not to lose the state support from a political and financial point of view, which could represent a certain risk of losing some of its independence. The state participation has meant some concessions by the PDPMM. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the PDPMM has firm objectives and concepts and a highly motivated and militant staff, which could hardly change its views and principles.

Another key aspect of the Peace Laboratory relation with the state is of a rather different kind. It is a distinct type of risk. The Peace Laboratory can, involuntarily or not, become a substitute to the state. Some of the Laboratory projects work on areas of welfare which are of a responsibility of the state. Should, for instance, the Peace Laboratory invest, in schooling, health, roads, aqueducts, environment and public services, which constitute functions and duties for the state and the local powers to fulfill? Can't the Peace Laboratory turn out this way to be a sort of parallel or para-state? This would mean, additionally, that the Peace Laboratory would contribute, in some degree, to a fragilization of the state, which constitutes one of the structural causes of the conflict it attempts to address. In this sense, the cure would become part of the disease.

Besides, from the state point of view, the fact that international aid and the civil society are fulfilling, in some cases, its role entails the risk that the state lowers its social investment in these areas (Soto, 2007). This would be highly problematic, as social development cannot be generated uniquely by development aid. Yet, this is a risk which has not been much detected so far.

It is also evident that this substituting role of the Peace Laboratory is, to a large amount, a consequence of the absence of the state and public services in some territories. And, therefore, it does not truly represent a substitution in many cases, but a fulfillment of a void. Nevertheless, the Peace Laboratory has been attempting to involve the local, regional and national institutions on its projects and programs. In this way, it has been contributing more to the strengthening of the state and the institutions, rather than to its weakening.

Above all, the Peace Laboratory aims at establishing a kind of new social contract, in which the state can be a guarantee of the public interest and social cohesion (Katz, 2004: 34). It attempts to create a new society and a new country in peace and development. To a certain extent, it has been doing it in a micro level. To do it on a macro level remains an extremely difficult and thorny task.

##### **5. The Peace Laboratory's assessment and impact:**

Considering that the Peace Laboratory intends to be an experiment and an alternative of peacebuilding, it is politically and socially important to assess and evaluate its impact at a micro and macro level.

However, we face a problem in this respect. To evaluate the impact of the Peace Laboratory represents a complicated task. It is extremely difficult to assess it. A variety of reasons sets hurdles on that task. First and foremost, it is the complexity of the conflict and the multitude of factors that influence and intervene in it that make it difficult to evaluate the Laboratory's action (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 40). The armed conflict is a multi-causal event. Many factors interfere in its dynamics. And qualitative indicators are insufficient and inadequate to explain multi-causal events.

Moreover, being the conflict a national phenomenon, it is hard to evaluate a regional impact without taking into account the big picture, i.e., the national framework of the conflict. And, in effect, “as long as illegal groups keep on fighting, there can be no absolute peace locally” (Banfield et al, 2006: 83). In addition, the conventional instruments of impact measurement cannot capture the vast qualitative dimension of the Peace Laboratory. (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 41).

According to the OPI, one can notice a positive evolution of Magdalena Medio’s regional indicators: violence levels have decreased in the last years; kidnappings have lowered; the regional aggregated value of income has increased; there has been a decrease of the coca production. However, to what extent may we give the Laboratory credit for that? What was its contribution? What role did it play in this process and evolution?

It is hard to tell. It is difficult to access and measure to what degree the Peace Laboratory has contributed to that or if it has contributed at all. Violence is multi-causal. And development is a complex process. It doesn’t obviously depend only on the Laboratory’s action. Many actors influence it – the security forces, the army, the state, the armed groups, the town parishes, the church... There is not a linear cause-effect relation. There are many factors and elements at stake.

In terms of violence, the confrontation curve has been decreasing in the last years. There has been a long term diminution of violence, at a national and Magdalena Medio level. But we can’t attribute it to the Laboratory. One has to take into account elements such as Uribe’s national war strategy, which has diminished some territorial influence of the guerrillas, and the on-going DDR process with the paramilitaries (Vargas, 2007).

Development is also contingent to many factors (Banfield et al, 2006: 83). It is a process which has to do with micro decisions, macro economic policies, economic conjunctures, market dynamics, and even globalization.

Moreover, with such small projects as the ones the Laboratory deals with, it is arguable to affirm that it has influenced violence and development. As the Colombian economist Jorge Ivan Gonzalez (2007b) puts it, 42 million euros cannot transform a region like Magdalena Medio. The resources the Laboratory deals with are small. It is a large amount in development aid terms, but it represents very little on the regional economy. Comparing it to Barrancabermeja’s municipal budget, to the regional income, to the coca economy, to the oil money, it represents cents. “It is irrational to think that the laboratory will transform the region’s structures” (Gonzalez, 2007b).

The Laboratory’s impact is thus obviously marginal. It may have an influence on some of Magdalena Medio’s indicators and events; it may play a very important role in the region; it may have a visible impact within some communities and fulfil a deeply laudable and meaningful task. However, its impact is necessarily limited and its true contribution a complex topic.

In addition, it is premature to consistently evaluate the Laboratory. Its action is recent. And, despite being structured for only a few years, there is a long term logic inherent to the Peace Laboratory. The structural problems the Laboratory intends to address cannot be resolved within a few years. A region cannot be easily transformed. So, its impact is hard to be assessed on the short term.

Notwithstanding, there have been evaluations. Reports have been regularly made and written. This is, specially, an European requirement. Accountability is important for the EU. It has a concern in knowing how its resources are used, to analyse the regional indicators evolution and to show that its action generated impact. However, this generates tensions within the Peace Laboratory. It represents a bureaucratic and

technical struggle between the PDPMM and the EU. The Programme has a different logic. It is reluctant to attempt measuring its impact. Its emphasis is on the social, political and economic learning processes the Laboratory generates (Vargas, 2007). Yet, although this perspective is coherent and suits the Peace Laboratory objectives well, we cannot deny the need and the importance to try to find and analyse, with more or less accuracy, the Laboratory multilevel impacts. It is vital for this initiative auto-reflexion, to empower the experience, to analyse the projects' strengths and malfunctions and to be an example and a referral to other regions and initiatives in Colombia.

In fact, although it is difficult to evaluate the Peace Laboratory impact, one can make a few qualitative observations concerning its successes and failures:

Above all, there is a remarkable micro success. As Jorge Ivan Gonzalez tells, "it is moving to hear the peasants speak about the Programme. [...] In an absolutely exasperating world of war, the Programme has aroused the peasants and given them expectations"<sup>52</sup>. In fact, within the contexts of poor and vulnerable population the Laboratory deals with, 42 million euros may represent a lot of money (Ibidem).

This micro success is visible principally on a productive farming impact. This quantitative dimension of the Laboratory is easier to read and to measure (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 9). In reality, the EU's involvement with the Laboratory has allowed, with the injection of much more resources in the process, to support productive activities and social and economic facilities the Programme hadn't the chance to support previously. It represents an important economic support.

In terms of conflict dynamics, another visible success was the Humanitarian Spaces project. These have become true instruments of civil resistance to the armed actors. The Laboratory gave communities which live in very difficult zones the chance to survive, to keep organised and to prevent forced displacement. In fact, even though violence is far from having disappeared from the region, the Laboratory has contributed to protect the civil society and empower its organisations (Kurtenbach, 2005: 11). No "islands of peace" of been established with the Peace Laboratory and the Humanitarian Spaces, but some accomplishments have been reached in terms of conflict dynamics.

In this framework, the European political support to the process has been of much importance. The EU, as an international actor, is viewed with some respect and carefulness by the armed groups (Vargas, 2007). Its involvement has served as a kind of a political shield to the Laboratory. It has, to some extent, offered some protection to its activities and organizations. The armed actors are aware that attempting against Peace Laboratory employees provokes a direct reaction from the EU. As some people related to the Laboratory have told, "those yellow stars cannot be underestimated. They have some power. They give some protection".

But Church also plays a crucial role in terms of political shielding. This institution enjoys a status and credibility with no comparison in all Colombian society. The armed actors, with no exception, show respect for the Church and its men and women. Thus, being the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM, to a large extent, a peacebuilding initiative lead and managed by catholic priests, this has given some protection and immunity to the Peace Laboratory initiatives and staff.

Additionally, the Peace Laboratory has played a very important cultural and social role. It has empowered civil society, stimulated popular participation, and allowed marginalized social sectors, like women and peasants, to become more visible. As CINEP's researcher Omar Gutierrez (2007) refers, "the Programme has become a

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<sup>52</sup> "Escuchar los campesinos hablar del Programa da ganas de llorar. [...] En un mundo exasperante de guerra, el Programa ha dado expectativas a los campesinos."

reference for many sectors of Magdalena Medio”<sup>53</sup>. More than seventy communitarian organizations (Saavedra and Ojeda, 2006: 57) and one hundred thousand people have benefited from the PDPMM in this territory (De Roux, 2007). Moreover, it has stimulated a change of attitudes among the people towards negotiation, peace and tolerance (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 41), and has amplified the civic capacity and awareness of the citizens.

Another clear sign of the Peace Laboratory of Magdalena Medio’s success has been the expansion of this experience with a second and a third Peace Laboratory in other regions of Colombia. It constitutes obvious evidence that for the EU, for the Colombian state and for other regions of the country the initiative is successful and desired.

However, there are also a few problematic elements in the Laboratory’s action. Some problems, blockades and interrogation shade its success and impact.

Firstly, there is a technical and administrative problem. One of the most criticised aspects of the Peace Laboratory is its bureaucracy. There have been manifest problems concerning the projects’s execution. The flow of resources has not fulfilled the previewed deadlines. The implementation of the projects has been slow (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 32). The European Union has been particularly criticised in this matter. It has been accused of having introduced, from Brussels, very rigid, inflexible and complicated norms. In fact, the European Commission standardized package of procedures contrasts with the flexible methodology of the Programme. Principally, the European system of public convocation is incoherent and contrary to the PDPMM’s open methodology of participation. To some degree, this method has disrupted and distorted the Programme’s dynamics, as it has limited the people’s participation, due to inability to formulate projects and manage the heavy European bureaucracy (Herrera, 2007).

This top-down aid logic has motivated heavy critics, such as the ones by former CINEP director Priest Alejandro Angulo (2005), who has described the European cooperation as a form of neo-colonialism, denouncing a “complex of superiority” of the EU, its procedural impositions and its technocratic mentality. Nevertheless, one must say that, despite some methodological impositions, the majority of the people have emphasized the autonomy the EU has allowed the PDPMM to have to lead the process and manage the resources within the Peace Laboratory and the European respect for the civil society dynamics.

A second problematic topic relates to the Laboratory’s productive dimension. The Peace Laboratory faces a critical risk. There is a certain dominance of the development and productive component of the Laboratory over the peace component. The majority of the Laboratory’s projects are on productive and facilities fields and not on peace, institutional building and integral rights projects (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 32). This may generate a severe unbalance and a distortion on the Laboratory’s goals. The Laboratory may turn into a mere development process and a regular aid project. This configures the risk that the Peace Laboratory may become everything but a peace laboratory, or convert into a simple development laboratory. In reality, an excessive focus on the economic dimension doesn’t suit the multidimensional concept of peace the Laboratory intends to set. Peace is economic, but it is much more than that. Notwithstanding, one must stress that the Peace Laboratory has brought an increment of the political projects of the PDPMM and that a high peacebuilding focus is manifest on its objectives and projects.

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<sup>53</sup>“ El Programa se volvió un referente importante para muchos sectores en el Magdalena Medio”

Another troubling aspect for the Peace Laboratory action and projects concerns its security. It represents one of the most important problems the Laboratory has to deal with. Without security, it is hard for a project to succeed. In a situation of violence, economic blockade and instability it is difficult to put projects in practice. Serious security problems have menaced the viability and sustainability of the Laboratory in these regions. The armed actors view with suspicion the PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory. The guerrillas have sometimes seen it as part of a counter-insurgency strategy and the paramilitaries as part of a pro-insurgency strategy (Vargas, 2007). In a highly polarised country and conflict, there is very little space for alternative logics and approaches. Besides, the state participation in the processes is a source of more doubts and mistrust from the part of the guerrillas. So, the relation between the Laboratory and the armed groups has always been a tense one. People working with the Laboratory have been accused of being sympathisers to both parts of the conflict and threatened because of that. There have been cases of violence against Peace Laboratory participants (De Roux, 2005: 40). People have been killed, kidnapped and threatened, both by the guerrillas and the paramilitary. There have been more than 20 casualties so far (Ibidem, 43).

The Paramilitaries, in particular, have constituted a great menace to the Laboratory's projects and personnel. They view civic and social mobilization as expressions of support to the insurgency. Therefore, the paramilitary strategy has considered the social movements in Magdalena Medio as military targets (Paez, 2006). The *Organizacion Femenina Popular* (OFP), a feminist organization which works in supporting women during this time of war and has been a Peace Laboratory beneficiary, is a good example of it. Its director and several members have been systematically threatened of death and have been object of violence (Pax Christi, 2006).

This constitutes a clear drawback for the Laboratory. It represents one the main threats to it. An insurgent or counter insurgent offensive against the Peace Laboratory could put in risk its own existence.

In fact, one notices that the conflict dynamics are deeply rooted and still very visible in the region. And the Laboratory has found difficulty in appeasing them, even if in some places, within some communities and to some levels we can do say that the Laboratory has contributed to the diminution of violence (Vargas, 2007).

Nevertheless, the armed groups accept and tolerate, to some degree, the Laboratory. They recognise its social work at the local level and that their projects benefit the population. Moreover, the European and Church involvement have shielded, to some degree, its dynamics and projects.

Another trend reflects this relative acceptance of the Laboratory. In some zones and some circumstances, the armed groups have attempted to co-opt the Laboratory (Herrera, 2007). The paramilitaries, in particular, have tried to make use of the Laboratory and the Programme and manipulate them for their profit and objectives. In other cases, they have created parallel organizations with similar names, intending to show to the people that they can do the same work the PDPMM does and that they are the real alternative (Soto, 2007). This dynamic hasn't affected the Laboratory's processes and concepts much. Besides, it is impossible for the Laboratory to completely prevent it, as the Laboratory intends to be open and participated space and to create peace with all kind of social actors and organisations. The contact between the Laboratory and the armed groups is inevitable in a context of conflict and peacebuilding. And in many cases it is necessary. Otherwise, it would be impossible to establish projects (Herrera, 2007).



In this context of insecurity and illegal armed groups threats, some people ask for a stronger European political position and commitment and for a pressure on the Colombian government, which could bring more security to the processes. Many have accused the EU of not having firmly reacted when Laboratory people have been victims of violence and threats and when human rights have been systematically violated in the region by the illegal armed groups or the army (Bayona, 2007). In fact, on several occasions, the European Union has preferred to privilege its diplomatic relations with the Colombian government, rather than to create diplomatic tensions, manifesting some lack of political will to firmly and unconditionally support this peacebuilding initiative. Notwithstanding, some declarations have been made and a productive political dialogue with the Colombian government is regularly taken.

Nevertheless, a stronger criticism regarding the EU participation on the Laboratory focuses on another aspect: the idealism of the European peace aid is viewed with some reluctance by many. The fact that Colombia has become an important place for European investment in the last years has made some people look at its development aid as being an extension of European enterprise interests (Herrera, 2007). Concerning this critic, there is some ground for this argument, but only to some extent. It seems evident that Europe has an interest in investing in Colombia and that the existence of stable conditions in the country is important for this goal. This can play a role and be a motivation for the European development aid policy and its peace approach. Former European Commissioner Chris Patten has referred to it explicitly<sup>54</sup> (apud Loingsigh, 2005). However, it doesn't appear to be its primordial concern or motivation. This is a quite cynical and political realist view. In fact, there are no major interests in stake for Europe in Colombia. The Peace Laboratory doesn't seem to hide vested interests. Besides, Europe's political involvement in Colombia was motivated, to a large extent, by a Colombian call, both by Andrès Pastrana "peace diplomacy", which requested European countries to participate in the peace processes with the FARC and the ELN, and by the PDPMM, which invited the EU to support the Magdalena Medio peace initiatives. In addition, the Ingrid Betancur case has given also the EU a strong political motivation for an European involvement in conflict resolution in Colombia. Thus, the European approach can be considered a mixture of both realism and idealism.

Finally, another element which menaces the Peace Laboratory's projects is related to its sustainability and viability. Is it viable to implement a peasant traditional economy and productions in this day and age? Its survival in a competitive market economy and globalized economy cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, serious doubts can be raised concerning it. The Peace Laboratory can show alternative paths of development, but surely cannot change the characteristics of capitalism. And the macroeconomic policies in force in Colombia go precisely in the opposite direction. Truly, to support and strengthen the local peasant economies constitutes an enormous challenge for the PDPMM and the Laboratory.

Moreover, there is the risk that some economic and productive projects cannot resist and survive when the financing will end, going thus back to the *status quo ante*. The temporal horizon of the Peace Laboratory is only of 8 years, even tough the European Commission has manifested its will to keep financing some programmes and projects in the region (Bertolini, 2007). There is a strong concern and an explicit objective within the Peace Laboratory and the PDPMM that its projects reach sustainability. As Christian Wlaschütz (2007), affirms, "our concept of development is

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<sup>54</sup> According to Chris Patten, "the european institutions are not the only ones which believe in Colombia. The European companies too" (Loingsigh, 2005).

not to give fish, but to teach how to catch fish”<sup>55</sup>. However, this risk of unsustainability is undeniable.

## 6. Conclusion:

As recognised by the European Commission (2001b) Country Strategy Paper, the Peace Laboratories are the EU’s primary development aid instrument in Colombia. In fact, of all the EU development aid projects in this country, it is beyond doubt the most ambitious one (Francia, 2003). But the Peace Laboratories have become not only EU’s principal development aid instrument, but also the core of a EU peace approach to Colombia, based on efforts to facilitate a political negotiated solution to the conflict and on the definition of a structural conflict resolution strategy, carried by addressing the root causes of the conflict.

It represents a very original experience of peacebuilding. It truly corresponds to a peace laboratory. It seeks new paths to peace, an alternative form of peacebuilding, in a country which desperately needs new and imaginative solutions in order to reach peace and which lives an impasse on the national peace processes.

Essentially, the Laboratory is a proposal, a seed. It tries to show at the micro level a peace and development alternative solution. That proposal can be accepted or not on the mezzo and macro level. It’s up to the Colombian state, to the local authorities, to the armed groups and to the Colombian society to do it or not. If they don’t, the Laboratory impact is limited, (Gonzalez, 2007b), or merely localized.

In fact, the key to the Laboratory success or failure lies on the articulation between its micro level and the macro level. It will determine to a large extent the Laboratory’s impact. It is its greatest challenge.

In this framework, the state plays a crucial role. Despite its participation and backing to the process, it hasn’t truly embraced the experience and its concepts. The public policies and the governmental approach to the conflict and development go in divergent ways as the Peace Laboratory proposals. While this happens, it can turn out to be a Sisyphean task to try to create peace and development in Magdalena Medio. Or it may become a mere palliative or a rhetoric of peace cradle.

However, one must emphasize that the Peace Laboratory is mainly a symbolic initiative. It aims at showing that it is possible to build another model of peace and development, to create another type of institutions, another form of state, another form of life (Vargas, 2007). To some extent, it attempts to put in practice, on a micro level, the alter-globalists slogan “another world is possible”. It intends to show that another Magdalena Medio is possible, another Colombia is possible, another peace is possible. It has a certain utopian character. It truly corresponds to what Fetherston calls counter-hegemonic peacebuilding projects (Ramsbotham et al. 2005: 217).

But it is clear that the Laboratory, put before the gravity of the situation, is not enough to solve the Colombian conflict (Palechor, 2005: 45). It has essentially a symbolic and demonstrative value. It can’t substitute a peace process and national negotiations, essential for the peace in the country. It does not even correspond to an island of peace. It didn’t suppress the conflict dynamics in the region, nor does it has the capacity to do it.

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<sup>55</sup>“Nuestro concepto de desarrollo no es de dar pez, pero de enseñar a pescar”

However, it constitutes a very important, interesting and innovative peacebuilding initiative. The PDPMM and the Peace Laboratory were visionary and pioneers in attempting to marry and combine peace and development in a same programme and in opening a state – civil society dialogue. This relates to the Peace Laboratory's broad concept of peace. The Laboratory is simultaneously a peace and development proposal. It sustains on an integral approach. It has multidisciplinary focus and a participative methodology. It is based on an attempt to address the structural root causes of the conflict at a micro and regional level.

All in all, the Peace Laboratory conveys an alternative, more complex and complete conflict resolution perspective as other actors in the region, such as the US (Maio-Coliche, 2005: 37) or such as the governmental democratic security policies. Its identification and analysis of the problems is correct, its conceptual framework and objectives are daring and its suggested methods are coherent (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005: 52). It is an European alternative to Plan Colombia. It focuses on the causes of the conflict, rather than on its consequences; it is a plan for peace, not a plan for war, even if at the productive level one can identify some similarities between the European and the American aid and strategy.

Moreover, for the EU, the experience of the Peace Laboratory attests an European political commitment to peace on a global scale, even outside its "normal" geographic area of intervention and influence, and in a region where no major interests are at stake.

It also represents the creation of new peacebuilding instruments in the framework of development aid policies (despite the fact that in this case it isn't the main author). The Peace Laboratory is an instrument with no parallel on the European communitarian aid policies. Though it can be framed within the European aid paradigm, it has specificities and unique elements. Therefore, this original experience could configure a test tube for the European Commission, which could be reproduced in other contexts and other areas of the world. In this case, this would mean that the Peace Laboratory would be not only a laboratory for Colombia, but also for Europe.

Thus, one must underline that whatever its impact in the region and at the national level is, the Peace Laboratory is on track, oriented to the real problems, to the root causes of the conflict and to a negotiated solution. As in a real laboratory, it can take time to reach some results, or it may never obtain or reproduce the formula to peace. Nevertheless, as John Paul Lederach mentions, "violence is known; peace is the mystery. By its very nature, therefore, peacebuilding requires a journey guided by the imagination of the risk" (apud Zapata, 2006).

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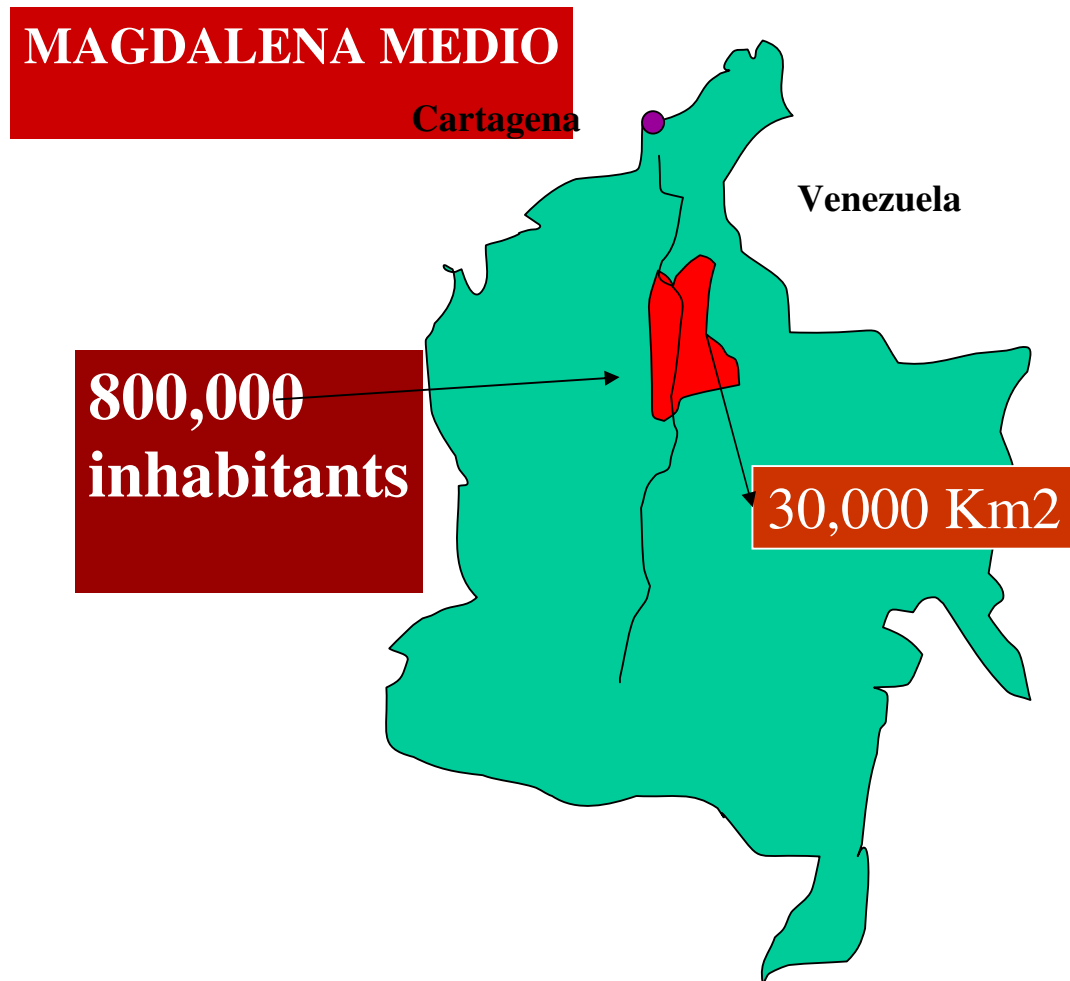
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8. Attachments:

Attachment n° 1



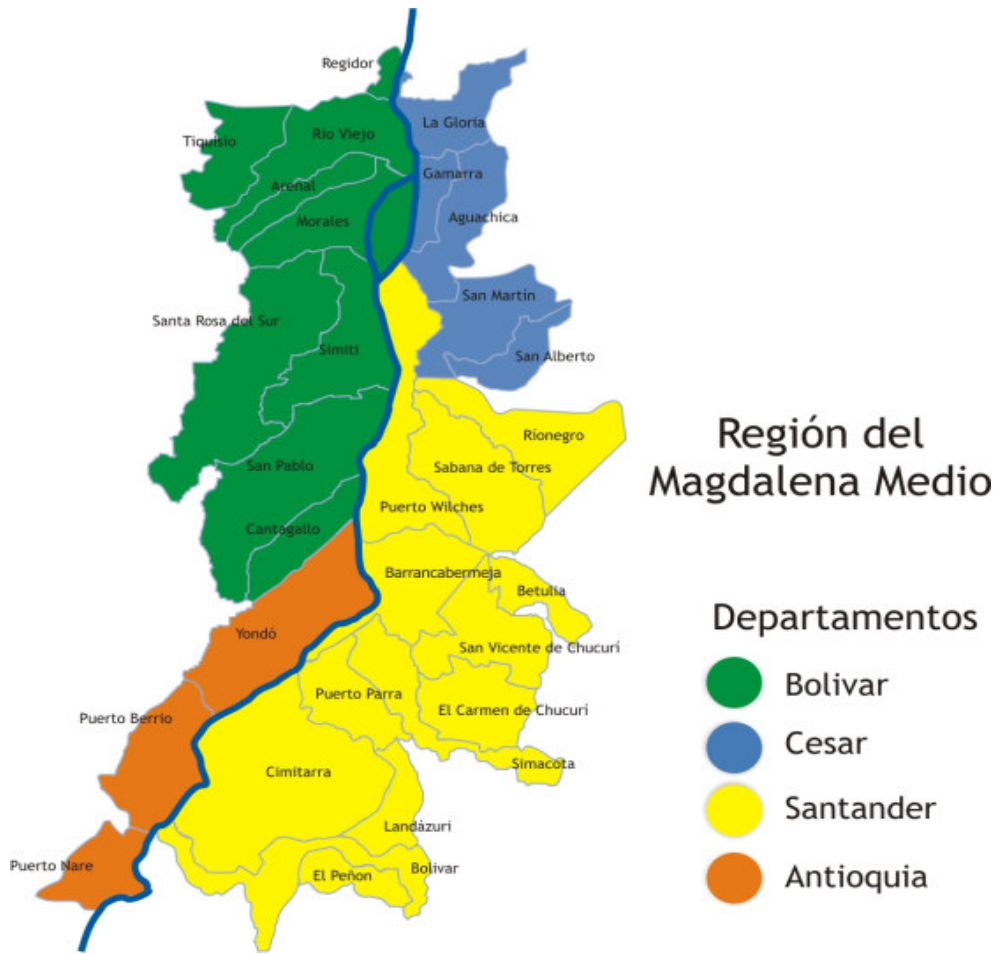
Source:

Francisco de Roux, Powerpoint Presentation Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio, 12 October 2007



Attachment nº 2:

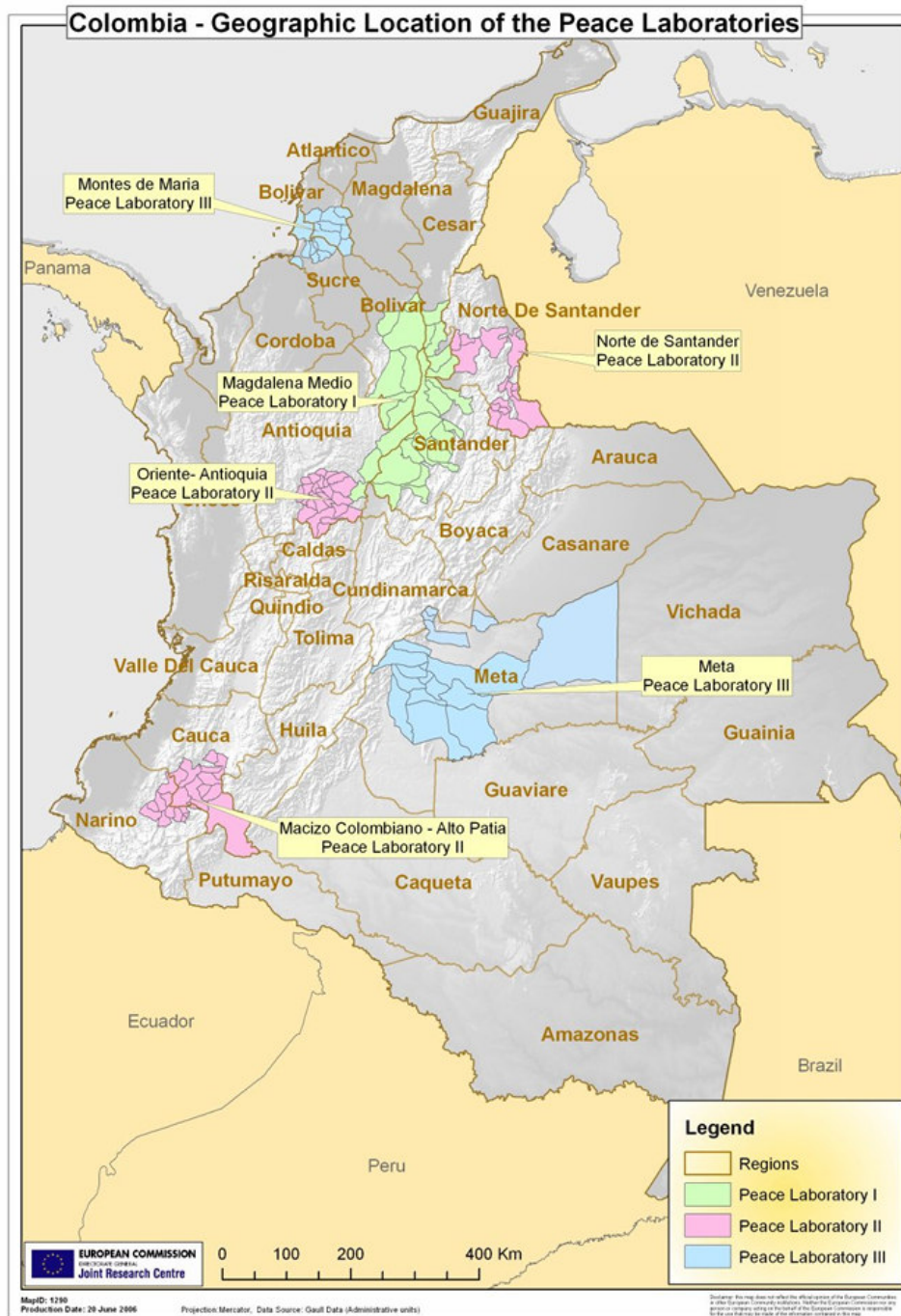
Magdalena Medio's Departments:



<http://www.pdpmm.org.co/pdpmm.asp?grupo=pdpmm&id=%203>

Attachment n° 3:

The Peace Laboratories' Location:

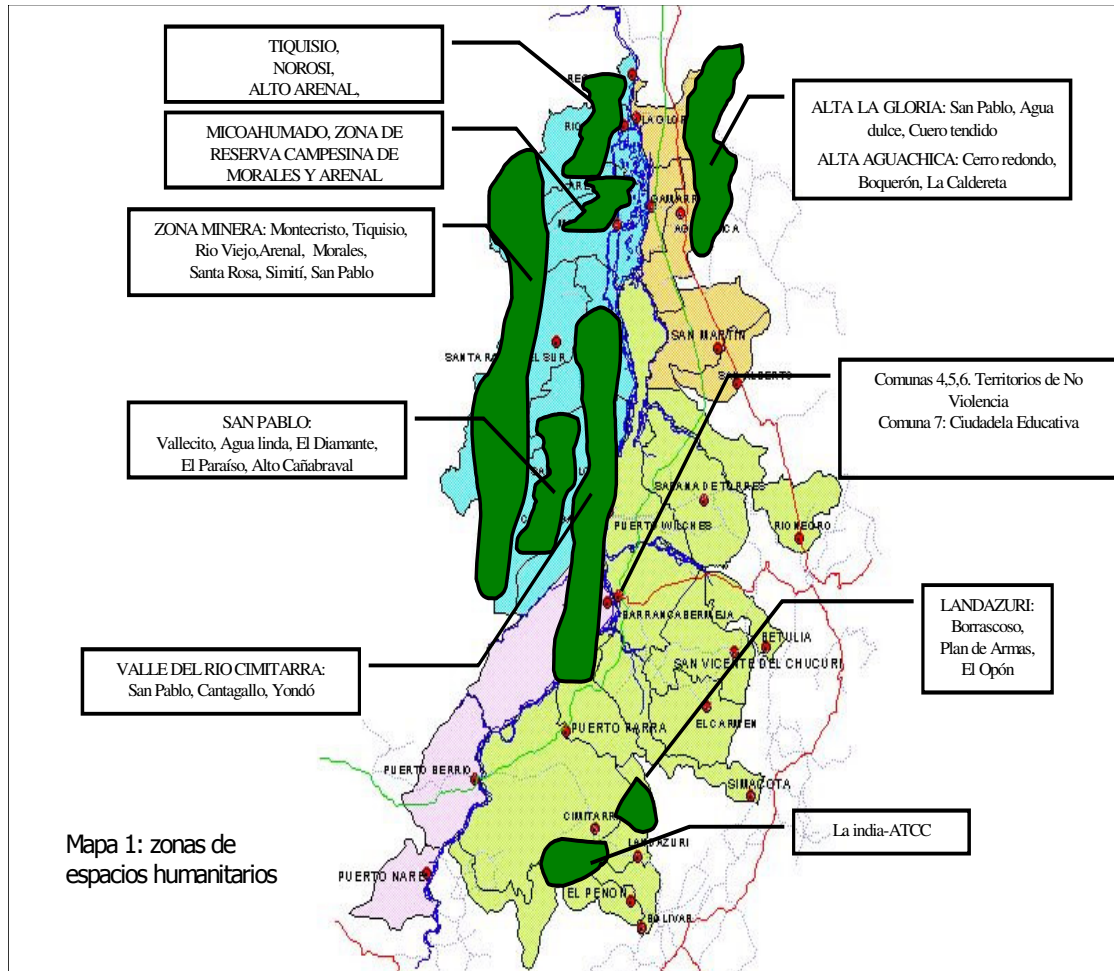


Source:

[http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/colombia/intro/localizacion\\_w700h989.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/colombia/intro/localizacion_w700h989.htm)

Attachment n° 4:

## The Humanitarian Spaces:



Source: (Rudqvist and Van Sluys, 2005)