COMMUNICATION AND THE PROCESS OF NATION BUILDING
- THE COLOMBIAN MAGDALENA MEDIO REGION -

Amparo Cadavid Bringe.[1]

INTRODUCTION

The following paper presents an experience in communications for development and peaceful coexistence over the years 1995 – 2000, within one of the poorest and more violent regions of Colombia. It summarizes the first attempt to systematize the experience and reflects upon it from an academic point of view. The aim is to identify and assess the most significant elements in the hope that they might enrich similar experiences elsewhere, as well as offering an interesting text for future more rigorous analysis.

The paper has three parts. The first one puts the geographical and cultural region in context and explains the institutional framework under which the project was undertaken; the second part describes both the actual experience and the process behind it; finally, the third and last part, makes a first analysis of the basic elements yielded by the work as a whole.

It is worth mentioning that the present paper has not reached its final stage.[2] We consider that, in spite the richness of the experience and the knowledge so far acquired, we still need to develop a theoretical framework that allows for deeper reflection. The very first thing that comes through after this first attempt in understanding such an intense experience is the need to place it within the cross roads of communications in the midst of social, political and cultural elements in a context of poverty and internal violent strife, such as it is nowadays in Colombia.

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[1] Researcher and consultant in Communications, Teacher at the Communication and Language School, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia

[2] This paper is an abstract of a longer work that compiles and analyses the 15 year-experience of the author doing communication work in poor and violent Colombian regions.

Still, the results and impact of the experience compel a future approach to the problem that takes in its stride, among other things, different specific aspects of the communication phenomena, such as the effect of new technologies, the vernacular narrative styles, the relationship between the different media and the creation of new local sensitivities and identities.

I. THE CONTEXT

A. <u>The Colombian conflict in the Magdalena Medio Region</u>

The Colombian internal armed conflict is considered one of the worst worldwide. Some estimates speak of 35 thousand violent deaths, over a thousand kidnappings and 800 citizens found missing every year; all these with a staggering impunity rate of 90%. Sixty percent of all murders committed against trade unionists worldwide take place in Colombia, and the same is true against journalists (40 assassinated in the last 5 years; 30 are now living in exile for security reasons).[4]

The Colombian internecine conflict has worsened since the late 80's. Though its causes are numerous, most of them have their origin in historical structural problems associated with the difficulties inherent to the creation of a Nation capable of giving breathing space to all its dwellers.[5]

However, over the last quarter of a century, different and recent specific factors have made the conflict more intense and have given it some special characteristics. One such factor has been drug trafficking. Its widespread repercussions worldwide are well-known; however, the situation is not quite the same in terms of the enormous impact it has had on Colombian economic, social, political and cultural life, and particularly with respect to the aforementioned will to create a Nation where peace and development are possible.

Clemencia Rodríguez presents an up-dated and accurate analysis of the Colombian conflict that is particularly relevant when she states that:

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[4] GONZALEZ URIBE, Guillermo: "Cultura y Guerra. Colombia y Estados Unidos", in *Revista Número* No. 37. Bogotá, August 2003.

[5] There are many studies on this matter where the problem is contextualized and where the causes of the conflict are explained, particularly its history. See attached bibliography under Consuelo Corredor.

"While the 1950's violence was lead by the traditional political parties, new social subjects became the main characters in the violent conflicts of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. During the 1960s three important guerrilla organizations emerged in the country: the FARC (Spanish acronym for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces), the ELN (Spanish acronym for Ejército de Liberación Nacional – National Liberation Army), and the EPL (Spanish acronym for Ejército Popular de Liberación - Popular Army for Liberation). Other guerrilla groups emerged during the 1970s such as the M-19 and the ADO. The FARC and the ELN have approximately 20,000 combatants combined. According to Francisco Leal Buitrago, a leading Colombian historian, these new political forces were a direct result of a legitimacy crisis of the Colombian state and the traditional parties. Not believing that traditional politics and the state offered a real option for political participation, many Colombians found in these armed movements their only hope. Today, guerrilla organizations have lost much of their grounding on political principles. Guerrillas have become major violators of human rights and of international humanitarian rights. Also, some (although not all) guerrilla groups do business with drug traffickers in order to finance their operations."[6]

Deeper and wider scrutiny will show that, right from its first social and political organization during the Spanish conquest and colonial period (1500–1819), and even during the Independence and Republican period, Colombia has been, and still is, a country with marked regional differences. Regions could very well be considered small little countries in their own right (within the bigger Nation), if we consider the immense geographical, social and economic differences between them, the variations in the actual presence and behaviour of the State vis-à-vis each of the regions and, above all, culturally speaking, the different identities, roots, as well as the national and regional 'imagined projections'.

As Francisco de Roux says: *"The country's 1991 Constitution is frequently and explicitly mentioned as the space where all Colombians convene. But that's not true: not all Colombians convene in the 1991 Constitution. Only some of us, excited with the rights therein expressed with intensity, convened in our Magna Carta. It is the Colombia we hoped for, but there is a significant number of Colombians —perhaps not as many as those of us who see in the 1991 Constitution the manifest expression of what we would like Colombia to be— who do not find in that Constitution the Colombia they want to see. And this is not only true for groups like the FARC but also for members of the ruling class working for the Colombian government. And the same is true in many other areas. Colombia is a stack of very many different things. Such is the drama we all really are: a sort of territorial community, inhabitants of a common territory who entered the 21st century without having created beforehand a nation or at least a national community based upon or around some minimal collective principles or common enthusiasms. We lack a public ethic considered by all as constituent of our very own identity and manifest in laws and institutions for which we would vouch with responsibility, as committed citizens do, because, otherwise, Colombia's future can not be feasible".*

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[6] RODRIGUEZ, Clemencia: "What is going on in Colombia Today?".

This country, divided in regions, sectors and social groups with very different ways of conceiving and understanding the whole, is the background scene of the conflict. Now, in spite of the fact that the nature, causes and consequences of the conflict are all the same, it does not manifest itself in the same way nor with the same intensity in all places. The symptoms are different in big cities and in rural areas; there are also differences among the regions. The conflict manifests itself with its peculiar characteristics in each region, and its specificity can only be explained by attending the particular history of the region behind its economic, social and cultural development. The Magdalena Medio region does not escape this circumstance; therefore, an attempt to understand the conflict here might be a good way to start.

The Magdalena Medio region is strategically placed in the centre of the country. It covers the middle course of the Magdalena River, which crosses the country from south to north and forms a long valley between two of the three Andean ranges (the east and central ranges) that likewise cross the country. Its banks comprise territories from four departments: Antioquia, Santander, Cesar and Bolívar. Paradoxically, the municipalities located in the region are the poorest and more marginalized towns of each of the departments involved; however, economically speaking, they are the ones which make higher tax contributions to their respective departments. Six of them are oil towns: Barrancabermeja[7], Sabana de Torres, San Vicente de Chucurí, Puerto Wilches, Yondó y Cantagallo; five of them stand over the country's richest gold deposits: Río Viejo, Morales, Arenal, San Pablo and Santa Rosa del Sur de Bolívar; some are important agricultural and livestock centers thanks to the richness of their soils and a long agro-industrial tradition with crops such as African palm, cotton, sorghum, plantain and fruit trees (Barrancabermeja, San Alberto and San Martín del Cesar, Morales, Río Viejo, Aguachica, San Vicente de Chucurí), or dairy and meat products in places like Puerto Berrío, Puerto Nare, Yondó, Cimitarr, Puerto Parra and Sabana de Torres.

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[7] Barrancabermeja, Santander, port on the Magdalena River where the biggest oil complex in the country lies. Its refinery produces 3% of the nation's GDP.

As opposed to many other river basins around the world, where great and highly developed civilizations grew, the Magdalena river valley has not managed to do so. It was, though, the main causeway into the country where big, important and rich cities and societies established, such as Bogotá, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Tunja, Manizales, Pereira and Armenia, among many others. All of them are located in the upper reaches of the Andean ranges with milder, more benign climates. The Magdalena river basin has a lowland humid tropical climate where high temperatures and heavy rains are a yearlong fixture; its dense tropical forests abound in flora and dangerous fauna. Therefore, the region's climate is not healthy in particular for people coming from the northern latitudes. Still, the Magdalena basin, long considered an ecological niche rich in biodiversity and natural resources (oil included), has been mercilessly exploited over the last five hundred years.

Different indigenous groups known by their independence, strength and courage, though not for their political organization or their technological skills, initially inhabited this region. These peoples where never subjugated by the Spaniards whom they fought against until they were practically exterminated. Anyway, almost up to the end of the 20th century, the Magdalena Medio region has been an important, necessary and strategic area for the country but is still basically uncharted territory. Historians[8] usually agree in considering the region as a sort of 'inner frontier', ironic as it might sound. In fact, it has had the bearings of a landlocked island geographically placed in the heart of the country, through which all communications and transactions necessary for the development and evolution of the nation have in fact gone through. The Magdalena river (the most navigable course in the country), the main interstate highway and railroad (connecting the capital city to the Atlantic coast), the optical fibre lines, the main gas and oil pipelines, etc., all pass through this region. Yet, the region in itself is way back behind the development and "progress" of other regions that benefit from it. In a nutshell, it is a region of

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[8] See Germán Plata, Mauricio Archila, Alejo Vargas Velásquez, Amparo Murillo Posada, and Jacques Aprile-Gniset, among others.

enormous richness having the highest poverty levels of the country and the highest incidence of violence.[9]

The poorest municipalities of the two richest departments of Colombia (Antioquia and Santander) and the municipalities from two of the least developed (though rich) departments (Bolívar and Cesar) constitute the Magdalena Medio region. It has been said that these towns are the aforementioned departments 'back yard' whereby they offer their wealth but receive nothing in return for their contribution.

The first studies ever done on the economics of the Magdalena Medio region[10] showed that its contribution to the GDP should be enough for its inhabitants to have the living standards of a European country like Spain. But the truth is that its people live like the communities of the poorest African nations. That is why it has been asserted that the Magdalena Medio region's economy has a 'wicked or evil dynamics'. One of the reasons, of course, is the fact that in spite of being a territory rich in natural resources actually exploited, the bounty is taken out of the region and never invested back for the benefit of its people. Another reason is that a good amount of the money that the region produces is earmarked for the war effort.[11] Last, but no least, is the simple fact that the redistribution of the national revenue is extremely unfair.

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[9] De Roux, Francisco, *Informe Final.* Bogotá, PDPMM, 1996.

[10] *Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio: "Investigación diagnóstica"* . Bogotá, SEAP-CINEP, 1996.

11 According to the MMPDP reports (1995), there where about 50.000 armed men in the MM region including the Colombian Army, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, oil cartels, and 'vigilante' groups. A The cost was estimated to be US$ 6.000 each one, for a total of US$ 30 billion a year. The annual budget for the biggest municipality in the region, Cimitarra, was, in 1995, US$ 21.000.

B. PDPMM - Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio: The Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program (MMPDP)

Towards the end of 1994, a group of institutions and entities[13] with concerns and interests in the region worried about the gradual growth of the conflict from the Urabá region[12] to the Magdalena Medio, and decided to combine their efforts in an attempt to create a huge regional movement to stop the conflict or, at least, to diminish its effects.

One year later, in October 1995, the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program (MMPDP) was created. It was born as an autonomous and independent entity through the institutional agreement of two private institutions: the CINEP (Spanish acronym for Popular Research and Education Centre), a NGO with long experience and leadership in social, economic, political and cultural research[14], and the SEAP (Spanish acronym for Economic Society of Colombia's Friends), an entity created by a think tank of the Colombian Liberal Party and officially established during the 60's by former president Carlos Lleras Restrepo, then in office.[15] This partnership had, to begin with, the financial support of ECOPETROL (Spanish acronym for Colombian Oil Company), Colombia's biggest national oil company. Later, the Program found other sources of financial support when the work done in the region was shown to be not only important but also serious.

The first step was to make a diagnosis of the region in order to see how to better 'approach' the problem. The target was to guarantee what could be called

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[13] Ecopetrol, the Diocese of Barrancabermeja, and CINEP.

[12] Important banana producing region in northeast of Colombia, close to the Atlantic Coast where, during the 80's and 90's, intense conflicts between guerrillas and paramilitaries took place to control the region.

[14] CINEP's experience and work is well known both in the country and abroad, particularly its data bank on Human Rights and its studies on violence, drug trafficking, communications, popular education, etc.

[15] The SEAP is also attached to the Liberal party —in power at that time— and is known for the seriousness and rigor of its research papers and publications.

a *sustainable human development and a peace with dignity* for all the inhabitants of the region.

The MMPDP defined "*sustainable human development*" as the development punctuated by and referred to human beings and not to the economy, the infrastructure, the financial sector or exports. This way of understanding the term 'development' was influenced by the concept of *development on a human scale*, developed by a group of Chilean economists under the supervision of Manfred MaxNeef:

"The basic principle behind the idea of development on a human scale purports that development has to do with people, not with objects. (…) How can it be established that a particular development process is better than another? We have long seen that the conventional, orthodox approach, where indicators such as the GDP… show the growth of tangible objects, things and artefacts, is not particularly helpful. What we need is an indicator capable of showing the qualitative growth of people".[16]

If different sectors require a particular impetus or boost so that human beings can improve and develop, such impetus had to be found. The aims behind this concept of development are: a) To improve the quality of life of every person to a level equal to his / her own dignity as a human being; b) To empower all social actors, in such a way that they can decide which activities make it possible to achieve such quality of life; c) To make everything possible so that such development guarantees the possibility for all human beings to achieve the fulfilment of all aspects of their nature: freedom, peace, and creativity, as well as material, intellectual, ludic and spiritual growth.

This new vision of development drawn up by the MMPDP (1995) was not exclusively a Latin American phenomenon. In 1988, the Indian economist Amartya Sen, professor and researcher at Oxford University, England, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, made the concept of development firmly bound to the concept of freedom. In his terms, people's freedom "to search for their own way of achieving happiness" is closely linked to two concepts: first, an

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[16] Manfred Max-Neef, in his works *Desarrollo a escala humana,* states it clearly: "Development has nothing to do with objects but with people".

economic theory nurtured by a profound ethics, and second, as in our context, an economy where people's freedom should be guaranteed for them to meet their basic needs as well as the right to participate socially and politically in the construction of their society.

"The lack of economic freedom, as manifest in extreme poverty, can turn an individual into a defenceless victim of further violations of other forms of freedom…. The lack of economic freedom can certainly feed the lack of social freedom in the very same way in which the lack of social or political freedoms can actually curtail economic freedom".[17]

As far as peace is concerned, the MMPDP defined the concept as the search for a "peace with dignity" This concept was worked out within the Program during and after a series of talks and debates among the people who started the project and then, through talks and debates that this same team had with outside interlocutors. The word 'dignity' was meant to emphasize a difference, to set a precedent, and to allude to a principle of enormous importance at the moment.

The "search for peace" has become a cliché among all sectors, including the warring parties. So much so that the concept of 'peace' has gradually lost its deep meaning. The term 'dignity' was added in order to establish the "character" of such peace: it is not the sort of peace obtained after vanquishing or exterminating the opponent through the use of force. It is the peace neither of defeat, nor of the grave. Neither is it a peace by decree, nor one unilaterally defined. It is not the sort of peace, which hides a latent conflict or the 'dead calm' before the storm. It is not the peace behind which the interests of a minority are concealed to the detriment of the majority. It is a peace obtained by the factual transformation of individuals and the community. This transformation should move people towards finding political solutions instead of armed and mutually exclusive actions, so that the profound differences that separate the warring factions can be bridged. A peace that should be achieved through the

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[17] SEN, Amartya: *"Desarrollo y libertad".* Bogotá, Planeta, 2000.

understanding, awareness and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of everybody's existence, everybody's right to be respected, and the exertion of sympathy and solidarity for all mankind.

In summary, it is the peace that declares openly the dignity of all human beings for the simple fact that they exist. Such 'peace', therefore, became both the 'compass' that guided the Program and conditioned its framework.

The MMPDP started work in 1995 through a comprehensive diagnostic research whose main points were: 1) Agricultural and farming development and economy; 2) oil; 3) institutional development; 4) political development and coexistence; 5) history, culture, communications and social organizations.[18] This research was done with the participation of regional people, and inspired a development and coexistence plan initially created for two years, but conceived and formulated for the long term.

In 1997 the MMPDP received a first loan from the World Bank in the line of what was called a 'Learn and Innovation Loan', or LIL. The loan was endorsed and guaranteed by the Colombian state through the National Planning Department, the Ministry of the Interior, and the support of international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Program and Ecopetrol.

The loan made it compulsory for the Program to create its own institutional structure and to generate a series of processes and plans to the satisfaction of both the country's expectations as to what should be done, and of the World Bank's new vision for Colombia's development, all of this within the framework of what the LILs are.

As soon as the MMPDP started, a particular vision and a communication strategy were implemented as part of the project. The latter is this paper's main theme.

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[18] Published by the MMPDP in ten consecutive reports, Bogotá, April 1996.

II. THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

A. <u>Communication within an Interdisciplinary Context</u>

The first question here considered was: What is the role of communication in a peace and development program? How is communication seen from the perspective of other disciplines? How does communication see itself, what role does it want to play, and how should it get there?

1. <u>The blueprint</u>

Traditionally, all development programs and projects —both public and non-governmental— have considered communication media as valuable tools that provide them with projection, diffusion and support to strategies, such as education. That is why "communicators" are usually called as soon as the blueprint stage is finished and it is time for work to start. Communicators are then asked to design information processes, to develop media campaigns, to write and print diffusion materials, to organize spreading out events, and to access the existing press as much as possible.

This time, the first 'breach' with this traditional *modus operandi* was the fact that communicators 'sat' in the board meetings and participated in the planning stages, and thus took part as representatives of a discipline in true capacity to make their position and perspectives known from the beginning.

This gave rise to several important challenges, one of them being essential: a series of internal relationships was enforced within an interdisciplinary team, whose first job was to conquer its own space. Communicators not only had to explain their discipline but also their views, strategies and fields of action and, at the same time, to make an effort to understand others and their own particular perspectives.

2. <u>The Collective Field</u>

The aforementioned was achieved on two levels:

I) First and foremost, on a general level which involved the whole team, communicators managed to take part in the global diagnostic research, giving support to all other areas and taking responsibility for the particular roles previously and jointly decided. All this was done after an overall analysis of what the proposal was to be. In the middle of this activity, a joint and interdisciplinary vision was constructed, always sharing each others' experiences on equal terms, and going through diagnosis and design processes, and choosing the best methodologies and approaches to be used on a collective basis. The problem was therefore approached with an integral view, based on two main questions which were in good part responsible for the generation and general dynamics of the process: *Why is such a rich (in people, natural resources, road and industrial infrastructure, etc.) region overwhelmed by poverty?* And *why is there so much violence in a region with such a rich cultural diversity, where people love life, where all arts, music and dance included, flourish?*

Communicators' point of view contributed significantly to the conception and design of the participative methodology, to the gathering and systematisation of workshops, and in a later stage, to the feedback given to participating communities. Also, thanks to its own initiative, this methodology included the subject matter (and its variables) of the cultural and the communication field.

II) Next, on the particular level (that is, regarding *the very activities of the communication field*), whatever was achieved came to be thanks to two crucial exercises within the general framework of collective work at this first stage: a) Defining the 'Middle Magdalena Region', provided that such definition should circumscribe clearly "our target population" in terms of territorial, political, social, cultural, and economic aspects; up to that time, it was not clear enough and created not few communication difficulties within the whole team. This definition constituted the first conceptual element, essential to our common language and research. b) The drafting of a 'brief history' of the so called 'Middle Magdalena' region, capable of determining two main factors: the dynamics that had made it

into a region, and the identity nodules constructed throughout its particular history.[19]

Both exercises became documents that are now part of the reports drafted over this stage.

3. <u>The Communications Field Proper</u>

As far as the communications field is concerned, we agreed to start by drafting our own diagnosis in order to widen and understand better some of the aspects identified by the joint general diagnosis. It was decided to make it as an '**Inventory** that included communications, culture and organizations' and, at the same time, a 'survey' of consumer trends that enabled the creation of a 'map' or eagle-eye's vision as comprehensive as possible of whatever was found, what it looked like and the dynamics behind these factors in the MM region. The territorial unity used as reference for this research was the *municipio* (municipality) and, within it, the *cabecera municipal*, the main *corregimientos,* and finally the rural areas. As it has been already said, this inventory included social organizations as well as communication and cultural aspects.

4. <u>The Strategy: both Regional and Integral</u>

Based on the results of this diagnosis, the communication 'strategy' was defined: "*Everything that, based on the idea of recovering the vernacular (the identities), as integrally and comprehensively as possible, and through 'empowering' methodologies, contributes to finding voids and deficiencies, strengthens and develops potentialities, always committing to the reconstruction of the region and from there, of the Colombian Nation*".

B. <u>Interlocutors in the Communication Process</u>

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[19] The conclusions of this research where published in 1996: *"El Magdalena Medio, una región que se construye por el Río"* (A. Cadavid) and *"Diagnóstico de Comunicación y Cultura en el Magdalena Medio"* (Bohórquez, Lozano Plata). Several later versions appeared in publications by the MMPDP.

As far as the people, organizations and institutions involved in the communication processes are concerned, the approach focused on the idea of developing the most significant elements found in the Inventory. With that in mind, a Communication and Culture Strategy for the MMPDP was drafted.[20] In general terms, the main objective of this strategy was to boost the communication and cultural supplies found in the region, so as to strengthen the civil society represented by established and empowered organizations capable of managing and implementing projects in the area with a real effect over the decision making process concerning local and regional development. All this oriented towards the creation of appropriate conditions for a healthy coexistence, based on the recognition and acceptance of the different identities, the historical and cultural heritage, and the development of talent, economy included.

The communication strategy covered two different needs: 1) Needs concerning the institutional structure of the MMPDP (that is, the creation of an institutional interlocutor), and 2) Needs concerning the MM region (that is, support for the creation of social regional interlocutors). This idea follows an understanding of the relationship between the two: the MMPDP is therefore established as the transitory institutional subject whose aim is to propose, strengthen and support regional processes which aim at reaching peace and development in the middle and long terms (15 years). To achieve it, though, it has to construct its own 'subjectivity' while supporting the strengthening of all other 'subjectivities' in the region. The main purpose, of course, is the final interlocution among all of them. Hence, the relevance of a communication strategy becomes evident.

Understood as said, the strategy worked in the following areas:

-The design and implementation of an internal communication strategy for the MMPDP, capable of consolidating it as a viable social interlocutor in the region and in the country, as solid, coherent, and harmonious as possible.

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[20] There is a MMPDP document which explains this strategy. A profile and a justification of this work were published in Controversia, N° 174, under the title *"Con otros ojos".*

-The recovery of the regions' history and memory, highlighting those values that have inspired the actions leading to solidarity, understanding and constructive practices.

-The design and development of a press and media strategy in order to create a real image of the MM that could be shown and spread in the region, the nation and the international community. This strategy should, at the same time, find its own style and narrative forms, its own way of reporting and defining agendas and opinions.

-The strengthening of local media and the creation of community networks: one of community radio stations, and another one of local TV channels. All in all, a proposal designed to develop the elements found in the diagnosis.

-The design, implementation and assessment of communication projects that contribute to the strengthening of social organizations linked to the different economic, political, educational and environmental activities taking place within the MMPDP.

-The creation of a macro-cultural project that would include two main enterprises, music and literature, both in harmony with the results of the inventory, which stated that this is where the richest resources and the bigger expectations were to be found.

III. LESSONS

In this section we include an analysis and a reflection on what the experience of designing and implementing the aforementioned communication strategy for the MMPDP really meant. Such strategy was developed in a region signed by poverty and conflict, with the idea of constructing a region and a nation in mind.[21]

How does communication contribute to this purpose?

A. The Framework of Learning

The conflict taking place in Colombia and its specific manifestation in the MM region brings out particular problems. This is precisely (problem manifestations, magnitude and specificities) what the MMPDP tries to diagnose through a participative methodology and perspective, so that it becomes the starting point of a solution.

Communication has a lot to do with it. That is why projects have been designed to overcome the specific problems generated by communication. By doing so, a series of achievements are made, such as learning how the role played by all sorts of communications can affect people in the midst of conflict.

B. The Construction of Subjects

The particular concept with which the MMPDP built the ideas of *sustainable human development* and *peace with dignity*, leads to the idea that all men and women, all individuals are an end in themselves and not a means, and that the construction and strengthening of each individual's subjectivity is therefore a priority. The opposite idea of human beings being a means to something else — which is, by the way, the neo-liberal way of understanding the problem— turns

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[21] This is an attempt to link the basic concepts concerning communications with a peace and development approach inspired by the principles stated both in *"Desarrolllo a escala humana"* by a Chilean team led by Manfred MaxNee, and in *"Desarrollo y Libertad"* by Amartya Sen.

all men and women into objects that can be manipulated and disposed of. But we are convinced that only social subjects (and not objects) can reach for the goal of peace and development.

Only subjects can fight for and conquer their liberty, liberty that has to start, first and foremost, with the freedom to choose the best road to accomplish happiness. Only within this framework can the idea of development really be thinkable and desirable.[22]

This is why the concept of subject in this context has a deeply philosophical connotation that, at the same time, determines the formulation of our goals and objectives. As such, the social subject is understood as the human spirit, a sort of antithesis of the external world, with the ability and skills to deal with that world in order to know and ponder it. It is from within this subject that all actions stem to determine and direct the way in which such subject can place itself in such world and make it his own with as much satisfaction and creativity as possible. Otherwise, to conceive the human being, as an object would imply that, as such, it is the passive recipient of an external action forced upon it. The MMPDP wants to transcend that.

Yet, it is not only within the neo-liberal and other development ideologies that human beings are conceived as objects; war and conflict too underlie such conception since the subject is denied and placed in a position where it is thoroughly manipulated. This happens everyday in zones of intense conflict such as the MM.

This explains the MMPDP fundamental need to establish strategies and projects that allow the re-measuring of all men and women as *subjects* capable of making development viable and finding the tools to do it.

That is why the project found in communication a strategic factor of no little importance: all communication processes imply the notion of the human being

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[22] Basic principle for Amartya Sen when exposing her vision of development from an economic perspective.

as a 'subject-interlocutor', who creatively accomplishes communication as soon as he/she perpetrates it. As far as the reflection on the communication process is concerned, the human being is conceived as a unique, creative, participative and transcendent being capable of going beyond his/her immediate milieu in order to reach the collective sphere and, at the same time, provided with the history and the tools necessary to do so. After all, the essence of all communication lies in the existence of an interlocutor, capable of interchanging with 'others', 'others' immediately acknowledged and recognized in the act of communication. The interlocutor has all that is needed to do so: it has the language and the autonomy to agree with possible agendas, and it can do nothing without establishing a common ground with the 'others', who are instantly acknowledged as fellow interlocutors with the same attributes and qualities.[23]

Since the interlocutor is the essence of communication, communication has developed points of view, methodologies and tools directed towards the 'construction' and empowerment of interlocutors.

Such a communication strategy has to go beyond the established wisdom where communication is understood as the mere transmission or propagation of data, or even the simple mechanical operation of machinery, of technology or media (either mass or small-community media) on its own. It also has to transcend the position of those who consider that the essence of communication lies in the message and its particular purposes. Both are conceptions, which underlie the notion of the human being as an object whose only value rests in the possibility to exert power over the 'object'. In short, they are ways of understanding the communication process that remove from it the basic sense of something "common", an act that implies 'community, 'being together', having a common ground, being in communion'.

Our way of understanding the communication process allows for the inclusion of the individual as a subject, as a cornerstone of the process, capable of

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[23] Conception of communications matching the dialogue concept established by Estanislao Zuleta in his Ethics.

performing the creative act of giving meaning, of making sense, which is basic in the construction of anything social; the interchange that takes place is therefore considered the substance of all communication, and the commitment with what is thus 'created' becomes the end to be achieved. Communication takes place to create something new which enriches all those who create it and perhaps even others. Communication between two or more individuals is an act of rapprochement, connection, encounter; it is an agreement on a common purpose. Dialogue, conversation, narrative or debate is in itself and par excellence a communication process which belongs to the person that engages in it ever since him or her came into being; it is also the heritage that allowed humanity to bear its social nature and create civilization. This is why communication is the essence of anything social and of coexistence.

Thus, the communication strategy designed by the MMPDP had as its main purpose to contribute to the creation of social subjects by first creating interlocutors. So, the first collective subjectivity to be created was each and everybody's own, so that from they're a dialogue could be established with others in the search for elements that would, in turn, strengthen their own subjectivities. Once committed to these principles underlying our approach, the time for action came.

Who are all the other interlocutors in the process? Well, the social organizations that wants to construct something in the region because they live there and expect to transcend in the generations that will follow them. All the communities —social organizations— (associations, cooperatives, social groups, town committees), as well as all territorial institutions and companies (from multinational ventures to Pymes)[24]. Though different in nature, constituency, social reason and behaviour, all these groups are committed to the reconstruction of the region through the construction of a public sphere, of coexistence, productivity, fairness and justice for all inhabitants.

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[24] Spanish acronym for Small and Medium-size Companies and Enterprises.

All these parties, as interlocutors themselves, had to create the conditions to make their aims viable. Therefore, there was a need to build the scene for encounters, to create a common language, to access media and available communication technologies, and to develop agendas capable of summoning the attention and commitment of all interested.

Again, in Francisco de Roux's words: *"We can't simply expect Colombia to solve for us the regional problems. Colombia is not going to tell the northeast or southeast regions of Antioquia what to do. Nor can we expect Colombia to tell the coffee axis what it must do to improve its competitiveness. Nor is it going to solve the problems of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Colombia is not going to solve the challenges ahead for the MMPDP, which are our challenges, nor is it going to solve the problems of Casanare. (…) I want to stress this fact and this approaching because Colombia is in itself a problem that we have not been able to solve yet. We don't really have a national community we can speak of. And this is the drama that the inhabitants of this huge territory are suffering. We have to stress and repeat this fact because it explains why we have not yet understood that we have to construct, to create Colombia from the regions. Why? Because the only way to build anything up must come from the basis of a deep sense of identity and belonging, from the basis of simple 'imaginaries' capable of rapidly summoning up a whole community that lives and identifies with a particular territory. Only then we will have a human community from which it will be possible to define and work out a new collective common purpose".[25]*

We therefore have: on an individual basis, subject-interlocutors; on a collective level, social organization among organizations; on a regional level, a region where a nation can be created in dialogue with other regions. This was our focus.

C. Building the public sphere

1. The 1991 Constitution:

The 1991 Constitution is a key factor in recent Colombian history that provides an important framework for any debate on the topic of building the public sphere. The Colombian Constitution is important not only because of what it implies and transforms, but mainly because of the significant social convergence repercussions it had at a national level when written and passed.

Until 1991, Colombia was ruled by the 1986 Constitution, which was the result of a covenant between the liberal and conservative parties, which instituted it

through Congress. The 1991 Constitution was written by popular mandate through a National Constituent Assembly. This Assembly encouraged a one-year "pre-constituent movement" all over the country, which meant conducting "Working Tables" regarding main topics that Colombian men and women considered should be included in the "new legal order" or "social agreement". The themes proposed were presented, debated and agreed with, and then submitted to the Assembly.

Its most outstanding implications are the following: (i) It declares in Colombia the social rule of law (ii) declares the State guarantor of citizen rights. The 1986 Constitution only acknowledged the rights to life, honor and property; the 1991 Constitution adopts the Universal Declaration of Human and Children's Rights. (iii) Establishes freedom of worship while the 1986 Constitution only acknowledged one official religion. (iv) Recognizes equal rights for women and men. (v) The 1986 Constitution defined centralism while the 1991 Constitution establishes decentralization and autonomy of territorial entities. (vi) The new Constitution establishes citizen participation as a fundamental principle in the Colombian state, and determines participatory institutional instruments in order to exercise such participation. (vii) The 1986 Constitution acknowledged one language (Spanish) and one ethnic group (indigenous and black minorities were considered minors); the 1991 Constitution considers all indigenous languages as the official language in their territories, and respects the citizen rights of all existing ethnic groups. (viii) The 1991 Constitution transfers the (1886) Congress' sovereignty to the people. (ix) Administrative decentralization allows regions and localities to choose their leaders and to be autonomous in budget allocation, and creates citizen control and surveillance authorities to watch the state's actions.

In the communications field, the Constitution goes from a general freedom of the press (1886) to the right to communication (Article 20). "Every person is free to the express and spread his/her thought and opinions, entitled to inform and receive true and impartial information, and has the right set up his/her own mass media enterprise. Every person is free and has social responsibility. The

right to rectification is guaranteed with fairness. There will be no censorship"[1].
And it gave the opportunity to legislate community media.

The 1991 Constitution is a cultural text and it crerates a new political culture. It is neither a code nor a manual, and it sets a goal to be attained by the Colombian nation. It promotes relationships between the society and the state, which it wants to achieve in the middle and long term.

2. The public sphere

Within the framework of this Constitution, the public sphere stops being state-owned to become society-owned. Therefore, the social control is established as a regulatory principle of the State. The rights now adopted allow the inclusion of all-Colombian on equal terms and to create mechanisms towards such end.

The Talleres del Milenio [Millenium Workshops][2] (2001) which purpose was to analyze the current crisis and rethink Colombia so as to point out a route towards a new social contract stressed the importance of building and legitimizing the public sphere as a way to discover new approaches. In the workshops mind the public sphere was not exclusively the state's concern since society should as well build, enrich, renew and legitimate it, the public sphere, by means of participation, deliberation, controversy, competition, and conflict among citizens around collective interests.

The MMPDP defined the public sphere (1995) as *"the common public way in which people and groups in a society think, judge, and act; the common sense of a collectivity; the collective project to build a common home; the ethical task of specifying fundamental values and principles that question and encourage citizens, and the effort to guide these questioners to ensure everyone's survival and future. As the political task of a human conglomerate performing in a geographical, regional or national atmosphere (…) The public sphere, as construed by the MMPDP, is the ultimate possible goal as a collective, a non-*

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[1] 1991 Colombian Constitution.

[2] GARAY, Luis Jorge (Coord.) <u>Repensar a Colombia. Hacia un nuevo contrato social</u>. *[Rethinking Colombia: Towards a New Social Contract]* Bogotá, UNDP / (Colombian Agency for International Cooperation - ACCI, 2002

negotiable, intransferable, indivisible, and in no case private project for a region and a nation." [3]

In the previous context, the public sphere is – from the communications point of view – both a scenario and an essence for building a region, a framework of meaning and use produced by the communication process. The public sphere is the purpose and the meeting place of interlocutors who jointly create what everyone needs to live on and transcend as individuals and collectives based on their differences. They do so through communicative functions such as dialogue, deliberation, controversy and competition.

The afore reflection signed and determined by the fact that both the strategy and the Middle Magdalena Peace and Development Program were designed and are carried out in the midst of a serious armed conflict. Thus, the conflict is the main referent for this analysis of the public domain.

3. The conflict

How does the conflict affect the construction of the public sphere?

War invades, destroys or hinders the public sphere by means of several mechanisms, among them: privatizing all common interest spaces and instances; imposing a given truth; encouraging silence, and along with it, the likelihood of meetings and dialogue; breaking the bonds that join a community; building destructive imaginaries and identities, and projecting them on enemy images.

The first strategy of the armed parties in the Colombian conflict is the struggle for territory dominance. When one of the sectors in conflict "takes over a territory", it imposes "a communicative order" as a central strategy. In order to dominate, the parties in conflict —guerrilla, paramilitary groups and national military forces— need to impose their truth by willingly or forcibly convincing or "conquering" the communities for their cause. Thus, they create "insiders" and

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[3] By Roux Francisco: Final Report.

"outsiders". The former, support their cause, and the latter are their "enemies". Previous unified relationships among community members are then fractured, and trust, solidarity, and communications are broken.

"Outsiders" become dangerous "enemies" against whom everything goes. Likewise, all that surrounds them, the places they go to, the activities they participate in, their family, friends and acquaintances, become suspicious. To prove that one is not dangerous, one must stay away from the "enemy", denounce him, and deprive him of trust and his freedom of speech. Relationships are destroyed.

There are also activities suddenly tagged as "dangerous". The most important one of which is, of course, any community meetings. Hence, community meetings are proscribed in areas controlled by the armed actors, group conversations are not allowed. There is no possibility for them to share and build new opinions, to solve common problems, and to work on their community interests.

Domination of the armed actors results in imposing silence. In fact, after undermining reliance and solidarity, people no longer know each other, ignore who they are, and what their neighbor thinks. This silence is exploited by the rulers to "say" what is true by string-pulling and in their own benefit. The place is now clear to create "good" and "bad" entities according to whether they are convenient or not, to spread rumors that manipulate people and make them react in certain ways. However, the main objective of this process is to generate isolation, fear and fright, which are important dominance weapons.

4. Communication as a perspective

Such was the panorama of the Middle Magdalena region, when the MMPDP was founded in 1995, and faced the decision of working in this context to build the public sphere and to do it with all the instruments within its reach. Communication was used as a strategy to find solutions.

Some aspects regarding communication's significant contribution at a conceptual, methodological, pedagogical and instrumental levels are mentioned below. It is important to understand that the communication perspective was always a contribution within an interdisciplinary context, so that it interacts with other disciplines and fields to find solutions.

(i)   The creation of imaginaries to recognize individuals as citizens that have rights and duties within a social rule of law.

In wide areas of Colombia where the State has had an impact because of its traditional presence, (mainly through the Military Forces who coerce the population in these so called 'public order areas'[4]) individuals do not feel part of the social order which legitimized that State, a State almost exclusively known by its repression but hardly because it fosters development or brings justice. What these communities feel is rejection towards a state they consider their "enemy". Consequently, they do not feel citizens with rights and duties to the State or to the "bigger society"[5], and do not take responsibility to do so.

In this regard, the purpose of a communication strategy is to generate imaginaries to change how the social order and the people involved in it are conceived. One way of doing it is by providing information and knowledge about the national, departmental and local authorities of the State, and mainly on spaces, political opportunities and events related to the communities' interests. The other way is by generating debate and participation spaces around these fundamental rights and duties.

Decentralization of the Colombian State and the 1991 Constitution opened important spaces to community participation not only regarding territorial planning processes, but also for citizen control and surveillance. To encourage the communities' participation, it is necessary to increase their self-esteem so that they "feel capable of", and to provide information and training in

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[4] In Colombia "public order areas" are zones where there is armed confrontation between the guerrilla and the paramilitary groups with the presence of the Military Forces.

[5] Central society from which power is exercised.

communication. This will allow them to understand and use suitable languages, as well as to have criteria, power and capacity to influence agendas and control mechanisms.

This training means providing concrete elements for people to communicate with; it also means that citizens should adopt a new "communicative vision" about the participatory processes, and particularly develop the capacity to place themselves in context.

Whenever the Program has been evaluated, training has frequently been mentioned as one of its "strengths". Organized communities have been empowered as far as their capacity and role played in relation to the state through their participation in planning and control activities.

(ii)   Legitimacy of social individuals as interlocutors on the building of the ideal society with access to free flow of (public) knowledge and information for everyone. The need to ensure media and technology in citizens' hands to build the public domain from the new 'subject-individual'.

The lack of access to information and communication channels through public and private media – which are in the hands of the tycoons – is one of the limitations of poor areas in conflict. There are objective restrictions to the way public information is handled by conflicting parties. This situation causes a series of what we already called "wicked or evil dynamics" derived from the space now open to the manipulation of information by power holders, as previously mentioned. These conditions also hide and twist truthful information and knowledge to which citizens have a right.

Also, communication forms, such as rumors, misleading information, inaccuracy and distortion about events, create confusion, mislead people's actions and generate fear and fright. These latter aspects constitute one of the most efficient weapons of war and are the main factors of community weaknesses and fragility in war areas; they make communities vulnerable and generate very

serious conditions caused by phenomena like the physical displacement of entire families and communities at a national level.

War imposes many restrictions upon society. One of them is the privatization of the public sphere by making public interest information private following particular interests. War also monopolizes the citizens' rights to be part of and generate communication processes amidst the public domain according to their own interests.

As J.M. Pereira says, "The building of the public sphere is first of all associated with communication because it is constituted by symbolic spaces where all citizens can communicate and be interlocutors of all existing voices and projects in Colombia. The public sphere should give room to words, images in their multiple expressions, debates, parties and the expression of memory. Therefore, talking about communication to build the public domain implies opening up spaces for deliberation, participation, reflection, controversy, expression, given that, as Hanna Arendt says, pure violence is voiceless and therefore can never be a big deal" [6]

One of the ways in which the warring parties exert domination (including the state's military forces themselves) is by depriving individuals of their condition as citizens and interlocutors in the conflict through the use of weapons and the fear associated with them, thus surrendering them to "their truth" and "their criteria", which often means imposing total silence to people.

When this condition lasts, as in the Middle Magdalena region, new generations grow with a passive, fearful and pliant attitude towards their rights, rendering the public sphere concept unlikely. These new generations only experience the world of "the private domain" being built by war, and they only know silence. Therefore, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and legitimate Military Forces, who in many cases also go astray as guarantors of citizen rights, fall into defending their own interests.

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[6] PEREIRA, J.M. "Comunicación para construir lo público" [Communication to Build the Public Sphere"] published in Signo y Pensamiento No. 38, Bogotá, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana - PUJ, 2001

Omar Rincón, a media analyst, says, "Mass media as well as the social movements carry out a worrying activity disconnected from the community since they do not create social bonds but rather foster civil fragmentation (...) precisely because they want to stand out as the legitimate space to ´represent` (appear on behalf of ...) the citizen; since they always say they speak on behalf of the public (speak on behalf of...), and want their welfare (act on behalf of...). Consequently, the public domain is perceived not as a group of citizens, but as mass spectators; its value as a social actor is ignored. Through these mechanisms (speaking, appearing, thinking, and acting on behalf of), mass media and social movements become a power that imposes the way of the difference / the other, and dictates the ways in which society should think. They not only disconnect the community, but finish it off."[7]

On the face of this situation, adopting a communication strategy is extremely important. It will reactivate the communities' 'communication' capacity not to lose sight of their rights, and defend the public sphere that guarantees them.

Communication channels and networks in citizen hands are a basic requirement of today's democracy. Then and only then the word "citizen" stands for autonomy, independence, dignity, and merits public interest.

In spite of the abovementioned limitations, it is obvious that in spite the Colombian armed conflict the country has not abandoned its attempt to try and build a democratic and participatory nation. Although war weakens society, particularly its possibility to participate and influence its fate, Colombians still fight for their democracy more than ever. Perhaps this wishful thinking, this utopia, is one of the few things that we are sure about, and links us as a Nation.

Perhaps that is why society's fight to have its own mass media in the hands of the citizens still goes on. In fact, citizens' communication is the field where we

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[7] RINCON, Omar: "De la desconexión a la concexión" [From disconnection to connection] published in Signo y Pensamiento No. 38, Bogotá, Pontificia Univesidad Javeriana - PUJ, 2001

can more readily witnesses Colombian tireless fight to build a democracy – even in the midst of war.

"Regarding the internal conflict and violence caused by drug trafficking, some sectors are committed to build a society where citizens demand their economic, social, civil and political rights; a society which permanently and organized participates in public affairs, and take up diverse participation spaces created by the 1991 Constitution."[8]

For the first time in Colombia, the 1991 Constitution boosted the legal existence of community radio and TV channels, and contributed to the spread of those that existed illegally.

(iii)   To assist in building the "rules of the game" to favor each other's understanding; strategic and meditation spaces to face conflicts through coexistence, and to find ways to prioritize whatever common ground exists rather than the differences within a context of violence and confrontation.

In the absence of clear "rules of the game" there is no coexistence or democracy, since they are the ones that allow the inter-relationships that aim for a common goal. These rules should be agreed to by consensus within the community and should consider the basic elements to understand each other. What rally matters is that they are freely and voluntarily adopted by everyone, and therefore be respected, used and complied with.

The "rules of the game" should also be consciously and "technically" made, that is to say that they should respond to specific attitudes and actions in society's daily life and social contexts. Some game rules are imposed by the state, such as the Police Code, which have a general and lawful scope. They help a lot, but what we are talking about is more localized and pertinent to specific communities in relation to the objectives they want to achieve.

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[8] PEREIRA, J.M. "Comunicación y ciudadanía" [Communication and Citizenship] published in Signo y Pensamiento No. 38, Bogotá, Pontificia Univesidad Javeriana - PUJ, 2001

Communicative processes are essentially a permanent field to establish and maintain these rules of the game. Based on these processes, rules are being made, adjusted and applied on all occasions. Media in particular guarantees their legitimacy. However, there are risks involved in this activity. Mass media, even citizen media, can carry out actions that breach or twist the rules.

When a community values the respect for human life and dignity, this reflects on communication processes, which on its own will allow everyone, access and the possibility to be named, represented and recognized as such[9] in the field.

These rules exist in daily life and, as far as their enforceability is concerned, they are reinforced and controlled through the communicative processes and through media. It is also from these processes that rules are reviewed and adjusted as required.

Since Communicative processes produce representations, it is also through them that people generate rapprochement processes and build bridges between sectors that differ and confront in a conflict. Communications and mass media are strategic aspects in a society and rapprochement or rift can be encouraged through them.

In a conflict context, media can signal what brings the parties closer or bring them apart. Media can contribute to identify convergence or divergence since both possibilities have always been present in close agreements or distant disagreements. It depends on the vision and the objective to be attained.

Clemencia Rodríguez points out some cases where communication processes have brought traditional enemies closer precisely because they have a rapprochement "bridge" vision looking for common ground. *"In Burundi, the radio drama Our Neighbors, Ourselves, shows Hutu and Tutsi families (traditionally enemies), who are neighbors... The program describes the difficulties and tribulations of these neighbors and how in the end they are able to reconcile. Another case is that of Thokosa, one of the most violent*

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[9] RINCON, Omar: Op.Cit.

communities in South Africa, where there were two mortal enemies, Each of which was given the chance of using two video cameras. The purpose was to make a documentary about local murders. After six months, these two warriors jointly produced a film where they tried to find answers to the insanity in their communities."[10]

C. Rodríguez shows other cases like theses where citizens' media act as communication facilitators among the parties in conflict.

These and other situations cannot be summarized in an instrumental vision of media communication, even in Colombia. On the contrary, they show us the need for a wide context, a conception of interlocutors from the parties in conflict, and a strategy to plan and develop the experience.

C. Identities

The strengthening of civil society and collective work to build the public sphere as a scenario for democracy is based on the population's capacity to become collective individuals who communicate. Collective subjectivity is based on and deeply rooted in local and regional identities. From them, it takes its force, vitality and ability to see, respect and work together. This field of culture is approached in communicative processes.

Collective subjectivity in a community is mainly composed of its cultural heritage. This enhances a wide range of elements and factors: their particular history, grounded myths, common stories, beliefs and values, phobias and devotions, all this expressed by stories and legends, literature, poetry and theater, in songs, rhythms and music, dance, celebrations and ways of doing and telling things in daily life. Also, they are expressed through collective attitudes, such as solidarity, religious faith, and pagan celebrations, the practice of honesty and decency, and the concepts of productivity and well-being.

These marginal communities permanently violated by armed actors, live and practice their values to keep their identity in very different ways. They do it very

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[10] RODRIGUEZ, Clemencia: "Civil Society and Citizen's media" published in <u>Redeveloping communication for social change. Theory, practice, power</u>.

often in secrecy (solidarity for example), or in a world of expressions that are only coded / decoded by them. They create a protecting shield against outsiders and build levels that can only be reached with time and trust.

This particular, local and meaningful world makes it possible to establish communication processes that really question and penetrate their own community. For example, the topic of the human rights is untouchable in these isolated rural communities in conflict areas. However, there are groups (specially women) who have managed to make documentaries, informative, and educational programs about this topic without naming it directly, but through local coding / decoding processes[11] they can be accessed by citizen media.

Communication offers such possibility, which is not likely in other contexts. In the year 2000, the musical and cultural macro-project carried out – within the communication strategy – produced a CD with 34 songs that represented the musical variety of the Middle Magdalena region. To launch it in the region, there was a concert in Barrancabermeja which included songs with choreographies, dances and other cultural elements, such as poetry, all related to the river and riverside cultures, ancestral characters (giants), and a multicultural dance. There was also an estimated 4,000 audience made up of complete families (grand-parents, parents, children, grand-children) who stood there for 6 hours enjoying the show, applauding and participating. This happened in the midst of one of the worst public order moments in the region, precisely between two periods of "armed strikes" declared by the ELN. This fact, though, did not prevent, coerced or diminish the show audience. It proved to be a way to build "common places", synchronies, to get closer based on what joins us, and to be one collectivity. The enormous potential of the region was once again witnessed.

Mass media ignores local and regional events to focus on national and global processes. This is the message mass media take to small local communities, either rural or urban. But this message's difficulty lies in that it transfers foreign

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[11] Such is the case of the community radio stations at Los Montes de María in the department of Bolívar.

values and tastes that rarely belong to the communities, and ignore their own. Media do not see, identify, or "name" these communities, events and topics. Therefore, as Omar Rincón says, people are not given the opportunity of becoming individuals before the nation.

D. Citizens' Own Media

Local media in the hands of citizens allow to see, name, represent, and talk about the local sphere and about what is known. Above all, they socialize their new generations in this cosmo vision, values and heritage.

Citizens' mass media are a requirement of democracy. In 1995 there were 10 community radio stations in the Middle Magdalena region: 5 operated illegally, 8 were "local channels"[12] and there were also 8 municipal groups that worked on initiatives to establish their own radio stations and TV channels. This was one of the main works addressed by the MMPDP and its results led to the creation of the network AREDMAG - Middle Magdalena Community Radio Stations Network Association[13]-

The relevant aspect is that once the possibility of having legal citizens media is opened, real conditions should be faced to establish them. This is a long process. Small local processes should be conceived and followed closely for a while so they are not thwarted. Citizens' media cannot operate successfully all of a sudden as commercial businesses do since the latter have their own technology and know-how, and all they have to do is to "set it up" with a well-known and predetermined format.

Citizens' media require a series of steps, the permanence of which depends on their starting point. On the one hand, there is a need to create a community with common interests, that is well structured, coherent and clearly constituted,

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[12] Small TV broadcasting units "clinging" to national channels at certain hours to broadcast local programming generally including news and opinion programs.

[13] See CADAVID, Amparo "Las emisoras comunitarias del Magdalena medio", [Middle Magdalena Community Radio Stations], paper presented at the International Conference of OurMedia/Nuestro Medios, Barranquilla, Colombia. May 2003.

which can be implemented in a local *communication group,* legally recognized and with an internal organization. This is the first step since this group is legally "granted the ownership of the means" in its capacity to broadcast (community radio stations or TV channels). This is the core group that makes it possible; it should address the community's desires, needs and expectations to develop this project as a collective.

On the other hand, there are needs at the financial and technical resources level that force interested groups to find the tools to make the project possible: (i) To design projects to obtain support and perform financial and technical liability analysis to know whether these media will survive. (ii) To get informed about the institutions, organizations and corporations that are willing to support them. (iii) To learn how to manage projects including learning the institutional language and style in order to have dialogs and debates with unknown people – even with people out of their reach– about themes they do not master. (iv) To conceive community radio stations and TV channels as small businesses that should look for their social and financial stability over the years. (v) To learn technologies to make budgets, to make economic projections, financial statements, and other economic processes applicable to any project and business.

Finally, they have to take possession of what a "communication means" to the service of the community one belongs to, really means. This requires learning how to use the radio and television language, their resources and narrative, to design and put forward a programming that reflects the community's diverse interests and expectations, to involve different community sectors and groups on radio stations and TV channels, and to keep follow-up processes, programming adjustment, and programs.

Maturing individually and collectively a project is a process that takes time, demands investment in human resources, dialog and continuous debates to reach the necessary agreements, training and participation spaces. It is not something that can be attained all of a sudden since it requires maturity and funds. The community and its supporting institutions should work together.

Media provides a concrete and daily opportunity to contribute creatively to coexistence. We share Mrs. C. Rodríguez' views on the various ways used by citizens' media.[14] In spite that only AREDMAG developed between 1995 and 2000, and has survived and projected itself in the Middle Magdalena region, we believe this fight should not be left aside.

To have a community's own medium was a process intensively experienced in the Middle Magdalena region by the 16 radio stations that initially made up the network. It was there where the radio stations united and carried out their association. This network has gained more space and has become a stronger and more influential interlocutor in the region; it has contributed new ideas and experiences at the national and Andean level, in spite of the multiple obstacles and enemies it has encountered.[15]

V. CONCLUSION

We, Colombians, have been thinking for the last ten years on possible solutions to the conflict through different points of view such as academia, culture, communications, economy and businesses. From the development of the Pymes (small and medium size companies) to economic solutions for productivity, employment and income, as well as the proposals made by theater groups to regain our own "Colombian thought", we, Colombians do not give up in this endeavor, which has become an increasing obsession.

This effort should not be stopped. On the contrary, it should be given greater momentum because it is the way to approach each other and lead us to common ways. This text has been analyzed, written and presented with this purpose, and therefore is open to any remarks and enriching comments from the readers.

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[14] RODRIGUEZ, C. Op. Cit.

[15] To study more this topic, see CADAVID, Amparo: "Las Emisoras Comunitarias del Magdalena Medio" [Community Radio Stations in the Middle Magdalena].

I would like to finish this paper by admitting that while I was writing it, I read a text by Jesús Martín-Barbero on "Our ways of being in the World"[16]. Martín-Barbero criticizes the way academics, thinkers, and intellectuals have regarded the Colombian process. He incisively points out that one of our problems has been to keep ourselves isolated from the Latin American thought and processes, and that we have jumped from the finest Colombian thought to the European and American thought ignoring the continent to which we belong, and of which we are made up.

Despite the fact that William Ospina[17] talks with Martín - Barbero about this topic and gathers and states the contributions that Latin America has made to Society, culture and western thought, I have to confess that we still have a wide world to talk about in order to analyze this experience deeper.

We should take a closer look to the experiences in communication in those fellow countries that have gone through very long conflicts like El Salvador, Nicaragua, The Dominican Republic, Chile, and Argentina. And any other countries where proposals have made and thoughts developed in this regard, for example in Mexico, Brazil, and Peru.

This is the purpose to be immediately addressed.

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[16] MARTIN – BARBERO, Jesús: "Nuestros modos de estar en el mundo" [Our ways of being in the World] published in Revista Número No. 37, Bogotá, August 2003

[17] OSPINA, William: "El renacer de la conquista" [The Rebirth of the Conquest] published in Revista Número No. 37, Bogotá, August 2003

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