Victim-Centred Peacemaking: The Colombian Experience

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ABSTRACT
This article interrogates how survivors/victims participate in peacemaking and victim-centred Transitional Justice initiatives, focusing on the role of the victims’ delegations during the Santos-FARC/EP peace talks in Colombia (2012-2016). The article presents unique empirical data, drawing on sixty-eight interviews with participants from the talks. The research assesses Colombia’s victim-centred approach, arguing that the delegations shaped the content of the peace agreement, influenced historic narratives of victimhood and shaped victim-perpetrator relationships, facilitating victim agency and empowerment. However, wider political and economic prerogatives and dominant TJ tendencies constrained the broader exercise of agency, whilst participants experienced episodes of disempowerment and instrumentalisation.

KEYWORDS
Colombia; peacemaking; reconciliation; transitional justice; armed conflict; FARC-EP; victims

Introduction
At the end of November 2016, the Colombian Congress ratified a comprehensive package of five peace agreements negotiated over four years between successive governments of President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). After having been initially rejected in a public referendum in October 2016, and urgently revised during the following weeks, the political settlement brought formal closure to Colombia’s 52-year armed conflict with the FARC-EP, although peace with the country’s other long-standing insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN), remains elusive.

Six years on from the Santos-FARC talks, Colombia is ensnared between ‘no war, no peace’ (Bell 2006). Whilst the peace deal has held, it remains fragile. Continued opposition to the process across broad social spheres, the systematic execution, since 2016, of social activists and former FARC-EP combatants by paramilitary groups, the re-emergence of a dissident FARC-EP faction in 2019 and the ongoing spoiling activity of elite actors linked to former President Uribe represent formidable challenges.

Given the severity of the obstacles to Colombia’s peace settlement, and the protracted struggle to reach peace with the FARC-EP, the deal continues to represent a significant milestone. Beyond succeeding where other negotiations with the FARC-EP had failed, what was unique about the talks was the formal role afforded to victims of violence
perpetrated by all armed groups during the conflict. In June 2014, the negotiating parties undertook the unprecedented step of inviting five delegations, each incorporating twelve victims, to present their individual testimonies and proposals for the Victims’ Agreement at the peace talks in Havana, Cuba. The parties sought to give victims a say in crafting the content of Point Five of the agenda, which consecrated the transitional justice (hereafter TJ) provisions relative to the country’s eight million victims and broad spectrum of armed actors. At the behest of the negotiating parties, during the second half of 2014, the United Nations (UN), the Colombian National University (NUC) and the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church (ECCC) (the Organisers) arranged five visits of the so-called victims’ delegations to Havana. The Victims’ Agreement was eventually signed in December 2015, a year after the final delegation had returned from Cuba.

This article explores the role of the victims’ delegations in the Santos-FARC-EP negotiations, a culmination of both the ‘victims’ turn’ in TJ and the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding (García-Godos 2016; Sajjad 2016). The delegations were a hybrid mechanism conferring victims a formal role in negotiating peace, whilst representing a victim-centred TJ practice mandated to guarantee the inclusion of victims in the design of accountability mechanisms.

The article presents unique empirical data, advancing scholarship on Colombia’s search for peace. The research is based upon 68 semi-structured interviews carried out under the auspices of a UN investigation led by the author in 2015 to determine the impact of the victims’ delegations on the peace talks. Within the framework of the UN investigation, the author was mandated to conduct in-person interviews, analyse the empirical data and write a report subsequently published by the UN in 2017 (Brett 2017). Interviews were carried out with 52 participants across all five victims’ delegations and a further sixteen individuals from state institutions, one accompanier and one guarantor country and with members of the UN system, NUC and ECCC. Interviews were transcribed and data input into a database, before the interpretation of data and analysis were developed using grounded theory (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021). Prior to publication, the findings of the investigation were disseminated virtually to the participants of the victims’ delegations and the Organisers. All interviews are anonymous, given the sensitive nature of the investigation. Fieldwork was approved by the UN in Bogota in 2015.

Whilst focused on the Colombia case, the research addresses the broader question of how survivors/victims participate in peacemaking and victim-centred TJ initiatives. Considerable research has explored the formal and informal role unarmed non-state actors play in peacemaking/peacebuilding and within victim-centred TJ (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013; Robins 2015). Scholars have claimed that, at best, the inclusion of victims/civil society actors in the design and implementation of peacemaking initiatives may reinforce the legitimacy of political settlements and contribute to more durable post-accord peace. Victim-centred TJ, it is argued, may, at best, potentially strengthen the representativeness, legitimacy and effectiveness of TJ mechanisms, facilitate their appropriation by survivors, enhance their impact and durability and deliver state/societal acknowledgement of victims’ grievances (García-Godos and Sriram Lehka 2016, 7). However, at worst, victim inclusion has not achieved such ambitious claims and, in fact, led to victim instrumentalization (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013).

This research interrogates the capacity of Colombia’s victim-centred approach to achieve its objectives of representing victims and facilitating the inclusion of their
voices/demands at the ‘centre’ of the peace talks, ultimately contending that maximalist claims should be tempered in this case. The research illustrates how the victims’ delegations shaped the design of the accountability mechanisms undergirding Point Five and reframed the TJ agenda to incorporate key issues – such as LGBTI rights and sexual and gender based violence – whilst simultaneously challenging the embedded perceptions and beliefs historically influencing narratives of victimhood and relations between victims and perpetrators. Nevertheless, although victims’ organisations had already consolidated their role as influential political actors by the early 2000s (Nussio, Rettberg, and Ugarrizo 2015), the broader impact of victims as political actors during the negotiations was limited due to the nature of victim participation. In the aftermath of the negotiations, moreover, their impact has been negligible, given that powerful actors, both armed and unarmed, have retained the political prerogative/power.

Furthermore, the article advances insight developed from other cases such as Nepal and Northern Ireland, that victim-centred TJ occasions the instrumentalisation of victims and constrains their capacity to exercise agency, even in spite of a rhetoric of ‘victim-centredness’ (Robins 2017). The article contends that the Colombian case, in part, reflects experiences elsewhere: Colombia’s delegations precipitated episodes of politicisation, traumatisation and re-victimisation of participants. However, Colombia’s experience was not characterised uniquely by disempowerment. Participation was also ‘meaningful’ (Firchow and Selim 2022): victims asserted agency across diverse spheres and crafted consequential outcomes within Point Five. The article presents, therefore, a nuanced perspective, where, despite victims’ contributions to shaping accountability mechanisms and the wider peace process, the sustainability and legitimacy of Colombia’s peace settlement remain under question.

The article begins with a discussion of the relevant scholarship to situate the experience of Colombia’s victims’ delegations within broader conversations relating to peacebuilding and victim-centred TJ. The subsequent section explores the role and impact of the victims’ delegations through the experiences and perspectives of their participants.

Contextualizing the Colombian experience

Transitional justice and peacebuilding

Since the 1990s, TJ has become increasingly embedded within the dominant global peacemaking and peacebuilding architecture of the liberal peace (Sharp 2013), intrinsic to post-conflict statebuilding and progressively central to discussions over human rights, DDR and SSR. The paradigm and its objectives have become ‘a quasi “normal” tool in the liberal peacebuilding toolbox of war-torn societies’ (Andrieu 2010), as how to address/redress gross violations of human rights and their causes, consequences and legacies are progressively perceived as core to the achievement of peace and, in turn, undergird how peace is defined normatively (Arnould 2016). TJ ‘discourse and practice’ have thus been ‘institutionalised, regularised, and mainstreamed’ within the predominant peacemaking/peacebuilding architecture and discourse (Sharp 2013), fuelled by the assumption that durable peace rests, among other factors, upon ‘dealing with the past’ (Leebaw 2008).
Whilst coordination between TJ initiatives and the core pillars of liberal peacebuilding has been more ad-hoc than deliberate, the rationale behind the incorporation of TJ into wider liberal peacemaking/peacebuilding frameworks has been discussed extensively (Mendeloff 2004). Lehka Sriram contends that TJ initiatives connect directly with peacebuilding interventions, such as SSR and DDR, suggesting TJ ‘spills over’ into those rule of law and security matters central to liberal peacebuilding (2007, 585). Scholars have signalled a symbiotic relationship between peace, peacebuilding and justice (Lambourne 2009). Within liberal peacebuilding, ‘Confronting the past is considered essential to building a culture of human rights, reforming a state’s institutions and rebuilding civil society after mass violence’ (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2017). TJ initiatives and the human rights frameworks that undergird them are accordingly understood as instruments central for ensuring how states and societies may ‘account for the past and satisfy international legal standards’ (Bell 2009, 16). In this regard, the concerns of TJ have become embedded within broader political discussions and pronouncements inherent in the ‘deal-making’ which is at the centre of peace, as was the case in Colombia (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012).

**Victim-centred transitional justice**

As it has evolved, the TJ paradigm has confronted critiques similar to those faced by liberal peacebuilding (Vogel 2016). Criticism of both paradigms – and responses to them – have paralleled one another, although developed on ‘separate tracks’ (Sharp 2013). At the core has been the imbalance in scale and power between conflict-affected and elite domestic/international actors (Lundy and McGovern 2008; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). Survivors have charged that both paradigms are driven by standardised, internationally-led and habitually Western-biased top-down, state-centric interventions that impose culturally inappropriate initiatives and extraneous agendas, disempowering victims by sidelining their context-specific demands (Evrard, Mejía Bonifazi, and Destrooper 2021; Robins 2011).

In response to said claims, the principle of victim participation/inclusion has become increasingly central to mainstream TJ thinking and practice, in parallel with the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding (Andrieu et al. 2015, 5; Robins 2011).

The so-called ‘victims’ turn’ emerged in the mid-2000s, as increasing attention was paid by policymakers and scholars to victims’ claims and rights (Garcia-Godos 2016, 350). The victims’ turn was consolidated with the crafting of specific norms, such as the UN’s Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (Firchow and Selim 2022) and the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to Remedy and Reparations (Garcia-Godos and Lid 2010; Sajjad 2016) and further bolstered with the establishment of the victims’ fund within the International Criminal Court and the increasing role of victims in criminal proceedings (de Waardt and Weber 2019). The accompanying ‘hardening’ of international human rights law, international criminal law and international humanitarian law (UN 2005) reinforced the codification, increasing normatisation and legal categorisation of victims’ rights, developments which, in turn, played a crucial role in providing political opportunities for survivors’ claims-making, claims that are now broadly perceived as morally and legally legitimate (Garcia-Godos and Lid 2010, 515).
Victim participation in TJ is indeed a ‘well-established norm’ (Mendez 2016, 1). On paper, the increasing promotion and protection of victims’ rights within international and national policy/academic arenas aims to position victims as ‘preferential policy targets’ (Nussio, Rettberg, and Ugarrizo 2015, 336). Policymakers/practitioners and scholars habitually advocate closer alignment between survivors’ demands, the priorities of TJ norms and entrepreneurs and the configuration and mandates of TJ mechanisms, employing terms such as ‘victim-centred approach’ and ‘victim-oriented perspective’ (Hamber 2009; Lambourne 2009; Verdeja 2009). The UN System and European Union, for example, have adopted a ‘victim-centred’ approach across much of their policies oriented towards dealing with the legacy of past atrocities, seeking to ensure victims are guaranteed a role ‘in the design and implementation of transitional justice processes and mechanisms’ (Robins 2017, 43).

**Critiques of victim-centred transitional justice**

The effectiveness of victim-centred TJ has been limited, suggesting the need to interrogate more contextually how successful victim-centred peacemaking and TJ might be conceived (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012, 528). Victim-centred initiatives have habitually been driven by states’ needs/prerogatives (Robins 2017, 53). The ‘victim-centeredness’ of TJ is thus linked to governments’/policymakers’ quests to legitimise top-down processes and by the ‘pursuit of larger political or social goals’ (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012, 2013, 490), leading to tokenistic inclusion and ultimately instrumentalising subaltern voices (Firchow and Selim 2022). At worst, ‘instrumentalisation’ represents ‘the defining characteristic of the relationship between victims and the mechanisms of transitional justice’ (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012, 2013, 491). Victim-centred practices often objectify and disempower victims and ‘reproduce existing unequal power relationships’ (Firchow and Selim 2022), whilst creating legitimation narratives for states (Robins 2017, 48).

Scholars have advocated a radical shift in TJ practices beyond legalistic discourse and practice to re-conceive the political core of the paradigm as a means of giving effective voice to marginalised actors and transforming power relations (Grewal 2016). Referring to the case of Nepal, Sajjad (2016, 44) argues that victims were not active ‘participants’ in a purportedly victim-centred process. Rather, the parameters of participation ignored realities on the ground, such as education and illiteracy rates, whilst obligating local actors to learn and articulate the ‘appropriate language’ of (internationally-led) TJ (Jamar 2018).

In spite of increasingly innovative victim-centredness, claims made by ‘victim-oriented’ TJ are thus rarely borne out in practice, falling short of the ‘victim-centered threshold’ (Sajjad 2016, 26). Victims’ participation – when it occurs – is often restricted, leads to retraumatisation and politicisation and fails to guarantee the inclusion of victims’ demands, needs and interests, and the satisfaction of victims’ rights rarely follows (McEvoy and McConnachie 2013, 528).

Importantly, recent scholarship has identified useful benchmarks against which purported victim-centredness may be measured. Advancing Arnstein’s research, Taylor (2014), Tsai and Robins (2014) and Firchow and Selim (2022) have innovatively developed the conceptualisation of and normative typologies pertaining to meaningful
participation. Evrard, Mejía Bonifazi and Destrooper (2021) have similarly crafted a useful framework for evaluating participation across specific empirical cases of alleged victim-centred TJ. This article acknowledges these important contributions, and assesses the purported victim-centredness of the Colombia case against the mechanisms’ own stated objectives and intentions and against the self-expressed goals of the delegations’ participants, as discussed below. The Colombia case, to which the article now turns, offers nuanced insight on meaningful inclusion, and suggests that there may be a mid-point between instrumentalisation of victim participation and unencumbered expression of victim agency and empowerment.

Victim-centred peacemaking and transitional justice in Colombia

Background to the delegations

On 7 June 2014, the negotiating parties issued a joint statement, the Declaration of Principles for Discussion Agenda Item 5: Victims. The principles reflected international norms relative to victims’ rights and established five objectives, specifically to guarantee:

1. Recognition of victims
2. Recognition of responsibility
3. The satisfaction of victims’ rights (to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition)
4. The participation of victims
5. The principle of reconciliation

The ‘endgame’ to the negotiations began in September 2015 with the signing of the partial accord on victims and TJ. However, the complexity and controversial nature of the discussions incorporated into Point Five. In fact, the negotiating parties held substantial disagreements over how to approach TJ – including around the fiscal viability of TJ measures, judicial fate of perpetrators and whether to open up the process to victim inclusion – difficulties that temporarily stalled the talks (Nasi and Rettberg 2019, 64).

By mid-2014, however, commitment by the parties led to agreement upon two participatory mechanisms aimed at victim inclusion. Firstly, the parties requested that the UN and NUC arrange a series of public forums addressing ‘Victims’. Subsequently, forums in 2014 brought together victims from conflict-affected regions in Villavicencio, Barrancabermeja and Barranquilla and a national forum was held in Cali. Secondly, the parties requested that the UN, the NUC and the ECCC organise five delegations (of twelve victims) to visit Havana to present their individual testimonies to the negotiating parties during private hearings and submit specific proposals for Point Five. The Organisers were mandated to select participants for each delegation and organise the visits. The delegations were not intended to ‘represent’ Colombia’s eight million victims, but rather illustrate what the negotiating parties defined as a ‘universe of victims’ and victimising events within the confines of the conflict.

The participation of the delegations responded to mutually reinforcing factors at international and national levels. As already discussed, the mainstreaming of victim-centred TJ and the incorporation of the paradigm as core to liberal peacemaking had been shaped by evolving human rights norms (Bell 2011), mechanisms and discourse, response to
survivors’ critiques of the limits and weaknesses of top-down models and the shift towards more inclusionary standards within both peacemaking and TJ (Leebaw 2008).

Domestic factors, however, played a determinant role in enabling victim participation. Since the 1980s, widespread human rights, women’s and victims’ organisations have emerged at sub-national and national levels in response to patterns of victimisation. Organisations such as the Colombian Commission of Jurists, La Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres and the Movement of Victims of the State (MOVICE) developed influential platforms prioritising redress of ongoing and past atrocities, as well as demands linked specifically to women’s rights, displacement and land. Victims’ organisations have since become increasingly professionalised, and, after 2003, became central interlocutors in debates over TJ models, including through their advocacy for the Ley de Alternatividad Penal project of 2003, which became the Justice and Peace Law in 2005. Moreover, victims’ organisations played a crucial role shaping and sustaining the National Commission for Reparations and Reconciliation, the first state agency dedicated specifically to victims (Rettberg 2015). Professionalisation led to increasingly sophisticated political platforms and strategic repertoires, although the representative nature of victims’ organisations and the reach of debates on victimisation has remained partially limited to a ‘small group of experts’ (Rettberg 2015, 2).

Civil society organisations took advantage of international and domestic political and legal opportunities to lobby state and international actors for recognition. Victims’ and human rights organisations directly shaped the TJ model adopted during negotiations with the United Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) (the Justice and Peace Law, No. 975), determining the paramilitary DDR process (Garcia-Godos and Lid 2010). Leading up to 2011, victims’ organisations similarly played a key role shaping the Law for Victims and Land Restitution (Law 1448), evidencing their increasing recognition, political leverage and strategic capacity. The law reinforced the legal status of victims, conferring legal weight and legitimacy upon demands for reparations, and consolidated a series of administrative/institutional procedures and mechanisms through which to guarantee victims’ rights. The Colombia case accordingly evidences how victims and their organisations possessed significant experience of mobilising human rights discourse, appropriating said frameworks to their specific context and struggles, perhaps in contrast to the Nepal case.4

By 2014, within the historical context of victim/survivor mobilisation and broadening political and legal opportunities, the strategic capacity of victims’ organisations as political actors was a key factor pressuring the negotiating parties to open up the talks to wider participation. In response, the inclusion of the delegations sought explicitly to place victims ‘at the centre of the peace talks’.5

Victim inclusion

The selection of 60 individuals (out of approximately 8 million victims) was a sensitive and complex task. From the outset, the negotiating parties argued that the delegations did not aim to represent all victims, but rather to reflect Colombia’s ‘universe’ of victims and victimising events. This narrative sought to bypass the contentious theme of including only sixty individuals, which fell short of proportionately representing victims, a point made emphatically by interviewed delegates in 2015.

In June 2014, the Organisers established a working group to clarify selection criteria, in consultation with organisations such as the National Participation Forum, Colombia
without Wounds, Visible Victims, MOVICE, the Development and Peace Programmes and the Pastoral Sector of the Catholic Church. These organisations represented a wide range of victims from across the spectrum of armed actors, allowing the Organisers to craft a broad alliance, capitalise on the knowledge and experience of victims’ organisations and embed the process within national architecture.\(^6\)

The Organisers considered thousands of potential candidates before reaching consensus upon each twelve-person delegation. Selection criteria aimed to balance: (a) forms of victimisation; (b) geographical region; (c) demographic groups; and (d) victims of all (often multiple) armed actors. Delegates were selected to reflect emblematic violations perpetrated during the conflict, such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), massacres, the False Positive scandal, forced displacement and victims of kidnapping. Victims of SGBV, particularly against women, were prioritised, given patterns of victimisation. Participants were selected to maximise the heterogeneity of victims and selection criteria crafted an intersectional, multidimensional reflection of the patterns/impact of the violence (see Graphic 1). Overall, 60% of participants were female, and 40% male.

**Graphic 1.** The composition of the delegations.

Assessing the victims’ delegations: empowerment or instrumentalisation?

Given the ongoing severity of obstacles to the implementation of the peace agreements, victim inclusion has been far from a panacea to violent conflict or a guarantor of sustainable peace in Colombia. Evaluating the instrumentalisation/empowerment of civil society within peacemaking and victim-centred TJ in the Santos-FARC-EP compels, however, a
nuanced reading, given the fact that the objectives of victim recognition and participation, recognition of responsibility, satisfaction of victims’ rights and the principle of reconciliation were, in fact, partially achieved.

**Participation as empowering?**

The 2014 victims’ forums aimed to increase the number of victims consulted over the content of Point Five. However, on paper, a severe limitation remained that of proportionality: 60 out of 8 million individuals participated directly. In 2015, interviewees frequently indicated how they felt deeply dissatisfied and offended by such numbers.

A further weakness in design was the breadth of participation. From 2012, forums organised by the UN and NUC sought to gather proposals for all agreements, as did the electronic portal established in the Framework Accord in 2012. Direct participation in Havana was, however, restricted to Point Five, revealing the negotiating parties’ bias that direct victim inclusion were only requisite for discussions concerning victims/victimhood/victimisation and less relevant to the remaining agreements. In short, victims were only directly mandated to discuss victims’ issues.

Participants commented how their proposals included specific recommendations over broader issues, such as agrarian/land reform and SSR. However, they were sanguine about their recommendations being incorporated, given the delegations visited Havana only after the remaining accords had been agreed upon. One delegate suggested that their participation ‘had been compartmentalised and isolated from discussions relating to power’.

Victim participation was not, however, solely window dressing (Barnes 2002), or reducible to instrumentalisation. Participation took place within two mutually reinforcing spheres: the victims’ forums and the delegations. In the former, direct victims from the most vulnerable sectors were prioritised alongside local victims and their organisations, whilst, for the delegations, broader criteria were incorporated. Participation accordingly took place during sequential and mutually reinforcing phases of the peace talks, and was scaled outwards and upwards, on paper opening the door to a complex mosaic of context-specific ‘pre-existing agency and organisation’, what Evrard, Mejia Bonifazi and Destrooper term an ‘ecosystem of participation’ (2021, 430). By enabling local participation, the forums situated formal inclusion within the everyday territorial realities of participants, in part overcoming perceptions that inclusion mechanisms were peripheral to the everyday experiences of victims, as interviewees signaled. The recommendations made by participants at the forums – both individual and organisational/collective – were passed on to the parties in Havana, providing a general pattern of the diversity of victims’ demands, which would be elaborated upon once the delegations arrived.

**The visits**

The twelve person delegations visited Havana in the latter half of 2014. Each hearing lasted a day, during which delegates presented their testimonies and proposals. The negotiating parties and Organisers were obligated to listen and only permitted
interventions at the beginning and end of each hearing; dialogue between the parties and participants occurred only during coffee and lunch breaks. Individuals did not receive direct responses to their cases. The guarantor and accompanier countries and a therapist were present throughout the visits.

The opportunity to confront those directly responsible for their suffering on what delegates termed a ‘tu a tu’\(^9\) (equal) footing was unprecedented. Interviewees explained how, building on their less direct participation during the forums, the delegations satisfied longstanding demands to participate in ‘an historical process’.\(^10\) Nevertheless, the invitation and their subsequent participation brought feelings of anxiety and pain and a fear of renewed violence. Many delegates recounted how, from the moment they accepted the invitation, they experienced emotions similar to those felt during and after the original victimising event. One delegate stated she felt she was going ‘back into the past, to the event I had sought to overcome’.\(^11\) Fear was commonly compounded by feelings of distrust towards the negotiating parties. Consequently, the will to assert agency triggered feelings of isolation, trauma, stress and pain.

The Organisers sought to anticipate possible crises by including psychological support from a therapist, present throughout the process. Delegates widely appreciated this support, which was required on several occasions. However, almost no follow-up was offered to delegates once they had returned from Havana, including to those that had suffered from trauma or been re-victimised, as discussed below.

Participants’ testimonies of their suffering, for which the negotiating parties were directly or indirectly responsible, were harrowing. Delegates, officials from the government’s Victim’s Unit and Organisers attending the hearings stated how the testimonies imbued the peace talks with a hitherto absent moral authority/compass, obligating the parties to confront the ‘human face of suffering’, and, in turn, acknowledge the cost of their actions.\(^12\) With each visit, a cumulative relational effect emerged. Individual negotiators claimed that the delegations transformed their comprehension of the humanitarian dimensions and human tragedy behind the violence.\(^13\) Interviewees stated how hearing the testimonies demonstrably shifted negotiators’ perspectives of their actions and of the victims themselves. The parties’ ‘unavoidable proximity to human pain and suffering’ precipitated evident physical and emotional distress,\(^14\) which led to what interviewess described as the ‘softening of [perpetrators’] hearts’.\(^15\) One organiser defined this as a process of maturation: ‘in almost all … an imprint, a mark, remains. A memory, a reminder of what made them grow and develop’.\(^16\)

During the five month period, the attitudes of the negotiating parties evolved. Initially, both the government and the FARC-EP vehemently denied responsibility for violations committed and damage caused during the conflict. In October 2012, a FARC-EP negotiator publicly stated ‘Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps’, when asked by a journalist whether the guerrilla would ask for forgiveness from its victims. Nevertheless, participants interviewed stated that, during the 2014 visits, in private the guerrilla began tentatively to admit responsibility for certain violations, itself a considerable advancement. In 2015, the FARC-EP offered their first formal public apologies for specific violations. For example, the guerrilla offered a public apology in Bojayá for the massacre perpetrated there, a survivor of which had participated in the delegations and requested the parties guarantee rights to truth, justice and reparations.
One delegate, a victim of a FARC-EP landmine, delivered a harrowing testimony after taking off his prothesis and placing it on the table in front of him. Interviewers, including from the government, delegations, guarantors/accompanying countries and Organisers, stated that this episode caused considerable impact and contributed to subsequent discussions over de-escalation initiatives by the guerrilla, although wider factors are also likely to have shaped these discussions. Mirroring the guerrilla, President Santos subsequently offered a limited number of admittances of responsibility for state commissioned acts of violence.

The victims’ delegations arguably shaped the attitudes of the negotiating parties towards recognising/acknowledging/dignifying victims, and recognising responsibility, two of the mechanism’s objectives. In the words of one of the female members of the delegations: ‘one of the gravest aspects of the conflict has been denial from both sides that they caused suffering and harm to non-combatants … The fact that sixty people in flesh and bones directly attested to the atrocities represented a central mechanism through which to overcome this denial’.17

A further relational consequence was manifest within the delegates themselves. Many identified how participation precipitated empowering individual changes. According to a female delegate:

‘I crumbled in Havana before giving my testimony. I thought I was not going to be able to express my feelings. After I came back from Cuba, I feel I have got over these crises, and they have not returned. … it was a healing process’.18

Of fifty-two delegates interviewed, over 50% responded that they had ‘returned changed from the visit to Havana’. Several delegates expressed how the encounter with ‘their perpetrators’ felt ‘like an exorcism’, that ‘my nightmares have stopped’,19 although this was not synonymous with forgiveness. Remarkable friendships between the delegates themselves, including delegates who had been child soldiers (from the FARC-EP and paramilitaries) and former soldiers also developed as a consequence of the visits, offering inspiring stories of change and seeds of reconciliation. One delegation included a young woman who had been abused by the security forces for allegedly supporting the guerrilla and a former police commander. According to one delegate: ‘Neither showed any sign of animosity to the other, in fact, they strongly supported each other …. incredible to see at a moment in which Colombians were sending each other messages of hate, intolerance, aggression and stigmatisation’.20

Mutual acknowledgment precipitated an initial process of (re-)humanisation between both victim and perpetrator, what Colombians sometimes refer to as the ‘deconstruction of the enemy’. This transformation found its roots in the environment in which the delegations occurred, as much as in their design. The majority of delegates identified how the treatment and support received from the parties had been of respect, kindness, and acknowledgment and that the Organisers ‘never imposed any opinions or themes upon us’. According to one delegate: ‘The interaction we had [during breaks] was central: I no longer saw this or that person as from the government or the FARC, a perpetrator, nor did I see myself as victim. What we created was a relationship between equals, as human beings’.21 In this respect, victim participation led to partial acknowledgement, recognition of responsibility and episodes of reconciliation, reflecting four of the delegations’ five objectives.
Participation as disempowering?

Not all delegates underwent transformative experiences nor did they feel acknowledged; empowerment was not generalised. When the parties refused to demonstrate remorse or contrition, accept responsibility or denied the victim’s experience – the case with victims of both negotiating parties – the delegations did not wield a restorative effect. Rather, the experience represented a ‘second injury’ (Urban Walker 2006, 82), and brought re-victimisation. One victim of the guerrilla, whose participation was vehemently rejected by the FARC-EP, suffered greatly in this regard and was severely sceptical of the delegations: ‘When I was in Havana, their reaction was similar to how I was treated when I was held captive: they were aggressive and arrogant. This had a significant impact upon me as a person’.22

A female delegate whose father had been extra-judicially executed by state forces critiqued both the government’s initial closure towards acknowledging victims of state violence and the limited follow-up to the delegations: ‘How are we going to guarantee the fundamental rights of victims … if we went to Havana and that’s it, nothing else? They are talking about our rights and in this country it’s always the victim who presents their testimony of pain and the rest is done by the experts, by historians. This is not the way’.23

A further core weakness of the process pertained to re-victimisation after Havana. Over 25% of delegates were re-victimised on returning, the majority of whom suffered death threats relating to their participation. Approximately 7% of all participants were forcibly displaced to avoid potential repercussions; for some this represented their second or third displacement. Although the organisers aimed to establish effective security protocols, such measures were inadequate.

A further aspect of re-victimisation was the politicisation of delegates during and in the wake of their visits. For example, in August 2014, a photograph of one delegate, a victim of the FARC-EP, was leaked to the press and subsequently disseminated on social media by a member of former President Uribe’s political party, Maria Fernanda Cabal. A belligerent critic of the negotiations, Cabal’s ‘tweet’ accused the individual, photographed shaking hands with a government official in Havana (and not with a member of the FARC-EP team, as Cabal asserted) of suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. The episode demonstrated how those opposing the talks instrumentalised delegates in pursuit of their wider political aims. Moreover, it was not unique; victims were frequently instrumentalised by opponents of the talks, portrayed in social media as having ‘gone on holiday to Cuba’. The delegations represented, therefore, an extension of the conflict, a terrain of struggle between those supporting and those opposing negotiations, culminating in extended patterns of re-victimisation.

Victim participation and the content of the transitional justice agreement

The negotiating parties faced significant challenges as they sought to establish mechanisms to satisfy international standards relative to victims’ rights, appease the demands of powerful sectors opposing TJMs – in particular given the widespread opposition to reduced penal sanctions for the guerrilla – and keep the negotiations on track by identifying TJ provisions upon which both parties could agree. The victims’ delegations demonstrated then a core dilemma: how to guarantee victims’ rights and demands whilst
simultaneously putting an end to the conflict and satisfying the demands of the conflict parties for amnesty (Lessa and Payne 2012).

Organisations in Colombia, such as MOVICE and the CCJ, have consistently demanded penal justice for human rights violations perpetrated by state and non-state actors alike. The approach adopted by the delegates was pragmatic and, it must be said, deeply generous. All delegates advocated the immediate cessation of violence: ‘No More Victims’ (‘Ni una víctima más’) quickly became the slogan adopted by the delegations. One mother whose son had been killed in a FARC-EP bomb stated how she ‘did not want another mother to have to go through what she had gone through’.  

The delegates promoted an integral approach, driven by a compulsion ‘to put an end to the killing, to the conflict’. Their sophisticated proposals sought equilibrium between retributive and restorative justice, shifting the terrain away from demands exclusively for penal justice. One delegate’s words evoked the peace versus justice debate, acknowledging the importance of rethinking the accountability approach, so as not to impede the peace process: ‘I am aware that the FARC is not going to sit to negotiate to go to jail. But then if there is to be TJ, there must be a judicial process, with some alternative sentencing. But these decisions must be seen to be legitimate’.  

Interviewees accordingly recounted how they demanded that the right to justice be balanced with other rights, in particular the rights to truth and non-repetition:

Prison for 40 or 50 years isn’t going to bring back my son, and nor will a check from the government for millions of pesos. I base my vision of justice on knowing the real truth and the facts of what happened, knowing what they did, why they did it and who the violence favoured. Other delegates vehemently advocated penal justice. A mother whose son had been extra-judicially executed by the state insisted upon penal justice and truth as requisite to Point Five, disturbed by the government’s attitude towards her son’s killing within the so-called False Positives scandal. Similarly, whilst accepting the need for pragmatism, a victim of the massacre of Bojayá identified a crucial caveat:

The justice we seek as victims is not an unmovable righteousness that obstructs the peace process. I believe that peace has to be greater than the desire for justice. However, it must also achieve a delicate balance: we cannot attain such a low level of justice that it impairs the dignity of victims.  

The general tendency of claims towards an integral approach (balancing rights to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition) coincided with and, ultimately, came to legitimate the negotiating parties’ position that retributive justice should be balanced with restorative justice if talks were to continue and a political settlement be reached. Participants prioritising a balanced approach did so given their objective of putting an end to the killing and suffering; others argued that the perpetrators’ serving prison time would not bring back their loved ones. The rationale of the negotiating parties was driven, of course, by a different logic: they were not negotiating to end up in prison, nor to go down on the wrong moral side of history. The parties accordingly expressed their hostility towards penal sanctions for violations of which they had been accused or found responsible. In February 2015, for example, even after the visit of the final delegation, FARC-EP
negotiator Ivan Marquez repeated his position that the guerrilla was ‘not going to spend a single day in prison’.

The reticence of the negotiating parties to accept penal justice evidences a tension within victim-centred TJ. Whilst contact with the delegations transformed the parties’ individual perceptions of and willingness to acknowledge their victims and their acceptance of responsibility for their actions, it did not engender approbation of prison time for the violations they had committed. The negotiating parties differentiated between acknowledgment of victims, on the one hand, and acquiescence to penal sanctions, on the other. The crucial question accordingly remains what would have happened had the delegations insisted collectively upon penal justice, as many victims’ organisations did during the peace talks? It is in this respect that criticisms of instrumentalisation perhaps find their most authentic echo.

On 12 December 2015, almost a year after the last delegation had visited Havana, the fifth agenda point was signed. The agreement established the so-called Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition. The framework, based upon international standards relative to victims’ rights and principles of a victim-centred approach, established three interrelated bodies: a truth commission, a special body to investigate cases of forced disappearance and a Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP), or tribunal. The agreement reflected many of the proposals from the victims’ delegations, as discussed by Brett (2017) and was praised by many, although not all, delegates (see Table 1), aiming as it did to satisfy rights to truth, justice, reparations and non-repetition.

With respect to penal justice, the agreement rejected amnesty for crimes against humanity or war crimes, adhering to international standards. In an effort to balance retributive and restorative justice, reduced sentences were conferred upon those perpetrators acknowledging responsibility, contributing to truth-telling and compensating victims. The agreement also gave provision for amnesty for political crimes and drug-related crimes connected to political crimes.

The provisions incorporated into Point Five represented themes upon which there had been broad convergence of interests between the victims’ delegations and the negotiating parties. An assessment of the impact of the delegations upon the content of the agreement appears positive: with few exceptions, the proposals of the delegations were incorporated within Point Five. Furthermore, the recognition and incorporation of sexual and gender based violence and violations against LGBTI groups demonstrated

Table 1. The content of point five.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposals from the victims’ delegations</th>
<th>Content of the victims agreement (Point 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integral Justice – majority proposes sanctions balancing victims’ rights (to truth, justice, non-repetition and reparations)</td>
<td>YES – Special Jurisdiction for Peace (amnesty for political crimes; reduced / suspended sentences for those acknowledging responsibility, reveal truth compensate victims)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation of Third Parties</td>
<td>YES – subsequently removed by Constitutional Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission to Search for Disappeared Persons</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of Truth Commission</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Reparations (and Measures for Non-Repetition)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guarantees of International Humanitarian Law</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of Sexual Violence as a Crime</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for and Protection of Rights (human rights; fundamental political rights; socio-economic rights; LGBTI)</td>
<td>PARTIAL PROVISION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agrarian Reform</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significant achievements, given the delegations’ insistence upon said crimes. As such, the delegations shaped the framework for the satisfaction of victims’ rights.

Widespread proposals from delegates pertaining to the urgent need for land reform (a major driving force of the conflict) as being core to the satisfaction of their right to non-repetition were not consecrated within Point Five. Although the agreements go some way towards addressing rural development and patterns of land use, they did not redress unfair land distribution, a key limitation to the impact of the delegations.

A further proposal made by delegates was that the SJP include within its mandate investigation of so-called ‘third parties’ – groups, such as the private sector, that had been direct perpetrators or had supported armed actors, as discussed by Hristov (2016).29 This provision was of critical significance given the support of the private sector to paramilitary groups. Whilst the provision was included within the final draft of Point Five, it was subsequently expunged by the Constitutional Court during the revision of the peace agreements. The exclusion of land reform and the post-facto removal of such a core component of the SJP demonstrates examples of how the transformative capacity of Colombia’s victims’ delegations was constrained, subordinated to the prerogative of powerful actors.

Closing remarks: A victim-centred approach?

The delegations’ mandate ended in December 2014. Direct participation in the discussions around Point Five had amounted to ten days during eighteen months of negotiations; beyond the forums, no direct participation had occurred during the discussions for the other agreements, despite their explicit connection to patterns of victimisation.

In the wake of their visits to Havana, little was seen of ‘the sixty’, despite suggestions by the Organisers that they would become ‘peace ambassadors’ and advocates.30 Delegates were given the stage accompanying then President Santos on National Victim’s Day during 2015 and 2016, for example, and issued press releases in support of the negotiations. As they were progressively absented from the national stage, disenchantment with the process soon set in. At a 2017 meeting with delegates and Organisers, participants criticised the Organisers’ lack of commitment, stating they felt ‘taken advantage of’ in order to give a ‘stamp’ to the peace process,31 given that insufficient budget and human resources had been assigned for follow-up, and support relegated to accord implementation.

During the drawing up and adoption of the legal framework within Congress to formalise the mechanisms consecrated within Point Five, victim participation was almost non-existent. In May 2017, participants stated they had been permitted a small number of hearings within Congress, in which less than half serving parliamentarians had participated.32 In 2020, petitions to address Congress by the mothers of the Falsos Positivos victims, the Madres of Soacha, were similarly rejected.

Wide-ranging scholarship has interrogated the degree to which inclusion in peace processes and victim-centred TJ empowers and represents victims and addresses long-standing inequalities and structural drivers of conflict, with consensus that greater numerical participation is insufficient (Paffenholz 2015). Scholars contend that the dynamics of victim participation should aim to transform dominant power relations, echoing insight
that the participation of women and inclusion of a gender perspective within peace negotiations should be driven by the goal of reallocating power and redefining relationships of power to forge a ‘new political settlement or social contract’ (Bell and McNicholl 2019, 3–4). Scholars similarly argue that, for participation to be meaningful, the inclusion of civil society actors should be grounded in local processes, knowledge and demands and guarantee decision-making capability, both during and as an ongoing commitment after talks. Lundy and McGovern (2008, 267) define such a commitment as one where victims/civil society actors become ‘stakeholders in, and active agents of change’, afforded ‘ownership and control’ over processes that enable a ‘transfer of power’ from elites to subordinated actors, even when victims’ demands diverge from international TJ tendencies (Firchow and Selim 2022).

This article set the original objectives and expressed goals of participants as the benchmarks against which to evaluate the alleged victim-centricness of Colombia’s delegations, specifically, the guarantee of the recognition of victims, recognition of responsibility, the satisfaction of victims’ rights, the participation of victims and the principle of reconciliation. Victim participation during the negotiations attained important transformative achievements across a series of spheres/outcomes, in this regard, although contrasted starkly with the lack of commitment to sustained participation in their wake.

Building on historical mobilisations that appropriated global human rights frameworks, the delegations provided a roadmap at a critical phase of the talks, precipitated, above all, by the controversial nature of the TJ discussions, in particular amnesty and justice provisions for past crimes. Participation facilitated a fruitful, although ultimately restricted space for victim-perpetrator dialogue in Havana. The dialogue, which took place during formal hearings, as well as during informal breaks, lunches and conversations, in part transformed the relationship between participants and the negotiating parties and their perceptions of one another. The delegations yielded victim acknowledgement and sculpted what early TJ practitioners/scholars posited as one of the paradigm’s original objectives: interpersonal reconciliation in the aftermath of political violence. What in part emerged out of the delegations then was ‘postconflict social repair’, leading to the reconstruction of ‘the human’ (Theidon 2010, 71, 203).

The delegations partially moulded the content of Point Five to reflect their demands and experience, and arguably shaped discussions concerning de-escalation initiatives carried out by both parties, further advancing victim participation and recognition. Victim participation did not, however, follow the simple logic of instrumentalisation or disempowerment. The initiative emerged out of historical grassroots struggles, driven by victims themselves, which successfully reframed the narrative around TJ/peacemaking, imposing a prerogative for victim participation. Delegates articulated a series of diverse demands pertaining to the satisfaction of victims’ rights and, by so doing, played a role in shaping the truth and accountability provisions undergirding the Victims’ Agreement, including themes such as LGBTI and sexual violence. Many delegates advocated a shift away from an exclusively retributive approach to justice towards balancing rights to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition. Participants imposed their narratives upon the negotiations, appropriating a space for agency and contestation, which ‘produced a qualitative shift in the peace talks’, according to one of the Organisers. Operating under the caveat that the delegations were not ‘representative’ of the country’s victims, the Organisers sought to guarantee that the delegations accurately reflected
Colombia’s universe of victims and victimisation. Moreover, the Organisers also included individuals who belied the victim-perpetrator binary, such as child soldiers, reflecting more closely Colombia’s patterns of victimisation.

The final agreement closely resembled then the proposals of the majority of delegates with respect to mechanisms for the satisfaction of their rights, demonstrating victim agency in crafting the accountability mechanisms. In this respect, the Colombia case illustrates core elements of the so-called ‘victim-centred approach’ to peacemaking and TJ, given that the initial focus of the peace process upon ‘normative criteria and universalist rights’ was complemented by what victims perceived would ‘aid most in their recovery from the impact of the violation’ (Robins 2017, 51).

This integral approach closely echoed the demands/interests of the negotiating parties to limit penal provisions for past crimes and prioritise other forms of sanction and redress. As such, the parties were able to defer to the proposals of the victims’ delegations as a point of moral reference to legitimate their own demands for amnesty, pardon or alternative sentencing. The convergence of the negotiating parties’ and many participants’ demands in this regard shielded the process from a potential crisis, which would have occurred had delegates collectively prioritised demands for penal justice. The negotiating parties benefitted then from the delegations, which conferred credibility upon the talks and legitimised the formers’ demands to balance retributive and restorative justice. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the negotiating parties were aware of this from the outset, particularly given prevalent demands for justice from victims’ organisations: their gamble may have engendered an entirely different outcome.

The Colombia experience poses a partial corrective to scholarship that, at best, refutes and, at worst, negates the capacity of victims as political actors within victim-centred TJ, framing victims therein as uniquely instrumentalised and lacking meaningful agency. Colombia’s delegations were not an exclusively ‘depoliticising project’, the term adopted by Rajca in his important work on memorialisation sites in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay (Rajca 2018). In fact, the delegations partially generated a site through which to contest the depoliticisation of survivors of atrocity – reflecting Rojas-Perez’s insights on the potential for victims in Peru to become political subjects (Rojas-Perez 2017). Empowerment/agency and disempowerment/instrumentalisation both occurred disjunctively, suggesting the need to resist a sweeping narrative that victim-oriented TJ is paralysing and merely instrumentalises victims’ narratives/experiences or, on the contrary, is solely transformative and empowering. Although the delegations generated spaces for agency, contestation and resistance, wider contextual factors, political and economic prerogatives and relations of power restrained their more sustained impact.

By participating within formal peacemaking channels, victims strengthened their profile as legitimate political actors and asserted agency within a range of spheres. Moreover, the delegations shaped the content of accountability mechanisms, whilst playing a transformative, relational role by shifting relationships between victims and the negotiating parties, in turn precipitating the breakdown of perpetrator denial, the recognition and acknowledgement of victims by the conflict parties and individual acts of apology, aspects that speak to the delegations initial objectives. Referring to changes at the personal level, the majority of interviewees stated that participation had been ‘empowering’ when recognition had been mutual; facing ‘their perpetrators’ had allowed them to begin the slow, fragile process of moving forward.34
An assessment of the delegations also demonstrates critical limitations. Direct participation was restricted and formalised within a single agreement, not across all agreements. The delegations were numerically unrepresentative, not achieving a thousandth of a percent of the total number of registered victims, and restricted in breadth. As such, significant voices were left out of the delegations, including those that strongly advocated retributive justice and, as such, may have challenged a more integral approach to accountability.

Delegates’ demands for comprehensive land reform, moreover, were excluded from the final agreement and demands to investigate third parties were removed post-facto. The incorporation of delegates’ demands into Point Five was contingent then upon their convergence with the demands/interests of the negotiating parties and powerful domestic political/economic actors. Echoing experiences in Nepal and Guatemala, the Colombia case demonstrates the constraining nature of the global TJ paradigm, wherein there is little to no precedent for institutionalising far-reaching transformative measures in the social/economic realms. Such constraints arguably make it less problematic for powerful actors to delegitimise or sideline claims for wide-reaching reforms, including land reform. As Miller has argued, TJ discourse defines and delineates who may/may not speak and which violations are deemed relevant and which are out of scope (Miller 2008).

Inclusion of participants’ demands for land reform was unlikely, given the interconnectedness/alignment between domestic elite actors’ and conventional TJ discourses responding to and shaping power dynamics and asymmetries (Robins 2012). The delegations took advantage of the political opportunities afforded to them. Assertion of victim agency was, however, constrained by domestic factors and broader tendencies within global TJ repertoires, limiting possibilities for broad transformation of the conditions undergirding Colombia’s armed conflict. The role of victims as political actors within Colombia’s peace process and the exercise of their agency therein were accordingly beset by power perogatives and the limitations of the paradigm itself. Inclusion ultimately failed to acknowledge and transform power relations and the structural drivers of conflict, sustainably empower subordinated groups or sculpt wider social relations based upon mutual recognition.

A final issue relates to the challenge of re-victimisation and politicisation, which affected a significant number of participants. Hughes (2017, 625–628) has identified how post-conflict elites may ‘muddle along’, achieving a degree of accommodation and a ‘veneer of peace’, whilst deep segregation and division remains at community and broader societal levels. A complex process of dialogue between the guerrilla, the government/state and the victims’ delegations began in Havana, and fostered important transformation at the interpersonal level. Once delegates returned home, however, they were thrust back into a deeply divided society, subject to accusations of betrayal and to threats and violence. One delegate, for example, was berated in public by a stranger in a restaurant in Bogota, who insulted her for meeting the guerrilla and asked her what she did with her children’s tears. In terms of broad relational changes between victims and perpetrators, what happened in Havana very much remained there.

The path ahead remains unclear, particularly given the 2022 Presidential elections and the prospect of how Colombian state, military and economic elites and broader society receive the truth commission’s final report. Cleavages in Colombia are unsurprising:
societal divisions tend to be accentuated during peace processes and, after 57 years of conflict, polarisation remains. Eight years of Uribe’s presidency consolidated and exacerbated historical polarisation, and Uribe’s figure and legacy continue to fracture, particularly during electoral cycles. In 2016, Colombians marginally rejected the peace deal (50.21% to 49.78%), after a campaign led by Uribe’s political constituency, religious congregations and the private sector. Although only approximately 35% voted in the referendum, the vote evidenced the faultlines across the country and the challenges ahead. Although social proximity in Colombia has, in part, moulded moderate attitudes towards ex-combatants and empathy towards victims (Nussio, Rettberg, and Ugarrizo 2015; Prieto 2012), ongoing persecution of civil society organisations, elite opposition to the accords, paramilitary, ELN and dissident FARC-EP operations, impunity for past crimes and acute inequalities continue to shape narratives.

Nevertheless, the Santos-FARC-EP peace agreement began to shift political debate and cleavages connected uniquely to the peace process are, albeit slowly transforming (Rettberg 2021). The Duque government’s mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic, moreover, precipitated wider faultlines and spotlighted wider socio-economic and political issues. Despite historical and emerging challenges, Colombia’s victims’ delegations embodied redemptive change, sculpting as they did considerable transformations driven by victims and, in the end, perpetrators who learnt to embolden their imaginations. Such changes will remain elusive until this audacity and bravery is more widespread across powerful elite groups, broader society and the highest levels of government. As one of the participants sagely stated, ‘we cannot rebuild our country from hate, and if anyone knows how to hate, it is those of us who have faced the war in our skin. I believe that there is no greater test than that of shedding rage and hatred. Change comes with acknowledging that we all failed, but also in recognising what we must do not to fail again. This can only happen if one is stripped of rage’.  

Notes

1. All interviews were carried out by the author in a face-to-face setting.
2. Follow-up, in-person interviews with select members of the victims’ delegations were conducted in 2016 as part of an individual research project.
3. Between 2012 and mid-2014, three of five peace agreements were signed in Havana: (i) Towards a New Colombian Countryside: Comprehensive Rural Reform (May 2013); (ii) Political Participation: Democratic Openness to Building Peace (November 2013); and (iii) A Solution to the Illicit Drug Problem (May 2014).
4. Interviews with members of the victims’ delegations and UN organising committee. February – April, 2015.
6. Interviews, UN officials and delegation participants, March 2015.
10. Interview, male delegate, Bogota, March 2015.
11. Interview, female delegate, Cali, March 2015.
13. Interviews, Sergio Jaramillo Cano and Tanja Neimeier (see footnote 67).
15. Interview, female delegate, Santa Marta. April 2015.
22. Interview, male delegate. Bogota, April 2015.
27. Ibid.
31. Interviews with participants of the delegations and Organisers, online. May 2017.
32. Ibid.
34. Interviews, female delegate, Bogota, male delegate, Santa Marta, female delegate, Cali. April 2015.

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