



POINTS OF VIEW

SUMMARY:

This interview provides an overview of the reintegration program for former child soldiers in Colombia. This program emphasizes education and vocational training. In the interview Ms. Paez also provides information on child soldiers' experiences with the FARC.



Erika Paez

14. REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS

PROGRAMMING FOR FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA ERIKA PAEZ, SAVE THE CHILDREN - U.K., COLOMBIA

Ms. Paez is known for her research and programming work to support children's rights in Latin America. She is the author of *Las Ninas en el Conflicto Armado en Colombia*. She is currently working with Save the Children – UK in Bogotá, Colombia. In this interview she describes an education and reintegration program for former child soldiers.

Q. What is the legal situation for former child soldiers?

A. There is no general amnesty yet. However, the legislation is changing after two years of lobbying. We want all ex-combatant children to be recognized as victims in this situation.

Q. Where do these children fit in the legal system?

A. If the courts confirms that he or she is not a danger to society or vice versa the judge will sometimes close the case. Of course, this doesn't mean that the child is out of danger. It can be very difficult for them to come back to the family or their communities. Only 10% of the cases can be returned to their families.

In Colombia the ICBF (Institution for the Welfare of Children) has the responsibility for all children until they are 18. This is a national program (education and reintegration of former combatant children). It is working well at this moment, though it isn't always easy. The program is for children until they are 18 but for protection reasons sometimes it goes until they are 21.

Q. What do these young people say about their time with the armed groups? Do they like it?

A. Yes and no. In some cases they get certain advantages, say when the girls are girlfriends of the commanders. This meant that they were able to go to town and they had some money to buy makeup. Of course, now that the war is worse, this is not as common.

Some of them enjoy the discipline of the training. Sometimes they had to be disguised, to be a sort of spy and get information – that is very exciting for them. They didn't like being awake all night when they had to do guard duty. Most of them hated that. They find it really hard to deal with the dead, especially the death of their friends.

Of course there are some good moments but they feel that they can't say that, it wouldn't be proper. One time I was interviewing a girl and she was describing being in town with eight others and they were making jokes. The topic was how things were so difficult for her. However, she was also describing their feelings of being together, the comradeship. Telling jokes, laughing – they were kids in the middle of all these dangers, being adults already.

When you ask them why they joined, some will say, "Oh I joined the guerrilla because I wanted to be free, I wanted to have things. But then I found out that I was not that free after all, that I couldn't do what I wanted."

It is at that point, with that discovery, that many of them begin to think about leaving.

Some can be reluctant to accept that things were bad. In the course of one-to-one interviews you learn that their lives have never been easy. You find that not only in the guerrilla but before their lives were hard. It is only with this reintegration program that they have a chance to have any advantages.

Q. For those who volunteered, what attracted them?

A. When they first join, the tendency is to be very committed to the FARC or the armed group. This is partly because they are scared but it is also because it becomes a family for them. Many of them have not been treated well in their own family so they enjoy this feeling of belonging.

You also have to realize that compared to their lives before, what they receive from the guerrilla in some ways is not that bad. They get food every day, three times a day. So because of all this, it can be hard for them to recognize that they were being totally controlled and used and that it was very dangerous.

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For others, maybe in the middle of a battle, when they see a friend being killed, then it comes home to them exactly what this is all about. Some tell us that older ones came to them and suggested that they should try to escape together. Then this can be another adventure. There are many different reasons. Of course, they find out it is not so easy as just choosing to leave. They know that if they try to leave they can be killed.

Q. Is the FARC very punitive?

A. Yes and also it works also that the other side – the paramilitary – will punish them for having been with the FARC. So it is both sides.

Q. What happens after they have escaped?

A. Their first contact is with the armed forces so they are very frightened. They don't know what will happen to them. If they are captured, there is no feeling of relief. And even if they have escaped, it is difficult. They know that they cannot return to their families because they will put their families in danger, especially if they are in the militarized zones.

Q. How does the program support them?

A. We have opened six programs and two reception centres in the country. We are using different types of centres and institutions, depending on the nature of the area. The ideal is to have an NGO that sets up a program for ex-combatant children. It is best if this is an institution that adapts itself to suit their needs, rather than the children adapt to them. We have found that if you have an institution that tries to fit the ex-combatants into an existing program it is tough, it doesn't seem to work as well. We have given them training but it doesn't seem to be enough.

We have tried different approaches. For instance, we work with one organization that has a lot of experience working with children of the street. But their approach is not to treat these two groups the same. They don't try to integrate them because they found that the needs are different.

Another group we work with is church based. They also work in Liberia with ex-combatants. Their program is very religious but the children don't seem to mind this. And when you think about it, it makes sense. Like the church, the guerrilla is a very hierarchical operation. So when they come to be in this centre they are replacing one hierarchical situation for another. And they can feel comfortable inside this, they know this.

This is OK, but for our program we want to provide new models to the children, ones that are an alternative to a hierarchical way of being. For a society like Colombia that has been so affected by armed conflict, this is fundamental.

Q. Could you describe the process?

A. The idea is to settle the child emotionally, socially and educationally. First they go to a reception centre where they stay for one month. We have six reception centres in four cities. During that month we determine their education level, see what they want and contact their families. We also need to confirm about the child's background. We have had a couple cases where a child claimed to have been in the FARC in order to get into the program – the other children told on him.

We do a complete documentation process to determine everything about that child's standing. We ask about her education level, how many years since she stopped studying, the subjects she liked in school, what she didn't like. We want to identify any difficulties she had in school before she joined the armed forces. And finally we want to know what they learned when they were in the guerrilla or the armed forces.

Q. What did they learn?

A. Some learned basic medical aid or first aid training, especially the girls. Some electronics and politics. They learned how to read maps and mathematics. Many of them did not have much of that in school but they needed it with the guerrilla.

Q. How are the centres organized?

A. The centres are semi-open, so many of them will leave. The centres are also a little secretive. Sometimes NGOs complain about this but we find that constant visitors can be just too much, too disruptive. One centre was visited 10 times in one week. It is the children's home – we need to remember that. They need their privacy. For example transition houses for women fleeing domestic violence – they usually keep the house separate from meetings and trainings. We should have the same here.

Q. After the assessment process, what happens next?

A. From the reception centre they move to integration houses. Now there are 12 integration houses – with 45 children living independently with some support from somebody. So a child will live in the house and each day go to a special centre where he is getting his education upgrade.

You have to be careful how you organize the distribution. For example if there are eight who have just escaped – you can't put them in one house. It also isn't a good idea to put too many paramilitaries in one house.

We often give them one to one tutoring to increase their grade levels quickly. We know that it usually takes two to five months to achieve one year of school. So from that estimate we can figure how long it will take to get a child to a good level for his age or so he can go into vocational training. We generally try to get them to complete at least half the levels. The average is one or two years. After that they go to a special institution or a boarding school or with a family.

We have also set up these scholarships for youth who we think are likely to continue studying. We are hoping that these children will obtain a secondary school diploma or a mid secondary school level with vocational training.

Out of 300 you may get about 40 who achieve the highest goals.