

Colombia Twinning Peace Groups

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How the Link Came About

One of Peace Direct's activities is to promote links between grassroots peace builders and groups and/or individuals in the UK. The nature of these links can range from financial support to mutual learning, thus the relationship varies from being a passive to an active one. The link between Mujeres Pazificas de Cali and the Primrose Hill Group is unique. Usually Peace Direct identifies groups in conflict areas and then finds supporters here in the UK. In this case we were approached by a UK supporter specifically interested in forming a group in her local area with the aim of supporting a group of women peace builders in Colombia.

It took a full year for Peace Direct to identify a group in Colombia as a potential partner for the London group. Peace Direct looks for groups operating at a grassroots level, led by local grassroots peace builders. The groups need to have a developed long term strategy in tackling issues directly linked to the causes of the conflict, with the ability and potential to scale up their work, (for example to institutional and national sphere). Groups we choose are usually able to achieve this by liaising with other groups and networks, thus having the ability to make connections across society.

If financial support is part of the link, Peace Direct tries to ensure that the support offered covers part of the core costs incurred (the most difficult to fundraise for) by the group, so to enable it to fundraise for specific projects. The group are also asked to nominate referees.

In this particular case, we had to make additional considerations. The group had to be made up of women only. Due to the specific nature of the request, the Colombian group needed to have the ability to communicate with the UK both in terms of access to technology and to do so in English (something which is rare in Colombia). It was also important that the group demonstrated an eye for identifying and communicating stories that could be relayed to the women in the UK, who would then promote them in their local community.

Mujeres Pazificas de Cali is a women's informal network, which operates in the area of Santiago de Cali, Dept Valle del Cauca. The group is an informal organisation. It is driven by a core of 8 – 10 women reaching 15 – 20 in number for particular initiatives. Some women participate on an individual basis, other bring with them the experience of the organisation they work with. There is a local entrepreneur, two social workers, two lawyers, an academic, an actress and theatre director, a communicator, and a reproductive and sexual health consultant.

What brings these women together is a concern for women issues, in a variety of contexts, (most of them have a strong past in feminist activism) and a strong belief that many of these issues cannot be addressed properly until peace is achieved. They also have a strong belief that women in Colombia can make a great contribution to reach this goal. Mujeres Pazificas de Cali came to life during the 1998 – 2002 negotiations with the FARC hoping to bring women's issues to the negotiating table. At that time they made contact with guerrillas and opened dialogue to understand the issues faced by women within the military set-up. After the break down of

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negotiations, these conversations had to stop. Resiliently the women took a new direction.

Observing the impact of the war on women (sexual violence and abuse; increased responsibility as single parents/sole income providers, etc.) on the economic, social, political marginalisation, Mujeres Pazificas de Cali became determined to tackle the issue of violence and peace from a systemic perspective. The Escuela Politica de Mujeres Pazificas was the result.

Underpinning the School is the belief that a transformation of the causes and dynamics of the conflict need a long-term approach. Women must rethink their position in the community and the Colombian society, starting by valuing their role in the family and by developing as active citizens. The School aims to encourage the women of the city and surrounding rural areas to understand the social-economic and political context they live in, and to participate in the political process either directly by standing for election or indirectly through campaigning and taking the authorities to account.

The long-term aim is to build a critical mass of women aware of their needs and rights both as individuals and those of the community so that, when negotiations start again, they will be able to influence the agenda.

The fundamental component of the School is non-violence. Its principles inform all types of action undertaken by the women, from demonstrations to the resolution of domestic or community conflicts. The course has a theoretical base as well as a curriculum of activities. The conceptual part is designed to enable women to reflect on their particular condition and empower them. In the second half, women are invited to join initiatives led by local and national networks as well as developing their own projects, for example participating in local urban planning sessions. Participants are thus given the skills to exercise their rights and provided with the contacts to join in existing work or to scale up their own initiatives.

The Primrose Hill Link Group in London, in line with our experience, is driven by one individual, very active in the local community who is attracted by the work of grassroots peace builders. This person discussed the idea of forming the community link among friends. Once a core was established, the members were active in finding additional supporters among their circle of acquaintances, church networks, book clubs and the neighbourhood in general.

The process is slow and involves various awareness raising activities, starting from the distribution of posters and notices, to the organisation of speaking events in the local community centre and the running of a stall at the local summer fete.

Each member receives a regular bi-monthly update on the activities of the Colombian group and the school. These short notes are mainly personal communications from the Women of Cali to the Primrose Hill group, relaying recent activities, planning and reflections. These are accompanied by photos. Shortly, the exchange of information will be reciprocal, as information from London will be sent to Cali.

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Different members of the Primrose Hill group contribute in different ways. The majority offer financial support. Some of them are active in raising awareness among their circles of acquaintances and beyond. Others are keen in writing articles for local newspapers. The overriding desire, of both groups, however is, to establish a relationship based on mutual learning and support.

What draws the two groups together? It is difficult to say for sure and what is written below is mostly based on my perception and intuition.

Gender solidarity is very strong. It was the driver from the beginning. Next come personal experiences of the culture either through work or family. There is also a strong ethic of giving, sharing experiences and of reaching out to the “other”. And most interestingly there seem to be an “emotional” connectivity. The latter is very difficult to explain, at least for me, in rational terms, however it is something that visibly sparks when talking to one group about the “other”.