



“In Guatemala we are still living under a truce and we have not finished building peace.”

An interview with Hans Peter

By: Otto Argueta & Arnoldo Gálvez

Hans Peter is in the farming business and represents the Agrarian Chamber (Cámara del Agro) at the Land Fund (Fondo de Tierras). During these last months, he has been a participant in the group which addresses the issues involved in socio-environmental conflictive situations under the project “Resilience and Peacebuilding: Frameworks for Assessing Resilience” that Interpeace promotes and coordinates. The objective of this project in Guatemala is to provide national actors with a conceptual and action framework that will allow them to identify and foster existing capacities in society to transform conflicts in non-violent ways.

In this interview, Hans Peter shares his vision about the challenges to peace in Guatemala from the perspective of the private sector, in which he underlines the need to strengthen those institutions that can lay bridges among the diverse sectors that make up society. For Hans Peter, peace is only possible if these sectors coordinate among themselves to overcome long-term backwardness that will allow for the construction of a decentralized and inclusive country, one with

opportunities for development and solid institutions capable of satisfying the needs and guaranteeing the rights of its inhabitants.

Eighteen years after the end of the armed conflict, what are the principal challenges for peace in Guatemala?

The challenge is to build it. We all understood that the peace accords were a truce of the war that had lasted 36 years. However, we had no idea it was going to be so difficult to build peace. If, for example, we count the number of people killed after 36 years of armed conflict, and if we compare that with the averages we have today, there is no difference. What was signed on that occasion aimed only to resolve the ideological issue and the war between the State and the guerrillas. After the signing of the peace accords we saw a lot of investment coming into Guatemala and institutions were set up, but we continue to have high poverty levels and death rates, shortcomings in health, infrastructure. In other words, we have not been able to take care of the problems that were inputs for the war.

For that reason, I personally would consider that we are still living in a truce and that we have not yet finished building peace. And all that we have today could backslide, not under the same conditions as previously, because the ideological issue does not exist anymore, but the people's needs continue to be the same. Or even greater.

In this context, what has been the role of the private sector?

The private sector saw the peace accords as an opportunity. And in these years there have been substantial improvements. As concerns the Agrarian Chamber, the fact that we participate in labour policy, which had not been the case for a long time, is a great advantage; the fact that agreements are reached with the ministries of labour and education in order, for example, to not allow child labour, represents a substantial improvement. That is, the role of the private sector is much more proactive. Today it is very common to talk about private sector social responsibility. And that is all well and good, but I still don't know how integrated these efforts are. And that is whe-



A farm worker cleans lettuce crops, in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Photo: Maria Fleischmann / World Bank Licensed under Creative Commons

re I point my criticism to some extent: the efforts are being made but are they well integrated, are those who run them the right people, are all these efforts really providing solutions for the people? Those are my doubts. And if the private sector has done its share, I doubt that the public sector has done the same. We shouldn't also think that the private sector must substitute for the public sector when they are already paying their taxes in order to generate public investment. And there is a great problem: a priva-

te sector foundation can help someone get an education but that person doesn't have a dwelling or food. And who is responsible for these shortcomings?

Following on the above, how do you understand peace?

Tranquility. What else? Tranquility. Where no one affects my interests and I don't affect anybody's interests. In order to achieve this, society must have its needs satisfied. Take the example of the gangs (*maras*): the so-

cial phenomenon of the gangs is the result of population movements within the country and this movement continues. Why? Because everything is centralized in the city. Before the displaced populations were the result of war. Today those displacements continue because everything is centralized. We should be decentralized in all respects, jobs should be created all over the place, there should be the necessary infrastructure, but there is an obvious lag in infrastructure. Everybody forgets the earth-

quake of 1976 and that was the first cause of massive population displacements and the State did not have the capacity to rebuild the country in its entirety; and it wasn't only a matter of housing, it was a matter of jobs, of productive installations that were destroyed. People then started to migrate towards the capital and problems began to arise that went beyond those of the conflict between the insurgents and the counter-insurgents.

Governments have not had the capacity to overcome these shortcomings, there are no policies of the State, only policies of a government, without continuity, and the private sector has operated in similar fashion. The only significant thing it has been able to achieve is job creation, which is valid but does that respond to population growth? Possibly not. Then we have the fiscal problem, which means basically paying and raising taxes. There is so much corruption that the resources are not employed where there is a need for them, which raises the question: in the face of these scenarios of corruption, is it valid to raise taxes?

Given that perspective, what you are saying is that without a strong and transparent State, that has effective mechanisms for investment and redistribution, there can be no peace.

Without a doubt. That is why the private sector is only one of the pillars and we are very limited. Take, for example, the issue of security; instead of us spending on private security services, that money could be invested in growing the company or simply put to work on actions to attract more capital that can create more jobs. The same thing happens with the issue of infrastructure: investment is centred in urban areas because that is where the means exist to generate energy but I cannot install a factory in a location at some distance from the regional capital, as would be the case in Ixcán in the north-western part of the country where the necessary infrastructure does not exist.

The country needs to be decentralized with regards to businesses. We need to take businesses where populations are located. This would help the people in the

zone a lot and reduce costs. But, how can I do it if I don't have the infrastructure or if the cost of energy generation is very high in the zone or in the region? For now, poverty, misery, the housing deficit continue to grow. That is, they grow like the population.

In Guatemala, after the Peace Accords, various institutions were created to address agrarian conflict. What has been the role of these institutions and their relationship with the private sector?

In order to address the problem related to access to land, the Land Fund was created, a meeting point that is well represented by all the sectors involved: an indigenous sector, a small landholder (*campesino*) sector, the cooperative sector (which is part of the private sector), the National Council for Agricultural Development (Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Agropecuario, which links the productive sectors together), the Ministry of Agriculture (that presides), the Ministry of Finance, and finally the Agrarian Chamber. To the extent that it is well represented, the Fund has become an important meeting



Mother and child on a farm in Chimaltenango, Guatemala.
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place to build bridges among the various sectors. Face to face, every Tuesday, we all sit together to discuss issues that have become political, even though they shouldn't be political. The Land Fund should be a technical body that is charged with providing solutions to the land needs of campesinos with little or no land and to provide assistance to those people who have no land. The Land Fund is charged with providing legal assurances and without legal assurance there can be no peace, because I might live on the land but if I don't have a

document that states that I am the owner, the land can be taken away from me at any moment. In addition, there is no way I can become an investor because no bank will give me a loan if the land is not in my name. Many conflicts in the country start due to the absence of legal assurances. It is infrequent that an agrarian conflict should occur on a farm which is lawfully owned.

It is important to point out, finally, that even though the Land Fund has become politicized in a number of ways by sitting go-

vernments, and at times has been subjected to patronage and corruption, it continues to provide a fundamental meeting ground to address the land issue. The fact that all the sectors should be represented there means that the Fund is the best bridge to be had. Currently, it is the strongest link in duly represented civil society.

Has the existence of a forum such as the Land Fund contributed to improve the levels of trust among the various sectors that meet there?

Yes, in general, regardless of ideology, today one can sit down with whomever. We still need to work somewhat more on raising the level of trust because there are many 'pseudo-leaders', many political operators that live on that, intermediaries of unknown interests.

For the private sector, for the agrarian sector, in particular, the Fund can translate into an escape valve for the pressures of agrarian conflictive situations. At the same time, although the direct beneficiaries of the Fund are not us as a sector, we also benefit when things are done well because conflictive situations are lessened.

What positive changes have you observed in the way in which the problems of access to land and agrarian conflicts are understood and addressed?

I think there is a change in generational attitudes. I see greater sensibility in the generation of my children than in mine. There was a lost time, a generation that coincides with the war, when people left their farms, they no longer communicated with their employees, and that absence of the employer from the employee generates tremendous insensitivity, these were people who distanced themselves from the country's reality and left their interests in the hands of others. This generation, that is not resilient and continues to move around ideological positions of left and right, is still in positions of authority, which are occupied by people between 50 and 70 years of age who lived through the war. Fortunately, we see that the new generations are not like that anymore. Today's youth is uncomfortable and feels outrage in the face of misery.