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 Peace-building: 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-
there is a great problem: a priva
generate public investment. And
ey paying their taxes in order to
public sector when they are alre
vate sector must substitute for the
shouldn’t also think that the pri
sector has done the same. We
its share, I doubt that the public
if the private sector has done
providing solutions for the peo
people, are all these efforts really
extent: the efforts are being made
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sary infrastructure, but there is
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centralized in all respects, jobs
shortcomings, there are no poli
ices are not employed where there
much corruption that the resour
cial phenomenon of the gangs
is the result of population mo
ments within the country and
movement continues. Why? Becaus
everything is centralized in th
city. Before the displaced
populations were the result of
place, before the displaced
people. Where no one affects
Tranquility. What else? Tranq
these shortcomings?
Following on the above,
how do you understand
peace? Tranquility. What else? Tran
quility. 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 exam
ple of the gangs (maras): the so
Social phenomenon of the gangs
is the result of population mo
ments within the country and
this movement continues. Why?
Because everything is centralize
in the city. Before the displaced
populations were the result of
war. Today those displacements
continue because everything is
centralized. We should be de
centralized in all respects, jobs
should be created all over the
place, there should be the neces
sary infrastructure, but there is
an obvious lag in infrastructu
re. 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 pro
ductive installations that were
destroyed. People then started
to migrate towards the capital
and problems began to arise that
gone 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 poli
cies of the State, only policies of
a government, without continu
ity, and the private sector has ope
rated 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
raising taxes. There is so
much corruption that the resour
ces are not employed where there
is a need for them, which raises
the question: in the face of these
scenarios of corruption, is it va
lid 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 redis
tribution, there can be no
peace. Without a doubt. That is
why the private sector is only one of
the pillars and we are very limi
ted. Take, for example, the issue
of security; instead of us spen
ding 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 nor
th-western part of the country
where the necessary infrastructu
re does not exist.
The country needs to be decen
tralized with regards to busines
ses. 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 con
flict. 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 mee
ting point that is well represented
by all the sectors involved: an
indigenous sector, a small land
holder (campesino) sector, the
cooperative sector (which is part
of the private sector), the Na
tional Council for Agricultural De
velopment (Consejo Nacional de
Desarrollo Agropecuario, which
links the productive sectors toge
ther), the Ministry of Agricultu
re (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
point for all the sectors. It has
funds that are used to generate
public investment.
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.

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 whoever. 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 no 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.