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What Africa Can Learn From Colombia

By Pierre Buyoya, Olusegun Obasanjo, David Kilcullen and Greg Mills

Synopsis

Colombia's success in curbing criminality and drug-trafficking and extending governance to much of the country offers lesson for African states facing similar threats to their security.

Commentary

A dozen senior African leaders recently visited Colombia, South America to understand better its response to threats of criminality and narco-trafficking while bringing development and government to much of the country. Their observations of the lessons learned from Colombia's experience are described below.

The port city of Buenaventura, on Colombia's Pacific Coast, is a microcosm of the country's social, economic and security challenges. The port is fast expanding, with international investment helping meet the demands of Colombia's economy, which has been persistently growing at around five percent annually for the last decade. But in other respects, this is a town that time—and the government—forgot. One senior naval officer says criminality and unemployment are the result of 'decades of neglect by the central government,' going back centuries, when Africans enslaved by Spanish colonists escaped and settled the Pacific Coast—a region that is still more than 90 per cent Afro-Colombian.

Buenaventura's 400,000 inhabitants have long been caught in the crossfire of a murderous gang war between the *Urabeños*, a nationwide paramilitary criminal group, and its rivals, *La Empresa*. The two gangs compete for control of this critical drug trafficking node, which connects the Pacific (and producers further south) with Colombia's most dangerous city, Cali, via a two-hour truck ride. Hundreds have been killed, and thousands displaced by the violence.

Community leaders have been victims of the extreme intimidatory technique of *decuartizando*, murder by quartering: eleven dismembered bodies were found in the first five months of 2014 alone. The *barrio* of Piedras Cantan, its houses built on stilts over the harbor like a miniature version of Makoko in Lagos, has seen as many as 27 murders a month for a population of only 220 families. Now 500 troops of the Colombian Navy's Marine Infantry are working in support of 1,200 police to rid the port city of crime and violence, part of a wider struggle against insurgents and lawlessness that has ebbed and flowed over fifty years.

In the process, Colombia has had to learn how to extend governance, security and infrastructure across a large, rugged territory, one-third of which is covered by jungle so dense it looks like broccoli from above. The absence of governance and essential services has intersected historically with a lack of licit job opportunities, encouraging criminality from narco-trafficking to illegal mining.

Change for better

Yet things have changed dramatically, and for the better, in Colombia.

At the turn of the century, with the failure of a peace plan in 2000, just a third of Colombia's territory was under government control, FARC guerrillas threatened most Colombian roads, and operated in groups of up to 200 guerrillas, running a narco-state within a state. Today, government controls over 90 percent of its terrain, violence and kidnapping are down dramatically, and only 80 municipalities (of roughly 1100 nationwide) see much FARC activity, suggesting that the threat to Colombia's people has been significantly rolled back.

Colombia is confronting rudimentary service delivery issues, while simultaneously dealing with armed challenges to state authority. This is not unlike the situation in eastern Congo, with Boko Haram in Nigeria and Mali's insurgents, or increasingly, with Al Shabab across East Africa.

Five key lessons were drawn from the Colombian experience and transformation.

First, they have to get the politics right, and this requires strong leadership, first to confront the threat of insecurity, but able also to remain flexible and agile in response to changing circumstances. Today Colombia's political debate has shifted to peace talks in Havana, and President Juan Manuel Santos' re-election for another four years this June can be seen as a vote for peace.

Second, there is no peace without security. Better security demands more than money or equipment. It's about better intelligence, improved inter-service co-operation, clever tactics, good training, high morale and a sense of common mission and purpose.

Fundamentally, the best tool for security, as elsewhere, is good people and using them well.

Third, international co-operation, as with the US government under the ten-year \$11 billion PLAN Colombia from 2000 has helped, but the solution has to be owned and implemented locally. No-one can want to help you more than you want to help yourself. Now the Colombians are co-operating extensively with their region and offering training in the fight against drugs.

Fourth, offering an alternative to the political economy of war is necessary to undermine those 'conflict entrepreneurs' who seek to perpetuate wars for their narrow financial interests. Yet re-establishing a 'normal', legal economy in the rural areas is, as the Colombians have found, very difficult, not least since the guerrillas have preferred to keep these populations dependent on their preferred alternative and since now, fifty years on, many people know little different or better than to live off a cocktail of crime and coca.

Once seen as the crime and cocaine capital of the world, Colombia has reduced its area under drug cultivation to just a third of the level of 2000. Whereas Colombia was 'number one' in the world in terms of kidnappings and crime by the start of the 21st century, this has fallen by 95 percent and 43 percent respectively.

The fifth and final pointer from Colombia: change takes time. With two-thirds of Buenaventura's people unemployed, for example, high levels of illiteracy, a virtually non-existent culture of education, and jobs unsurprisingly few and far between, systemic change will take perhaps a generation. A sense of alienation, hopelessness and a lack of personal responsibility, especially of young males, is deeply ingrained within poorer elements of Colombian society.

The situation of Colombia should resonate with many states in Africa and they would do well to learn from it in bringing government to once ungoverned spaces.

Buyoya and Obasanjo are the former presidents of Burundi and Nigeria respectively; Kilcullen and Mills headed the visit to Colombia for the Brenthurst Foundation.

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