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The Economics of Peace

The role of businesses in Colombia’s armed conflict

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During the preparation of this master's thesis, the author utilized ChatGPT (OpenAI) for the following purpose:

1. Language assistance: ChatGPT was used to correct grammar and spelling throughout the document, and to help translate interview transcripts from Spanish to English for inclusion in the annexes.
2. After using ChatGPT, the author diligently reviewed and edited the output. Full responsibility is taken for the final content presented in this thesis.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that the content of this master's thesis reflects my original work, supported by the responsible use of AI.

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I. Introduction

"Peace is more than the absence of conflict; it is a catalyst for economic well-being, laying the foundation for societies to thrive for generations to come."

— United Nations

Peace is not merely about ending violence; it involves transforming the conditions that made violence possible. It requires rebuilding trust, redistributing power, and addressing the inequalities that fueled the conflict. This transformation is not only legal or institutional, but also economic. As Frankzi and Olarte (2013) emphasize, transitional moments are shaped by contested interests, power asymmetries, and decisions about what should be changed and what should be preserved. Economic actors, particularly private companies, play a central role in this transition. They hold powerful tools, such as their investments and the employment they generate, but also through the political significance of their choices, their silences, and their alliances.

In post-conflict contexts such as South Africa and Northern Ireland, businesses have taken on this role. In South Africa, they transitioned from complicity with the apartheid regime to becoming mediators and facilitators of democratic dialogue. The Consultative Business Movement played a key role in bridging political divides, supporting negotiations, and legitimizing the democratic transition. In Northern Ireland, the private sector, through the Group of Seven, positioned itself as a unifying voice advocating for peace as an economic necessity, rallying under the banner "Peace through Prosperity." These examples show that, under certain conditions, businesses can move beyond risk management and actively contribute to the reconstruction of post-conflict societies.

And yet, despite similar potential, the case of Colombia tells a different story.

On November 24, 2016, in Cartagena, a peace agreement was officially signed between the Colombian government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), putting an end to 52 years of conflict rooted in profound social inequalities and the concentration of land ownership in Colombia. Juan Manuel Santos, the Colombian president at the time, spent four years drafting this agreement, an effort that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. The 297-page document stipulated that the FARC, formed in 1964 as a peasant self-defense group influenced by Marxism, would disarm and transition into a political party.

As of today, nearly a decade after its signing, the implementation of the agreement remains incomplete. The lack of coordination and effective monitoring mechanisms has allowed certain armed groups to strengthen their presence, further fragmenting the security landscape and complicating the transition to a lasting peace (Breda, 2024).

Amid these political fluctuations, one dimension of the peace process has remained consistently under-examined: its economic component. According to researcher Camille Boutron, the agreement's failure lies partly in its omission of a structural economic transformation. Rather than challenging Colombia's neoliberal development model, the accord attempted to reconcile two visions: a liberal, export-oriented framework and a more sustainable, land-based model inspired by the FARC (France Culture, 2024).

Compared to the two historical cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland, the Colombian private sector displayed a more cautious involvement in the peace process. Although certain fiscal mechanisms were introduced to encourage participation, the private sector did not assume a clearly defined national role, and interactions with conflict actors remained limited.

This contrast leads to the following research question:

Why have Colombian businesses remained largely disengaged from the peace process, despite the economic logic and potential benefits embedded in the 2016 agreement?

My hypothesis is that this disengagement reflects not only a lack of incentives, but more fundamentally a political deficit: the absence of a collective, public, and cross-sectoral commitment from the private sector. In the absence of unified leadership and meaningful dialogue with other actors in the peace process, Colombian businesses remained confined to sectoral logics, thus limiting their ability to support or shape a transformative peace.

This thesis seeks to shed new light on the structural conditions shaping business engagement in peace processes, by not only examining economic incentives but also emphasizing the political role of the private sector. Its contribution lies in adopting a sectoral and comparative perspective, systematically analyzing the Colombian case alongside historical examples from South Africa and Northern Ireland, to better explain the divergence of corporate trajectories.

To explore this hypothesis, this study is organized into four steps. First, it analyzes the historical, economic, and territorial foundations of the Colombian conflict, as well as the architecture and limits of the 2016 peace agreement. Second, it examines two international case studies, South Africa and Northern Ireland, where businesses assumed more proactive and politically visible roles in peacebuilding. Third, it returns to the Colombian case, comparing business engagement before, during, and after the agreement with these historical trajectories, in order to highlight key divergences and convergences. Fourth, it develops a sectoral perspective with a specific focus on tourism, a sector with limited historical involvement in the conflict but growing visibility in post-accord narratives. This case allows for a grounded examination of how different types of businesses relate to peacebuilding.

To support this analysis, the thesis also draws on qualitative data from two expert interviews. Each interview was designed around the interviewee's specific area of expertise: Professor María Rocío Bedoya Bedoya, an expert in labor law, governance, and rural development at the University of Antioquia, offered insights into land reform, rural inequality, and the political economy of implementation. Dr. Ángela María Ocampo, a specialist in human rights, peacebuilding, and environmental justice at UCLouvain, shared a critical analysis of Colombia's conflict and provided valuable insights on the sectoral approach adopted in this thesis. Finally, Paula Sedano, director of the Fundación Diamante de las Aguas, shared her grounded experience of community-based tourism in Guaviare, highlighting both the challenges and transformative potential of locally driven alternatives. These interviews helped to contextualize structural challenges and deepen the analysis of sectoral and territorial dynamics in post-accord Colombia.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to develop an analytical typology of business engagement trajectories, ranging from continuity to transformative engagement. By drawing on both sectoral variations and international comparisons, this typology provides a conceptual framework to navigate the complex role of the private sector in peace processes. It aims to categorize different forms of engagement, uncover the underlying logics, and assess their contribution (or lack thereof) to structural transformation.

II. Understanding the Colombian conflict: Power, territory, and economic structures

a. Historical foundations: Land as the battlefield

The origins of the Colombian conflict lie in the country's profound social and territorial inequalities, particularly the concentration of land and the exclusion of rural populations from economic and political life. As early as the 19th century, land accumulation occurred through a two-step process: independent peasants settled frontier areas, only to be displaced by large agrarian investors once the land became connected to external markets. These investors, often urban elites, had the legal and political means to secure land titles, while peasants were left without protection or ownership (Grajales, 2021, p.22). This process laid the foundation for one of the most unequal land distributions in Latin America.

Over the 20th century, Colombia undertook several agrarian modernization efforts. However, rather than redistributing land, these reforms tended to reinforce elite control. The 1936 Law 200 under President López Pumarejo aimed to prioritize productive use over ownership, but its implementation was weak. The 1960s reforms under President Carlos Lleras Restrepo tried to reduce land concentration and address rural poverty, yet they were met with fierce resistance from landowners and resulted in violent repression, rural depopulation, and the consolidation of agro-industrial sectors like bananas, sugarcane, and rice (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013).

By the early 2000s, the effects of this historical trajectory were stark. Narcotraffickers and paramilitary groups controlled vast swaths of land: by 2005, nearly half of Colombia's best agricultural lands were under their control, while small farmers, who made up 68% of the rural population, controlled just 5.2% (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.48). This "relatifundization", a return to extreme land concentration, process not only deepened inequality but also enabled the infiltration of illegality into state structures, reinforcing violence and weakening institutions.

Colombia's economic model, based on extractive industries and agro-export products, further compounded the problem. Trade liberalization in the late 20th century prioritized sectors like oil, coal, bananas, and palm oil, while food imports surged. Between 2000 and 2013, Colombia became dependent on imports for 50% of its food needs (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.71), undermining domestic agriculture and reinforcing rural marginalization.

In this context, land is not just an economic asset; it is a central driver of conflict and a symbol of exclusion. As Grajales (2021) argues, the Colombian conflict is a war over the terms of rural capitalism, where control over land and labor has structured both violence and resistance. Echoing this perspective, Professor Maria Rocío Bedoya Bedoya, a labor law scholar and human rights advocate at the University of Antioquia, explained in an interview that “the land issue has been at the heart of Colombia’s social and armed conflicts,” not only due to issues of ownership, but also because of disputes over land distribution, production, and access. Understanding this historical dimension is essential for the rest of this thesis, as it provides the context in which the interactions between the various actors of conflict and peace take place.

b. Conflict stakeholders: At the crossroads of military control and market forces

The Colombian conflict cannot be reduced to a confrontation between the state and guerrilla groups. It is a complex struggle involving a wide range of actors. Guerrilla movements, paramilitary groups, the state, but also economic and social actors such as businesses and trade unions, all pursue their own interests, yet often converge around one central issue: land.

Described as a “permanent coexistence of opposites” (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.10), understanding the roles and interactions of these actors is essential to grasp why violence persists despite a peace agreement, and why business engagement in peacebuilding remains so limited.

i. Armed and political actors: Guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the state

Guerrilla groups

The FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) is the most emblematic guerrilla group in Colombia, and the one that sat at the negotiating table during the 2012–2016 peace talks. But it was far from the only one. Others such as the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or National Liberation Army) and M-19 (Movimiento 19 de Abril, or April 19 Movement) also shaped Colombia’s armed landscape. This section focuses primarily on the FARC due to its central role in both the conflict and the peace process.

The FARC emerged in 1964 in response to deep-rooted rural inequality, positioning itself as a peasant guerrilla defending small farmers from land dispossession by large landowners and foreign investors (Grajales, 2021, p.121). At its inception, the FARC sought to reform the agrarian system and redistribute land. However, it gradually moved away from these ideals. Internally, the group became increasingly authoritarian and centralized. Strategically, it embraced an exclusively military path, alienating parts of civil society and losing legitimacy over time (Leiner & Flämig, 2012, p.75).

The idea of negotiating peace gained traction when the FARC realized that armed struggle alone would not achieve its goals. It was inspired by the trajectory of Sinn Féin, a political party in Northern Ireland that emerged from the IRA and transitioned into institutional politics. In 2012, the FARC entered peace talks with the Colombian government (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.8). This transformation became official in 2017 when the group rebranded itself as Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común, maintaining the same initials.

Yet this transition was fraught with fear and uncertainty. The FARC carried with it the traumatic memory of its previous attempt at political integration: the Unión Patriótica (UP). Founded in the 1980s, the UP brought together former guerrillas, members of the Communist Party, and civil society actors. As the party gained legitimacy and political visibility, especially in the 1986 elections, it became the target of a brutal extermination campaign. Over the following years, thousands of its members were assassinated in what is now widely recognized as a political genocide, carried out with the complicity of paramilitaries, business elites, and state forces (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.13; Anrup, 2009, p.29).

This violent precedent deeply shaped the FARC's perception of peace negotiations and their risks. The extermination of the UP not only symbolized the fragility of Colombia's democratic institutions but also revealed how efforts to reintegrate leftist actors could provoke fierce resistance from powerful economic and political interests.

Although the FARC demobilized as part of the 2016 agreement, internal divisions, persistent insecurity, and broken promises have led some former members to take up arms again, forming dissident groups such as the Segunda Marquetalia. Meanwhile, other guerrilla organizations like the ELN continue to operate, further complicating the implementation of peace (Breda, 2024).

Paramilitary groups

Originally authorized in the late 1960s as a legal tool to support military counterinsurgency operations, paramilitary groups quickly evolved into a formidable force aligned with Colombia's landed elites, military structures, and segments of the private sector (Dabène, 2020, p.68). Their emergence coincided with growing fears among conservative actors of the expansion of guerrilla influence in rural areas, especially in regions critical to agriculture, mining, and infrastructure. Initially presented as a way to protect local communities and investments, paramilitary violence soon became systematic and strategic, targeting not just guerrilla sympathizers, but also peasant leaders, unionists, and civil society actors (Grajales, 2021). In the 1980s and 1990s, these groups were increasingly funded by legal and illegal economic actors, including banana multinationals like Chiquita Brands and its Colombian subsidiary Banadex, which transferred hundreds of thousands of dollars to the paramilitary group AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) (National Security Archive, 2018).

But paramilitaries were not merely enforcers; they became full-fledged economic actors. They launched agro-industrial ventures, invested in large-scale landholdings, and facilitated the expansion of the drug trade. Their territorial presence allowed them to control key economic corridors, including those linked to the export of commodities like bananas, palm oil, and even minerals (Dabène, 2020, p.77). This shift from ideological militias to criminal-economic networks enabled them to insert themselves into Colombia's formal and informal economies. Yet, despite the visible impact of their operations, the actual extent of their economic power remains difficult to quantify. There is a significant lack of systematic research and data on the paramilitaries' role as economic actors, partly due to the clandestine nature of their activities and partly because their integration into legal markets often blurs the line between criminality and legitimacy.

Despite official demobilization efforts through the "Justicia y Paz" law of 2006, paramilitary structures proved highly adaptable. Many re-emerged as so-called successor groups, continuing to exert territorial control, particularly in resource-rich areas where state presence remains weak. In these zones, they provide illegal governance, manage local economies, and control access to land and labor (Grajales, 2021).

Efforts to hold paramilitary sponsors accountable have been slow and largely ineffective. As of 2018, 85% of the legal proceedings involving business actors accused of complicity remained stuck in the pre-trial phase. The extreme danger faced by prosecutors and the deep entanglement of economic elites in state institutions contribute to this inertia (Grajales, 2021, p.156). As a result, transitional justice remains incomplete, and paramilitary power, though transformed, continues to undermine both democracy and peace.

The state

Rather than acting as a neutral arbiter, the Colombian state has historically protected elite interests and repressed popular mobilizations. From the criminalization of unions to the systematic repression of peasant movements, the state has often worked against the democratization of land and labor relations (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.81). It is widely perceived, especially in rural areas, as a force aligned with a privileged minority (Anrup, 2009, p.166), sustaining a development model centered on extractive industries and export agriculture.

This alignment has evolved across successive governments. Under Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010), the state embraced a security-first approach through the "Democratic Security Policy," intensifying military operations while deepening neoliberal economic reforms. Dubbed the "George W. Bush" of Colombia due to his close ties with the U.S. and hardline stance, Uribe ruled with an iron fist, regularly violating human rights (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.17). He was perceived by many Colombians as a paternal figure capable of restoring order (Anrup, 2009, p.61), but his presidency left the country profoundly polarized and resistant to dialogue (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.3).

The election of Juan Manuel Santos in 2010, though he was initially seen as Uribe's protégé, marked a shift in discourse. With the Havana peace talks launched in 2012, Santos placed peace at the center of his presidency. However, his administration avoided confronting the structural foundations of inequality and largely maintained the economic status quo by choosing to align peace with market stability and investor confidence (France Culture, 2024).

This ambiguity deepened under Iván Duque (2018–2022), who openly criticized the peace agreement and systematically slowed down its implementation. As Professor Bedoya points out, the Duque administration focused almost exclusively on victim reparations, neglecting the broader social policies necessary to uphold the peace accord. She emphasizes the lack of differentiation between transitional justice and structural reforms, underlining "very little land redistribution, very little formalization of property titles, and very few solutions regarding illicit crops" (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Key elements such as agrarian reform and the reintegration of former FARC combatants stalled, contributing to the resurgence of dissident groups and the expansion of criminal organizations like the Clan del Golfo (Breda, 2024). As Bedoya concludes, this was "a particularly dark period for the implementation process" (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Gustavo Petro's arrival in 2022, as Colombia's first left-wing president, seemed to promise a different approach. Yet his "Total Peace" strategy also revealed internal contradictions. Hasty ceasefire agreements, without robust monitoring mechanisms, enabled certain armed groups to consolidate power in strategic regions, resulting in a paradoxical situation where violence decreased in some areas but deepened in others (Breda, 2024). Instead of restoring territorial legitimacy, the state risked ceding informal governance to illegal actors. This fragility is also tied to what Professor Bedoya describes as a form of state capture. In her analysis, the Colombian state has, in many rural regions, lost its ability to act as a sovereign guarantor of rights. Instead, its functions such as security provision, local governance, and even development planning are increasingly assumed by other actors, including criminal organizations. In these areas, legality and illegality coexist, and public authority is displaced or fragmented. This dynamic, she argues, not only obstructs the implementation of the peace agreement but also reinforces deep-rooted mistrust toward the state and its institutions (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

In short, while presidential rhetoric has evolved, the role of the Colombian state in the peace process has remained ambivalent and inconsistent. Often more invested in military control and market reassurance than in structural change, the state has struggled to act as an inclusive guarantor of peace. Its failure to challenge entrenched power relations, both political and economic, has left deep mistrust among the populations most affected by the conflict and has contributed to the fragility of the peace process.

ii. Economic and social stakeholders: Business elites and trade unions

Business actors

The Colombian private sector is large, diverse, and highly fragmented. As of 2024, the country had over 1.7 million formal enterprises, of which 99.5% are micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises also referred to as MiPymes. These firms generate nearly 79% of national employment and contribute around 40% of the country's GDP (BBVA Research, 2024). Despite this economic and social relevance, MiPymes often lack political influence and are excluded from national-level debates on development and peacebuilding.

At the other end of the spectrum, a small group of large companies and economic conglomerates wields disproportionate influence over national policy, media narratives, and investment flows. These actors are more structurally embedded, often have access to the state, and in some cases benefited from conflict-related dynamics such as land concentration or territorial control.

Understanding the sectoral distribution of these business actors is key to analyzing their positioning within Colombia's peace process, particularly across agriculture, extractive industries, and the service sector. The aim is not to be exhaustive, but to outline the structure, dominant actors, and internal dynamics of each sector, in order to better understand the broader environment in which Colombian businesses operate.

The **agricultural sector** is marked by a deep structural divide, between smallholder farmers and large agro-industrial groups. According to the Unidad de Planificación Rural Agropecuaria (UPRA), farms of less than 0.5 hectares represent 38.1% of all rural properties but cover only 0.2% of the total rural area (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural, 2019).

In contrast, a small but powerful group of large agro-industrial firms dominates export-oriented agriculture, focusing on products such as sugar, palm oil, poultry, avocados, and bananas (Oxford Business Group, 2016). Properties larger than 10,000 hectares represent just 0.012% of all landholdings but account for a staggering 45.9% of total rural land (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural, 2019).

This elite segment includes companies such as Manuelita, one of the country's oldest agribusiness groups, with operations in sugarcane, palm oil, and ethanol; Cartama, the largest avocado exporter in Colombia, with over 6,000 hectares under cultivation (Rojo, 2024); and Avidesa Mac Pollo, a major player in poultry production (Statista, 2025). These firms are often connected to powerful family-owned conglomerates, such as Sarmiento Angulo or Valorem, and have consolidated vast territories with over 70,000 hectares in the Altillanura alone in the case of Manuelita (Oxfam, 2013).

Foreign companies, such as Cargill and Mónica Semillas, have also entered the sector by acquiring thousands of hectares through legal loopholes that circumvent landholding restrictions intended for small-scale producers (Oxfam, 2013). Their operations reinforce a model of large-scale, capital-intensive agriculture, often in regions marked by historical conflict and forced displacement.

The **extractive sector** shows a comparable concentration of corporate power. Despite the presence of thousands of active mining titles, the sector is marked by a strong duality: while more than 50% of mining titles correspond to small-scale operators, the bulk of revenue and exports is concentrated among a few large companies (Agencia Nacional de Minería, 2025).

Among these dominant actors, Ecopetrol stands out as the country's largest oil producer. Although state-owned, the company operates according to market logics and has faced repeated criticism for environmental degradation, labor disputes, and its position as the 75th largest global carbon emitter (Osorio, 2025; InfluenceMap, n.d.).

In the mining sector, Cerrejón, operated by Glencore, runs one of the world's largest open-pit coal mines in La Guajira, a region heavily affected by displacement, poverty, and environmental damage. In 2025, Glencore announced a 50% reduction in production, citing falling international coal prices and President Petro's green transition strategy (El País, 2025). Similarly, Drummond, a U.S.-based firm, operates large-scale open-pit mines in Cesar and Magdalena, with limited engagement in local peace efforts despite operating in highly conflict-affected zones (JusticeInfo, 2024).

The **service sector**, while structurally different from agriculture and extractives, presents a similarly fragmented configuration. Given its diversity, spanning industries such as finance, telecommunications, logistics, and tourism, this section focuses exclusively on tourism, which will be further explored in a dedicated case study. Most tourism service providers in Colombia are small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly travel agencies, tour operators, and independent lodging businesses. In 2022, there were approximately 61,400 lodging establishments, 12,500 travel agencies, 3,600 tour guide businesses, and 1,500 gastronomy-focused establishments (Statista, 2024a).

Alongside these smaller actors, the sector also includes major national and international hotel groups. Hoteles Decameron was the leading tourism company in Colombia in 2021, with operating revenues exceeding 72 million USD, followed by Hoteles Estelar, with nearly 56 million less (Statista, 2024b). International chains such as Hilton, Holiday Inn, Wyndham, and Sonesta also maintain a strong presence in major cities and tourist destinations (U.S. Department of Commerce, n.d.).

Trade unions

Trade unions have long been a central force in Colombia's social struggles, particularly in the oil, mining, and agricultural sectors. Yet in the context of the armed conflict, they became one of the most systematically targeted groups. Seen by paramilitary groups as guerrilla sympathizers in civilian clothing (Grajales, 2021, p.77), union leaders and members faced brutal repression. This violence, often carried out in collusion with business actors and state security forces, resulted in Colombia being ranked among the most dangerous countries in the world for trade unionists (CSI / RSCD, 2023).

The repression of organized labor intensified during the 1960s, as guerrilla activity expanded and the state increasingly framed all forms of dissent as subversive. Oil and agrarian unions, in particular, radicalized in response to precarious working conditions and economic exclusion, making them key targets for paramilitary violence (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.11). The consequences were devastating: waves of assassinations, forced disappearances, and threats decimated union structures and created a climate of generalized fear.

Even after the 2016 peace agreement, the targeting of social leaders, including unionists, continued. In 2022 alone, Colombia recorded 215 assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders, many linked to drug trafficking and paramilitary successor groups (CSI / RSCD, 2023). This enduring violence has had a chilling effect: unionization rates have dropped to just 5% nationally, compared to around 50% in countries like Belgium (Worker Participation, n.d.). Despite their historical importance, unions were not invited to the negotiation table in Havana. Their exclusion reflects a broader trend of marginalizing civil society actors who challenge dominant economic interests.

c. Economic structure: Growth without transformation

Understanding the actors involved in the conflict is essential but so is examining the economic environment in which they operate. This section adopts a sectoral approach to Colombia's economy, reflecting the different historical and structural ties each sector has to the conflict. It highlights the contradictions between growth and exclusion, the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality, and the ways in which economic structures have both enabled violence and shaped the limits of peacebuilding.

Agriculture remains a cornerstone of Colombia's economy, particularly in rural regions where it continues to shape livelihoods, territorial dynamics, and economic structures. In 2024, the agriculture-livestock-fishing sector contributed 9.3% to the country's GDP and represented 10.2% of national value added, making it a central driver of post-pandemic economic recovery (Ministerio de Agricultura, 2025). According to the same source, agricultural activities grew by 8.1% compared to 2023, led by strong gains in coffee production (+22.5%) and livestock (+5.6%).

Colombia also stands out as a major global exporter of agricultural products. In 2021, food and live animals made up 16.5% of total merchandise exports (OECD, 2024). The country ranks among the world’s top producers and exporters of coffee, bananas, avocados, cut flowers, sugarcane, cocoa, and palm oil (Wikipedia, 2024).

However, this export potential coexists with deep structural imbalances. Of the 51 million hectares deemed suitable for agriculture, only 5 million were actively cultivated as of 2013, while 38 million were used for extensive cattle ranching, often in environmentally unsuited areas (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.63). These patterns reflect not only inefficiency but also a legacy of land concentration and exclusion. Peasants have been systematically dispossessed, and efforts at reform have failed repeatedly.

Extractive industries, particularly oil, coal, and metals, have historically anchored Colombia’s export economy, even as their social and environmental costs remain deeply contested. Between January and November 2024, mining exports accounted for 25.4% of the country’s total exports (Boletín Minería en Cifras, 2025). Yet, despite their dominance in foreign trade, the sector contributed only 1.12% to national GDP in 2024, reflecting a continued decline compared to 2023. This disjunction between economic visibility and domestic value-added highlights the extractive sector’s capital intensity and narrow distribution of benefits.

The service sector is the backbone of Colombia’s economy, contributing 56.9% of national GDP and employing 65.6% of the workforce (Lloyds Bank, 2024). It encompasses a wide range of activities, including finance, telecommunications, education, public administration, professional services, and tourism. In urban areas, the service sector represents the primary source of employment, reflecting broader economic and demographic trends.

In recent years, services have also gained prominence in Colombia’s export structure. By 2022, they accounted for nearly 20% of total exports, with tourism alone representing 60% of all service exports (OECD, 2024). This growing visibility highlights both Colombia’s increased attractiveness as a tourist destination and the government’s strategic promotion of peace-linked tourism. Initiatives such as “Turismo para una Cultura de Paz” (Tourism for a Culture of Peace) aim to integrate former combatants and victims into local economies, particularly in post-conflict zones, by promoting sustainable and community-based tourism models.

In 2024, Colombia welcomed a record 6.7 million international visitors, an 8.5% increase compared to the previous year, further emphasizing the sector’s relevance in key cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena, Cali, and Barranquilla. Beyond tourism, other dynamic subsectors include business process outsourcing (BPO), which accounts for 3.5% of national GDP, and the banking and financial industry, which involves both domestic and international actors and plays a central role in Colombia's economic development (Lloyds Bank, 2024).

The informal and illicit economies play a crucial yet often underestimated role in sustaining Colombia's broader economic system. The informal sector absorbs a significant portion of the labor force, especially in regions where state institutions are absent or ineffective. More strikingly, the drug trade has not only fueled violence and corruption but has also injected substantial liquidity into the formal economy. Profits from narcotrafficking are often laundered through real estate, agriculture, commerce, and even infrastructure projects, contributing, indirectly but measurably, to national growth indicators. As of 2005, drug cartels controlled nearly half of Colombia's most fertile agricultural lands (Centro de Pensamiento y Seguimiento al Diálogo de Paz, 2013, p.48). In this context, the boundaries between legal and illegal economies are porous. The permissiveness toward tax evasion, rural exclusion, and the state's selective presence have enabled a hybrid economy in which illicit capital supports formal investment. This reality challenges conventional notions of peacebuilding and development, as it questions whether a sustainable peace is possible without confronting the economic structures that have benefited from illegality.

What is particularly striking about the Colombian case is that, despite the intensity and duration of its internal armed conflict, the national economy continued to grow. This paradox was especially visible during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010). While violence intensified, particularly in rural zones, GDP also increased, and international trade expanded (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.5). This growth was driven by a neoliberal development model centered on extractive industries and large-scale agriculture, sectors that often operated in conflict zones, benefiting from territorial control by armed actors and weakened labor resistance.

At the same time, this model involved the criminalization of social protest, the assassination of union leaders, and the securitization of development. Middle-class security and investor confidence were prioritized, even as conflict and inequality persisted (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.5). In this context, conflict became compatible with economic growth, especially from the perspective of economic liberalism, which tends to interpret growth as a proxy for well-being (Dabène, 2020, p.92).

Under President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the narrative shifted: he presented peace not only as a moral and political imperative, but as a condition for sustainable economic modernization. He acknowledged that ongoing violence damaged Colombia's international image and limited the country's development prospects (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.23). However, despite this discursive change, the economic model itself remained virtually unchanged. Foreign partners, satisfied with Colombia's economic indicators, often turned a blind eye to the persistent social and territorial inequalities (Dabène, 2020, p.91).

Paradoxically, this reluctance to spend is not evenly distributed. Between the Uribe and Santos administrations, approximately 158.5 billion USD were allocated to defense and national security (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.36). In 2018, Colombia had the highest military spending in South America relative to its GDP, reaching 3.8%, while the implementation of the peace agreement averaged just 0.94% of GDP per year (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.38). This reveals a selective conception of "what is worth funding", security over transformation, containment over reconciliation.

In this light, the Colombian case illustrates a war-compatible economy, in which growth was made possible through violence, exclusion, and deregulation. The peace process, by contrast, has been under-resourced and politically constrained, reinforcing the idea that peace, for some, is too expensive, or too risky, to pursue seriously.

d. Invisible frontlines: Where peace didn't reach

In Colombia, the frontlines of war were often out of sight, but never out of impact. Colombia's history makes this conflict uniquely complex, and one of its most distinctive consequences is its deep territorial fragmentation. For several scholars, it is impossible to understand violence in Colombia without examining its connection to the country's spatial dynamics (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.11). As seen earlier, the conflict has revolved largely around land appropriation, making rural areas far more affected by violence than urban zones. This territorial divide was particularly evident during the 2016 peace agreement referendum: while urban centers tended to vote "No", a closer analysis of electoral maps reveals that the regions where the "Yes" vote prevailed were those that had suffered the most from the armed conflict (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.33).

The Colombian conflict has thus allowed large segments of the urban population to live in relative stability, protected by a political and economic environment disconnected from the violence taking place outside the cities. As Dabène (2020, p.63) notes, this disconnection allowed urban elites to maintain a Western-like lifestyle, shielded from the rural atrocities that remained invisible to both international observers and the urban public (Dabène, 2020, p.78).

This gap widened in the second half of the 20th century, as economic activity became increasingly concentrated in cities. According to the Escuela Nacional Sindical, Colombia experienced an urban growth rate of 6% per year between 1964 and 1973, leading to a significant rural exodus. This trend persists today: the rural population dropped from 35% in 2002 to 29.5% in 2017 (Coronel López, 2020). As a result, political attention and public investment have become increasingly urban-centric, reinforcing spatial inequalities. These are clearly reflected in income distribution: in 2024, Bogotá's GDP was nearly six times higher than that of Vichada, a department primarily dedicated to agriculture (Banco Mundial, 2024).

The geographical dimension of the conflict is not just a backdrop, it is constitutive. Land dispossession does not merely transfer ownership; it reshapes spatial and political power. As Grajales (2021, p.150) argues, dispossession restructures access to resources, displaces populations, and reorders local economies. It also legitimizes and conceals inequality, making it harder to contest.

In this fragmented national space, the concept of territorial peace promoted in the 2016 agreement aimed to acknowledge and correct these asymmetries. But reconnecting a country whose development, governance and violence have been historically uneven remains a major challenge. As Professor Bedoya pointed out in the interview, despite the agreement's discourse on local empowerment, key decisions regarding rural development continued to be made in Bogotá (Bedoya, interview, 2025). This ongoing centralization reproduces historical patterns of exclusion and weakens the role of local communities in shaping their own future.

e. The peace agreement of 2016: Between institutional rupture and economic continuity

The signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC on November 24, 2016, marked a turning point in the country's history. After more than five decades of armed conflict, the agreement was presented as a comprehensive roadmap toward reconciliation and transformation. Built around six pillars, including rural reform, political participation, end of hostilities, reintegration, drug policy, and a victim-centered transitional justice system, the peace deal stood out for its complexity and ambition. It was one of the most detailed and inclusive agreements ever signed in a post-conflict setting, shaped through four years of confidential and public negotiations in Havana, Cuba. Notably, the agreement introduced the concept of territorial peace, acknowledging that armed conflict had not affected all areas equally and that peace would need to be built from the ground up in regions most affected by violence and state neglect (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.31).

Yet the agreement, despite its progressive discourse, was built on fragile foundations. One of its key weaknesses was the lack of economic transformation. While rural reform was established as the first and arguably most structural point, it failed to challenge Colombia's export-oriented, neoliberal economic model. As Professor Bedoya highlights, one of the main limitations of the negotiation was precisely that it did not allow for any discussion of the agrarian model or the country's neoliberal economic structure, which set clear limits on the potential for real change (Bedoya, interview, 2025). No mechanism was proposed to shift the macroeconomic priorities of the state or to involve economic actors in building a more equitable system. Instead, the agreement remained largely within the logic of compensation and inclusion, without redistributing power or wealth. As a result, implementation has been slow and fragmented. By 2023, less than 1% of the promised 3 million hectares had been distributed to landless farmers, and less than half of land formalization targets had been reached (OECD, 2024).

The business sector, while consulted during the process, remained peripheral to the peace agenda. Some companies provided logistical support during the Havana talks, but they were not included as central actors in the peacebuilding process, nor were they held accountable for their historical role in the conflict. Transitional justice mechanisms, such as the Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP), focused primarily on guerrilla and state actors (Grajales, 2021). While the JEP's mandate allowed for the prosecution of third parties, including business actors who may have financed or collaborated with armed groups, these provisions were weakened under political pressure and rarely enforced. Investigations into corporate complicity remained in the early stages, with little real progress in terms of truth, reparations, or institutional reform (Grajales, 2021, p.155).

The fragility of the Colombian peace process became evident during the 2016 referendum. Despite the symbolic and political weight of the agreement, a narrow majority of voters rejected it, influenced by a campaign orchestrated by former president Álvaro Uribe. Framing the "Yes" vote as a threat to property rights, particularly for agribusiness elites, Uribe warned that it would legitimize the expropriation of land acquired *in good faith* (Grajales, 2021, p.129). This discourse, heavily amplified in urban centers, contributed significantly to the rejection of the agreement, with 50.2% of the votes cast against it (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.3). As Professor Bedoya explains, "the victory of the 'no' vote in the October 2016 plebiscite strengthened the right-wing opposition and entrenched the idea of 'tearing the peace agreement to shreds' in Colombia" (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Following the referendum, the government engaged in renegotiations with the opposition, leading to the removal or dilution of several key provisions (Grajales, 2021, p.129). However, this adjustment process only deepened public distrust and revealed underlying fractures in the peace process (de Nanteuil, 2016, p.2). Land redistribution was marginalized, and the government increasingly promoted an agro-export economic model (Grajales, 2021, p.135). Simultaneously, pressures to dismantle transitional justice mechanisms, particularly the JEP, highlighted the persistent power of Colombia's economic elites, eager to protect their interests from legal scrutiny (de Nanteuil et al., 2020, p.35; Grajales, 2021, p.158).

Although a revised agreement was eventually ratified and signed later that year, its transformative scope had been significantly eroded. The pursuit of peace unfolded without addressing the very economic and social foundations that had fueled the conflict, leaving Colombia not as a fully post-conflict society, but rather as a case of "warless capitalism," where forms of exclusion, territorial domination, and socio-economic marginalization persist under new guises (Grajales, 2021, p.143).

III. Comparative foundations: Business and peacebuilding elsewhere

Although the role of the private sector in conflict has often been overlooked in peace studies, the historical cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa offer valuable insights into how business actors can influence transitions from war to peace. Their engagement differed in terms of timing, structure, and motivation, but it was grounded in a shared recognition that prolonged violence was economically unsustainable.

a. Northern Ireland: Economic neutrality and political legitimacy

The case of Northern Ireland provides a striking example of coordinated and politically neutral business engagement in a deeply divided society. The Troubles was an ethno-nationalist conflict between, on one side, Loyalist Protestants who supported remaining in union with the United Kingdom, and on the other, Republican Catholics who sought reunification with the Republic of Ireland after the island's partition in 1921 (The Portland Trust, 2013, p.21). Over time, political and economic power became concentrated in the hands of the Protestants, leaving Catholics systematically marginalized, with significantly higher rates of poverty and unemployment. In 1985, the unemployment gap between the two communities even reached 14%, fueling resentment and reinforcing cycles of violence (The Portland Trust, 2007, p. 4).

Although initially reluctant to take a position, the business community began in the early 1990s to publicly acknowledge that prolonged conflict was directly undermining the region's economic development. Large employers, particularly those affiliated with the Nothern Ireland Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the regional branch of the UK's main business association, recognized that peace was not just a political issue, but a condition for market stability, foreign investment, and sectoral growth (International Alert, 2006, p.438). In 1991, the CBI Northern Ireland partnered with the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), its counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, to promote cross-border economic cooperation, aiming to foster interdependence with the Republic of Ireland as a stabilizing force (International Alert, 2006, p.438).

This shift was reinforced by empirical analysis. A 1994 report by DKM Economic Consultants, a respected economic research firm, outlined the immense cost of the conflict for Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and the Republic of Ireland (DKM Economic Consultants, 1994). That same year, the CBI published a landmark document, Peace – A Challenging New Era, which presented peace as an economic opportunity (International Alert, 2006, p.438). The concept of a "peace dividend" entered the public discourse, framing peace as a mechanism to reallocate resources from military expenditure to productive investment. The economic upturn that followed the 1994 ceasefire, characterized by lower unemployment and a surge in tourism, appeared to validate this approach (International Alert, 2006, p.439).

In 1995, with support from the UK and US governments, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), an organization established to promote economic and social progress in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, sponsored investment conferences and facilitated informal meetings between actors not yet in official dialogue (The Portland Trust, 2007, p. 20). When peace talks collapsed in 1996, seven major business and professional organizations, including the CBI and trade unions like the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, joined forces to form the **Group of Seven (GoS)** (Democratic Progress Institute, 2017, p.7). The GoS launched a media campaign urging citizens and political leaders to choose "peace, progress, and prosperity" over sectarian division. It also circulated open letters to employers and employees, emphasizing the tangible benefits of peace (International Alert, 2006, p.441).

Importantly, the GoS maintained political neutrality while acting as a strategic intermediary. It engaged with all parties, including those excluded from formal negotiations, and served as a calming presence during crises, such as the 1996 Drumcree Orange March tensions, which were annual Protestant parades that often sparked confrontations with Catholic communities (The Portland Trust, 2007, p. 21). Throughout, the Group framed peace as vital to economic revival, warning of the severe consequences should the talks collapse. To communicate this, each of its five key meetings between 1996 and 1998 was followed by a public awareness campaign (Democratic Progress Institute, 2017, p.8).

These efforts proved fruitful. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed. It established a political framework aimed at ending three decades of conflict, introducing a power-sharing government and strengthening cross-border cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, the agreement did not close the chapter; it marked the beginning of a complex implementation phase.

The private sector, along with key figures such as Sir George Quigley, president of the Group of Seven, actively supported this fragile moment of transition. In early 1999, as tensions threatened to undermine progress, the GoS publicly called for the activation of the power-sharing executive and the disarmament of paramilitary groups, delivering a clear message: "To succeed, we need the vigorous dynamic and the self-confidence generated by a society which is able to achieve reconciliation and build a common purpose” (International Alert, 2006, p. 442).

The newly created Northern Ireland Business Alliance (NIBA) complemented these efforts by coordinating private-sector initiatives focused on economic regeneration and long-term development (The Portland Trust, 2007, p. 24). The private sector thus remained a consistent and stabilizing force throughout the transition.

What makes the Northern Ireland case particularly distinctive is the emergence of a unified business voice: the Group of Seven, a coalition that deliberately adopted a politically neutral stance. Rather than defending the interests of specific sectors or companies, it prioritized broader goals such as peace and economic stability. This allowed the private sector to gain legitimacy in a context marked by long-standing political and sectarian divisions.

b. South Africa: From complicity to structured mediation

South Africa offers also a particularly revealing case of how the private sector can participate in a transition to peace. What makes this historical case especially interesting and relevant is the evolution from active complicity in a violent regime to becoming a central force in peacebuilding. The country’s conflict was rooted in the apartheid system established in 1948, which institutionalized racial segregation and created a rigid social hierarchy that benefited the white minority, primarily composed of Afrikaners.

In the early decades of apartheid, most South African businesses, including major international firms, directly benefited from and contributed to the regime. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), companies were central to sustaining the apartheid economy and therefore shared moral responsibility for its abuses (Valsamakis, 2012, p. 83). The mining sector, in particular, was singled out. Its labor needs and segregationist practices, such as influx control, which was designed to prevent Black families from settling in cities, shaped apartheid policies even more than the Afrikaner political elite (Valsamakis, 2012).

However, by the 1970s, cracks began to appear. Rising labor unrest, international pressure, and economic instability challenged the sustainability of apartheid. After the 1976 Soweto uprising, where students protested against the imposition of Afrikaans in schools, key business leaders began calling for reform. Among them was Harry Oppenheimer, CEO of the Anglo-American mining conglomerate, who argued that apartheid was incompatible with economic growth (Valsamakis, 2012, p.85). That same year, the business community launched the Urban Foundation. This organization aimed to promote gradual reforms and advocate for the legalization of Black trade unions (The Portland Trust, 2013, p.30; Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.15).

The decisive turning point came in the 1980s, as international sanctions, balance of payments crises, and escalating violence rendered apartheid increasingly unsustainable (Valsamakis, 2012). In 1985, several business leaders began supporting the United Democratic Front (UDF), a broad anti-apartheid coalition of trade unions, religious groups, and student movements (Marais & Davies, 2015, p.5). They also participated in the now-famous Trek to Lusaka, an informal meeting with the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's main Black liberation movement, then still banned (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p. 9). Despite continued violence, including attacks from the ANC's armed wing, the private sector became more actively involved in fostering political dialogue (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.14).

In 1987, secret meetings between Afrikaner elites and the ANC resumed in Senegal, paving the way for the creation of the **Consultative Business Movement (CBM)**. Composed of over 80 business leaders and civil society representatives, the CBM positioned itself as a non-partisan platform for mediation and trust-building (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.16). It gained legitimacy by including actors from liberal, student, and religious circles, and by engaging across the political spectrum: from conservative Afrikaners to Black nationalists (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.17).

During the turbulent early 1990s, the CBM became a key institutional actor, helping organize the 1991 Peace Conference, contributing to the National Peace Accord, and supporting structures such as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and the Multi-Party Negotiating Forum (MPNF) (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.19). The CBM's legitimacy and flexibility allowed it to intervene when talks stalled, particularly during crises like the Boipatong massacre, and to mediate between actors who lacked trust in one another (Marais & Davies, 2015, p.8).

In the lead-up to the 1994 elections, the CBM played a pivotal role in defusing tensions and bringing reluctant parties, such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), into the democratic process (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.20). Its involvement ensured broad-based participation and a relatively peaceful transition, in a context where state institutions alone could not guarantee consensus (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016). The April 1994 elections, which brought Nelson Mandela to power, marked the formal conclusion of the peace process.

In South Africa, the democratization process cannot be understood without considering the power and mobilization of organized labor. After decades of stagnation and repression, South African miners began organizing wildcat strikes in the 1970s, making the sector virtually ungovernable (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.11). Faced with economic disruption, major companies like Anglo American acknowledged the need to legalize Black trade unions, not only to avoid chaos, but also to modernize the labor force and reduce dependence on costly white labor (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.11).

By 1979, Black unions were officially legalized, and membership soared. The formation of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in 1985, led in part by Cyril Ramaphosa, marked a decisive moment. COSATU became a pillar of the Tripartite Alliance, alongside the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) (Makgetla & Shapiro, 2016, p.11). Over the years, it secured formal recognition through agreements such as the Laboria Minute (1990) and institutionalized its role via dialogue platforms like the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), established in 1995 to provide a formal forum for negotiation and consultation on economic and social policies (Marais & Davies, 2015, p.12; Valsamakis, 2012, p.153). This meant that workers' voices were not only heard but structurally embedded in the transition process.

Even after the signing of the 1994 agreement, the private sector remained deeply involved, shifting from mediating peace to influencing the country's post-conflict economic direction. According to Valsamakis (2012, pp. 90-98), after 1994 the private sector maintained its influence over economic policy. While the ANC initially promoted redistributive measures through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), economic actors advocated for a more conventional approach, based on market stability. Their lobbying contributed to the adoption of the GEAR strategy, a neoliberal framework centered on liberalization, deficit control, and privatization. This shift was contested by COSATU and the SACP, who accused the business sector of using its early support for peace as a strategic move to preserve its interests.

What distinguishes the South African case is the fact that the same actors who contributed to systemic violence later helped dismantle it. Their transformation was not spontaneous, but emerged from a convergence of international pressure, social mobilization, and economic necessity. Businesses had to build legitimacy from a position of mistrust. The CBM and its partners gained influence by committing to dialogue and neutrality, although this legitimacy was later challenged due to their resistance to the redistributive measures pursued by the post-apartheid government.

c. Private sector as a peace actor: Lessons from two transitions

The cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa show that, under pressure or changing incentives, businesses can move from a passive or complicit role to active participation in peacebuilding. In both contexts, private actors understood that prolonged violence threatened economic stability. They responded by forming coalitions, engaging in dialogue, and contributing to the transition.

What unites these two experiences is the idea that peace became a shared economic interest. Private sector engagement was not incidental; it was structured and coordinated, carrying significant political weight.

Colombia, however, followed a different path. It was marked by fragmentation, institutional gaps, and limited private sector involvement in the peace process. This contrast is not merely analytical. It was also acknowledged by former Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, the architect of the 2016 peace agreement. During a visit to Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, in 2016, Santos described the Northern Irish case as a point of reference, emphasizing how peace had attracted investment and brought urban renewal: “We can do the same if we are able to reach peace” (Democratic Progress Institute, 2017, p. 10). His words underscore why comparing Colombia to other transitions is not only useful but necessary.

IV. Business engagement in Colombia: A dynamic comparative analysis

This section explores the evolution of business engagement across the different phases of the peace process in Colombia and highlights how these experiences differ from those of Northern Ireland and South Africa.

a. Before the peace agreement

Far from being passive observers, many businesses in Colombia played an active or complicit role in the armed conflict. During the 1980s and 1990s, both national and international companies sought to protect their operations in contested areas by forming informal alliances with paramilitary groups. As mentioned earlier, in regions such as Urabá, large agribusinesses, particularly in the banana sector including the company Chiquita, made security arrangements with the AUC, a paramilitary group responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the conflict, transferring them thousands of dollars in exchange for protection (National Security Archive, 2018).

This pattern of collusion recalls the role played by South African mining companies under apartheid. There too, corporate actors benefited from violent exclusion, shaping labor and spatial policies to serve their interests (Valsamakis, 2012). In both contexts, violence was not simply endured by businesses; it was structured into their operations and risk management.

In Colombia, these practices were widespread. In 2017, the Attorney General's Office launched investigations into over 200 companies suspected of financing paramilitary activity (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2017). These dynamics were particularly concentrated in extractive and agricultural regions, where the interests of businesses, landowners, and armed groups converged. While union leaders and peasant organizations were targeted as subversive threats, corporate assets were secured and expanded (Grajales, 2021).

Despite this deep entanglement in the conflict, the Colombian private sector did not develop a coordinated response or adopt a public stance in favor of peace before the Havana negotiations. In contrast to Northern Ireland and South Africa, where structured platforms such as the Group of Seven and the Consultative Business Movement were created during the negotiation phases, Colombia lacked a similar business-led initiative.

Yet national business associations did exist. The country's main organization, the Asociación Nacional de Empresarios de Colombia (National Business Association of Colombia, ANDI), founded in 1944 and representing more than 1,600 companies as of 2024 (Andi del Futuro, 2024), limited its involvement during this phase of the conflict to development-oriented initiatives. Between 2009 and 2013, ANDI partnered with the Fundación Ideas para la Paz to run a national program on business preparedness for peace. The initiative addressed ethical dilemmas, local collaboration, and strategies to manage extortion. At the program's closing event, ANDI president Bruce Mac Master acknowledged that business is not an island within society, but rather a piece of the puzzle, a link in the chain (FIP, 2014). Yet this discourse did not translate into political visibility or strategic mobilization.

In contrast, the turning points in South Africa and Northern Ireland came when the economic costs of conflict, through sanctions, instability, or declining investment, became too high to ignore. In both cases, peace was reframed as a condition for growth and business legitimacy. In Colombia, despite decades of conflict, this shift never materialized. Businesses continued to operate in fragmented ways, with no collective reframing of peace as a national imperative.

b. During the peace negotiations

Between 2012 and 2016, as the peace talks unfolded in Havana, the Colombian private sector began to cautiously position itself as a potential stakeholder in the national dialogue. The ANDI publicly described the 2016 agreement as a "historic opportunity" for stability and growth (Martin, 2020). Through its foundation, it mobilized over 150 companies in support of initiatives such as inclusive hiring and responsible supply chains. However, in a polarized political context, many firms refrained from taking clear public positions. Reflecting this cautious stance, ANDI deliberately avoided using the word "peace," opting instead for the more neutral and business-friendly language of "competitividad inclusiva" which translates as "inclusive competitiveness" (Martin, 2020).

This gap between discourse and action reflected a broader ambiguity. A 2015 survey of 200 Colombian companies found that 90 percent of respondents believed peace would be good for business, primarily due to legal stability and expanded access to markets (González Mendoza, 2015). Yet most of them expressed uncertainty about how to engage in practice. There was widespread concern about the cost of reconstruction and the lack of clear frameworks for corporate participation. This uncertainty was compounded by the absence of coordination mechanisms and institutional guidance. As a result, companies acted mostly in isolation, through discreet partnerships or informal lobbying, rather than as part of a unified effort.

This fragmented engagement stands in contrast to what occurred in Northern Ireland and South Africa during their respective negotiation periods. In both cases, business coalitions emerged not only to endorse peace in principle, but to publicly support it as an economic and national imperative. In Northern Ireland, the Group of Seven brought together employers and trade unions in a highly visible and politically neutral campaign. Its members engaged with all political sides and played a calming role during moments of crisis. Similarly, in South Africa, the Consultative Business Movement provided a platform for mediation, bringing together representatives from across the political spectrum and helping to sustain dialogue during moments of institutional breakdown (International Alert, 2006; The Portland Trust, 2007; Valsamakis, 2012).

In Colombia, by contrast, no such coalition emerged. Despite efforts by ANDI and other organizations to prepare the private sector for a post-conflict scenario, there was no unified business voice to publicly support the peace process. This absence became particularly visible after the October 2016 referendum, when the initial peace agreement was narrowly rejected. In the aftermath, several influential business leaders aligned with conservative political forces to push for revisions, targeting sections of the agreement dealing with land reform, political participation, and transitional justice for corporate actors (Grajales, 2021). The revised version, ultimately ratified, preserved institutional peace but watered down many of its most transformative elements.

This ambivalence echoes certain dynamics in South Africa, where parts of the business community actively participated in the transition, while others sought to shape the post-apartheid settlement in ways that protected their interests (Valsamakis, 2012). In Colombia, many firms welcomed the end of armed confrontation, but few were willing to support reforms that might challenge established property regimes or open the door to accountability for past complicity.

Ultimately, during the negotiation phase, business actors in Colombia positioned themselves not as agents of transformation, but as guarantors of institutional continuity. Their discourse helped legitimize the peace process, but their engagement remained cautious. In the absence of a unified and proactive coalition like the Consultative Business Movement or the Group of Seven, the Colombian private sector failed to play a bridging role between elite interests and the broader demands of society.

c. After the peace agreement

After the 2016 peace agreement, many expected the private sector to play a more visible and constructive role in Colombia's post-conflict reconstruction. In practice, business engagement remained limited, fragmented, and often symbolic (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2021;

Observatorio de Inversión Privada, 2022). A few companies launched reintegration programs or supported community development. Terpel, a fuel distribution company, implemented hiring schemes for ex-combatants and supported small-scale micro-enterprises, particularly in the agri-food sector where low-skilled labor is in demand (Scola et al., 2025). Meanwhile, companies such as Sura Insurance and Grupo Nutresa, a leading food processing company, adopted a different approach by investing in technical skills development for young ex-combatants, often through targeted training programs and job placement opportunities (Scola et al., 2025). These initiatives aimed to foster both social reintegration and long-term professional growth, aligning corporate responsibility with broader economic dynamism.

Professor Bedoya also noted that business-led peace initiatives remain very rare, a reality she has personally encountered in her academic career where she seldom crosses paths with companies genuinely engaged in this field. However, she expressed encouragement following a project presented during a rural development working group in April 2025. During this session, Nacional de Chocolates, reportedly the only company represented in her group, introduced a partnership with the Petro government (2022-2026) to support cacao-based productive projects in five conflict-affected territories. While this kind of engagement is not the norm in Colombia, Professor Bedoya emphasized the importance of closely following such initiatives to understand their potential impact (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Despite these few encouraging efforts, most business initiatives remained isolated and lacked a systemic approach. Many major firms continued to prioritize regulatory stability and market expansion, rather than engaging directly with the challenges of peacebuilding and addressing the needs of rural communities most affected by the conflict.

This pattern stands in contrast with the post-agreement landscapes of South Africa and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the creation of the Northern Ireland Business Alliance helped coordinate private sector involvement in economic regeneration. While the approach remained focused on investment and cross-border trade, business actors stayed publicly engaged and contributed to reinforcing the legitimacy of the peace process (The Portland Trust, 2007). In South Africa, the early role of the Consultative Business Movement evolved into a formalized presence in public dialogue spaces like the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), established as the institutional embodiment of South Africa's social contract between government, business, labor, and civil society. Although the private sector often lobbied to protect its interests, it remained structurally embedded in shaping the economic transition (Valsamakis, 2012).

In Colombia, by contrast, post-agreement engagement by the business sector has lacked both structure and continuity. In May 2024, Bruce Mac Master, president of ANDI, reiterated the organization's support for peace, while insisting that any negotiation must remain anchored in constitutional order and broad national consensus. He warned against processes perceived as politically imposed or exclusionary, reaffirming ANDI's commitment to peace under conditions of legal stability and national unity (Forero, 2024). This discourse confirmed ANDI's enduring role as a guardian of institutional continuity, not as a driver of transformative change.

To encourage private investment in peacebuilding, the Colombian government introduced several public policy instruments. These included Obras por Impuestos ("Works for Taxes"), which allows companies to invest in infrastructure projects in exchange for tax benefits, and targeted incentives in Zonas Más Afectadas por el Conflicto Armado (ZOMAC, or "Most Affected Areas by the Armed Conflict"). Other programs, such as the Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET, or "Development Programs with a Territorial Approach") and Zonas Futuro ("Future Zones"), aimed to attract investment to the rural regions most affected by the conflict (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2021). However, participation in these schemes remained voluntary, often limited to large companies, and typically concentrated around their existing operational areas. Their impact in historically excluded territories remained marginal and largely technical in scope (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2021).

According to Professor Bedoya, business disengagement was not merely passive. Under the Duque administration (2018-2022), segments of the business elite actively influenced public policy to protect their own interests. She describes a form of "corporate government," where private actors contributed to redirecting state resources originally intended for rural reform toward their own benefit. This appropriation weakened the redistributive ambition of the peace agreement and marked a deeper departure from the idea of business neutrality (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Colombia's post-agreement context reveals deeper structural barriers. Corporate power remains concentrated in urban centers, far from the territories most in need of reconstruction. Business engagement remains voluntary, selective, and guided by conventional CSR logic. Unlike in South Africa and Northern Ireland, where at least segments of the private sector assumed a national role and continued to shape the post-conflict landscape, Colombian firms largely returned to silence. Their support for peace, when it exists, is framed within a narrow logic of risk management and institutional preservation.

In the end, this creates a paradox. Businesses benefit from the stability brought by peace but do little to sustain or extend it. Their silence during the conflict has persisted into the post-agreement period, no longer as protection, but as strategic detachment.

d. From comparison to interpretation: Understanding Colombia's divergence

The comparative analysis of South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Colombia reveals a striking divergence in the role of business during transitions from conflict to peace. In both South Africa and Northern Ireland, business actors, initially passive or complicit, gradually recognized that sustained violence was economically untenable. Over time, they organized into cross-sectoral coalitions, framed peace as a shared economic interest, and positioned themselves as legitimate participants in national dialogue. Their engagement was not always transformative, but it was structured, collective, and politically visible.

In Colombia, by contrast, no such shift occurred. Across the three phases of the peace process (before, during, and after the 2016 agreement), the private sector remained fragmented, strategically disengaged, and focused on continuity rather than transformation. While some firms supported peace rhetorically or through localized projects, there was no collective reckoning with the private sector's historical role in the conflict, no national coordination platform, and no significant pressure from civil society or institutions to engage meaningfully.

This absence of unified business leadership was further reinforced by sectoral fragmentation. Agricultural and extractive firms, often historically tied to land concentration or paramilitary activity, remained silent or defensive. Urban-based service firms endorsed peace from a distance, disconnected from the rural territories most affected by violence. As a result, no common narrative or cross-sectoral vision emerged, and the private sector failed to reposition itself as a credible stakeholder in the post-conflict transition.

This divergence cannot be explained solely by business strategy. It also reflects the architecture of Colombia's peace process. As de Nanteuil (2016) explains, the negotiations were narrowly confined to the government and the FARC, excluding other key actors such as civil society, organized labor, and business coalitions. Unlike in South Africa or Northern Ireland, where broad participation lent legitimacy to the process and fostered societal buy-in, Colombia's elite-driven approach limited opportunities for collective engagement and cross-sector coordination.

Beyond corporate trajectories, this limited engagement also reflects the nature of Colombia's democratic transition itself. Drawing on de (Coppens et al., 2023), democratic transitions can generally follow two paths: a diachronic transition, which entails a rupture with the previous regime and a redefinition of political and institutional foundations, or a synchronic transition, which seeks to repair and restore a damaged democratic project without altering its core structures. Colombia clearly falls into the latter category. The peace process did not mark a break with the past, nor did it dismantle the institutional, economic, or territorial arrangements that had enabled violence to persist. Instead, it aimed to re-establish democratic normalcy within an unchanged framework. This logic of continuity limited the potential for structural reform and contributed to the absence of pressure on private actors to reconfigure their role. In this context, the business sector had little incentive to engage in a transformative way, and the transition itself remained largely managerial rather than transformative.

Ultimately, the Colombian case illustrates how the absence of rupture with the past, with economic structures, and with elite governance has limited the emergence of a business sector willing or able to support inclusive peacebuilding. In the absence of public pressure, a unifying narrative, or participatory institutions, corporate engagement has remained scattered, reactive, and largely symbolic.

V. Rethinking business and peacebuilding: Sectoral and conceptual insights

This section brings together two complementary perspectives to deepen the analysis of business engagement in peacebuilding. It begins with a sectoral approach, using the tourism industry as a case study to highlight its potential and limitations in Colombia's post-conflict context. Then, it presents the final output of this study: an original analytical framework, a typology of corporate trajectories from war to peace, developed through insights drawn from Colombia and historical cases.

a. Tourism as a contested path to peace: Between inclusion and exclusion

This thesis has argued that Colombia's private sector failed to assume a unified and accountable role in the country's transition from war to peace. Throughout the analysis, a sectoral approach has been adopted to explore how different economic sectors have influenced, and been influenced by, the dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding. It has become clear that sectors such as agriculture and mining are intrinsically tied to the conflict, due to their close connection to land, territorial control, and resource extraction. These sectors have historically reinforced patterns of inequality, exclusion, and violence, making it difficult to envision them as drivers of transformative peace. That said, the case of South Africa, where the mining sector played a contested but significant role in supporting the transition to peace, reminds us that such transformation is not impossible.

Against this backdrop, attention now turns to a sector that appears to offer a different perspective: tourism. Unlike agriculture or mining, tourism is often perceived as less directly entangled in the conflict, and therefore potentially better positioned to contribute to peacebuilding. At first glance, tourism seems to provide an alternative model, one capable of fostering reconciliation, rural development, and the reimagination of Colombia's cultural and natural landscapes. Urban-based service companies, social entrepreneurs, and government initiatives increasingly promote tourism as a tool for inclusion and peace. Programs such as "Turismo para una Cultura de Paz" (Tourism for a Culture of Peace), as well as community-based tourism initiatives in former conflict zones, are often cited as evidence of the sector's potential to foster inclusion, symbolic repair, and economic revitalization (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2021; Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2023).

However, this optimistic narrative conceals deeper tensions. As Professor Bedoya points out, tourism promoted within the current economic framework often replicates dynamics of exclusion and dispossession already seen in other sectors. Reflecting on urban transformations in cities like Medellín, she observes that both legal and illegal power networks influence the city's reconfiguration, with the tourism boom fueling real estate speculation, displacement, and rising rents (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Bedoya further warns that even well-intentioned tourism initiatives risk perpetuating systemic inequalities if they do not challenge the underlying economic model: "Ultimately, the solution is to change the model. Because under this current model, some accumulate wealth while others become increasingly impoverished." (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

She also highlights the social consequences of these dynamics, noting the increasing divides between locals and foreign visitors: "Foreigners receive first-class treatment—while locals are second-class citizens, because they can't spend as much". There is therefore growing sexual exploitation, drug tourism, and loss of community identity. (Bedoya, interview, 2025).

Dr. Angela María Ocampo a specialist in human rights, peacebuilding, and environmental justice reinforces this critique, urging a deeper reflection on how tourism operates under existing power structures. "Tourism is not usually thought of as extractive," she explains, "but it can be analyzed as one… ," and adds, "Especially in tropical countries like Colombia, where there's this idea of the exotic — exotic biodiversity, exotic women — it becomes another form of extraction" (Ocampo, interview, 2025).

She also warns against uncritical state-led narratives that frame tourism as a universal solution. Ocampo observes that "as a country, Colombia's national policy—especially after the peace agreement and now with this government—promotes the idea that 'Colombia, the country of beauty' can turn tourism into a major industry. That's the slogan," and she adds that "it's important to ask: who gains, and who loses from this narrative?" (Ocampo, interview, 2025).

While these critiques reveal the structural limitations of tourism in Colombia's peace process, they should not obscure the existence of alternative, grounded initiatives that challenge dominant logics from within. In certain cases, tourism has been consciously reimagined to support ecological protection, community inclusion and territorial care, offering glimpses of what a more just and peace-oriented model might look like.

One such initiative is led by Paula Sedano, co-founder of the Fundación Diamante de las Aguas in San José del Guaviare. Echoing academic critiques, she denounces the dynamics of mass tourism, stating: "Mass tourism, for example—at what cost? Often, local communities aren't included, and the focus is purely economic. Here, tourism must be done differently. It should be grounded in nature, local knowledge, and culture. This is a unique place, and we can't apply the same extractive tourism model where people just come to take photos. We need a kind of tourism that's integrated with the territory and its people" (Paula Sedano, interview, 2025).

Yet her testimony also illustrates how tourism, when approached differently, can act as a meaningful tool for peacebuilding. In her words, "Tourism is one of the activities that helps promote peace. We're in a region that has experienced violent events, and tourism has helped rebuild the social fabric. It contributes to peacebuilding from the territories—especially when done differently, like we're doing here, in close partnership with communities. This kind of work helps weave networks of peace, which are essential. Peace means tranquility, a sense of rootedness in the territory. It's something we have to build ourselves by involving everyone—communities, children, women" (Paula Sedano, interview, 2025).

Her work shows how reclaiming local narratives and fostering direct, trust-based relationships with visitors can transform perceptions and relationships to place. Far from being limited to defensive strategies, such projects carry an aspirational dimension. As Sedano explains, "Our hope is that the foundation will be officially recognized as a science center by the Ministry of Science. There currently aren't any recognized science centers in the Amazon region, so we hope to become one of the first. We want to keep promoting knowledge, science, and responsible tourism—and become a reference point not only for Colombia, but also for Latin America" (Paula Sedano, interview, 2025).

While the experience of Fundación Diamante de las Aguas illustrates the transformative potential of tourism rooted in community inclusion and territorial care, a closer analysis reveals that such alternatives remain fragile within broader structural constraints. Some academic perspectives, notably those of Diana Ojeda, offer a more critical and vigilant analysis of the sector's limitations, even in its so-called alternative models. In her 2012 analysis, Ojeda highlights how ecotourism, though framed as sustainable, has facilitated land dispossession through militarized conservation, portraying peasant and fishing communities as ecological threats. This process of exclusion was justified through a discourse of environmental protection, while in reality advancing elite interests and corporate tourism concessions. In a broader perspective, Devine and Ojeda (2021) argue that such practices exemplify a form of "violent socio-spatial reconfiguration," in which tourism development restructures land access, displaces local agency, and produces commodified landscapes at the expense of community sovereignty.

These patterns are not isolated. In her 2013 study, Ojeda further demonstrates how tourism was explicitly mobilized by the Colombian state during the "Democratic Security" period as a tool of territorial control. Campaigns like "Vive Colombia, viaja por ella" (Live Colombia, travel through it) framed tourism as a civic act and evidence of regained state authority, naturalizing military presence along travel routes and turning touristic landscapes into performances of order and securitization. The result was a form of "banal security geography," where armed soldiers and displaced populations coexisted behind a façade of normalcy (Ojeda, 2013, p. 765).

These experiences demonstrate that tourism is not inherently extractive or peaceful; it is shaped by those who design and inhabit it. This conclusion shifts the focus away from the sector itself and toward the broader structural conditions that shape its outcomes. In Colombia, as elsewhere, sustainable and just peacebuilding cannot rely on tourism or economic activity alone. It must be rooted in a transformation of the development model that centers territorial justice, equitable governance, and historical accountability.

While this chapter adopted a sectoral lens to examine the role of business in peacebuilding, the analysis of the tourism sector reveals that its apparent distance from the core dynamics of the conflict does not automatically translate into a more inclusive or transformative form of engagement. On the contrary, the complex environment in which organizations operate and the prevailing Colombian economic model risk perpetuating extractive and exploitative dynamics, even in promising sub-sectors such as ecotourism.

This analysis thus challenges the notion of positioning tourism as a potential pathway to peace or as a sector capable of driving transformative change. However, it is important to avoid broad generalizations and to recognize the value of exemplary initiatives, such as those led by Fundación Diamante de las Aguas. Once again, the Colombian conflict reveals its complexity and the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches.

b. Analytical framework: Typology of business trajectories from war to peace

This thesis has shown that the role of business in peacebuilding is anything but straightforward. It is a highly sensitive and complex issue, shaped by a wide range of factors including historical legacies, territorial presence, institutional frameworks, and market dynamics. The boundary between complicity, opportunism, and constructive engagement is often blurred. Some companies have benefited from violence, others have remained silent or distant, while a few have adapted to new post-conflict realities. In many cases, these positions evolve over time, defying binary classifications.

To better understand these shifting dynamics, and building on the insights developed through this research, this section proposes a typology aimed at interpreting how companies navigate the transition from conflict to peace. At the heart of this reflection lies a guiding question: are the businesses involved in peace today the same ones that contributed to violence yesterday?

The typology outlines four trajectories that help conceptualize different patterns of corporate positioning in post-conflict environments. These categories are not exhaustive, nor do they claim to predict or prescribe behavior. Rather, they offer an interpretive lens to grasp the depth, logic, and evolution of corporate strategies in societies emerging from violence.

Trajectory 1: Continuity – Business as usual

In this scenario, companies maintain their pre-conflict practices into the post-conflict phase. They may have benefited from violence, through land appropriation, collusion with armed actors, or the suppression of labor rights, but refuse to acknowledge this history or modify their operations. Their post-conflict strategy focuses on stability and legal security, not on accountability or transformation. This trajectory is marked by institutional silence, where businesses operate as if nothing has changed.

Trajectory 2: Peace haze – The illusion of engagement

Here, companies publicly align themselves with the peace process but in a purely symbolic or superficial way. They adopt the discourse of reconciliation, promote peace-themed branding, or implement isolated CSR projects but without structural change. This “peace haze” creates the illusion of corporate responsibility while preserving the economic status quo. The result is a discursive alignment without substantive engagement, which may defuse criticism without contributing meaningfully to peace.

Trajectory 3: Strategic repositioning – Adapting to post-conflict markets

In this trajectory, companies acknowledge the shift brought by the peace process and adapt accordingly. This adaptation may be driven by reputational concerns, regulatory changes, or access to new markets and territories. These firms revise their practices, sometimes engage in reintegration programs, and attempt to reposition themselves as responsible actors. This scenario reflects a pragmatic transformation, where peace becomes a factor in business planning, but not necessarily a moral commitment.

Trajectory 4: Transformative engagement – Peace as corporate responsibility

In the final trajectory, some companies embrace peacebuilding as an integral part of their identity and mission. These businesses go beyond risk management and actively seek to repair the harms of conflict. They engage in long-term local development, support transitional justice mechanisms, and collaborate with communities and victims. This proactive commitment is rare but represents a model for ethical and sustainable corporate behavior in post-conflict societies.

Furthermore, as this analysis has shown, sectoral variations are fundamental to understanding corporate engagement in peace processes. In Colombia, companies in agriculture, extractive industries, and services have followed markedly different trajectories. These reflect their historical entanglements, territorial presence, and market structure. Similarly, the experiences of South Africa and Northern Ireland demonstrate that business trajectories are not fixed. Companies once complicit in violence can, under sufficient pressure or shifting incentives, reposition themselves as promoters of peace.

Therefore, the typology proposed here should not be seen as a static or deterministic model. It is a tool for navigating complexity, one that requires sensitivity to sectoral, temporal, and contextual specificities. Understanding business behavior in post-conflict environments requires moving beyond essentialist perspectives to grasp the interaction between structural constraints, strategic calculations, and political opportunities.

VI. Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand why Colombian businesses have largely remained on the sidelines of the peace process, despite the potential economic benefits associated with the 2016 agreement. The central hypothesis is that this disengagement goes beyond a simple lack of incentives. It reflects a political deficit, marked by the absence of a collective, public, and cross-sectoral commitment from the private sector.

The research has uncovered distinct dynamics that help explain the absence of private sector leadership. Colombia's private sector is deeply fragmented, both sectorally and territorially, which has prevented the emergence of a unified voice for peace. While the agricultural and extractive sectors are historically tied to the conflict, urban service companies have often supported peace from a distance, without a real connection to the territories most affected by violence. The peace agreement itself, focused primarily on demobilization, gave limited attention to economic transformation, thus reducing opportunities for meaningful business involvement. In contrast, the cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland show that, under certain conditions, the private sector can become a visible and influential political actor in transitional contexts. In Colombia, this dynamic has not materialized. The sectoral analysis of tourism further demonstrates that even in sectors perceived as peaceful, meaningful engagement depends on the economic models adopted and the nature of their relationship with local communities and territories.

These findings challenge the assumption that businesses will naturally support peace when it aligns with their interests. On the contrary, private sector engagement is shaped by historical legacies, institutional incentives, and political choices. The typology developed in this research, ranging from continuity to transformative engagement, offers an analytical tool to understand how companies navigate the space between war and peace, and to what extent their actions promote or hinder structural change.

The Colombian conflict and the broader field of peace economics are highly complex, and this research therefore presents certain limitations. It is based on a limited number of interviews, primarily with academic and community-based actors, which restricts the diversity of perspectives. The lack of access to major private sector representatives, combined with the challenge of addressing such a sensitive topic from abroad, constrained the empirical scope of the study. Furthermore, the complexity of the Colombian conflict, its informal dimensions, and the opacity surrounding business links with armed groups posed significant challenges to documentation and analysis.

Future research could deepen the tourism-focused analysis by interviewing companies involved in more "extractive" or large-scale forms of tourism, in order to capture a broader spectrum of perspectives. It would also be valuable to expand the sectoral approach by examining other service industries such as finance, education, or technology. The analysis of tourism has shown that even in sectors perceived as less directly linked to the conflict, the prevailing economic model can still reproduce deep inequalities and limit the sector's contribution to peace. Studying other service sectors could help determine whether this pattern holds more broadly, or whether some sectors offer greater potential for inclusive transformation in post-conflict contexts. It would also be relevant to observe how companies evolve under future political scenarios, particularly under the Petro government, which explicitly seeks to promote a more redistributive and inclusive model. Lastly, further research could explore whether new coalitions are emerging between businesses, civil society, and public institutions, and examine the potential role that ANDI could play in shaping a more inclusive post-conflict economic agenda.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that peace is not only about silencing guns or signing agreements. It is also an economic and political project shaped by decisions about what to preserve and what to transform. The private sector holds considerable power in this process. Whether that power is used to defend existing privileges or to support a more inclusive future remains a major political question. Recognizing this ambivalence is a necessary step, but not a sufficient one. The challenge now is to create the conditions for a truly transformative and collectively supported commitment to a peace that is just, lasting, and rooted in the territories.

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VIII. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview with Professor Maria Rocio Bedoya Bedoya (University of Antioquia)

The following transcript is based on an expert interview conducted with Professor Maria Rocio Bedoya Bedoya on May 6, 2025, as part of the empirical research for this thesis. The discussion, originally conducted in Spanish, has been translated into English. It focused on rural reform, structural barriers to peace implementation, and the role of the private sector in Colombia.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Before we begin, I'd like to ask if you're okay with me recording this conversation. I'd like to be able to cite some of your insights in my thesis, if you're comfortable with that.

[Professor Bedoya]

Yes, I'm fine with that.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Great, thank you very much.

[Professor Bedoya]

By the way, how do you pronounce it? Elisa or Elise?

[Elise Lefèvre]

Elisa is fine, either works, really.

[Professor Bedoya]

Perfect, understood.

[Elise Lefèvre]

So, as I mentioned in my email, my thesis examines the role of the private sector in Colombia's peace process. I'm comparing it to the cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland, where businesses played an active and collective role in the transition. In contrast, in Colombia, their role has been much more limited, which leads me to question the historical and structural dynamics that might explain this difference.

I also build on the observation that while a peace agreement was signed in 2016, several authors have questioned its transformative scope. Some describe it as warless capitalism—a formal peace without structural transformation, where exclusion and domination persist. Today, we can see rising levels of violence in some regions of Colombia.

So I'd like to begin with a more general question: how would you interpret the current moment of Colombia's peace process, eight years after the signing of the agreement?

[Professor Bedoya]

Well, first of all, thank you for the invitation. It's true that I'm quite busy, but these are topics I'm passionate about, and that's why I'm happy to meet with you and contribute to the reflections you're developing in your research.

I’ve been following the implementation of the peace agreement, especially Point One—the one related to comprehensive rural development. This led me to examine the historical context of land issues in Colombia, and then to analyze what was demanded in the agreement, what was actually agreed upon, and what has happened since.

Since I know we don’t have a lot of time, I’ll try to give you a brief synthesis of the work I’ve been doing on this point.

Historically, I think it’s crucial to underline that the issue of land in Colombia has been at the heart of both social and armed conflicts. The agrarian development model and its consequences have created longstanding difficulties in the country. These issues are so deeply rooted that, for instance, they led to the emergence of the FARC in 1964—the insurgent group with which the peace agreement was signed in 2016.

And this land conflict hasn’t only been about land ownership, but also about its distribution, its use, and its productivity. That’s why understanding this historical context is essential—it has been at the center of Colombian conflicts.

Over the past century, it has led to a series of peasant mobilizations, various agrarian reforms and counter-reforms, and widespread violent land dispossession through forced displacement.

When you examine the land issue in Colombia, you see multiple motivations, disputes, consequences, and major challenges.

For example, I think the year 1936 is especially important. Perhaps you’ve already studied this—the Revolución en Marcha under President López Pumarejo, which was the first time the idea of the social function of property was introduced in Colombia.

Law 200 of 1936 was a genuine attempt at agrarian reform. It recognized the right of rural workers to own land, proposed the extension of ownership to unexploited and unexplored lands, and even established a special agrarian jurisdiction for the first time.

I’m one of those who believes that without land repossession—extensión de dominio—there can be no meaningful agrarian transformation in Colombia.

After that, however, came many counter-reforms. One major example is the Chicoral Pact, a counter-reform where large landowners and business elites, who opposed rural reform, negotiated better terms with the government to protect their interests.

And that pattern of counter-reforms has repeated itself many times in Colombia since.

There have been many counter-reforms, which has made it very difficult to reach a lasting agreement on land.

In the 1970s, during the Agrarian Counter-Reform (ECA), we saw large-scale peasant mobilizations. The ANUC (Asociación Nacional de Campesinos) was founded, and if you follow the historical trajectory, you find many important milestones that clearly show that land has remained at the center—at the heart—of Colombia’s conflicts.

That is why it is so important to examine what happened with the 2016 peace agreement.

To briefly summarize: although many governments have tried to negotiate peace in Colombia—starting from the 1980s with figures like Belisario Betancur, Virgilio Barco, César Gaviria, Ernesto Samper, Andrés Pastrana, Álvaro Uribe, Juan Manuel Santos, and even Iván Duque, who also claimed to be working for peace—we can identify several key historical moments.

For example, in the 1990s, there were several negotiated demobilizations involving armed groups such as the M-19, the EPL, the PRT, the Quintín Lame Movement, the Socialist Renewal Current, the Medellín Popular Militias, and even the AUC, which were paramilitary groups.

However, if we focus on the peace process that led to the 2016 agreement, the negotiations officially began in June 2010 when Santos took office. In 2011, an important development related to land occurred: the approval of the Land Restitution Law (Law 1448 of 2011), which aimed to restore land rights to victims.

Then, in mid-2012, the Santos government publicly announced that it was initiating peace talks with the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army), an armed insurgent group.

In May 2013, it was announced that the first agreement had been reached: what was called the Comprehensive Rural Reform.

In my opinion, several problems emerged already at that point.

The negotiations avoided touching the agrarian model and the neoliberal economic model of the country, which imposed major limitations on the transformative potential of the agreement.

Still, I believe the points that were agreed upon were important.

They included the creation of a land fund of three million hectares to democratize land access for peasants.

A massive plan for land formalization was also introduced, since informality in land ownership was widespread in Colombia, especially among small and medium-sized rural properties.

Progress was made in that regard, with plans for formalization and the modernization of the multipurpose land cadastre.

National development plans with a territorial approach were another key point.

These included the PDET (Development Programs with a Territorial Focus), criteria for prioritizing rural areas, regional transformation action plans, mechanisms for peasant and community participation, investment in rural infrastructure and social development, support for peasant productivity, food security policies, and the strengthening of regional markets.

Those were the core commitments of the agreement.

In my view, however, many critical aspects were left unresolved.

For instance, the latifundio model—the large estate system—was left untouched.

Because the agrarian development model wasn't challenged, large estates remained intact.

Nor was any progress made in defining property limits.

I also wonder about policies to prevent the foreign acquisition of land. Many foreign actors have been buying territory in Colombia, and this complicates any effort to achieve meaningful rural reform. Increasingly, these territories are being sold off to foreigners.

Another pending issue was the renegotiation of free trade agreements, which also require structural transformation.

Territorial planning and land use remain unresolved challenges as well, largely because there was no political will to confront the existing model.

How would I assess the governments that came after the peace agreement? I believe that the implementation measures taken by the Santos administration—the one that signed the agreement—were full of contradictions. Why?

Because while a peace model was agreed upon—including land formalization and the redistribution of land—Santos, in the same year the agreement was signed (2016), also passed the Cidres Law (Law 1736 of 2016), which was supposedly intended to regulate state-owned lands (baldíos) for the benefit of large landowners. Initially, it was said that these baldíos would go to peasants—but that's not what happened. In the end, the Cidres Law allowed for agro-industrial projects that favored large private landowners, using public funds.

To me, that is very serious—public resources being handed over to private interests.

I'm highlighting here what I consider to be some of the major measures taken by that administration, and their negative consequences—there are others, but we don't have time for all of them.

Another major initiative by Santos was the creation of the Misión Rural—a large-scale plan for transforming Colombia's countryside, led by José Antonio Ocampo, who also served as minister under the current government. This mission included important proposals around territorial planning and rural development, reducing social inequalities, productive inclusion, environmental sustainability, and deep institutional reform.

But the fundamental issue is that the model was never questioned. So this grand mission ended up as an unfulfilled promise. Many of its proposals have not been implemented simply because they required touching the existing model—and that didn't happen.

In my view, one of the biggest challenges that remains is creating basic socio-economic conditions in rural areas. Rural workers still don't have employment, they don't earn a decent wage. What's needed is a rural territorial economic system that allows people to generate income and meet their basic needs.

There is also unfinished work in terms of community organization and participation. Some progress has been made under the current government, but it's very difficult to address such deep-rooted structural problems.

Another initiative under the Santos government was the use of fast-track legislative decrees to implement the Havana agreements. Some progress was made—on land funds, crop substitution programs, and the PDET programs. But there were major problems too.

Those decrees seriously affected territorial autonomy. All the decisions continued to be made from Bogotá, even though local autonomy had been promised. They also undermined the right to equality in rural regions, which still suffer from violence and poverty—really, almost all of them.

That process of bureaucratization and re-centralization continued, directly contradicting the notion of territorial peace. They said they would build peace with local autonomy, but in reality, all the decisions kept coming from Bogotá.

Another problem with those fast-track measures was the lack of clear criteria to differentiate between policies for victim reparation and broader social policy. They talked a lot about reparation for victims of the conflict, but what about the broader social policies the state is supposed to implement to fulfill the peace agreement?

There was, and still is, a lack of distinction between those two kinds of policies.

Now, what happened under the Duque government?

A total regression in implementation. The victory of the "No" vote in the 2016 plebiscite strengthened right-wing opposition and cemented the idea of "tearing the peace agreement to shreds." That's exactly what the Duque government set out to do. And of course, that drastically slowed the implementation process.

I can speak to this point specifically, because it's the one I've been studying: there was very little land redistribution, very little land formalization, almost no progress on the issue of illicit crops, and clear disdain from Duque's administration—yes, Duque—for updating rural taxation or democratizing land access.

The approach was completely regressive toward coca-growing peasants, and the administration actively rolled back everything that had been done in terms of land institutions under Law 1148 of 2011.

So I would say that it was a very dark period for the implementation of the peace agreement.

Now, what is the "government of change" doing?

Quite frankly, we could move on to other topics, but yes—the government of change has taken important steps in land redistribution, equitable access, and in the formalization and titling of land for small farmers and rural communities.

It has also made progress on rural infrastructure policies, improving access to basic services for rural populations, promoting greater community participation, strengthening the rural economy, and building new institutions.

In other words, laws and policies have been passed to formalize land rights, redistribute land, guarantee the rights of peasants, ensure community participation in rural areas, and promote sustainable development—which I believe is very important.

There's some very important data we don't have time to go into now, but that you can consult—data from the National Planning Department (DNP) in 2025, through the Integrated Post-Conflict Information System.

According to that data, which I reviewed in March 2025, the government has fulfilled 55.42% of the land-related commitments in the peace agreement.

And it also breaks down progress by key pillars.

The area with the most progress is regional transformation, at 79.16%—this refers to action plans for regional transformation.

That's followed by the right to food, at 77.64%.

Among the areas with the least progress are social development in healthcare, at just 18.68%, and social development in housing, at 32.22%.

The national plans for comprehensive rural reform show 46.72% progress.

So it's important to consult those DNP sources.

Now, what are the remaining challenges for this government, with a year and a half left in its term?

I believe the biggest challenge in rural areas is inequality.

There are deep inequalities in the countryside—in access to land, in access to basic services. Many areas don't even have potable water.

And there's also a huge gap in opportunities.

Rural people do not have the same opportunities as those in cities—not in education, not in healthcare, not in housing.

A second major challenge is the lack of adequate financing to meet all the needs in rural areas.

These inequalities are historical.

Solving them in four years is impossible.

There's still a strong need for increased investment in infrastructure, in social programs, and in productive projects.

A third challenge is that in many rural areas of Colombia, criminal groups still operate: FARC dissidents who rejected the peace deal, the ELN, and the Gulf Clan.

These actors continue to deeply affect security and stability in rural regions, making it harder to implement the agreement and to protect communities.

A fourth challenge is land formalization and titling.

There's still a lack of training for peasants, and although progress has been made, much remains to be done.

A fifth challenge is ensuring meaningful participation and organization of rural communities with a differential approach—truly allowing them to achieve autonomy.

But many decisions are still being made in Bogotá, at the center of power.

There's a lack of trust, and a need to build territorial peace.

In other words, there is deep distrust.

Reconciliation still hasn't happened in many territories—territories that have been violated by paramilitaries and by the state itself.

When it comes to climate change, we need effective risk management and the elimination of the agricultural frontier. Regarding land and human development, I believe—and this is a historical problem—that we must understand that land conflicts in Colombia today require a better distribution of land ownership, especially for youth and for women, as well as improved infrastructure.

In other words, we need to understand that land must be conceived as a source of human development.

That means recognizing that young people need land, women need land—because they are among the most vulnerable groups in rural areas.

And finally—and this is, let's say, a utopia, because it hasn't yet been possible, not even under the "government of change"—we need a new economic model that would also allow for a new approach to rural and agrarian development.

The current neoliberal model, especially the agro-industrial model promoted under the Cidres Law, cannot continue.

We need a model that provides equal opportunities.

I do support what the current government is doing, but obviously, there's still a long way to go for rural development to become truly just and sustainable.

Because as long as we continue under this neoliberal model, we're going to keep running into the same problems.

That's my reflection on what has been achieved through the peace process.

And this connects to a topic you raised earlier that has made me reflect quite a bit—tourism.

I don't believe tourism is the solution, at least not as long as we remain within this model.

Let me explain why. I want to tell you about the very complex situation in my city—Medellín.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Now I know a bit more than before, but I've never been to Colombia.

[Professor Bedoya]

You've never been? Well, you're invited to come visit me in Medellín!

[Elise Lefèvre]

I would love that.

[Professor Bedoya]

It's the city I know best.

We're facing serious problems with tourism. Medellín received 1.3 million visitors last year, and this year we expect 1.8 million.

If you compare that to a city like Madrid, where I did my PhD, Medellín is marketing itself as a tourist city.

The hotel industry is involved, the local government is involved, and so are the communities who live here.

The most attractive places for tourists are the museums, the Pueblito Paisa, and the Comuna 13—which was heavily impacted, and in fact bombarded by Uribe's local government in 2002.

Then there's El Poblado, which is known for its culinary offerings—but that has recently shifted more toward a scene of drugs and prostitution.

There's the Altrambía route, and the Laureles neighborhood, which has many cafés and is known for its food scene.

It's a beautiful city, with a wonderful climate and very welcoming people—but it's being heavily exploited by tourism.

Let me explain our main problems so you can see how tourism might be an interesting proposal—but not under the current conditions.

Many tourists are staying in Medellín because life here is cheaper than in countries where they pay in dollars or euros.

This has triggered a very intense process of gentrification—urban transformation—where lower-income or deteriorated areas are "revitalized" to attract foreign investment.

But that brings a host of problems—local people are being displaced, and other tourists end up trapped in drug hotspots.

Why? Because there is a lot of drug use, a lot of psychoactive substance consumption.

Some benefit from the gentrification, but others are pulled into addiction and get caught in those circuits.

So we are witnessing a very strong process of urban transformation in Medellín.

This transformation is being promoted not only by the local government and private companies, but even by the current national government, which has focused on tourism as one of its main economic development strategies.

But in my view, this proposal is very problematic—at least within the current model.

What are the main effects on our city?

Historically, Medellín has been an industrial and textile city. Its economy was centered on high production—this is Colombia's fashion capital. Textiles and manufacturing were at the heart of the city's economy.

However, since the 1990s, with the implementation of the neoliberal model, the city has shifted from an industrial and textile-based economy to one focused on services and financial speculation—and that has brought serious consequences.

What are the main consequences?

First: displacement of communities and territorial reordering.

Why?

Because there have been major changes in neighborhoods that have become especially attractive for those promoting tourism.

Here in Medellín, neighborhoods like El Poblado and Laureles are upper-income areas, where many tourists choose to stay.

But there are also working-class neighborhoods, like Manrique and Aranjuez, that have recently attracted foreign interest.

Foreigners are coming in to change the image of these neighborhoods and turn them into tourism-oriented businesses.

In the wealthier areas—Laureles and El Poblado—there has been a proliferation of bars, restaurants, and hostels, which have radically altered the social dynamics of local communities.

Medellín, known as the capital paisa—that's how we refer to ourselves, the people from Antioquia, the paisas—

We are facing an intense process of urban reconfiguration, in which economic groups and networks of both legal and illegal power are influencing the city's transformation.

We are seeing the privatization of public spaces, skyrocketing housing prices, and rezoning of land use.

Often, this happens in alliance with actors who control the territory—local governments and informal or criminal networks.

They are changing how these neighborhoods function.

For example, in the Laureles neighborhood—where I live nearby—rents have shot up.

I personally bought an apartment for 400 million pesos, and within two years, it was worth 780 million.

This is due to rising tourist demand and the spread of short-term rentals through digital platforms like Airbnb.

As a result, long-time residents have been forced to leave their homes so that foreigners can rent them in dollars or euros.

There's an uncontrolled growth of tourism, which is transforming the residential identity of neighborhoods like Manrique, Aranjuez, Laureles, and El Poblado.

And now, even the traditionally working-class neighborhoods are beginning to experience the same trends as Laureles and El Poblado—contributing to growing inequality in access to housing.

Another major issue is increasing inequality and the precarization of employment.

Tourism in Medellín has created a deepening social divide between foreigners and local residents.

If you go to a bar or restaurant, foreigners are treated better because they have greater purchasing power, while locals are treated worse because they don't have the same financial means.

Local residents are relegated to a second-class status.

Foreigners receive first-class treatment—while locals are second-class citizens, because they can't spend as much.

This reflects an economy designed to maximize profits from tourists, at the expense of the local population.

Public transportation also reflects this inequality.

During rush hour, there's chaos in the metro system—it can't meet the needs of local residents.

Meanwhile, tourists use the metro during off-peak hours, when it's empty and comfortable.

So under the guise of promoting tourism, real problems affecting local people—like the transportation crisis—are being ignored.

Then there's the issue of narcotourism, party tourism, and sexual exploitation.

It's still difficult to attract visitors without relying on the narco narrative—something reinforced by TV series and documentaries that continue to portray Medellín as a place for prostitution, for partying.

All of this has had a very negative impact on daily life and safety for residents, who must now endure high levels of noise, street fights, excessive alcohol and drug use—in many of the city's most touristic neighborhoods.

One of the most troubling effects of tourism is the strengthening of sexual exploitation networks.

All of this is happening in Medellín.

Medellín has positioned itself as a destination for sex tourism, which implies the commodification of the bodies of our girls and young women—especially when they are poor.

These popular neighborhoods are charming, they're made to look attractive, and people go there—and that has a direct impact on girls, especially minors.

It has created an underground market involving human trafficking, forced prostitution, and abuse.

And it obviously reinforces the stereotype of the paisa woman—that we are hypersexualized.

What do people say when they arrive here?

I remember asking in Spain, when I was doing my doctoral thesis, "What's the first word that comes to mind when you think of Colombia?"

The answer: prostitution and drug addiction.

Prostitution of women and drug addiction.

That's what Lleras Park in Medellín has become.

There is child trafficking—this is having a very serious impact on our girls and our youth.

There's a fourth issue that worries me deeply: the transformation of Medellín's cultural identity.

For us, living here used to be a joy—really pleasant.

Now it's been turned into a tourist market.

In places like Comuna 13, for example, the violent past has been romanticized.

They sell the story of narcotrafficking, while hiding the real relationships between drug traffickers, the state, and paramilitary groups.

There's a romanticization of that violent past, and it's being exploited through tourism.

To me, that's extremely dangerous.

There are still unofficial armed groups exerting territorial control.

Why?

Because they impose vacunas—extortion payments—in Comuna 13.

People go there as tourists to learn about what happened in 2002, but all the businesses linked to tourism have to pay these vacunas, which shows that illegal power structures still operate there—now through the dynamics of tourism.

And there's an urban transformation underway, which I think I already mentioned: gentrification.

Let me repeat: neighborhoods like Manrique and Aranjuez—historically working-class neighborhoods in Medellín—are being transformed.

New investors are moving in to capitalize on the tourism boom, which is driving up land prices and rent.

This obviously displaces long-time residents to other parts of the city—residents who can't adapt to the rising costs.

These neighborhoods are being turned into tourist accommodations, which puts enormous pressure on the real estate market.

It's transforming the very essence of these neighborhoods and increasing inequality in access to housing.

Who are the big winners from tourism here in Medellín?

Well, I can speak about Medellín because it's the city I know, where I live.

The political elite running the local administration—which is currently right-wing—doesn't care that our girls are being pushed into prostitution or drugs.

Then there's the tourism industry itself—powerful private business groups.

Real estate speculators, who profit from rising housing prices.

And the mafias involved in prostitution and drug trafficking.

And what happens to the displaced local communities in working-class neighborhoods?

They are pushed out by powerful business interests.

What are the main challenges, in my opinion?

First, we need to offer a different kind of tourism—one that isn't based on violence and criminality.

Tourism in Medellín today is heavily based on those themes: violence and crime.

We must stop romanticizing crime and violence to attract tourists.

Ultimately, the solution is to change the model.

Because under this current model, some accumulate wealth while others become increasingly impoverished.

As long as the model doesn't change, I don't see tourism as the way forward.

Just look at all the problems it's causing—all the challenges it brings.

But for a government that is complicit in the problem, that doesn't care…

The local government is promoting Medellín as a tourist city, and they don't care about the effects that tourism is having on our young people, on our girls and boys.

That's why I find it very difficult to accept tourism as a solution.

I don't know how you're addressing it in your thesis, but I personally don't see it as a solution.

I see it as a major problem—for all the reasons I've just explained.

I think we need to rethink the model.

As long as the model remains unchanged, tourism will never be the solution.

That was also one of the key takeaways from the Rural Development conference we held on April 24 and 25.

We held a Rural Development event with academics from the Universidad Nacional and the Universidad de Antioquia.

And the government listened to us. Right now, the government is making a significant effort to bring together social movements, academia, and public institutions to reflect collectively on the issue of rural development. One of the central points raised during that discussion was this: as long as the model doesn't change, we are simply reproducing the same practices within the neoliberal framework.

No matter how much effort is made, the same problems persist.

So when we talk about tourism in rural areas, it was made clear that it is reproducing the same capitalist dynamics—some accumulate wealth, while others provide the labor.

Some people continue to get richer, others remain in poverty. The asymmetries and inequalities continue to grow.

And then the question arises: what is the private sector doing to contribute to peacebuilding?

Well, the truth is that the private sector continues to participate in processes only when they are profitable. That's the issue.

Because as long as we maintain this capitalist perspective, it's very difficult to imagine the business sector becoming genuinely responsible.

When we speak of social responsibility from a business point of view, it should not be limited to just securing profits.

Corporate responsibility should also encompass the social, environmental, and human dimensions.

So we ask ourselves: what are companies actually doing to contribute to peacebuilding?

In my view, very little.

Businesses remain primarily focused on ensuring that their operations are profitable, on continuing to accumulate capital.

Very few are truly concerned with social responsibility beyond the economic.

Very few think about human well-being, social equity, environmental sustainability, or climate responsibility.

There is still a lot of work to do in that area.

I believe that Colombian companies have been largely absent from peacebuilding efforts.

Let me give you just one example.

When the Cidres Law was passed in 2016, large agribusinesses seized control of the páramos (highland ecosystems).

That law was supposedly meant to allow rural women and youth to access baldíos—lands that had been abandoned by the state—so they could make them productive.

But in reality, when a peasant is told to use these lands, they're required to come up with a large amount of money in order to access them.

There are massive asymmetries between big landowners and small-scale peasants.

In the end, the large private landowners took control of the baldíos.

They were the ones who had the resources to launch agro-industrial projects, and the peasants ended up working as cheap labor for those projects.

So once again, private entrepreneurs appropriated public funds.

And the peasants became even poorer, because these policies were not a real solution for them.

They didn't have the technical training or the capital to access and develop those lands under equal conditions.

This shows how decisions are made in Colombia—and how business actors participate.

They didn't have the technical capacity. They didn't have the financial resources to set up agro-industrial complexes.

So the Cidres Law—passed in 2016, right after a peace agreement had just been signed—is, to me, a paradox.

Because it ended up favoring the big landowners.

They established large agro-industrial operations, and the peasants were effectively turned into cheap laborers.

They were turned into workers in someone else's business, without ever being given the tools to compete on equal footing.

So the problem wasn't solved.

In fact, I believe that once again, these policies favored the big business interests—as has often happened in Colombia.

This law ended up benefiting that sector, rather than providing land to peasants, rural youth, or rural women.

That never happened—the goals that the law was supposed to achieve were not fulfilled.

Instead, inequalities and asymmetries in rural Colombia have only deepened.

And rural areas remain, arguably, the most unequal sector in Colombia, where the disparities are greatest.

At the Rural Development event we held on April 24 and 25—which was very interesting—we, the Colombian academics, signed a declaration.

In it, we committed, at least until the end of the current government's term, to join forces with the peasant social movement.

Five regional meetings and one national meeting are planned, from now until this government ends.

In those spaces, we will engage with peasants—men and women—to share what I've been telling you here, and so that all of us who work on rural development can try to build real capacity in the countryside.

We want these communities to be able to continue these processes independently, no matter which government comes next.

Of course, there's a great deal of uncertainty—and a serious risk—if the government of change does not continue.

Because this could all be reversed.

But at least there's a committed group of people working to bring these issues to the table, to discuss them with social organizations and peasant movements.

We want to ask: what can we do from now until 2026, in the year and a half we have left?

What can we put in place in rural areas?

Because there is still so much to do.

And even though this government has had good intentions, as long as the rural development model remains untouched, and as long as the country's broader economic model stays the same, the changes will remain incomplete.

There's still so much lacking, because the same practices and the same problems continue to reproduce themselves within the capitalist system.

That's what I have to say.

There are many things, of course.

For example, I believe that if companies truly wanted to get involved in peacebuilding, they would have to consider more than just financial capital.

They would need to also take into account human capital, social capital, ecological capital, and reputational capital.

But I think companies still remain focused primarily on their private interests.

Very few companies have gotten involved in driving change.

At the Rural Development event, I participated in Working Group #2, which focused on the implementation of the peace agreement in rural areas and on peasant participation.

I was happy to see that one company was present: Nacional de Chocolates—a Colombian company.

They sent a representative who told us that they had signed a partnership with the Petro government to support cacao-based productive projects in five Colombian territories.

They make chocolate, cacao products, and so on.

If I remember correctly, one of the territories is in Putumayo—but I'm not entirely sure.

In any case, there are five territories where Nacional de Chocolates is conducting a very interesting pilot of productive projects with peasant communities, through this agreement with the current government.

It was the only company I saw at the event.

Maybe there were others—we had five working groups.

But in the group I participated in, I heard about that experience.

And I said to myself, "We have to follow that case closely."

Maybe there are other companies committed to supporting change.

But in general, in Colombia, that is not the norm.

[Elise Lefèvre]

No.

[Professor Bedoya]

No. Just no.

Because, for example, during the Duque administration, business leaders were very close to Duque.

Of course—they supported the "No" vote in the plebiscite, they supported the non-implementation of the peace agreement.

So where do I get the sense that there was no real commitment from businesses in Colombia?

Quite simply: they aligned themselves with a government that openly wanted to tear the peace agreement to shreds.

Yes—they rolled back many of the decisions that had been made toward implementing the agreement.

And if you look at how businesses talked about the peace agreement, it's clear: they were not on board.

They were aligned with the policies of the Democratic Center party—the ones who wanted to destroy the peace deal.

Now, of course, there are exceptions.

I believe we should keep an eye on the partnership signed between the current government and Nacional de Chocolates.

Let's see if more businesses follow their example and truly commit to peacebuilding.

But in general, in Colombia, most business actors are defending their own interests.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes.

[Professor Bedoya]

And obviously, they are opposed to many of the measures being implemented by the current government.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes.

[Professor Bedoya]

Unless you have any more questions, Elisa…?

Well, maybe not—but it's a really interesting conversation.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Thank you so much. There's so much to think about now. But what really interests me is your opinion on the role of businesses.

Because clearly, they operate with an economic logic, focused on their own interests.

But what I find fascinating is that in Northern Ireland or South Africa, it was essentially the same—

the same capitalist mindset.

Yet in those places, companies came to realize that peace meant a strong and stable economy.

And in South Africa, for example, the mining sector—despite having benefited greatly from the segregationist system—came to realize that peace was essential for economic stability.

They positioned themselves as active promoters of the transition.

What's striking to me is that in Colombia, we haven't seen that same realization.

The capitalist mindset is the same, but there hasn't been that understanding that peace is a synonym for economic stability.

What do you think about that?

[Professor Bedoya]

I think there's an explanation for why things are so different in Colombia compared to South Africa or Ireland.

I believe that Colombian business elites have come to see that they can be profitable—very profitable—even without taking communities into account.

Sure, they have workers, but they pay them poorly, keep them in precarious conditions.

The rise of the service economy has made labor even more precarious in Colombia—worse conditions than before.

So they've seen that they can keep making money, even if their workers don't have good jobs, stable employment, or decent wages.

That has led them to believe they can succeed without including communities.

And that, of course, is troubling.

I believe that today, when we talk about corporate social responsibility—

Excuse me a second, something's interrupting me…

They (the business elites) should be more aware of the need to engage with communities and with the state.

But we've had a state that has been highly favorable to business interests.

For example, when I presented on how troubling I found the Cidres Law—how it handed public money to the private sector—the presentation that followed mine really gave me a lot to think about.

I can send it to you by email; I'll share it with you.

That next speaker made the same argument.

He said that the problem in Colombia is that, in many of the deals and reforms that have taken place, too much power has been handed to business.

He argued that, during the Duque administration, what emerged was essentially a corporate government—a government run by business elites, where business leaders were the ones making the decisions.

He explained this idea clearly (I have notes from his talk that I can share with you).

He described how, in many of the deals and policies enacted in Colombia after the peace agreement, it was the business sector that really held the reins of power.

That's why we talk about corporate governments—because the private sector has effectively taken control of public funds.

And of course, if they're already managing state resources—resources that should go to society as a whole, to all communities—then why would they bother engaging with those communities?

They're already using public money for their own private businesses.

So the idea I originally raised about the Cidres Law being problematic—that presenter expanded it.

He argued that this pattern is widespread, and he gave concrete examples of public policies under administrations like Duque's, where public money ended up in the hands of business actors.

And that's a very serious issue.

There's a key insight here that you should analyze:

A whole range of public policies where state funds are managed by—or have ended up benefiting—private business actors.

So naturally, businesses don't feel any need to consider the needs of communities.

Why would they, when they already have their own capital and they're also controlling public money?

And that is deeply troubling.

This, I believe, helps explain why these dynamics are so difficult to change in Colombia.

That's why it's so important for the current progressive government to recognize this situation and make different decisions.

We need to reclaim those public funds from the private sector.

That money is supposed to be for social programs—for the community.

It's meant for rural peasants, for rural women, for young people.

It’s supposed to be used to address the many social problems we face.

But right now, much of that money is in the hands of the business elites.

And I think that helps explain the divergence in outcomes that you’re studying.

There’s another key that you should explore—a doctoral thesis written by Claudia López some time ago.

She wrote about state capture.

The Colombian state has been captured by other actors—some of them illegal.

For example, today the Clan del Golfo is causing tremendous harm in rural areas, generating insecurity and deepening poverty.

It’s the Clan del Golfo, it’s criminal gangs—

So in many rural regions of Colombia, legality and illegality coexist.

Many responsibilities that should belong to the state have been captured by other actors.

This has made it impossible to implement the peace agreements in some areas, because those areas are under the control of others, and the government has not been able to enter them.

That, too, is a serious problem.

And that brings me to something I think you might not yet know:

There are international companies like Chiquita Brands that financed paramilitary groups.

There’s a ruling expected soon.

I completed a study in December 2023 in Urabá, which has been a hotspot of the conflict.

In that region, companies like Chiquita Brands funded the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

There has already been a ruling in the United States—or in New York, I think—

And another ruling is expected this year, in 2025, in New York, which would confirm Chiquita Brands’ responsibility for having financed the AUC.

In their defense, the company claims they were victims—that they were forced to make those payments.

But they ultimately authorized a series of payments.

And we have to ask ourselves: what was their real intention in making those payments to the AUC?

So there’s another huge problem here.

Apparently, on June 10 last year, a court in South Florida declared Chiquita Brands responsible for having funded Colombian paramilitaries with up to $1.7 million—

Money that came from bananas, from Colombian bananas.

This reveals another serious issue:

These companies have served paramilitary interests more than the interests of local communities.

And another ruling is expected soon in New York.

So it’s worth investigating the role these companies—particularly multinationals—have played.

In Urabá, my study was more of a labor-sociological diagnosis, trying to understand the situation of workers there.

And what I found was that all these transnational companies were present.

They always claim to be victims of the conflict.

But in reality, they have been perpetrators.

That’s very serious—because these multinational corporations have contributed more to illegal interests, like the AUC, than to the well-being of the local populations.

They’ve brought more hunger, more violence, more death, and more displacement.

So I believe that the work that businesses need to do in this country is still entirely ahead of them.

And we have to distinguish between national and international companies.

Because it’s not just about the banana industry.

There are many multinational mining companies as well, and they have been shifting the economic orientation of many territories.

Let me give you an example from Antioquia—and actually from Caldas, in a region called Marmato, which has historically been a mining region.

I did another study there in 2017, and we found that many multinational mining companies were operating there—like AngloGold Ashanti, which is Canadian.

There are many Canadian and U.S. mining companies.

They have had a very negative impact on many Colombian regions that were previously agricultural.

They came in to exploit the mines, changed the economic orientation of the territory, displaced populations, and created conflicts over water—because they’re polluting the water to extract minerals.

So I think it’s really important to investigate this further.

Hopefully your thesis can shed some light on the role of business actors.

Because I’ve done a lot of work with communities, but we haven’t done enough research on the business sector.

And of course, when I was in Urabá, another major issue emerged—related to the ports.

Foreign multinationals are coming in.

It’s mining, it’s the ports.

They’re transforming the economic role of these territories.

And yet, we have so little research on the business sector.

We need a real actor map:

Who are the business actors present? What are their interests? What capital have they brought into the country?

Are their investments truly contributing to local development—or are they just extracting value and leaving?

Are they here to stay, or are they capitales golondrina—“swallow capital”—that flies in and out?

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes.

[Professor Bedoya]

So, as I was saying, the work on the business sector is really just beginning.

I told myself, how great that you’re focusing on the private sector, because I’d like to study that too.

I’ve always focused more on the workers, the social movements, and the residents of these communities, but the truth is we don’t really know which businesses are operating here, what capital they bring, what their intentions are, or where their profits are going.

And they’re arriving through various channels: through mining, through land, through tourism—

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes.

[Professor Bedoya]

—and now also through the ports. Especially in Urabá.

It’s mostly ethnic territories, and we really need in-depth research into the impact these actors are having—not just economically, but socially and environmentally.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, yes. There really is so little information on Colombian companies.

I find it really surprising—and honestly frustrating—that it’s so difficult to find concrete information, like data or percentages of land owned by multinationals here.

It’s very hard.

[Professor Bedoya]

Yes. For your research, it might be useful to file a right-to-information request to the current government.

Maybe they’ll provide some data.

Under Article 21 of the Colombian Constitution, the right to petition is guaranteed, and they have to respond.

You could ask very specific questions:

Which companies are arriving in the ports of Urabá?

Which are involved in mining expansion?

They have to have some information.

I’ve thought about doing this too, to support my own research.

We should take advantage of this government—it’s more open—to see what information they’re willing to provide.

Because you’re absolutely right: the data systems in Colombia are very poor.

And that’s something the current government is also concerned about.

Even if they respond that they don’t have the information, that alone might push them to realize they need to build those systems.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, absolutely. That sounds really interesting.

Even though this thesis is only 40 pages, there are so many things I’d like to explore in more depth.

[Professor Bedoya]

I hope you’ll share it with me when it’s finished.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, of course.

[Professor Bedoya]

It’s been a pleasure. I hope something I’ve said has been useful for your research.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, absolutely. Your perspective is really valuable.

[Professor Bedoya]

I tend to have a very critical perspective on everything, but I think it’s important to analyze these phenomena critically, don’t you think?

Sometimes people say, “How great that tourism is bringing income to rural areas.”

But tourism can be an opportunity—yes—but also a very serious problem.

That’s why I think it’s essential to look at both the potential and the risks of tourism.

I hope I didn’t sound too negative about everything I said.

[Elise Lefèvre]

No, not at all. I don’t see tourism as a perfect solution either.

What interests me more is whether companies in different sectors have different perspectives.

For instance, the agro-industrial sector is so historically tied to the conflict that I imagine it has a different logic.

Tourism, on the other hand, doesn’t have that same historical baggage, so I wondered if it might offer a different lens.

But no, I don’t think it’s a silver bullet.

[Professor Bedoya]

Exactly. That’s a point we need to raise with the current government, too, since they’ve made tourism a national development priority.

But we have to point out the risks.

There’s the issue of drug trafficking, of sexual exploitation, of gentrification, of displacement, of urban reconfiguration.

There are so many problems.

You can see the positive side of tourism, but if that’s all you focus on—without acknowledging the darker side—

Well, then you ignore the fact that under capitalism, tourism helps some people and harms others.

Like so many other things under this system: it allows some to accumulate, and others to be impoverished.

As long as this model doesn’t change, as long as there is no better redistribution of wealth, any proposal will always be risky—because some will benefit from it, and others will suffer from it.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes. Do you think changing the model is possible?

I mean, it sounds like a utopia, but…

[Professor Bedoya]

I do believe it’s possible.

I think this government—the “government of change”—is taking some steps in that direction.

Of course, you can’t transform 215 years of right-wing governance in just four years.

But yes, they’ve started to do a lot of important things:

Redistributing land more equitably, formalizing land ownership, granting legal titles—

And doing all of this with an approach that considers local communities, women, Indigenous people, Afro-Colombians.

That’s why it’s so important for this process to continue.

Because there’s still a long road ahead.

We need more time, more committed people, stronger institutions, more resources.

But we’re on the path.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, it's just the beginning — that's great, yes, yes, absolutely. Well, thank you so much for all this information. It was truly so interesting for me and for my thesis. And of course, yes, I'll send you the final version when it's done. Thank you so much for your time.

[Profesora Bedoya]

Of course, and I wish you all the best with your work. And when you come to Colombia, make sure to reach out to me, please.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, definitely. Thank you again for everything. Have a great day — thank you so much.

[Profesora Bedoya]

Wishing you all the best. Take care, goodbye.

Appendix 2 – Interview with Dr. Angela María Ocampo (UCLouvain)

This transcript is based on an expert interview conducted on May 8, 2025, with Dr. Angela María Ocampo, researcher in climate, environment and human rights advocacy at the Université catholique de Louvain. The discussion explored the potential and limitations of tourism in peacebuilding, the structural contradictions of community-led initiatives, and the fragmented positioning of Colombia's private sector.

[Elise Lefèvre]

No worries.

How are you? How have you been?

[Angela María Ocampo]

I'm really good, thank you. I'm really happy that this thesis is advancing a bit and it's coming to the end. I really like it, to be honest. It was a really fun experience, so I'm really enjoying it.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Okay. And you? How are you in Colombia?

[Angela María Ocampo]

Yeah, I'm still in Colombia. Yeah, with tons of stuff as well.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yeah, I can imagine.

So yeah. Thank you so much for your time. I'm really grateful.

I know you're really busy. Are you okay if I record this meeting so I can maybe cite you in my thesis, if you're comfortable with that?

[Angela María Ocampo]

Sure, sure. No problem.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Amazing, that's really nice. So yeah, thank you very much.

I don't know if you're okay if we start like this.

I think my thesis evolved quite a lot compared to the last time I had you on the phone, and I'm really curious to hear your opinion on this new approach I have.

Especially also on the fact that I found it quite interesting to analyze the companies in Colombia and how they act based on the sector they are from. Because I felt like the more I was getting to know about the conflict in Colombia, the more everything was related to land.

And I was wondering if maybe sectors that don't have that close of a history with land would have a different approach to peace.

That's why I really wanted to focus on tourism.

But I had the chance to talk with Professor María Bedoya, I don't know if you know her, and she was quite opposed to the idea that tourism, for example, could bring peace.

So I'd be super interested to know your opinion on that.

[Angela María Ocampo]

Okay. Well, first off, I think that already, as you say, having more of a sectoral approach and a comparative approach — from experience, a comparative approach always illuminates different dimensions of a specific case.

So it can often enrich your perspective. That's really good.

In this case, comparing countries is also something that can maybe bring a more general notion or analysis, but at the same time help understand the complexities of each conflict or each post-conflict society that you're looking at.

Of course, you'll also find things that might not be comparable, but they still raise questions around the potential, the pitfalls, or the stalemates that businesses encounter in a post-conflict scenario.

So I think that was really interesting when you put it like that.

In my perspective — at least, I don't know about the tourism sector in the other two cases you're looking at — but in Colombia, it is a contested field.

Mostly because the economy here is still structured around more extractive industries or primary-centered industries.

Tourism is somewhere in between: it's extractive in a way, and also more service-based.

That's why I think it is contested on a large scale.

It presents the contradictions of businesses based on large-scale operations or this monoculture mindset — where you promote an ideology and narrative of development, but the conditions are not necessarily created for good labor conditions.

And at the same time, there's collateral damage on biodiversity or other goods.

Because tourism, especially in tropical countries like Colombia where there's this idea of the exotic, can have this idea of offering experiences around exotic biodiversity — and exotic women as well, as you may find in the writings of Diana Ojeda, who has a more gendered approach.

So in a way, there's also this idea of extraction in large-scale tourism endeavors.

I'm not a specialist, so I say this from the perspective of what I would be careful or more inquisitive about when looking at those dynamics.

And I wouldn't say that community-based tourism or community-based sustainable tourism initiatives are necessarily the best approach either.

They can also be confronted with many contradictions.

But what I've found interesting from those perspectives — from my experience last year working in territories marked by waves of conflict and internal migration — is how peasant farmers, or what they call colonos (people who came from different parts of the country, not necessarily farmers by vocation but who had to become land workers because they had no other alternatives), had to adapt to different economic waves in those regions.

For example, what I'm thinking about now — and I may be able to connect you with them once I get confirmation — is in the region of Guaviare, in the northern Amazon.

This is a place that has been marked first by colonization and violence against Indigenous communities, then by internal migration from other conflicts around the country, then by settlement and trying to make a living from what the land could provide.

Then came the conflict.

Then came the drug-centered economy — not drug trafficking per se, but how these people had to adapt to a coca-based economy.

And now, after the peace agreement, in this post-conflict scenario, they are adapting again.

They are looking for different strands of business activity that allow for sustainable living.

Yeah, and one of them is, for example, a community-led sustainable tourism initiative.

This is allowed by the fact that the region—well, now the conflict is reconfiguring again, it's kind of breathing down their backs—but for more than a decade, they've had a more peaceful scenario where alternatives like this could emerge.

They've had to revisit their view of the environment around them, and the resources they see—not just as something to make money from, but also as something to protect, especially being next to the jungle.

There are many contradictions in that experience too. I wouldn't say it's the alternative, but it could be very interesting to look at their expectations of peace, their notions of peace, and what they need to make tourism work for peacebuilding, in their own terms.

That's what I was thinking about when I was there, listening to the stories they told us. Like: "Now we have this opportunity, now we try to build something together with different families, something that could be interesting, especially for foreigners who are looking for nature."

So they start making a living out of this, and even if it's not fully intentional at first, they start to value nature—not just for tourism and business, but also in a deeper way.

But there's a lot of nuance. That's why I think it's the kind of experience that isn't necessarily business-centered, but could give you a perspective on how they view tourism, and what they suggest tourism could look like for peacebuilding.

I would agree with what she told you, depending on the details, but I would agree with that perspective—that massive tourism can create more problems than it solves.

There are very contested cases, especially in the north of the country. For example, Aviatur, which is a big tourism company that started as a family business in Colombia, installed itself next to Indigenous sacred land.

It's a beautiful place, but for the Indigenous people, it's sacred. And so land for these big tourism projects has been contested—even at the constitutional and human rights levels—to protect that territory.

So indeed, sometimes it creates more conflict than benefit.

I think that if you look at it from a critical perspective, from the perspective of people who work in the tourism sector, and also these different initiatives, it can give you a more nuanced vision of tourism.

As a country, Colombia's national policy—especially after the peace agreement and now with this government—promotes the idea that "Colombia, the country of beauty" can turn tourism into a major industry. That's the slogan.

So there's this narrative at the policy level, and it would be interesting to look at how it is being treated at the business level too—and who gains and who loses in that perspective.

What I find is that there are cases in southern Europe where this kind of tourism-based economy and narrative has been very present, and Colombia doesn't seem to be looking at those examples.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, I found it really interesting—also the papers that you sent me, and what Professor Bedoya told me.

She said that as long as the economic model doesn't change, it doesn't matter which sector businesses come from—it will always reproduce the same scheme of exploiting some and privileging others.

She mentioned Medellín, where she's from, and told me how gentrification is hitting locals hard. People can't afford housing anymore.

It's interesting, because when I looked at public websites in Colombia, tourism is really presented as a national solution—as if Colombia is now a post-conflict society, and tourism is the path forward.

So do you also agree that as long as the model doesn't change, these schemes will repeat themselves? Or do you think it could still be compatible with peacebuilding?

[Angela María Ocampo]

No, I very much agree with that intuition.

We feel it in other sectors too—like health and education—which are struggling because they were completely privatized.

This government wants to be more social, but in the Colombian mindset, the idea of "the public" is not really established. But that's another discussion.

On the question of the economic model, definitely. Tourism isn't usually thought of as an extractive sector, but it can be analyzed as one.

If you look at salaries in the places where large-scale tourism is established—for example, Cartagena—you really see intersectionality at play.

Social class, race—most of the people working in the tourism industry there are Afro-Colombians, and they are still very marginalized and excluded in the city.

So you have this ideal of tourism as a big business, but the benefits are reaped by those in more favorable positions.

I would also agree with Professor Matthew, who has a more nuanced understanding of the managers and people working within these organizations, these big corporations or businesses in any sector. There's a sort of rationality behind how these businesses function in the big scheme of things.

I think promoting Colombia as a tourism juggernaut is not necessarily productive, especially if the conditions aren't there to safeguard people and their rights—starting with labor rights, but also extending to others.

From my perspective, because I also work on these issues, if it doesn't respect nature and isn't sustainable—like now, water is already being depleted in many areas—then intensive sectors like tourism, which are also extractive in the resources they need to operate, threaten sustainability. Not just the sustainability of the country, but of people's health and life.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That's super interesting, thank you. It's a really valuable perspective. I was just curious: the community organizations you mentioned—how did you work with them, in what context?

[Angela María Ocampo]

No worries. I worked with them through what we call climate adaptation initiatives. I was in charge of doing more applied, participatory research to create territorial diagnostics—looking at social and environmental conditions, but also gender and peacebuilding.

These territories were very vulnerable to climate change and also heavily marked by armed conflict. You still find structures of distrust, fear of leadership, and other things.

So how do we create alternatives from the ground, without bringing in external solutions? How do we use what already exists—local capabilities—to become more resilient to the effects that are already felt in these regions?

There was a lot of advocacy, empowerment, and research that bridged the social and environmental.

The organization I want to connect you with is a kind of citizen science hub in the Amazon. They can probably connect you with others in the region who work more directly on tourism.

Their focus is more on birding—people contact them to watch birds, but now also scientists who are looking not only for leisure, but for a deeper understanding of nature.

Since they're building a network, I think they could connect you with more tourism-based alternatives. That's what I'm asking them—to connect you to the organizations I visited. I don't have direct contacts with them, but they do.

I'm also thinking of another one in the Pacific region. The only issue is that they're always so busy, so getting even one or two hours on the phone with them is hard. But I'm trying. They're really nice people. If I get them to agree to a two-hour interview with you, you should make the most of it, because I know their time is limited.

But I'll do my best to get you their contact and see if they agree.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That would be amazing. Thank you so much for doing that. I'm really grateful.

[Angela María Ocampo]

No problem, I know it's hard from afar. If I can give you an entry point into more nuanced perspectives—people on the ground who can share how they feel and see the future—that could be powerful.

Because even if we are in a post-agreement scenario, it's not post-conflict. The conflict is reconfiguring in many regions.

So hearing their perspective on peace could really be valuable.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, it really is. Thank you so much.

I just wanted to ask you one last thing.

I did a comparative analysis with South Africa and Northern Ireland. What I found is that in both cases, there was a moment when companies realized that peace equals economic prosperity. So they organized collectively and became political actors—through CBM in South Africa and the Group of Seven in Northern Ireland.

But in Colombia, I didn't find that same realization. There's no unified business voice saying peace is good for business.

Do you think that has something to do with how the Colombian economy works? Like the link between legal and illegal economies?

[Angela María Ocampo]

I have to be honest—I don't think I have the expertise to answer that in depth.

But I do remember when I was doing my master's thesis, and you mentioned in your email the business organizations like ANDI, I also had the impression that there's a lack of unity in Colombia's business sector.

That could explain it, but I'm not sure it's sufficiently tied to illicit economies.

I would say there's something about labor relations in Colombia—how they're structured, how economic elites have grown or developed, and their perspective on labor and workers.

I can't say much more about that with certainty, but I do remember, a long time ago during my master's thesis, I worked on free trade agreements and included a chapter on different business organizations.

Let me look into that again. If I find something that might give you an idea, I could send you that chapter. I wouldn't say it explains everything, but it might offer you a lead.

I had done a kind of repertoire of business organizations and some of their dynamics, though I haven't looked at it in a long time, so I don't know how relevant it still is today.

I do think the business environment is very regionalized. That contributes to the fragmentation.

These umbrella organizations tend to be territorially based, by region. So maybe that's another dimension—Colombia is a very fragmented society and country.

And yes, we don't really find a national voice for business in Colombia, even though ANDI is quite large.

When I looked at how they're mentioned in the peace process, they're very reluctant to even talk about peace.

They often refused to use the word "peace" in their reports because they considered it too politicized.

I find it really interesting that businesses in Colombia seem to want to step away from being political actors.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Yes, that's very interesting—almost as if politics is a minefield for them.

[Angela María Ocampo]

Exactly. And yet they do have a lot of influence in political affairs. But it's not something that's visible or openly acknowledged.

Professor Bedoya told me that for her, Duque's presidency was a corporatist government. I found that very interesting, but I've struggled to find any data or sources that show a clear link between corporations and Duque's government.

I think it was more about narrative—how that government positioned itself. But it was a very weak government, with little real substance, if I may say so.

One government I do think is worth looking at is the Santos presidency.

He belonged to economic circles, and I feel he was able—not entirely, but to some extent—to talk not only to the FARC but also to whisper to the ears of the economic sectors.

That could help explain, in part, why there was this window of opportunity for peace in Colombia.

Professor Angelika Rettberg talks about this notion of a window of opportunity, and I think it's tied to the fact that Santos was close to those circles—economic and military.

He was able to bring people around the table.

Now, in retrospect, we can see that this ability has not been repeated in later presidencies. The consensus around peace is faltering. People are wondering, "Did we really want to do this?" It's not clear anymore, and it's become a kind of minefield.

So yes, I think Santos had this ability—to speak the language of business and the language of the military.

He could say: "We won't agree on everything, but maybe we can agree on the essentials." And that was central to the peace agreement.

So it could be that.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That's really interesting. Thank you.

I don't think I have anything else to ask—it was really great to talk to you. Thank you so much.

[Angela María Ocampo]

No problem. If you already have something written or developed, I'd be very happy to read it—not necessarily to comment, but just to see how you're analyzing these things. Don't hesitate to send it to me. I'd be happy to learn from what you're working on.

[Angela María Ocampo]

I did have one question about your comparative view—what have the two other cases taught you about the sustainability of peacebuilding?

[Elise Lefèvre]

I think what really surprised me is that I had this intuition that in Colombia, sectors tied to the history of the conflict would be less willing to engage in peacebuilding.

But in the case of South Africa, I found the mining sector really interesting. In my research, I discovered they were sometimes even more powerful than the government during apartheid.

They created policies that determined where Black families could live to keep them available as mine workers.

So they were powerful actors that actively contributed to the system.

But they were also the first ones to realize that peace equaled a stable economy.

They were among the first actors—not just businesses, but actors in general—to voice the need to find peace, and they became some of the most active ones.

It was the sector that brought about the CBM organization, which unified all businesses. They really took on a role as political actors and brought different parties to the table.

They were speaking with white supremacists but also with Black church leaders, for example. I found that really interesting.

And in the case of Northern Ireland, you can also see that business groups really wanted to be seen as neutral. They worked to gain recognition from the public as a legitimate political actor—on the same level as the others—and they really helped bring all the parties to the table.

The Group of Seven is arguably the main reason why the agreement was signed in Ireland. They managed to put everyone in the same room, so to speak, and helped move the discussions forward.

So yes, I think what I found really striking in both cases is the emergence of a national business group that clearly took a political stance and played a very active role.

But in both examples—and I can send you what I've written—you can also see that, at the moment the peace agreement became too focused on redistribution (especially in South Africa), they intervened.

Because they were seen as legitimate political actors, their opinion carried weight, and they were able to reshape the final agreement in line with a more neoliberal perspective.

So I think that's what's really interesting about those cases. They were able to shape the outcome in a way that protected their economic interests.

At the beginning, you see them as heroes who changed everything. But in the end, you realize there were also economic strategies behind it.

[Angela María Ocampo]

Yes, okay, that's interesting. I'd love to read your work when you're done. It would be great to see how you've analyzed all that.

[Elise Lefèvre]

I'll definitely send it to you. Thank you again for your time.

I'll send you all of that, and I'd really love to hear from any contacts you might have—if they respond one day, that would be amazing.

[Angela María Ocampo]

Sure, I will. No problem.

I'm almost sure that I can get you the one in the Amazon. I'll send that to you.

For the one in the Pacific, I hope I can convince them. If not, then at least the Amazon one might be able to connect you with others in the region.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That would be amazing. Thank you so much for your time.

[Angela María Ocampo]

No problem at all, it was a pleasure. Have a nice day.

[Elise Lefèvre]

You too. Have a great rest of the day.

[Angela María Ocampo]

Yes. Okay. Ciao!

[Elise Lefèvre]

Bye!

Appendix 3 – Interview with Paula Sedano Duque (Fundación Diamante de las Aguas)

The following transcript is based on a semi-structured interview conducted with Paula Sedano Duque, co-founder of the Fundación Diamante de las Aguas, on May 18, 2025, as part of the empirical research for this thesis. The conversation, originally held in Spanish, has been translated into English. It focused on the foundation's origins, its relationship with tourism, and its vision of peacebuilding in Colombia from a territorial and community-based perspective.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Before we begin, I'd just like to ask: would it be alright if I record our conversation? I'd like to be able to cite some of your insights in my thesis, if that's okay with you.

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, of course. No problem.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Great, thank you so much! Can we start now?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, absolutely.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Thanks again. To give you a bit of context: my thesis looks at the role of businesses and organizations in peacebuilding in Colombia. I use a sectoral approach and focus particularly on tourism, because I think it may offer a different and more community-based perspective.

So my first question is: could you tell me a bit about yourself, your personal background, and how the foundation came about?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Sure. My name is Paula Sedano, I'm 30 years old, and I'm an environmental health engineer. I was born here in the Guaviare department, but I went to Bogotá to study, since we don't have access to university-level education in this region—especially not in environmental fields.

I studied at a public university, the Universidad Distrital, and after graduating I found a job in Bogotá. It's often very difficult to find work without political connections or networks.

My first job was with a company that produced reports for Colombia's oil companies.

At the same time, my family had already been developing a natural reserve in San José del Guaviare. I was helping remotely with social media and partnerships—whatever I could do from afar.

In 2022, we launched a project with USAID to train children in high-deforestation zones of Guaviare. They needed an academic coordinator, so I left my job in Bogotá and came to work on this project.

At that time, the reserve didn't yet have a legal identity, so we created the Fundación Diamante de las Aguas to manage our own projects. In this territory, if you want to access international cooperation, you need legal status and documented experience. We had over 20 years of work behind us, but without a legal entity, none of that was officially recognized.

So the foundation was created to take charge of our own development. In 2023, we secured a project with the UNDP because we are located in the Jaguar Corridor area. We started promoting community tourism connected to that corridor.

Our reserve protects 41 hectares of forest—it used to be a cattle ranch, but now it's a space for science and conservation. What was once pastureland is now living forest. Our goal is to preserve biodiversity and promote responsible tourism.

We also received a grant to strengthen science centers that are not yet formally recognized. Today, we're in the process of becoming a certified science center under the Colombian Ministry of Science.

We collaborate with universities—mostly from Bogotá—like El Bosque University and ESI Colombia, as well as with the CINCHI Institute for Scientific Research, which manages a geolocated monitoring plot in our reserve.

We also work with local organizations, because we can't do this alone. We need networks and partnerships. That's what the foundation has become.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That's all really interesting. At what point in all of this did you decide to incorporate the tourism component into the project?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Well, the tourism component has always been somewhat present. This place has always had potential for tourism, and Guaviare as a region is known for it.

We saw tourism as a way to tell our story—a story of conservation. This used to be a cattle ranch, and now it's a place where we protect water sources, forests, and ecosystems.

We've documented the species we have here: birds, mammals, amphibians. All of that biodiversity is a sign of life and healthy ecosystems. These species act as environmental indicators that show how vital and resilient this area is.

[Elise Lefèvre]

You mentioned working with universities—is the tourism you promote mainly scientific?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, we focus on scientific and nature-based tourism.

Scientific tourism is very important for us because it allows us to engage both communities and visitors—helping them understand what species live here and what role they play in the ecosystem. From pollinators to birds and frogs—we try to connect people with this biodiversity in a meaningful way.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Do you think there are differences in impact depending on the type of tourism that's promoted?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Absolutely. From the very beginning, we knew we wanted to do tourism differently.

For example, here we operate by appointment only. We're not a walk-in tourist attraction. Each group has a schedule, and visits are personalized.

This also gives the forest time to breathe. We don't want constant foot traffic on the trails. This is an ecosystem that needs care and balance.

So we've tried to build a model that's more sustainable and responsible.

[Elise Lefèvre]

How has tourism impacted your work at the foundation?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Tourism has had social, environmental, and economic impacts.

Socially, it's helped us connect with great people—young people, partners, allies.

Environmentally, it supports our conservation efforts. We help reduce biodiversity loss, which is one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Economically, it allows us to create jobs—especially for women, local producers, and transport providers.

It activates a local value chain that really helps the regional economy.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Thank you. One of the focuses of my thesis is peacebuilding in Colombia.

Do you think tourism in general—or more specifically the kind of tourism you promote through the foundation—can play a role in Colombia's transition to peace?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, absolutely. Tourism is one of the activities that helps promote peace.

We're in a region that has experienced violent events, and tourism has helped rebuild the social fabric.

It contributes to peacebuilding from the territories—especially when done differently, like we're doing here, in close partnership with communities.

This kind of work helps weave networks of peace, which are essential.

Peace means tranquility, a sense of rootedness in the territory. It's something we have to build ourselves by involving everyone—communities, children, women.

Even something like cooking is part of peacebuilding—because food brings together ancestral knowledge, culture, and nature. It's all connected.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Do you think the kind of tourism you promote—with its environmental and social focus—could be part of the solution? Should other forms of tourism evolve in that direction?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes. Sometimes tourism is promoted without thinking about the consequences.

Mass tourism, for example—at what cost? Often, local communities aren't included, and the focus is purely economic.

Here, tourism must be done differently. It should be grounded in nature, local knowledge, and culture.

This is a unique place, and we can't apply the same extractive tourism model where people just come to take photos.

We need a kind of tourism that's integrated with the territory and its people.

[Elise Lefèvre]

What you're doing could inspire other parts of Colombia, no?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, definitely.

[Elise Lefèvre]

And from the beginning, did you see the foundation's work as part of a peacebuilding effort?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes. That's been a core objective of the foundation.

We are located in a region that's rich in ecosystems, cultures, and people, and we want to promote spaces where peace can be fostered.

This center—open to the public, focused on science and community—is meant to be a place of dialogue and learning, where people come together around nature.

It can become a reference point for peace.

Many places speak of peace promotion, but we need to make it tangible and visible through action.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Now that violence is rising again in some parts of Colombia, how has this affected your work or the situation in your region?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Yes, it's something we've seen in the news—every time something happens in San José del Guaviare, it gets amplified.

But the problem is the media often sensationalizes things. Just hearing the name "San José del Guaviare" can make people afraid to come here, even if the incidents aren't happening in the town itself.

The way violence is portrayed can create fear and discourage people from visiting.

Still, Guaviare remains a highly attractive region. Many tourists are interested in rock art, rivers, and community experiences.

Tourist season is just starting now, and we're doing everything we can—especially through social media—to show the beauty of this place and encourage people to visit.

[Elise Lefèvre]

So the violence reported in the media mostly affects how people perceive the region, not necessarily your day-to-day work?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Exactly. The news often paints a picture that doesn't match the reality here.

We don't receive tourists every day like a big destination would. Most of our visitors contact us in advance, ask if it's safe, and we schedule visits accordingly.

So yes, media coverage can impact the flow of visitors, but not drastically. We're not a mass tourism site. We work by appointment, and people reach out to us directly.

Sure, those headlines can lower visitor numbers a bit, but we don't let it paralyze us.

For instance, when USAID paused activities recently, people panicked. But we can't depend entirely on others—we have to keep moving forward, keep working.

Personally, I try not to watch the news too much—it just feeds the panic.

[Elise Lefèvre]

How do you see the future of the foundation over the next few years—and, more broadly, the future of nature-based tourism in Colombia?

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Our hope is that the foundation will be officially recognized as a science center by the Ministry of Science.

There currently aren't any recognized science centers in the Amazon region, so we hope to become one of the first.

We want to keep promoting knowledge, science, and responsible tourism—and become a reference point not only for Colombia, but also for Latin America.

There are places in Latin America that are just beginning to explore tourism, and some don't yet know how to do it in a sustainable way.

We'd love to share what we've learned and help other communities build capacity through community-based and conservation-driven tourism.

[Elise Lefèvre]

That's amazing. I'd really love to come visit someday.

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Of course—you're always welcome!

[Elise Lefèvre]

I don't have any more questions, but if there's anything else you'd like to share, I'd love to hear it.

[Paula Sedano Duque]

We're always open to research collaboration. We already work a lot with universities—internships, theses, and other projects.

If you do end up publishing your thesis, we'd love to read it.

Also, feel free to follow us on Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube—most of our visitors find us through social media, so that's how we stay visible.

[Elise Lefèvre]

Definitely—I'll do that. I'll talk about the foundation in my thesis, and I'll also share it with my professor who's very passionate about Colombia.

Thank you so much again, Paula. This conversation is really helpful to me, and it's so hard to make connections like this from Belgium.

[Paula Sedano Duque]

Don't worry—anytime. We'll stay in touch.

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