

Destino Colombia

A transformative scenarios process to discover new ways new ways to deal with a complex conflict



THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

- Issue:** Peace
- Geography:** Colombia
- Duration:** 1996--1999
- Co-Convenors:** J. Mario Aristizábal and Manuel José Carvajal (business), Mario Suárez Melo (politics), and Eduardo Pizarro (academia).
- Scenarios:** “When the Sun Rises We’ll See”, “A Bird in the Hnd is Worth Two in the Bush”, “Forward March!”, and “In Unity Lies Strength”.



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The Context

Colombia has a long history of violent conflict; it even has a homegrown academic discipline called “violentology”. In the first half of the twentieth century, the country went through two bloody civil wars, the second one simply called “The Violence”. Then from the 1960s, it suffered continuing clashes among the military, drug traffickers, criminal gangs, left-wing guerillas, and right-wing paramilitaries, characterised by kidnappings, executions, massacres, and no-go zones.

And yet over the same period, Colombia has maintained democratic governments, a dynamic

business sector, and an active civil society. It has faced enormous challenges and has demonstrated enormous capacities to address these challenges.

The Convenors

In 1996, civic-minded businessman Manuel José Carvajal heard about the Mont Fleur Scenario Exercise in South Africa (see further reading) and thought that such a transformative scenario process might help Colombians find new ways out of their conflict. With Juan Manuel Santos, a journalist turned politician, he convened a meeting that included top national leaders from politics, business, the military, the church, and academia, with illegal guerillas participating by telephone from a secret location.

The conclusion of this meeting was that a diverse scenario team needed to be assembled. Santos understood that, because of his political position, he was too partisan a figure to act as a convener. He stepped back, and a broader and more neutral organizing committee stepped forward. The committee’s role was to put together a scenario team that would represent the whole conflicted society, and in particular would enable the combatants to talk with one another directly.



The scenario team ultimately ended up including guerillas and paramilitarists, as well as academics, activists, businesspeople, journalists, military officers, peasants, politicians, trade unionists, and young people. The convenors excluded drug traffickers and people from the cabinet of then president Ernesto Samper, whose election campaign was thought to have been partly financed by drug traffickers. Later this exclusion was acknowledged to have slowed the transformative effect of the scenarios, in that the government largely ignored the scenario work until after Samper's term.

The most remarkable feature of the project was the participation of both of the illegal, armed, left-wing guerilla groups. Although the government had offered them safe passage to the workshops, the guerillas thought that attending would be too risky, and so the organisers arranged, extraordinarily, for them to participate in the team's meetings by telephone. Three men called in from the political prisoners' wing of a maximum-security prison and one from exile in Costa Rica.

Team members took the important first step of agreeing to a set of ground rules for their work together. They agreed to call things by their name; to express their differences without irony; to assume the

good faith of others; to be tolerant, disciplined, and punctual; to be concrete and concise; and to keep confidences. They were proud of these ground rules and believed that, in the midst of so much lawlessness and violence, the rules helped them construct a safe container. Within this container, the members of the team were able to open themselves up and to deepen their relationships.

Beyond simply coming to the workshops, the participants showed outstanding openness and courage. In many cases, people were interacting for the first time with their enemies. They listened to and heard each other, and spoke their truth, even when it was difficult to do so. Out of this honesty came a shared understanding, hope, and commitment.

The Process

Convening the project and constructing the scenarios

The process of scenario building took place in three stages. In the first, called the divergence stage, the members of the Scenario Team articulated their various positions on the challenges facing the country. In the following emergence stage, national and international experts addressed group members, broadening their knowledge of various subjects regarding the country and



its place in the world. Finally, during the third stage, the group engaged in a process of convergence, starting out with a broad number of alternatives and concluding with four scenarios judged the most relevant, novel, and substantial.

The Scenarios

The first scenario, “When the Sun Rises We’ll See”, was a warning of the chaos that would result if Colombians just let things be and failed to address their tough challenges. The second, “A Bird in the Hand Is Worth Two in the Bush”, was the story of a negotiated compromise between the government and the guerillas. The third, “Forward March!” painted a picture in which the government, supported by a population frustrated with the continuing violence and operating from the principle that “a hard problem requires a hard solution”, implemented a policy of crushing the guerillas militarily and pacifying the country. The fourth, “In Unity Lies Strength”, depicted a bottom-up transformation of the country’s mentality away from judgment and violence and towards mutual respect and cooperation.

Moving to Action

Scenario Team members disseminated their scenarios on a massive scale. They published a summary of their work as an insert in all of the country’s major newspapers, created a video that was shown on national television, and held large public meetings in all of the regional capitals. The stories were taken up in the strategic conversation of many governmental, business, and community organisations.

Since Destino Colombia

Over the last few years, Colombia has been doing better. Economic investment and output are up, poverty and violence are down. A series of high-level multi-stakeholder dialogues, inspired in part by “In Unity Lies Strength”, produced an “Agenda for Colombia” that included important policy reforms on land rights, fair economic growth, and compensation for the victims of armed conflict. In 2012, Time magazine published a cover story entitled “The Colombian Comeback”.



Juan Manuel Santos, who 16 years before had put together the organizing meeting for Destino Colombia and who two years earlier had been elected president of the country, said about the project:

“It is truly breath taking to read the Destino Colombia scenarios now, because they seem more prophetic than academic... In Colombia we have now embarked on an irreversible evolutionary process that we hope will culminate in the peaceful transition and the final reconsolidation of the fourth scenario, “In Unity Lies Strength”. That scenario is the way forward that we want to realise today with the National Unity proposal that my government has launched... It is good to know that the best scenario that we imagined 16 years ago is now beginning to be realised.”

For more information, please see these related materials:

- The reports of the Destino Colombia and Mont Fleur projects available from:

www.reospartners.com/projects

- Rettberg, Angelika. Destino Colombia: Crónica y evaluación de un ejercicio de participación de líderes de la sociedad civil en el diseño de escenarios futuros [Destination Colombia: Chronicle and evaluation of an exercise of civil society leaders in the design of future scenarios]. Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Uniandes, 2006.

- Kahane, Adam. Transformative Scenario Planning: Working Together to Change the Future. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, 2012.