Grassroots Masquerades: Development, Paramilitaries, and Land Laundering in Colombia

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Abstract: This paper shows how paramilitaries and allied private companies channelled grassroots development discourses of political participation and subsidiarity, environmental conservation, and ethnic empowerment in executing and ratifying their massive land grab in northwest Colombia. More than a case of trying to 'whitewash' their malfeasance with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, I argue that the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—became utterly instrumental to the illegal land seizures. Moreover, when operating alongside practices of land parcelization, iterative transactions, producers' cooperatives, and third-party intermediaries, grassroots development facilitated what could be called 'land laundering'. In the process, grassroots development helped make paramilitary economies of violence perversely compatible with projects of liberal governance commonly associated with imperatives of 'institution building', 'good governance', and the 'rule of law'. With the World Bank increasingly concerned by fragile states, violent conflict, and alarming land-grabs, this paper sounds caution about how the grassroots strategies being endorsed by the Bank to address these often-conflated problems can in some case facilitate dispossession, illicit economies, and violent political projects.

INTRODUCTION: BABY TURTLES AND AK-47s

During a court hearing in 2007, authorities confronted a jailed paramilitary commander about his militia's possible involvement in an ecotourism project based in Colombia's northwest region of Urabá. Over the years, paramilitaries have violently forced millions of campesinos from their farms, seizing the vacated lands and using them as a means for maintaining territorial control, laundering drug money, and making profits—mainly through agribusinesses.

But in this case, the paramilitary-backed venture in question was an ecotourism project near a famous nesting ground for the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). The area also happened to be a key entry point for smuggled shipments of AK-47s and other munitions from Central America (UNODC 2006). Prosecutors wanted to know whether the ecotourism project formed part of the

paramilitary bloc's economies of violence.

The commander, nicknamed 'El Alemán', launched into a lengthy presentation—even including a map—that described how the ecotourism project near the town of Acandí was set up with a participatory cooperative structure. He said that besides 'helping repair the community's social fabric', the project was intended as an alternative to the area's only source of economic dynamism: smuggling drugs, guns, and other contraband. El Alemán explained he even sent members of his militia to convince local campesinos to not eat the turtle eggs and to not bother the turtle hatchlings ('*los animalitos*')—all this from a man facing charges for mass murder and drug trafficking.[1]

But the turtle project was not the only venture in Urabá set up with paramilitary help that drew on similar discourses of grassroots development; some projects were even pitched as being tailor-made for ethnic communities. Why would violent, drug-trafficking paramilitary groups in Colombia be using discourses of grassroots development? How is it possible for anything associated with these murderous militias to be characterized as promoting grassroots development ideals of political participation and subsidiarity, environmental sustainability, and ethnic empowerment?

This article argues that grassroots development became the means through which paramilitaries executed and ratified their massive land seizures in Urabá. More than a case of trying to 'whitewash' their plunder with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, grassroots development—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—was utterly instrumental to the paramilitary land grab in Urabá.

The first section of the article conceptualizes and defines grassroots development and situates its emergence within a particular global geopolitical and economic conjuncture. The second section very briefly shows how grassroots development became articulated with the shifting dynamics of Colombia's armed conflict. The third section, forming the bulk the article, details two empirical cases—an oil palm plantation and paramilitary demobilization project—showing how paramilitaries put the grassroots development apparatus to work in Urabá. I demonstrate how paramilitary land grabbing and land laundering worked through a complex assemblage of private companies, NGOs, peasant associations, public officials, and government aid to argue that grassroots development became perversely compatible with paramilitaries' illicit forms of accumulation and rule. The final section concludes the essay with some closing comparative remarks on the two cases, a review of the arguments, and potential practical implications.

The term 'land laundering' refers to the process by which the illegal origins of a land acquisition are concealed. In the cases examined below, land laundering operated through three main tactics. The first involves the symbolic means through which economic projects developed on stolen lands are cast in terms of green, local, participatory, or multicultural development, providing them an air of legitimacy. But, as I

[1] Versión Libre, Freddy Rendón Herrera, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, July 6, 2007, and July10, 2007.

will argue, the grassroots development discourses do far more work than mere legitimation. They inherently imply and make possible a set of practices and institutional articulations that help further obscure the land's illicit origins.

The second set of strategies involves material practices such as iterative parcelizations and transactions of land that end up in the hands of questionable peasant 'cooperatives' or 'associations'. The bureaucratic feats and outright fraud comprised in this aspect of land laundering implicate third-party frontmen as well as corrupt notaries and public officials.

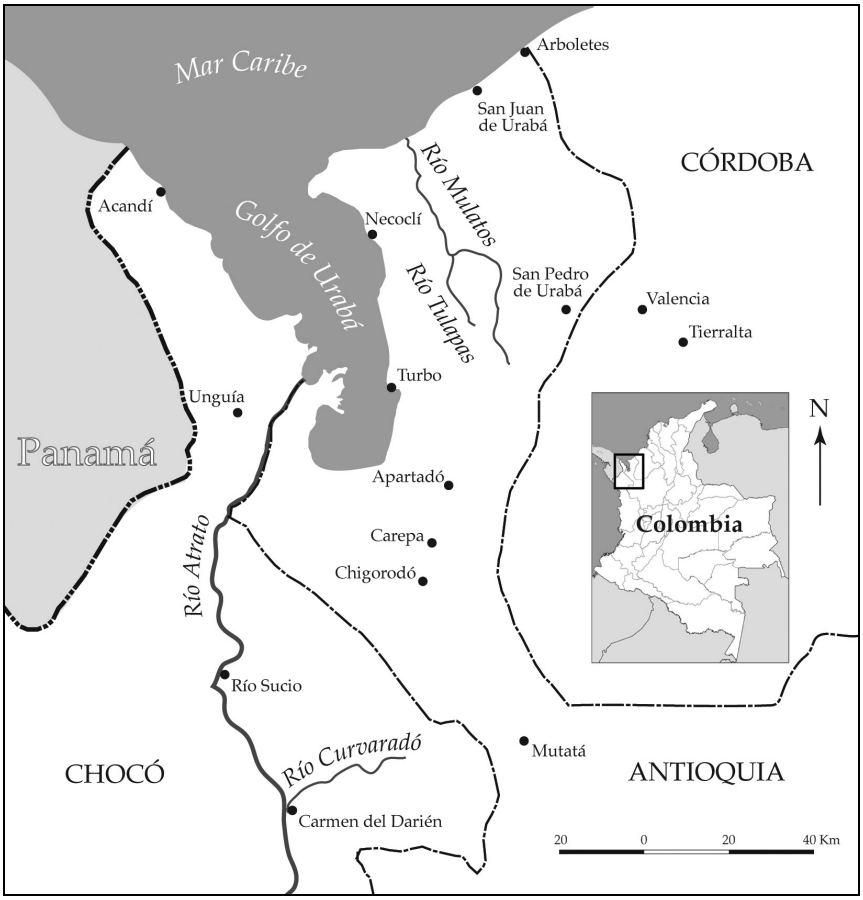
The third strategy involves the everyday politics of indistinction between the legal and the illegal achieved by the symbolic and material practices. In other words, laundering does not work so much by the one-time alchemy of converting the illegal into the legal, but rather by the on-going process of blurring any possible distinction between the two. In Urabá, grassroots development became a forging house of this everyday alchemy.

Issues related to land grabs, violence, and development have taken on a renewed significance with the publishing of two recent landmark reports by the World Bank—one on rising global interest in farmland and the other on the relations between conflict, security, and development (2010, 2011). With the World Bank's endorsement of grassroots strategies to address the problems discussed in the reports, this article raises questions about how these strategies might in some cases facilitate dispossession, illicit economies, and violent political projects. Urabá is virtually a microcosm of the problematic dynamics identified by the Bank, making it a rich case for weighing questions of development, conflict, and land.

Northwest Colombia's geography as a river-filled land corridor sandwiched between two ocean coastlines and bridging two continents has made it coveted geopolitical terrain in the country's turbulent history. Most Colombians call this area Urabá, while its western fringe with Panama is also known as the Darién. The Urabá gulf-region has no formal administrative status; it vaguely spans the northern tips of the departments of Antioquia and Chocó along with the western edge of Córdoba (Figure 1, p. 4).

Urabá had been a stronghold of rebel forces for decades until paramilitary forces arrived in the mid 1990s. Paramilitaries, who are discussed in more detail below, used the region as a veritable laboratory for forging their model of armed colonization, which was eventually exported to other regions, with a strikingly similar set of events, institutional forms and practices. As the outgrowth of a complex alliance between narcotraffickers and agrarian elites, paramilitaries emerged as ultra-violent counterinsurgent battalions partly funded by the drug trade. They were, to say the least, unlikely candidates for becoming the midwives of grassroots development.

Figure 1. Map of Urabá (Source: Author)



THE GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT APPARATUS

Discourses, as the socially produced statements we use to represent knowledge about the world, are powerful in so far as they help construct topics in particular ways; they enable some understandings and practices, while limiting others (Foucault 1972; Hall 1992, 291). Foucault, for instance, described how discourses of criminality in eighteenth century France emerged in the context of demographic shifts, the hardening of private property relations, and intensifying capitalist accumulation (1975, 80–91; 221; 270–300).

From this historical conjuncture, the increasing problematization of crime and delinquency generated a mushrooming strategic ensemble of interlinked discourses, disciplines, policies, institutions, practices, and tactics that Foucault came to call an apparatus, a *dispositif* (Rabinow and Rose 1994, xv-xvi). But the penal apparatus extended far beyond the prison walls, its discourses, rationales, and practices began seeping into other realms of social life. Foucault, in short, showed how discourses and practices were inseparable, socially constituted, and historically situated.

Applying Foucault's insights about the interrelations between discourses,

knowledge, and power, scholars have launched powerful critiques of the 'development' apparatus (Ferguson 1985; Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; cf. Watts 1993 for an early review). Hart (2009) argues those trailblazing accounts overlooked the tight and formative relationships at key turning points between 'Development', as a project of Third World interventions, and the on-going historical development of capitalism. In her view, both popular resistance and economic shifts (crises, in some cases) operating at multiple scales form integral parts of development's dialectic.

While still anchoring their analyses in Foucault's thinking, other writers have tracked the interplay between changing configurations of capitalism and discursive shifts in the development apparatus (Li 2007; Roy 2010). Tracing how and why Colombia's paramilitaries seized upon discourses of grassroots development must be situated within similar understandings of how development and capitalism are dynamically interrelated.

By 'grassroots development', I mean the apparatus—the strategic assemblage of discourses, practices, policies, institutionalizations, and tactics—that was cast as a 'bottom up' alternative to the perceived failures of 'top-down' development policies supported by governments and international agencies.[2] Grassroots development emerged as a perceived alternative—or, at least, a corrective—to the one-size-fits-all macroeconomic policies that had met with popular opposition in so much of the world in the 1980s and 1990s. It gained impulse from the decline of the Cold War, the toppling of authoritarian regimes, the deepening debt crisis, and the rising intensity of free-market reforms, along with the related political surge of NGOs and social movements.

Amid this confluence of factors, development policies and practices became newly problematized in ways that helped further crystallize discourses around political participation and subsidiarity, environmental sustainability, as well as ethnic and women's empowerment. Separately or more often in complex articulation, these discourses became the operative discursive field of the grassroots development apparatus. While the basic common denominator of grassroots development initiatives were their localized, bottom-up, participatory approaches, they were also often cast in explicit terms of being green, gendered, and multicultural—that is, everything deemed problematic about past development paradigms. From the 1970s to their consolidation in the 1990s, grassroots development discourses increasingly threaded together the work of community groups, NGOs, multilateral lenders, government agencies, experts, and activists.

During the final throes of state-led developmentalism in the 1970s, idioms of development shifted toward 'Basic Human Needs'. The Basic Needs discourse was oriented toward correcting the collateral effects of import-substitution industrialization by attending to what was deemed the most 'backward' economic sectors—namely, peasant farmers and informal workers (Hart 2010, 123). Itself an outgrowth from 'community

[2] I prefer 'grassroots development' rather than related terms such as 'sustainable' or 'alternative' development. 'Sustainable' has gained a primarily environmental connotation, while 'alternative development' in Colombia would be confusing since it's the name of the crop-substitution programs aimed at weaning farmers off of cultivating drug-related crops discussed below. Moreover, 'grassroots' usefully identifies the underlying political rationality of the approach in distinction to the problematized 'top-down' strategies.

development' initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s, Basic Needs also coincided with projects of 'integrated rural development' that became all the rage in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Ruttan 1984; Escobar 1995).

The foreign aid-backed initiatives sought to alleviate rural poverty by promoting small-scale production, producer cooperatives, and local political empowerment (Restrepo 2008; Aparicio 2009).[3] North-to-south financing of these projects contributed to the explosive growth in commercial bank lending and portfolio investment—from $777 million in 1970 to almost $18 billion a decade later—that helped inflate the Third World's growing debt bubble (Wood 1986; ctd. in Hart 2010).

Concurrently, and with growing frequency, international summits, reports, and treaties mainly shepherded by the UN system began articulating development with new discursive registers. The UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, the Brundtland Report on 'sustainable development' in 1987, and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit) in 1992 all helped frame a redemptive vision of development as both local and green. The growing chorus of reports, events, and treaties called for development to be more environmentally sustainable and more empowering of local communities, who were expected to take 'ownership' of projects that aimed to work through, rather than against, local particularities (Mosse and Lewis 2005). Development had swerved onto its own cultural and spatial turn.

Indeed, cultural and ethnic rights were integral parts of the new grassroots development ethos (Healy 2001), particularly when coupled with discourses of biodiversity conservation. Signatories to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, for instance, agreed to 'preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity' (UN 1992).

Ethnic and minority groups along with local communities, long seen as the principle 'victims of progress', were recast as 'stewards' of nature and knowledges that could be harnessed rather than bulldozed by the development apparatus (Hayden 2003). International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 169 ratified by most signatories in the 1990s further soldered the links between local development, environmental conservation, and ethnic rights (Van Cott 2000). Women, too, became not just an object of development policy, but key conduits through which many development objectives were to be achieved (Boserup 1970; Moser 1993; Molyneux 2006). Amid these shifts a growing global army of NGOs emerged and helped attend to this expanded conception of 'stakeholders'.

Positioned within vague notions of 'civil society', the NGO sector exploded with

[3] Both Restrepo (2008) and Aparicio (2009) have shown how these programs in northwest Colombia had far-reaching unintended consequences, including the creation of new subjectivities, economic relations, and territorialities that, among other things, helped contribute to the formation of new political claims and social movements.

the decline of the Cold War and the fall of authoritarian regimes in South America and Eastern Europe (Buttigieg 2005). The increasing role assumed by NGOs in steering development practice were justified by critiques from both ends of the political spectrum opposing the heavy-handed, top-down, and overly centralized dealings of the developmentalist state (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Besides picking up the slack of shrinking state capacities, NGOs also became privileged agents within development's new-and-improved grassroots vision.

Finally, the thickening role of NGOs was also well-aligned with the 'second generation reforms' of the Washington Consensus, which promoted institution building, good governance, the rule of law, and social capital (Naím 1994; Williamson 2003). The second-generation reforms are broadly representative of growing recognition that economic growth—the hegemonic metric of capitalist development—could not be sustainably achieved via macroeconomic stability alone.

However, it would be misguided to see the emergence of grassroots development as the unilateral brainchild of insidious international institutions, governments, and policymakers. Social movements, from radical to reformist, have been a determinant force in the torturous course of development since its colonial roots (Cooper 1997). It has been through movements' critiques and struggles that many of the key discourses of grassroots development gained traction in the first place. Transnational networks of NGOs and 'new social movements' advocating diverse agendas—including human rights, environmental conservation, labour, gender and ethnic rights—have been key actors in shifting the discourses and political horizons of development (Jelin 1990; Escobar 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sheehan 1998; Goldman 2005). The results, to put it mildly, have been mixed.

International development agencies' escalating incorporation of green, gendered, local, and multicultural concerns indicates the extent to which these discourses have become powerful. But reducing the mobilization of grassroots discourses by mainstream institutions to a blanket case of co-optation is far too simplistic and would overlook the significant (and on-going) material and symbolic gains achieved through movements' mobilization of the discourses.

Gramsci's (1971) more relational notion of 'hegemony', as a fluid process of struggle through which particular social relations become naturalized and enforced, offers much more nuance for conceiving the elastic push and pull political struggles between social movements and capital within the development apparatus. It is through such hegemonic struggles that processes of rule—in all their inevitable contingency and incompleteness—are actually produced in practice (Roseberry 1994; Williams 1977).

Scholarship in Colombia—and elsewhere—has amply shown how articulations of green, gendered, local, and multicultural discourses of grassroots development by diverse actors have produced dramatically contradictory results. In some cases, the discourses have helped reconstitute state legitimacy and capitalist-oriented development at a moment when both faced crises of hegemony (Ng'weno 2007; Asher and Ojeda 2009; Asher 2009). The plasticity of the discourses means they have underwritten violent land-

grabs associated with ecotourism development and landscapes of mono-crop agriculture (Ojeda 2012; Cárdenas 2012), while at the same time being articulated with localized political cultures by subaltern groups of peasant, Afro-Colombian, women, and indigenous groups in ways that have engendered far more radical political horizons (Escobar 1995, 2008; Wade 1999; Restrepo 2004; Agudelo 2005; Asher 2009; Aparicio 2009).

Still to be adequately explored is how illegal armed groups have also deployed discourses of grassroots development.[4] This not only leaves the obvious task of empirically showing how this process worked, but to also explore how paramilitaries' forays into grassroots development might change our thinking in debates about the political relations of force between the state, movements, and development in Colombia and beyond. These tasks are all the more urgent given that a composite of recent World Bank reports (2010, 2011) have endorsed a renewed vision of grassroots development for addressing the deep and related problems of fragile states, violent conflict, and alarming land-grabs—a combination of factors that Colombia has faced for decades, if not centuries.

The *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (or *WDR 2011*) demonstrates the extent to which grassroots discourses have gone mainstream, particularly around concerns of 'human security'.[5] The report's main conclusion is that the only way for 'fragile or conflict-affected states'—including those with high levels of criminal violence—to break their chronic cycles of violence is by strengthening and building confidence in legitimate institutions. In this iteration, grassroots development translates into hyper-localized 'best-fit' approaches aimed at creating economic opportunities and forging 'resilient' state institutions, capacities, and forms of governance that reduce 'vulnerabilities' to violent political dynamics.[6]

The Bank argues program design must be 'bottom-up', working *with* community structures, so as to not 'be misaligned with the process of forging and reforging trust in state institutions and in state-society relations' (WDR 2011, 255). Alongside the political participation and subsidiarity evident in the Bank's reinvigorated bottom-up localism, the gendered and ethno-cultural dimensions of grassroots development for reducing

[4] Daniel Ruiz Serna's (2003) article on guerrillas' environmental regulations in the Macarena National Park is a notable exception.

[5] The UNDP's 1994 *Human Development Report* is the seminal text on 'human security'; ahead of a 1995 summit on 'social development', the report sought to broaden notions of security beyond state-centric understandings by emphasizing people's economic, environmental, food, personal, health, community, and political security—elements, which are often explicitly or implicitly embedded in grassroots development thinking.

[6] Watts, who offers a sweeping critical review of the report, writes: 'What is striking is that in practical terms, the Bank endorses, unlike its one-size-fits-all approach in promoting market efficiency, a "best-fit" approach that takes history and geography very seriously…. By definition, this approach encourages what one might call local knowledge and local context, a multidisciplinary disposition, and a sensitivity to political opportunities and spaces as they emerge from concrete (national or subnational) spaces' (2012, 123). The new report seems to confirm development's cultural and spatial turn mentioned above. Watts also notes how the growing trend toward so-called 'resilience approaches', which subsume what I've defined as grassroots development, is oriented toward an ever-growing menu of biopolitical concerns—Reid (2012) makes similar points.

vulnerabilities to violence are also on full display.

Although environmental conservation is overshadowed by the report's emphasis on the political stresses induced by climate change and resource conflicts, conservation figures centrally in the World Bank's 2010 report on skyrocketing global investments in farmland. This is not surprising given the monstrous conversion of forests into industrial-scale agribusiness being driven by what many scholars have dubbed a 'global land grab' (Borras et al. 2011; cf. Peluso and Lund 2011). In fact, almost 60% of this new agricultural expansion in the tropics has come at the expense of forests, particularly in Latin America (World Bank 2010:33).

The land grab report and *WDR 2011* make insightful companions because they each identify both the root and solution to the problems they examine within local institutions and governance. The Bank's research shows that foreign investment in land, unlike most large capital inflows, tends to be higher in countries and regions with *weak* institutional structures and governance (2010, 2011:231). Indeed, land grabs evidently thrive on the same institutional vulnerabilities that endlessly reproduce fragile states and repetitive cycles of violence.

Together, the reports can also be read as the latest culmination of grassroots development praxis. And since Colombia figures prominently in both reports—even touted as a relative success story in *WDR 2011*—the country provides a revealing case for a critical assessment of grassroots strategies in places characterized by fragile state authority, violent conflict, and land grabs. Urabá, in particular, presents a cautionary tale about how grassroots development and, by implication, the approaches being endorsed by the World Bank may in some cases remain profanely compatible with—perhaps even be conducive to—organized violence, illicit economies, and ruthless land grabs.

COCAINE AND OLIGARCHS: FROM REFORM TO REACTION

The historical shift toward grassroots development that coalesced globally in the 1990s manifested with demonstrable force in Colombia. In 1990, for instance, the country only had 26 environmental NGOs, but by 1994 there were already more than 400 (Winograd 1993:62). As one enthusiastic account from Latin America at the time noted, 'NGOs actions have started to show results at local and regional levels vis-à-vis natural resource management, the appraisal and respect for native knowledge and cultures, and the implementation of alternative production models…. They constitute the force that may guide popular participation and produce important changes in development policies and actions' (Winograd 1993:62). Grassroots development had certainly come of age.

Colombia's political conjuncture made conditions particularly propitious for a redefined vision of development as more inclusive, sustainable, and participatory. From 1980 to 1990, the country had plunged into a dramatic political crisis. Political violence became overlaid with infighting among the cocaine cartels, while the drug capos also began ruthlessly lashing out against a U.S.-backed government crackdown, detonating

spectacular car bombs in metropolitan heartlands. The rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) meanwhile were gaining ground politically and militarily. Kidnappings soared into the thousands. Cartel hit men killed presidential cabinet members in targeted drive-by shootings. And the assassination of three presidential candidates running in the 1990 elections, including the clear favourite, sunk the country deeper into the abyss.

Colombia faced what Gramsci called a 'crisis of authority', which he defined as 'precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the State' in which even the total use of force is incapable of guaranteeing the stability or even recognition of its rule (Gramsci 1971, 210). Colombians overwhelmingly recognized the situation had spun far beyond the state's control and doubted whether anything could be done about it. Or, as then-president, César Gaviria, frankly put it in a recent interview: 'The country was fucked'.[7]

A briefly emboldened student movement emerged as a lone beacon of hope, publishing a manifesto that rallied readers with the closing phrase: 'We can still save Colombia'. The manifesto proposed a national referendum on writing a new Constitution. Stoked by the student movement and the staggering proportions of the crisis, popular sentiment swayed squarely in favour of rewriting the Constitution as the only way out of the crisis (Dugas 2001). When the new Constitution was ratified in July 1991, some of its most far-reaching reforms aimed to promote political subsidiarity and participation, environmental conservation, and ethnic empowerment.

The new *ordenamiento territorial* (territorial ordering)—which subsumed political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization—gave municipalities a protagonistic role in the country's political system. The *ordenamiento territorial* itself was defined as 'a state policy and planning instrument that allows for an appropriate political-administrative organization of the Nation, and the spatial projection of the social development, economic, environmental and cultural policies of [Colombian] society' (Asher and Ojeda 2009, 293).

For rural areas in particular, the *ordenamiento territorial* was supposed to foster local political participation, preserve cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as regulate access to and control of natural resources (Asher 2009, 77–8). The Constitution's implementing legislation for the state restructuring established all kinds of political, cultural, and economic initiatives for promoting grassroots development. Municipalities and other subnational entities were newly empowered to contract services from companies, NGOs, and community groups. Legislation gave producer cooperatives and other forms of 'solidarity economies' and 'associative' work arrangements renewed political traction, formal recognition, and greater access to public funds and subsidies.

In sum, the constitutional reforms created an amenable administrative, fiscal, and political infrastructure for grassroots development to become operationalized throughout the country. The security rationales of grassroots development were also important. Lawmakers hoped the new reforms would provide insurgents and other excluded groups (e.g. peasants and ethnic minorities) with meaningful forms of participation and a viable

[7] 'Los tiempos de Pablo Escobar, Parte II' *Caracol TV* (Bogotá), airdate: July 1, 2012.

stake in the nation's political life.

Conservative regional elites in places like Urabá balked at the reforms. Besieged by unprecedented waves of guerrilla extortion and kidnappings, Urabá's elites saw the reforms as undue concessions to subversive rebels and their presumed peasant allies (Romero 2003). Adding insult to injury, the new Constitution also introduced an article that recognized rural Afro-Colombian communities as an 'ethnic group' with the same rights over collective property once reserved for indigenous groups.

The previously cushioned rural oligarchy was losing out from declining state support and tumbling tariff barriers amid Colombia's push toward economic liberalization. In 1985, Colombia had the highest tariff barriers in Latin America, but by 1992 they had been slashed, bottoming out as the second lowest in the region (Urrutia 1994:286). The economic restructuring caused 'the massive redistribution of income between the city and countryside. The biggest winners were high-income sectors in urban areas, while the biggest losers were high-income sectors in rural areas' (Ocampo 1994:115). Sharp drops in commodity prices further hit the high-income sectors in Urabá, which included cattle ranchers and banana plantation owners. Bananas, for example, lost a third of their value by 1994, marking a 25-year low, while beef prices also crashed, losing nearly half their value from 1993 to 1995.

Landed elites complained they had been politically and economically abandoned by the state, left to the mercy of guerrillas, restless peasants, and a global market. In a complex class alliance, the old elites joined forces with the drug traffickers and established paramilitary militias. Paramilitary formations have a long history in Colombia, but this recent iteration, despite some geographic variations, brought together a consistent ensemble cast: drug traffickers, wealthy landowners, business owners, regional politicians, and members of the state security forces (Romero 2003; Duncan 2006). Fuelled by a zealous anti-Communism and ostensibly organized to fight the rebels, they more commonly massacred and terrorized innocent peasants accused of supporting the guerrillas.

Colombia's largest paramilitary faction emerged in the early 1990s from the cattle rangelands of Córdoba on Urabá's eastern fringe (Figure 1, p. 4). The paramilitary group came to be called the *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU), founded by three brothers from the Castaño family—Fidel, Vicente, and Carlos—whose father had been killed by the FARC in the 1980s.[8] The Castaño brothers had been battle-hardened by stints in Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and became heavily invested in Córdoba's cattle industry, building up huge estates during the narco land-rush of the 1980s.

Although never devoid of counterinsurgent aims, the violent momentum of their building war machine became driven by its own internal metabolism, gaining vast amounts of lands, businesses, and weapons, while eliminating political opponents and protecting their most lucrative activity, drug trafficking. Campesinos in Urabá often describe how in the months preceding the paramilitary onslaught, rumours coursed

[8] In English: Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá.

through their communities that the *mochacabezas* (decapitators) were coming; a reference to the gruesome way paramilitaries used machetes to dismember the bodies of their victims. Paramilitaries and the Army collaborated so closely that they often referred to each other as '*primos*' (cousins).

The initial incursions were often capped by wholesale massacres, a terrifying message that proved to be just the opening salvo. 'They said they came here to clean out the guerrillas', recalls a local peasant, 'but it was us, the campesinos, they cleaned out'. In interviews, several survivors explained that when the violence began, the Castaños' men came to their farms with the same bone-chilling offer: 'Sell us your land, or we'll negotiate with your widow'.[9] What followed was a crescendo of terror that would eventually leave thousands either dead or landless. Once purged of their legitimate owners, the lands proved fertile soil for paramilitaries' twisted brand of grassroots development.

THE GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT LAND GRAB

Paramilitaries' involvement in the grassroots development apparatus combined an intricate network of organized violence, private companies, NGOs, peasant associations, illicit capital, public officials, government aid, and, in some cases, funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). By casting their projects as participatory, bottom-up, local, green, or multicultural, paramilitaries harnessed the grassroots development apparatus, putting it to work toward their own predatory ends. I discuss these processes through two concrete cases, using evidence drawn from government investigations, court cases, land registry documents, corporate filings, and interviews.

The first case examines how agribusiness companies backed by Vicente Castaño adopted discourses of grassroots development in establishing an oil palm plantation after driving thousands of Afro-Colombian campesinos off their land. The second case focuses on how grassroots development figured into the post-demobilization projects of a paramilitary bloc commanded by El Alemán—also on ill-gotten lands.[10] Both cases demonstrate how paramilitaries channelled the grassroots development apparatus in carrying out and laundering their land grab in Urabá. Analysis of the two cases also highlights how the projects themselves were conceived and perceived as vehicles of state formation, showing how the imperatives of the 'rule of law', 'institution-building', and 'good governance' commonly associated with grassroots development remained perversely compatible with paramilitaries' economies of violence.

Oil Palm and Dead People Sell Land

[9] The 'negotiate with your widow' phrase appears to have been widely repeated by paramilitaries forcing campesinos off their land; its prevalence in victims' testimonies indicates how it's burned into the collective memory of displaced peasants nationwide.

[10] Although the paramilitary units of El Alemán and Castaño were nominally federated under a single umbrella organization and closely coordinated operations, they were effectively autonomous organizations.

The largely Afro-Colombian communities of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó rivers fled their farms in 1997 when a joint operation between the Army and the Castaño's ACCU tore through these two neighbouring basins. Forced to leave at gunpoint, many of the displaced campesinos took refuge in nearby towns and spent the next several years without being able to visit their farms. When some residents of the Curvaradó began returning in 2002, they found a devastating sight.

'All the work of my youth was gone', recalled an elderly campesino about the day he first glimpsed his razed farm. Reciting an inventory that he had apparently repeated often, he continued, 'I had corn, bananas, beans, rice, dozens of cows, nine mules, my wife had tons of chickens, pigs… they even chopped down the woods I used to fix my house. Everything was gone'.[11] Tidy and seemingly endless rows of oil palm saplings had replaced the messy patchwork of fields, pastures, and forest that had previously shaped his farm.

The 'private property' signs of one company were particularly ubiquitous: Urapalma. Through the denunciations of human rights groups, followed up by government and journalistic investigations, it is now known that Urapalma helped coordinate about a dozen agribusiness companies that developed an oil palm complex projected to encompass some 22,000 hectares of land. The massive plantation lies within the collectively titled 101,057 hectares conceded in 2000 to the mostly Afro-Colombian communities of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó rivers under the ethnic rights provisions of the 1991 Constitution.

The case of Urapalma has been widely publicized in Colombia and has become emblematic of how the nexus between the paramilitary movement and agribusiness interests has helped fuel the country's grave humanitarian crisis. Though estimates vary, over the past 20 years, Colombia's armed conflict has produced more than 4 million internally displaced people who have been stripped of some 5.3 million hectares of land—mostly, by paramilitaries.

The palm companies' complicity with paramilitaries in Urabá is obvious to Curvaradó residents. 'The palm owners are almost all paramilitaries, because they arrived here along with the paramilitaries', says one campesino. 'The paramilitaries would displace the people and the companies would seize the land, so they are paramilitaries, too. They all work together. This is something out there in the open for anyone to see'. [12]

In an interview with a national news magazine, paramilitary capo Vicente Castaño boastfully conceded the campesino's claim: 'In Urabá we [paramilitaries] have palm cultivations. I personally found the businessmen that invested in those projects'. Castaño viewed the process in terms of state formation, saying, 'The idea is to take rich people to invest in those kinds of projects in different parts of the country. By taking the rich to these zones, the institutions of the state also arrive. Unfortunately, the institutions

[11] Author interview in Carmen del Darién, Chocó: May 23, 2008.
[12] Author interview in Carmen del Darién, Chocó: May 23, 2008.

of the state only back those things when the rich are there. So you have to take the rich to all those regions of the country and that's a mission shared by all the [paramilitary] commanders'.[13] Castaño conceives the palm project as inducing the state's *arrival*—something to which I will return.

Although the government's own investigations have repeatedly confirmed collaboration between the palm companies and the ACCU's paramilitaries, the criminal cases against 23 agribusiness executives for complicity in the violence and displacement are bogged in the court system. The Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó communities remain besieged by paramilitary terror and are no closer to enjoying actual control of their lands. Along with simply forcing people to leave or coercing them into selling at giveaway prices, the Castaño's crafted an intricate illicit network for swindling the lands.

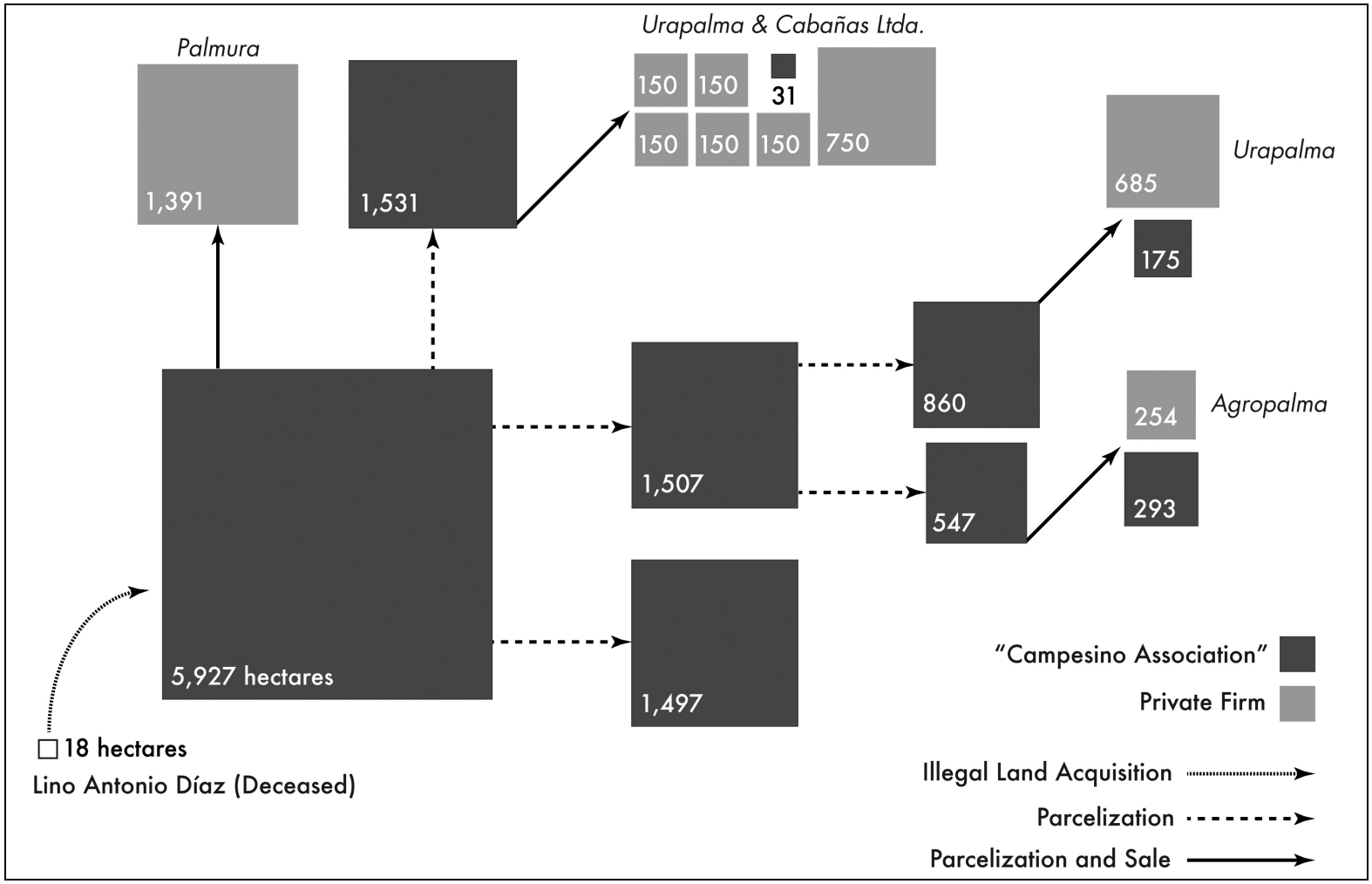
The most notorious case involves Lino Antonio Díaz, a long-time campesino resident of Curvaradó who had an individual title to his land. (The Constitution's collective ethnic property provisions, which mostly encompassed untitled lands, do not nullify previously existing individual titles.) Colombia's rural land management agency had awarded Díaz an individual title for 18 hectares of unclaimed land (*tierras baldías*) in 1990. Ten years later on May 27, 2000, Díaz supposedly filed paperwork at a public notary's office for extending his property to 5,927 hectares. The enormous property gain was justified by alluvial 'natural accession'. The changing course of an adjacent river had ostensibly enlarged his property by the improbable sum of nearly 6,000 hectares. Within the same bureaucratic transaction, Díaz then sold the newly enlarged property for a nominal price to the Association of Small-Scale Growers of Oil Palm in Urabá.

The problem is that Díaz had been dead since 1995 when he drowned in the waters of the Jiguamiandó—five years before all the transactions (with his signatures) took place. And court documents indicate the Association of Small-Scale Growers of Oil Palm in Urabá was a paramilitary front. Indeed, the head of the Association at the time was Javier Morales, who has since demobilized under the government's controversial demobilisation program, confirming his paramilitary status.

Land registration papers show that Morales immediately parcelled the hefty 6,000-hectare lot into four individual plots. Parcelization helps launder the land because each new parcel of land is assigned a new registry number (*matrícula inmobiliaria*), meaning that the detailed chain of transactions and ownership recorded in a property's registry documents is effectively wiped clean. (Every new piece of land has a new number and, therefore, a blank slate.)[14] Three out of the four resulting properties were then subdivided once again and some a third time, further interrupting the original land's paper trail. In all, through parcelization and sales, the Association transferred more than 90% of its 5,927 hectares to a handful of palm companies, including Urapalma (see Figure 2, p. 15).

[13] 'Habla Vicente Castaño', *Semana*, June 5, 2005: http://bit.ly/MyjtUC
[14] It is possible to trace numbers from one registry document to another, leading to the original document of the un-parceled land, but iterative parcelizations make it unlikely this ever happens.

Figure 2. Laundering Lino Antonio Díaz's Land (Source: Author)



The government alleges that the farm of another dead campesino—Sixto Pérez—met a similar fate. This time, the dead man's land ballooned from 33 hectares to 4,241 hectares. Again, the miraculous enlargement was justified by alluvial 'natural accession'. In this case, two other organizations of 'small-scale producers' orchestrated the parcelization and sales. After divvying the tract into four plots, the largest of the new parcels at 1,400 hectares was dutifully sold to Palmado, a private firm. At least six public notaries and a handful of local public officials are all being investigated for their complicity in these fraudulent transactions.

One of the most active 'peasant organizations' in the palm projects was the Association of Agricultural Producers of Belén de Bajirá (Asoprobeba). For several years, Teresa Gómez, whom the U.S. Treasury claims was the 'financial manager' of the Castaños' vast narco-paramilitary federation, directed Asoprobeba. Gómez, who was practically an honorary family member of the Castaños, managed at least one other paramilitary-affiliated NGO involved in land grabbing and is now wanted for the murder of a campesino leader in Córdoba who had clamoured for lands seized by the Castaños. As the director of Asoprobeba, Gómez purchased 1,100 hectares of disputed lands in Curvaradó from a known drug trafficker in 2002.[15]

The following year, registry documents show this property, too, was broken up; it appears to have been a token parcelization, resulting in a plot of a mere 12 hectares and another of 1,088 hectares. Gómez then ceded six-hectare plots to Asoprobeba's affiliated peasants, who received the lands under no-cost concession contracts (*comodato*) with the association retaining legal ownership. According to displaced campesinos and human rights groups, it was through these land concessions that paramilitaries repopulated the lands with campesinos from elsewhere. Displaced locals claimed Asoprobeba's *repobladores* (literally, repopulators) were either opportunistic locals or peasants loyal to the paramilitary project imported from neighbouring regions. Some human rights groups say the land concessions helped the paramilitaries create socio-spatial buffer zones around geostrategic points—drug laboratories or smuggling routes.

Though rife with paradox it is not hard to imagine why paramilitaries seized upon 'the NGO' as their favoured institutional façade. For one thing, it constitutes an act of sly political appropriation: Paramilitaries adopted the preferred institutional vehicle of their harshest critics—the human rights community. The choice also makes sense in that NGOs have positioned themselves—and been positioned—as uninterested do-gooders fostering 'empowerment' and 'participation' due to their 'closeness' to 'local communities'. And on a practical level, even when compared to corporations, NGOs are generally subject to much laxer rules regarding transparency and the information they must report to authorities—ideal for paramilitaries' illicit choreography.

Besides serving as a legal-institutional structure for repopulating and controlling the stolen lands, the 'small-scale' and 'local' producer associations appear to have served

[15] The seller was Hugo Fenel Bernal Molano, a former Army officer, who got his start in the Colombian underworld with Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel before joining the Castaños. He was extradited to the U.S. in 2008 on drug trafficking and money laundering charges.

another practical purpose: They helped justify access to soft loans from government agricultural programs under the rubric of what the government, the private sector, and aid agencies call 'strategic alliances' or 'productive projects'. The 'alliances' are a form of corporate-peasant contract farming subsidized through grants, soft loans, and tax breaks.

The goal of strategic alliances is for peasants under contract to provide land and labour—organized as cooperatives or other associative arrangements—while the government, development agencies like USAID, and agribusiness firms provide capital and technical assistance. Loan documents show that with its peasant associations in place Urapalma secured the equivalent of $2.1 million from the government's agrarian bank for what the company called its 'system of associative strategic alliances'.[16]

The notion of 'strategic alliances' gained wider application throughout the country under the 'non-military' initiatives promoted by Plan Colombia, the multi-billion-dollar U.S. anti-drug and counterinsurgency program negotiated in 1999. As Plan Colombia was still in the works, then-President Andrés Pastrana pushed Law 508 through congress, making 'strategic alliances' a national imperative. The turgid prose of the legislation came packed with grassroots development keywords in legislating the 'participation of the private sector in productive social alliances as the basis for development'.

Early versions of Plan Colombia drafted by Pastrana's office envisioned the strategic alliances as a cornerstone of the plan's broader 'alternative development' efforts by giving 'peasant farmers and their families' an alternative to drug-related crops (Presidencia 1999). Since 2002, Washington has authorized about $75 million a year for USAID's 'Alternative Development' portfolio under Plan Colombia. In interviews, USAID officials insist the 'strategic alliances' are 'community driven'. 'Without our support', says a U.S. Embassy official, 'farmers would have a weaker ability to negotiate fair alliances with the industrial processors'.[17]

According to Plan Colombia's framing document—itself laden with grassroots development discourses—the agribusiness alliances would constitute 'economically-feasible environmental protection activities designed to conserve the forest areas and end the dangerous expansion of illegal crops across the Amazon basin and Colombia's vast natural parks-areas of immense bio-diversity'. Moreover, the strategic alliances would offer 'sustainable, integrated and participatory productive projects combined with the required infrastructure'. Echoing the more recent recommendations made in the World Bank's *WDR 2011*, the strategic alliance projects would be particularly aimed at regions, 'which combine high levels of conflict with low levels of State presence, fragile social capital and serious environmental degradation' (Presidencia 1999).[18]

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[16] Loan award letters from the Banco Agrario de Colombia: the first issued on April 20, 2001, for 2,478,000,000 pesos (U$1,064,387 at that day's exchange rate) and, the second, issued on September 27, 2002, for 3,011,552,085 pesos (or U$1,090,905).

[17] U.S. Embassy Official, Bogotá, Colombia, May 21, 2009.

[18] Of all agribusiness sectors, the National Federation of Oil Palm Growers (Fedepalma) has been the most active proponent of the strategic alliance model. In 2000, when Plan Colombia officially began, only 1.4% of oil palm acreage was cultivated under strategic alliances, but by 2009 this proportion had reached nearly

In 2003, Urapalma applied for a grant from USAID under Plan Colombia's alternative development program. The six-page draft of Urapalma's application—obtained from court documents—is titled, 'The Afro-Colombian Palmiculture Project'. Although Urapalma left its proposal pending with USAID and apparently never received the grant due to missing paperwork, the application contains telling details about how the paramilitary-backed company worked in grassroots development discourses to legitimate the project.[19]

In the application, Urapalma claimed its palm project was the product of a 'united effort by a group of farmers that in 1999'—i.e. the height of paramilitary terror—'set the long-term goal of implementing a viable, environmentally and economically sustainable business in the region of Urabá'.[20] Urapalma further argued, '[The] timing is ideal for establishing a sustainable social program, as this project proposes, that could become an exemplary model of development between business owners and communities, co-participating in decision making and responsibility while working side-by-side'. The application emphasized the absolute subsidiarity of the project by repeatedly referring to beneficiaries as 'families' and 'small-scale producers'. But the text also seems to reveal a self-conscious insecurity about its claims in trying to no doubts that 'the community is absolutely and voluntarily determined to participate in the project'.

Among the many handwritten edits introduced into the draft application is one that apparently tries to shore up its green credentials. Next to a list of justifications for the project, the editor inserts an extra bullet point: 'Environmental: Reforestation in areas degraded due to lack of [economic] options'. And playing to USAID's counterinsurgency and anti-drug imperatives, the application notes, 'This zone is susceptible to all kinds of influence by the illegal armed groups, who see in the region a corridor for trafficking drugs and arms, given the area's waterways and dense vegetation.' Finally, the application concludes stating the company will give 'juridical form' to this 'strategic alliance', which 'by working collectively hand-in-hand with the community hopes to produce a glimpse of what we all long for: A peaceful and developed Colombia'.

Urapalma's activities demonstrate that it was precisely the local and participatory 'grassroots' mechanisms of the strategic alliance structure that made it such an appealing and amenable vehicle for paramilitaries to consolidate their hold over stolen lands. The strategic alliances, with their NGOs and peasant associations, provided paramilitaries with readymade institutional forms articulated with an established set of grassroots development discourses.

19% (Marin, Lovett, and Clancy 2011:15)—a period, moreover, in which total oil palm cultivation dramatically increased.

[19] In another article, I raise questions about USAID's vetting of applicants, in particular its ability to detect aid recipients links to narco-paramilitaries, violent crimes, and illegal land seizures (Ballvé 2009). Although Urapalma did not receive the grant, my article found evidence indicating that at least two other paramilitary-linked oil palm projects did receive USAID funds. Paramilitaries also managed to gain benefits from USAID's institution-building and good governance programs in Urabá (Ballvé 2011, 2012).

[20] From 2003 application titled, 'Proyecto Afrocolombiano de siembra y desarrollo de palma africana de aceite: Extractora Bajirá S.A. & Consejo Comunitario La Larga – Tumaradó'.

The Castaños *worked* the grassroots development apparatus: They combined discourses with legal manoeuvres, outright fraud, coercion, institutional arrangements (strategic alliances and peasant associations), and practices. As paramilitaries situated their projects within some of development's most contentious terrain—local politics, environmental conservation, ethnic concerns, and collective property regimes—the grassroots development apparatus became a well-oiled anti-politics machine.[21]

Forest Ranger Families and the 'Arriving' State

The paramilitary bloc controlling the northern and western portions of Urabá was the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas (known as the BEC or 'the Elmer'). Freddy Rendón, the BEC's commander, was an early protégé of the Castaños and demanded such discipline from his troops they called him 'El Alemán' (The German). Under El Alemán's leadership, his bloc became one of the most politically savvy of Colombia's paramilitary squads. As demobilization talks matured, the Elmer distanced itself from the other paramilitary factions and negotiated directly with the government on its own. In the end, the paramilitary groups demobilized under the government's controversial—and many would say failed—amnesty program, which provided light sentencing in exchange for confessional testimonies.

El Alemán's civilian advisor and spokesperson during the negotiations was Juan Rodrigo García, a former philosophy PhD student and the brother of a slain paramilitary chief. García and El Alemán presented an elaborate post-demobilization plan to the government in 2004 named the *Proyecto de Alternatividad Social* (PASO, Project for a Social Alternative). On paper the PASO was a wide-ranging (even utopian) proposal that envisioned displaced peasants, demobilized paramilitaries, landless campesinos, and private agribusinesses all working collectively on 'donated' lands toward reconciliation and shared prosperity. Victims groups immediately criticized the proposal as an inversion of justice, saying the PASO would effectively convert victims into day labourers on lands stolen from them with their former victimizers as bosses. As it turns out, they were not far off the mark.

When asked what made the BECs proposals such as the PASO different from those of the other paramilitaries, García responded, 'The Elmer's process is aimed the grassroots' ('*…tienen una proyeccion a la base social*'). Spelling out the strategic alliance structure, he said, 'The idea is for productive projects to be developed for the communities and for lands to be acquired with the help of wealthy ranchers (*ganaderos*). With the land as capital, the labour will come from campesinos and reinserted [i.e. demobilized] paramilitaries. El Alemán's goal is for the communities to participate in the expansion of palm, banana, rubber, and teak cultivation'.[22] The bloc's communiqués from those days emphasized how the PASO would promote 'community integration' and

[21] The 'anti-politics machine' phrase is of course James Ferguson's (1985).
[22] León, Juanita. 2005. 'El paso del alemán', *Semana*, September 18.

help establish 'peaceful and sustainable development through self-sufficient eco-forestry farms'.[23]

The PASO, in other words, was the Elmer's post-conflict vision of grassroots development and it became the national government's unofficial policy for Urabá. El Alemán claims, 'Our proposals were fundamentally incorporated by the government, putting it at the threshold of a particularly interesting and hopeful process in which our disarmament and demobilization was not an end-goal in itself, but rather the point of departure for a pilot project promoting a genuine reconstruction of the social fabric'.[24]

The BEC's 'pre post-conflict' manoeuvres began in earnest once a demobilization agreement seemed likely. The inauguration of ultra-conservative Alvaro Uribe as president of Colombia in 2002 had set ideal conditions for paramilitaries' disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration into civilian life. Uribe, a former governor of Antioquia with lands in Córdoba, was widely seen as sympathetic to the paramilitary cause and immediately floated a deal after his election. It was a chance paramilitaries couldn't pass up. A year later, the first demobilizations had begun, but El Alemán's bloc was the last to demobilize.

One of the BEC's foot soldiers testified that El Alemán gave him the order in 2002 to start 'negotiating' land in an area called 'Las Tulapas', a place in the north of Urabá bisected by a small river with the same name (Figure 1, p. 4).[25] The first wave of paramilitary displacements and forced purchases in Tulapas date from the mid 1990s, but the possibility of a post-conflict scenario apparently called for more careful choreography to ensure lasting control over the lands. Displaced locals assume that this was when paramilitaries started trying to 'legalize' older acquisitions and new purchases.[26]

Through the PASO, the Elmer became the handmaiden of the government's post-conflict grassroots development strategies in both design and implementation. In the years before the demobilization, paramilitary operatives were busy orchestrating land acquisitions and fraudulent paperwork and setting up producer cooperatives and NGOs that would form the basis of the PASO, meaning that land laundering and grassroots development went hand in hand.

During the demobilization talks, the government rolled out the *Programa de Familias Guardabosques* (Forest Ranger Families Program), a conditional cash transfer program aimed at reducing drug-related crop production. Under Guardabosques, campesino families signed contracts with the government making two promises: to keep their lands free of illicit crops and to 'promote the natural reforestation and the conservation of strategic ecosystems' (Acción Social 2007). In exchange, affiliated families received $1,500 to $2,000 annually in bimonthly instalments for three years along with

[23] Communiqué from the Bloque Elmer Cárdenas to Luis Carlos Restrepo, the President's High Commissioner for Peace, March 24, 2004.
[24] Versión Libre, Freddy Rendón Herrera, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, June 6, 2007.
[25] Audencia Cancelación de Títulos Fraudulentos, Postulado Fredy Rendón Herrera, Tribunal Superior de Medellín, Sala Justicia y Paz, September 16, 2011.
[26] Author interview in Turbo, Antioquia: October 2, 2012.

'social, environmental, and technical assistance'. More than 100,000 families have since 'graduated' from the program since it was introduced in 2003.

The government simultaneously expanded its support for strategic alliances, particularly in places with active Guardabosques interventions. The alliances and Guardabosques formed the backbone of the government's re-emboldened anti-drug 'Alternative Development Program'.[27] All over the country, money and expertise from government entities, international donors, NGOs, and the private sector were fused in strategic alliance with the land and labour of campesinos grouped into cooperatives. The focal point for these programs in Urabá was in Tulapas, the same place where El Alemán had begun acquiring lands the year before.

USAID meanwhile decided Tulapas was the ideal spot for testing out its own alternative development strategies. The agency called it a 'co-investment opportunity' in which campesinos would pool their cash transfers while USAID stepped in with generous grants. Considering the 'chances of delivering early success and demonstration of the benefits', USAID predicted the projects in Tulapas would become a replicable showcase for how Guardabosques could dovetail with Plan Colombia's alternative development initiatives (USAID 2004).

Public documents and statements associated with these programs describe how anti-drug efforts and environmental conservation are mutually beneficial. Constant reference is also made to how the programs build social capital by strengthening local 'community organizations' and help reconstitute the 'social fabric' of 'vulnerable groups'. The alternative development programs are also conceived (explicitly and implicitly) as vehicles for state formation in which cultivating a 'culture of legality'—a phrase repeated obsessively by both the government and USAID—plays a critical role.

According to USAID, alternative development helps foster a 'culture of legality' by promoting social capital, entrepreneurship, land tenure, environmental conservation, and local institution building. With the conflated frameworks of counterinsurgency and the drug war as the subtext, USAID says the programs 'ensure that [recipient] communities effectively transit into legality and reinforce the legitimacy of the State' (2009:99). Government reports also repeatedly highlight how the projects help 'strengthen local institutions' while 'boosting the State's credibility and legitimating national, departmental, and municipal institutions among the communities' (Acción Social 2007:107).

Policymakers argue alternative development helps break the 'panorama of illegality' through which irregular armed groups maintain 'clientelistic and authoritarian relations' of protection to coca-growing campesinos (Acción Social 2007:25). By inciting the creation of community organizations and cooperatives, the government celebrates how its programs help reverse the 'low levels of social capital (in some cases negative)' by

[27] For consistency, I refer to them as 'strategic alliances', but they were renamed 'productive projects' under the revamped program. They are also sometimes called 'productive alliances'. The anti-drug program also had a non-voluntary side, involving highly militarized, indiscriminate aerial fumigations.

fostering trust, solidarity, and community savings. In other words, when compared to the recommendations made in the World Bank's *WDR 2011*, Colombia's alternative development programs hit all the right notes. They combined state and nonstate, top-down and bottom-up approaches; they focused on basic job creation and quick, deliverable results. And they aimed to restore confidence in state institutions while thickening social capital.

El Alemán expressed a similar rationale, but he put the development programs in (typically roseate) terms of post-conflict reparations. Straining to emphasize particular words, he said, 'Some people understand reparations as just money. Reparation is also that the state *arrives*. And not just with police and soldiers, but for *all the state* to arrive in those far off regions of our national geography—with health, with education. So that our campesinos finally *know* the state—*know* what the *state is*'.[28]

Paramilitaries, policymakers, and the local beneficiaries all conceived and perceived the programs as terraforming 'the state' in spaces where it supposedly did not exist—where it had *not yet arrived*. The phrase expresses an expectant inevitability—the Leviathan's arrival here is only a matter of time. Indeed, arrival connotes a perceived historical and geographical absence, a place left behind in both time and space, especially since the Spanish verb *llegar* (arrive) can also mean 'reach', as in 'the state does not reach here' (*aquí no llega el estado*). As one paramilitary commander put it, 'Where is Tulapas? Tulapas is far from everything.'[29] In fact, it is a mere 20 kilometres in a beeline from the port of Turbo.

Nonetheless, as USAID predicted, the projects in Tulapas were billed a 'success story'. In 2004, after local campesinos voluntarily eradicated 1,600 hectares of coca, some 3,200 families inhabiting about 65,000 hectares of land signed on to the Guardabosques program. Government-backed strategic alliances followed. The communities' entry into the government's programs was sought and coordinated by the *Asociación Comunitaria de Urabá y Córdoba*, an NGO better known as Asocomún. According to a local campesino interviewed in an Asocomún promotional video, the NGO helped set up the projects because 'the state had not wanted to help and actually hadn't even arrived yet'.

Asocomún describes itself as an association of *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (Community Action Boards) that through 'participation' and 'consensus building' promotes 'sustainable integrated development through social, economic, educational, health, and environmental projects'. The president of Asocomún at the time was Jairo Rendón, who is currently in a U.S. jail on 'narco-terrorism' charges. Since he operated under the alias of 'Germán Monsalve', authorities did not realize at the time that he was the brother of El Alemán.

Juntas de Acción Comunal or JACs are a unique administrative form of local grassroots governance in Colombia established in 1958 as a way for local communities, especially those in isolated rural areas, to initiate local improvement projects and gain a

[28] Versión Libre, Freddy Rendón Herrera, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, June 6, 2007.
[29] Versión Libre, Salvatore Mancuso, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, May 17, 2007.

stronger collective voice before government entities—particularly municipal ones. By law, the JACs are locally elected and non-profit bodies that are legally defined as 'non-governmental' and 'civil society' organizations.

Since Guardabosques and the strategic alliances are both intended as collective community undertakings, the JACs formed pivotal institutional hubs for the projects.[30] And Asocomún's official status as an NGO representing local JACs—moreover, one that claimed to specialize in strategic alliances—made it an ideal intermediary and implementing partner for coordinating the alternative development projects. Witnesses say that in the process Asocomún was skimming its take off the government cash transfers.

El Alemán clearly knew the importance of the *Juntas*. He had an entire retinue of rank-and-file paramilitaries who were called 'Promoters of Social Development' (*Promotores de Desarrollo Social*), who were basically community organizers. Specifically trained for this task, the Promoters helped control the JACs and even created these community organizations in places where they did not exist.

According to El Alemán, these organizers 'would go out and do social work. They had a degree of knowledge of cooperativism, so they knew something about how to create a *Junta de Acción Comunal* and how citizen oversight worked, empowering the presidents of the *Acción Comunal*, giving juridical life to the *Juntas de Acción Comunal* in all our [the BEC's] municipalities'. [31] One campesino described how the JACs gained much stronger authority when it was made clear to locals the *Juntas* were backed by armed force. 'In some cases, you might ignore what a *Junta* president tells you to do, but not if behind them is a someone with a gun'.[32]

Asocomún, the JACs, and the bloc's community organizers formed the Elmer's dense network of social capital; it was this social-institutional infrastructure that was seamlessly retrofitted with the government-backed strategic alliances once they were introduced at the end of 2005. The strategic alliances in Tulapas took the shape of four private agribusiness firms—two rubber companies (Procaucho and Caucho San Pedro) and two so-called 'reforestation' companies (La Gironda and El Indio).[33]

The four companies embodied the strategic alliance structure with orthodoxy. Financial records show the bulk of their capital came from Incuagro—a mixed public-private company—largely bankrolled by the government and the Inter-American Development Bank, while a handful of private firms chipped in the rest.

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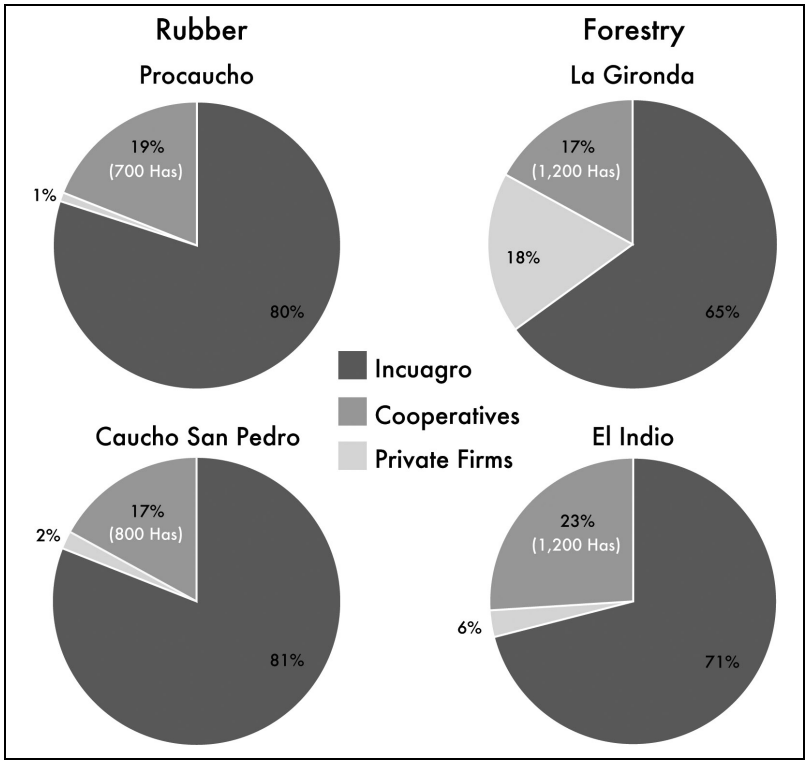
[30] Under Guardabosques, the JACs sometimes become the program's monitoring body, making sure their domains of jurisdiction remain free of illicit crops, as required by the terms of the assistance.
[31] Versión Libre, Freddy Rendón Herrera, Justicia y Paz, Attorney General's Office, June 16, 2009. For more on paramilitaries and the JACs, see Ballvé (2012).
[32] Author interview in Apartadó, Antioquia: October 2, 2012.
[33] 'So-called' because in practice they are commercial forestry outfits producing monocrops of non-native species of teak, beech wood, and acacia trees (respectively, *Tectona grandis*, *Gmelina arborea*, *Acacia mangium* or teka, melina, and acacia in Spanish).

Campesinos' stake in the companies was exercised collectively through newly formed cooperatives. As intended, some of the cooperatives were made up of demobilized rank-and-file paramilitaries. And each cooperative's stake was determined by the land acreage (Has.) that its respective members' ceded in usufruct to the venture (Figure 3). USAID gave the forestry companies $445,000 in grants and was slated to give $300,000 to the rubber companies, but it is unclear if they ever received the money. Between them, the four companies hoped to cultivate an area comprising 3,900 hectares—almost all of it in Tulapas.

Figure 3. Ownership of Strategic Alliance Companies in 2006 (Source: Author)



Promotional materials and agreements with funders describe the four ventures as environmentally friendly, bottom-up, and cooperative-driven projects that help stem the spread of illicit crops while providing gainful employment to demobilized combatants and poor peasants. Asocomún meanwhile boasted that its 'model' in Tulapas had 'become a laboratory of peace and social inclusion where excluded groups had shown their power of collective action for generating convivial spaces of peace while generating new forms of economic production that are both self-sustaining and environmentally friendly'.[34]

The residents of Tulapas at the time of the projects were by-and-large not the campesinos who lived there before the paramilitaries seized Urabá. The region had emptied in 1995 when fierce combat erupted between guerrillas and the incoming

[34] Asocomún even received a prize for its work from the UN's Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL in its Spanish acronym). The quote is from Asocomún's description of its work for the prize: http://bit.ly/SOvpyj

paramilitaries, who accused locals of being loyal rebel 'collaborators'. One campesino couple, who lost three children and 114 hectares of land to the paramilitary onslaught, said, 'Castaños' paramilitaries came from Córdoba and gained control of the territory in Tulapas by killing a lot of innocent people, disappearing and torturing many. They displaced people to different parts of the country, buying up their lands at low prices'.[35]

A few years later, as the fighting subsided and with the region under secure paramilitary control, a mix of people began moving into Tulapas: landless campesinos, displaced peasants from other parts of Urabá, and a few of the area's original residents. But most of Tulapas' original inhabitants had either sold their lands at rock-bottom prices amid paramilitary threats or were simply too afraid to return. Now, most of the displaced families are trying to reclaim the stolen lands under a new land restitution program.

Once again, Teresa Gómez, the honorary member of the Castaño clan, coordinated many of the sales. Between 1995 and 1998, she began buying up huge tracts of land in Tulapas through intimidation and fraud.[36] The owners of one property, for instance, had received their title for 34 hectares in 1991 from the government's rural land management agency, as part of its institutional mandate to distribute unclaimed lands (*tierras baldías* or *terrenos baldíos*). As the violence neared their small farm, the family fled to a nearby town. Soon after their arrival, Gómez approached them with a low-ball offer. According to the owners, she said the sale could be done 'the easy way or the hard way' ('*por las buenas o por las malas*'). They took the cash.

The farm's paper trail reveals a pattern that was repeated many times over across Urabá and especially in Tulapas. Rather than buying the 34 hectares of land in her name, Gómez forced the owners into giving her power of attorney, which she then used to sell the land—in their name—to the Fondo Ganadero de Córdoba, one of the country's most powerful ranchers' organization. The president of the Fondo Ganadero at the time was subsequently elected governor of Córdoba and is now facing charges for paramilitary ties.

In late 2006, with Tulapas' strategic alliances in full swing, the Fondo Ganadero ceded the 34-hectare property in usufruct to the Procaucho rubber company. Government investigations show that with the help of people like Gómez the Fondo Gandero de Córdoba illegally acquired more than 100 properties amounting to some 4,500 hectares throughout Urabá. The company ceded at least 622 hectares of this ill-gotten land to the rubber plantations in Tulapas, making it a major stakeholder in the two rubber firms.

Government reports identify a handful of individuals, including Gómez, who acted as intermediaries with power of attorney in forced land transactions. Comparisons

[35] Author interview in Turbo, Antioquia: June 10, 2010.
[36] Versión Libre, Salvatore Mancuso, May 2007. Proyecto Tierras, Grupo de Justicia y Paz, Superintendencia Notariado y Registro. 'Situación Registral de Predios en los Municipios de Apartadó, Arboletes, Necoclí, San Pedro de Urabá, San Juan de Urabá, Turbo, Región Urabá Antioqueño'. August 11, 2011.

of authentic signatures show that in some cases the intermediaries simply forged the affidavits giving them power of attorney, while corrupt notaries legally sanctioned the fraudulent forms. But the intermediation's veneer of legality nonetheless helped paramilitary operatives maintain anonymity or at least a degree of or two of separation since the land was legally sold in the real owner's name. Although the Fondo Ganadero acquired some of the land sold with power of attorney, the rest was parked under the name of third party, paramilitary front-owners (*testaferros*).

The land documents of La Gironda, one of the forestry companies, tell a similar story. The company gained 1,200 hectares in usufruct from its associated cooperative. A sample of land registry certificates—representing over 75% of La Gironda's land—shows that the members of the cooperative all bought the land from a single seller on a single day. What raises suspicions is that the go-between amassed the lands at the height of paramilitary dispossession and that that the cooperative members bought the land two months before the company even existed and six months before the BEC had actually demobilized. Keeping the land dispersed among several owners with small plots, helped avoid raising flags with authorities—a practice called 'smurfing' in money laundering.

Also questionable is why almost all the land-owning members of the cooperative ultimately took the usufruct arrangement a step further, selling their property outright to the cooperative—in some cases, at a loss. The stated purpose of the strategic alliance was for the cooperative members to eventually buy-out all the other investors in the company once the venture became profitable, but the end result was the exact opposite. The PASO became the contorted inversion of justice that victims' groups predicted it would. As in the case of the palm plantations, grassroots development discourses and practices were much more than the dissimulating accoutrements of the land grab; they were its conditions of possibility.

Seventeen years after they were displaced, Tulapas' original inhabitants are still scratching by in the cities and towns of Urabá rarely daring to visit their farms, which mostly lie in ruin. With nearly two decades behind them, the families have grown by one or two generations. Even with the hope sparked by a new land restitution law, displaced campesinos wonder whether they will ever go back—and whether their children accustomed to urban life will follow.

CONCLUSION: SMURFING WITH MAO

The palm project in Curvaradó and the PASO demonstrate how paramilitaries' put the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—to work as a means for carrying out and laundering their land grab. Even government anti-drug programs became operational to the illicit networks stitched together by these drug-trafficking militias, so much so that Washington negligently put drug-war dollars into projects linked to the very groups it claims to be fighting against. Although the palm project and the Elmer's PASO, both demonstrate how the grassroots development apparatus perversely facilitated paramilitaries' economies of violence, the two cases also present some notable differences.

The different property relations of each case—collective versus individual titles—called for different modes of acquisition and laundering. Besides mobilizing ethnic discourses, the oil palm companies operating on the collectively titled Afro-Colombian lands relied on huge enlargements of individual-private titles through alluvial accession. Since Afro-Colombian collective property is constitutionally inalienable, the palm companies looked to the tiny islands of individual titles lying within the collective lands. Since the individual titles preceded the ethnic rights legislation, they were the only lands that could be 'legitimately' bought and sold. The dispossessed peasants of Tulapas, by contrast, had received title to family-sized plots of *baldíos* (unclaimed lands) from the government in previous decades, so the PASO engaged a cumulative process of micro-acquisitions.

By using third-party landowners and cooperative structures in Tulapas, land grabbers were able to skirt laws limiting the accumulation of *baldíos*. For decades, the government has used the titling of *baldíos* as a lame substitute for a genuine agrarian reform, so congress passed a law in 1994 that restricted how many hectares of former *baldíos* a single owner could accumulate. During a moratorium of 15 years, newly titled *baldíos* cannot be accumulated beyond the size of an Agrarian Family Unit (UAF in its Spanish initials)—the size of which varies depending on local conditions. For the north of Urabá, the size limit of the UAF is 68 hectares. The small and dispersed land ownership of the campesino cooperatives made them ideal vehicles for 'smurfing' cumulative acquisitions of UAFs below authorities' radars. The PASO thus gives literal meaning to the idea of an agrarian counter-reform. But paramilitary action cannot be reduced to economic motivations alone, even though some blocs were more ideologically driven than others.

The leadership and peculiar make up of the BEC gave the PASO much deeper political moorings than the palm projects. For one thing, El Alemán adhered to the most ideologically driven end of the paramilitary spectrum. His unique brand of authoritarian rural populism made the PASO particularly Janus-faced: The evidence shows the PASO was not only supposed to make places like Tulapas into depositories of lands and wealth for posterity, it was also supposed to make them into durable bases of political support and bulwarks against the FARC. Such concerns might help explain why in Tulapas the cooperatives actually became company stakeholders, whereas the campesino associations of the Curvaradó palm plantation did not.

Another factor giving the BEC its unique political orientation was that it operated in an area that during the 1970s and 1980s had been a stronghold of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), a Maoist-inspired guerrilla group. Despite the obvious ideological dissonance, many former EPL rebels joined the BEC's paramilitary ranks. Beyond the simple traffic of personnel, the BEC effectively repurposed many of the political strategies that had been pioneered by the EPL. Indeed, some of the PASO's key practical components—the community organizing, the work of the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, and the campesino cooperatives—all bear the hallmarks of the Maoist EPL.

Finally, the PASO also had much closer and integral ties to government policy. Although the palm plantation received public financing and must be situated within the government's push toward expanding the country's agricultural portfolio—especially for biofuels—the PASO became entirely isomorphic with government programs. The BEC skilfully latched its post-demobilization future to the regional strategic concerns of both the government and Plan Colombia—namely, the drug war, counterinsurgency, and state formation.

Despite these notable differences, both cases show how the grassroots development apparatus in Urabá was shot through with violence and inequalities of wealth and power—not to mention militarized U.S. geopolitics. The way in which paramilitaries worked grassroots development in Urabá also raises questions about the strategies currently being endorsed by the World Bank to address the often-related problems of fragile states, violent conflict, and alarming land grabs.

Foremost among the Bank's endorsements for ending cycles of violence are 'programs that support bottom-up state-society relations' and 'multisectoral community empowerment' with an emphasis on providing security, justice, and jobs (2011:18, 255). In terms of policy and governance, the Bank also calls for approaches that combine government-led programs with local grassroots initiative: 'Top-down programming through the state can help build technical capacity, but may be misaligned with the process of forging and reforging trust in state institutions and in state-society relations. Bottom-up program design works with community structures to identify and deliver priorities for violence prevention' (2011:255). Meanwhile, the World Bank's seven guiding principles for ensuring responsible investment in farmland, with references to 'participation' and 'environmental sustainability', looks like a menu of grassroots development discourses (2010:x).

Almost all of the Bank's recommendations bear eerie echoes of the precise ways in which Urabá's paramilitaries worked the grassroots development apparatus toward their own predatory ends. Policymakers might argue that Urabá simply shows that grassroots development programs just need to be accompanied with better monitoring. But since the Bank's own research has found that land grabs and cycles of violence both thrive on weak governance and institutions, it is not clear how adequate oversight and due diligence would be implemented—a point driven home by USAID's negligence in Colombia. Urabá serves as a stark warning that grassroots development strategies can in some contexts actually facilitate dispossession, illicit economies, and violent political projects.

With paramilitaries' political use and abuse of grassroots development, it is not surprising that social movements in Colombia are trying to articulate their political projects in a different idiom. The political projects being developed by some of theses movements are explicitly aimed at strengthening ideas and practices (praxis) that go beyond 'alternative development' in the hope of forging genuine alternatives *to* development (Escobar 2008). But these campesinos are increasingly caught in a political bind: the discourses that form the basis of their affirmative lived critique of development, whether expressed in terms of ethnic or environmental rights, are the same ones being used in the course of their dispossession by the paramilitary-backed companies. And this

is why it is important to understand the relationship between paramilitaries and the grassroots development apparatus as something more than a simple case of co-optation.

Indeed, the story of the paramilitary projects could be easily interpreted as 'just' a case of corporate players and their armed accomplices trying to cover-up or whitewash their malfeasance with fashionable and politically correct development-speak. But, as this article has tried to show, the process goes beyond whitewashing. The problem is actually deeper and more serious. The grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, tactics, and practices—was utterly instrumental to how the land grab was executed and laundered. In the process, grassroots development enabled the coexistence of paramilitaries' violent forms of accumulation and rule with projects ofliberal governance associated with imperatives of 'institution building', 'good governance', and the 'rule of law'.

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