

Land & Life Stories Series # 2

Land is Life, Land is Hope, Land is Peace: The History of the Resettlement of Peace Signatories in Caquetá, Colombia

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Land has been an enduring issue throughout Colombia's history. If the people who negotiated a peace agreement, who had been in conflict for 60 years, signed a peace agreement – and have no land, what assurances exist for the peasantry? – A signatory to the Peace Agreement¹

The Colombian government has provided the reincorporated individuals and their families with something we did not request. We have made three specific demands to the Colombian government: security guarantees, compliance with the Peace Agreement, and land. Additionally, we have requested housing, but none of these have been granted to us. Instead, they offer something we did not ask for: 9-millimetre pistols for security purposes. In other words, they provide us with ammunition for protection plans, attempting to convince us that they will not harm us. However, this is not what we originally sought. They provide us with ammunition, whereas what we truly need is housing and land. It appears that we will have to ask for ammunition instead of housing or land.
– A signatory to the Peace Agreement.²

The signing of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) put an end to half a century of violent confrontation between these two entities. This raised hopes for those who had experienced the most harmful effects of the war, including peasants, Indigenous People, Afro-descendants, and rural inhabitants in general. It also gave hope to those who had taken up arms for various reasons, as they dared to sign the peace agreement. It seemed to be the starting point to stop the hundred years of solitude many Colombians were condemned and give us a second chance on earth, as Gabriel García Márquez would say.

National and international media carefully detailed what they called the FARC's last march to the Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización (Transitional Village Zones for Normalization) (See Figure 1). These were areas set up by the Agreement for former guerrilla members to lay down their weapons and begin the process of disarmament and reincorporation into civilian life. Suddenly, the guerrilla members became showbiz personalities, receiving visits from people around the world who wanted to witness first-hand the end of the oldest guerrilla group in the West, as Eric Hobsbawm once called it (1973). However, from the moment they arrived at what they thought were places of respite while they laid down their arms, their situation began to get complicated. Many of those who were on their last march were killed, and in other cases, their families were killed. Signing a peace agreement was equivalent to the crosses on the foreheads of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's sons, who were killed one by one in a week, as narrated by García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This Macondian metaphor perfectly describes what the peace agreement signatories have experienced. According to the NGO INDEPAZ, 353 signatories of the Peace Agreement have been assassinated since its signing until 25 April 2023.

Despite the uncertainty, former members of FARC guerrillas decided to remain in the Transitional Villages, honouring their commitment to peace and above all with high hopes for the life that awaited them after the war. The physical extermination of members of the former FARC guerrilla threatens to perpetuate violence. In addition to the lack of security guarantees for them and their families, the absence of access to land puts at risk their political, social, and economic reincorporation as proposed in the third point of the Peace Agreement (Equipo Negociador del Gobierno Colombiano y las Farc- EP 2016).

Many of the former guerrilla fighters do not like to be called 'ex-combatants'; they prefer the term 'Signatories of the Peace Agreement'. They see the Peace Agreement as a continuation of their fight rather than a surrender. Many of them identify themselves as peasants and when asked what they would like to do, they answer that they would like to cultivate and grow their own food. Their connection with the land and their agrarian vocation is not a coincidence. It can be traced back to the peasant origin of this guerrilla, more exactly in Marquetalia in 1964, where they established the Agrarian Program of the

¹ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, July 11 2022.

² Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, July 11 2022

Guerrilla Fighters (Programa Agrario de los guerrilleros y guerrilleras). This programme envisioned a model of social organisation for which they took up arms for more than 50 years. As one signatory of the Peace Agreement explains it:

*The agrarian programme has eleven points... These eleven points have to do with the issue of land tenure, it also has to do with the issue of land titling, access to land, and it also has to do with the issue of the countryside, the rural part, land mechanization, and everything that has to do with the issue of drinking water, everything that is needed for the issue of crops, which are part of the agrarian programme.*³

Although many members of the former FARC proudly recall their peasant origins and the agrarian roots of their struggle, they are aware that the terms of the Peace Agreement do not fully correspond to the agrarian reform they fought for while they were armed. As one of their representatives, now a congressman, stated “*When we signed the Peace Agreement, we always understood that the possibility of peace in Colombia implies reform. A reform - in this case, a Comprehensive Rural Reform - that is not the agrarian reform we aspired to*”.⁴

*The issue of land is fundamental for us to be able to work. Those of us who are here, we are not thinking of going to work in the city, in an office, in something, no, the city is not for us... We are descendants of peasants, working people, who know how to till the land and that is what we are focused on. So, for us the issue of land is fundamental, but other things derive from it, because what do we get out of having the land and not having the opportunity to produce it? Even if we manage to produce, we don't have a guaranteed market to sell our products. – a signatory to the Peace Agreement*⁵

Even though the first point of the Peace Agreement includes provisions for the allocation of 3 million hectares of land to landless peasants and the titling of 7 million hectares, it is unclear how the signatories of the Agreement will be able to access land. Throughout the peace talks in Havana, there was no explicit mention of a land access route for ex-combatants, partly due to the stigmatization of guerrilla fighters and the political climate of the negotiations. Consequently, negotiators interpreted that when the guerrillas laid down their arms, they would become peasants and therefore eligible for the 3 million hectares of land already envisioned.

*We thought the peace process was a positive step, but we never anticipated the extent of the suffering we would endure. And what does this suffering entail? We understand that all living beings must eventually die, but not in the manner in which they are killing us... We surrendered our weapons with the expectation of a better life, with hopes of transformation. However, I assure you, everything has been incredibly difficult. We have been striving to obtain land, but they continuously obstruct our efforts to acquire it by placing various obstacles in our path. – a signatory to the Peace Agreement*⁶

Because of this absence in the Peace Agreement, signatories of the peace agreement and their representatives (who are responsible for monitoring the Agreement’s implementation) are advocating for recognition of access to land as a crucial aspect of their socioeconomic reincorporation. As one of their reincorporation officials stated: “*Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the agreement, it is a fundamental requirement for the development of reincorporation itself*”.⁷ This absence is not minor and

³ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, February 19 2022.

⁴ Translated from Spanish, Personal Interview, July 7 2022.

⁵ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, July 11 2022.

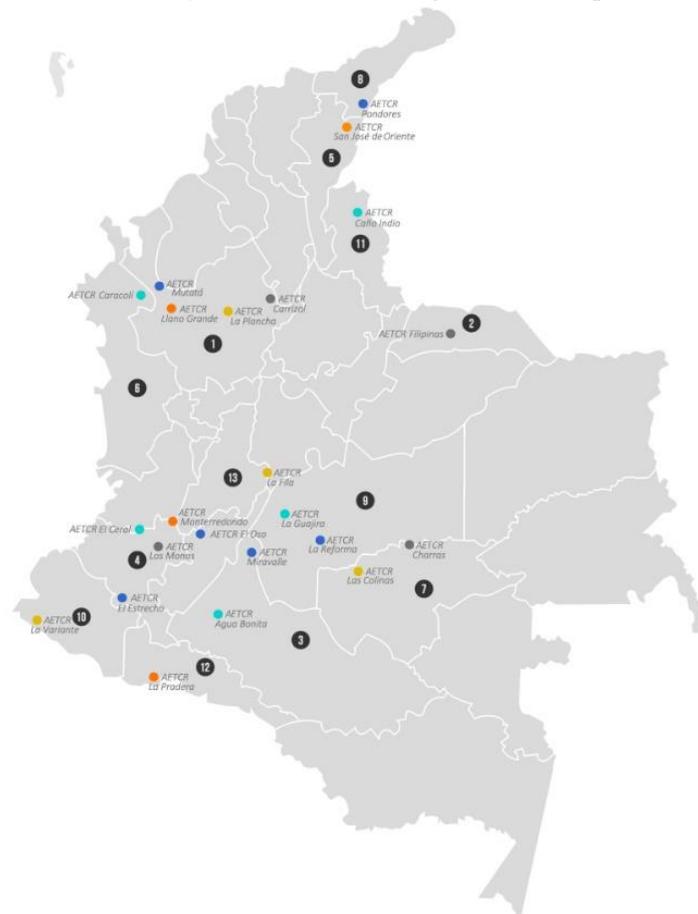
⁶ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, July 11 2022.

⁷ Translated from Spanish, Personal Interview, 24 March 2022.

today threatens the success of the wider re-incorporation of the peace signatories. Regardless of all assumptions, land for landless peasants and signatories of the Peace Agreement remains just a promise.

As it has been explained land and the agrarian question are important components of the political struggle of the signatories of the agreement, being the land and agrarian question one of the structural causes of the conflict (Fajardo 2015). This is evidenced by the fact that many former FARC members joined their ranks because they had no other possibilities for life in the countryside. They did not have land to cultivate, real employment opportunities, or minimum security guarantees to continue with life in the countryside. Many of them saw and continue to see the Peace Agreement as an opportunity to realize their dream of returning to live as peasants in the countryside, which starts with the land. This story presents the long march towards peace from the signatories of the peace agreement members of the community Urias Rondón, who now live in El Doncello Caquetá and highlights the importance of land in overcoming war and achieving peace.

Figure 1 Location of 24 Former Training and Reincorporation Sites



Source: Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización ARN⁸

Land to lay down the arms

Since the beginning of the peace talks in Havana, the complications of laying down arms and reincorporation of former FARC members began to become apparent. One of the first challenges was defining the places for counting, registration, and control of these guerrilla group members, known as ‘regrouping points’.⁹ These regrouping points were the first places where the guerrillas became visible to the public since the war scenario and the guerrilla struggle demanded secrecy. From these points, former guerrilla members began to move to the Transitional Village Zones (Zonas Veredales Transitorias) for disarmament and reincorporation into civilian life. The complications had to do with

⁸ <https://www.reincorporacion.gov.co/es/reincorporacion/Paginas/Los-ETCR.aspx>

⁹ Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, February 19 2022.

ensuring that these places met minimum security standards, but also with the willingness of the owners of the properties where the signatories were to settle. However, the biggest complication with the Village Zones is that they were initially conceived as transitory areas, not as spaces that could eventually become permanent. Over time, they seem to have become more or less permanent spaces for reincorporation, and the national government introduced new policies, transforming these zones into Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCR).

The signatories of the Peace Agreement brought these zones to life and they ceased to be mere administrative spaces for the implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration policies. Instead, they became almost new rural villages, where not only former guerrilla members but also family members and even neighbours from nearby villages started to live. One peace signatory explains the growth of these new villages as follows:

Many people joined (the FARC guerrillas) fleeing from difficult situations in the territory. And when we laid down our arms, many found their families in the same or a worse situation. Because of the training of our people and the way we organised ourselves, this generated trust and so many people ended up bringing their families. And the lost children of the war appeared and started to appear and then this thing grew from one moment to the next.¹⁰

Therefore, the urgency of land was no longer an individual issue for the ‘ex-combatants’ but became a larger issue involving entire communities.

The displacement of the community of signatories "Urias Rondon".

Various arrangements were made by the signatories and the national government to achieve their relocation. In the case of the Urias Rondón community, its members were accommodated on land that used to be under guerrilla control, but which was handed over to the national government as a sign of willingness to comply with the Peace Agreement. There were approximately 200 hectares of land that the former guerrillas handed over to the national government in the municipality of La Macarena in the village of Playa Rica. Of these 200 hectares, 8 were destined for the signatories of the Agreement to stay.¹¹ So far it is not clear what happened to the remaining 192 hectares, where they are being used and what has been done with them.

On 8 hectares of land, 103 families of the signatories of the peace agreement lived, which is less than enough to cover their needs. This is how one of the signatories describes it: *"It was a big farm, they only left us eight hectares to work and live on. Well, it wasn't even for working, not even for living."*¹² To ensure the survival of their community, some of the signatories began renting land from neighbours to secure some food and income. This was possible because several of the signatories were known in the region and leasing land was a common practice among peasants in the area. Despite the poor conditions in which they lived in this village in the municipality of La Macarena, such as the absence of drinking water and restricted access to arable land, they remained there for five years. They also established at least 13 production lines, as described by one of the community leaders:

We had a production line which was a restaurant, rural lodging, tourist cabins, we had a bakery, we had a panela mill where we produced panela, we had a livestock project and we had a carpentry shop, we had a community shop, we had three hectares of fruit trees...we had eighty machines and all these things are gone.¹³

The productive projects established in the village of Playa Rica were lost as a result of forced displacement. Before the displacement, five members of this community were assassinated. The security cars that the signatories had for their transposition were burned and they were intimidated

¹⁰ Translated from Spanish, Personal Interview, February 19 2022.

¹¹ Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, May 3 2023.

¹² Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, May 3 2023.

¹³ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, May 3 2023.

several times.¹⁴ These constant intimidations and attacks are due to a reconfiguration of the armed groups that remain within the armed conflict, putting the lives and integrity of peace signatories at risk. In the case of the Urias Rondón community from La Macarena, the aggravating factor was being located in a geo-strategic zone for these armed groups (CNR¹⁵ Officer, personal interview, 24 March 2022). The existence of the former Villages Zones, now Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ETCR), translates into the constant presence and accompaniment of international and state institutions. This is not welcomed by armed groups seeking to gain territorial control of areas abandoned by the former FARC.

The journey from the Yarí plains to Caquetá

After constant pressure, intimidation and harassment, the community approached the national government asking for security guarantees and a lasting solution to their situation. The solution was to relocate the community to another area. Thus, on 17 December 2021, signatories of the Peace Agreement and their families, around 106 families from the Territorial Space for Training and Reincorporation 'Urias Rondón' left the village of Playa Rica, in the municipality of La Macarena, Meta, and marched to the municipality of Doncello, Caquetá. The relocation of the community caused clashes between the signatories and the national government. The government did not recognise the relocation as forced displacement, nor did it offer the conditions that the signatories felt were necessary for their displacement. A CNR officer accompanying the relocation process describes the events of that day as follows:

*The day arrived to begin the humanitarian caravan, with the trucks loaded with furniture and goods for productive projects, the caravan began to leave La Macarena, Meta, in the Yarí area at five in the morning to go to Doncello. Around 09:15 in the morning, there is a communication cut, because the area does not have good connectivity. What happens is that hooded men on motorbikes appear on the road. They stop the caravan... they split the caravan in two, they let one part of the caravan move forward and the other part stays behind. The part that was ahead continued, because for security reasons it was better to continue and wait at one point for the missing part. While those who remained behind were intimidated by armed men, they specifically attacked the driver of one of the vehicles. They take the driver out of the truck and burn the truck. This sends a clear message of territorial control from our perspective. In addition, shots were fired in the air.*¹⁶

Several of the signatories who were trapped in this circumstance sought refuge in nearby farms, waited for the hooded men to leave, and continued the caravan until finally arriving at the San Jose estate in the municipality of Doncello (See figure 2) and has an extension of 75 hectares. According to the government, one family living in this area needs between 74 and 114 hectares to survive¹⁷. This means that the 106 families belonging to the community of Urias Rondón are living on a property that can barely ensure the survival of one family. As one of the community members put it, "*We haven't resolved the land issue, not even for one, and we are 106 families*".¹⁸ Therefore, land is an urgent demand for the signatories of the peace agreement. They are constantly struggling to gain access to land, facing many complications. One of those is that peasants in El Doncello are not used to leasing land, so the arrangements previously implemented in La Macarena to access land did not work in this area. Members of the Urias Rondón community tell with despair what it means to be landless:

So things in this environment of lack of land to work become very worrying because people have nothing to do and you know that if you have nothing to do in life, you become very fragile, very weak. Anyone can convince you to do anything... We have become old and we only know

¹⁴ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, May 3 2023.

¹⁵ CNR: Consejo Nacional para la Reincorporación (National Council for Reincorporation)

¹⁶ Translated from Spanish, personal interview, 24 March 2022.

¹⁷ This is the value of the UAF (Family Farming Unit) in this particular area of the municipality. The UAF is a unit used to measure the minimum amount required by a family to meet their needs in rural areas, taking into account regional factors such as soil fertility, ecological conditions, social aspects, and aptitude.

¹⁸ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, July 13, 2022.

how to till the land and handle weapons, that's all we know. They don't give us work in a company, they don't give us work anywhere because there is stigmatisation in this country, so where there is stigmatisation there is no way to work. Nobody looks at you and they see you as a strange person. So this is worrying us¹⁹.

Figure 2 Entrance of the Community Settlement Urias Rondón, El Doncello Caquetá



Welcome to the Community Settlement Urias Rondón. For Life, Nature and Peace.
Photo: Itayosara Rojas

Figure 3 View of the Community Settlement Urias Rondón



Photo: Itayosara Rojas

¹⁹ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, May 3 2023.

As they explain, they have no job opportunities and the only hope they have left is land to cultivate. If there are no jobs, and no land, what options are left? This is a serious situation that threatens not only the peace agreement with the FARC but also future agreements with other groups. The land is not only needed for productive projects and to establish cash crops, land is needed to build housing, have collective meeting spaces, and schools for the children of peace (as the children of the signatories are called in Colombia). The land is needed to live in dignity and to build peace.

Life in the Urias Rondón Resettlement

At present, the families of Urias Rondon live in cramped and poorly ventilated modules provided by the United Nations, and staying inside these units in the temperatures of the Amazon is very difficult. Some families have home gardens where they grow oranges, cassava, pineapples and medicinal plants. The community is also growing maize and grass for livestock. These crops help them to survive but are limited due to the soil conditions. In this way, the signatories consider that it is necessary to ensure decent housing for the community, and then to ensure the sustainability of the productive projects they have. Both of these urgent needs require land: land to build houses and land to cultivate crops. So far the peace signatories are trying to respond to this urgency on their own. As they describe it *'We are trying to buy land by our means because there is no state policy that would allow us to obtain land or international organisations that could give us land'* ²⁰.

The national government through the National Land Agency, purchased the San José estate where the Urias Rondón community resides, thus, its members believe they can stay there for a long time and continue their lives in the area. However, the lack of land remains their biggest challenge. Without land or work, the offers of dissident and residual groups become more attractive and pose a threat to peace. Community members dream of acquiring more land and 'becoming productive,' as they put it. As the department of Caquetá is known for its cattle ranching, they see cheese and milk production through cattle raising as a viable option for achieving productivity. They also believe that other agricultural activities will depend on the quality and nature of the soil, and therefore, they require soil studies to guide their transition to a more productive lifestyle. Signatories of the peace agreement understand that economic production cannot be divorced from nature protection. They have a vision that includes both socio-economic benefits and environment protection. In their own words *"We did not come to El Doncello to get in the way of peasants and nature. We came to join the peasant struggle and the protection of nature as part of a bigger struggle, the conservation of the planet"* ²¹.

The security conditions, not only for the members of the Urias Rondón community, but also for all signatories of the peace agreement, compelled them to organize a peace pilgrimage to the city of Bogota in March 2022. Between the 7th and 9th of March, 3000 signatories of the peace agreement met in Bogota and requested four things: security guarantees for themselves and their families, access to land, decent housing, and support for their economic sustainability. Since the relocation, members of the Urias Rondón community perceive a tense calm regarding their safety. While they feel moderately safe now, they are concerned about the increasing frequency of common crime in the surrounding area. Some community members have been extorted, and the village residents have been victims of robberies.

²⁰ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, personal interview, July 13, 2022.

²¹ Translated from Spanish, Personal Interview, February 18 2022.

Since their arrival members of the Urias Rondón community have engaged in the social and political life of the village. They have joined and dynamized the political work of 20 community councils in the area. They perceive a favourable environment for them and feel well received by the local peasants who also support the struggles of signatories of the peace agreement²². Despite all the negative circumstances, including their forced displacement and the lack of political will to fulfil the peace agreement, members of the Urias Rondón community have managed to start collective projects with the support of the United Nations. Through the UN development programme, they were able to acquire 18 cows for a cattle project. Through self-organization, they also managed to collectively purchase a tractor. As one community member stated, *“We are here to cultivate, and all of this has come to us through the effort of each one of us, men and women living here”*²³.

Figure 4 Improvised clothing yard in the housing modules.



²² Community Member, Personal Interview, May 3 2023

²³ Translated from Spanish, Community Member, Personal Interview, May 3 2023.

Figure 5 Housing Modules. Photos by Itayosara Rojas



New Hopes for Land: ‘Paz Total’ and a new government

The signatories of the peace agreement have been major supporters of the government of President Petro and Vice-President Francia Marquez. They are aware of all the complications this government is facing regarding land demands and far-right politics. In terms of reincorporation policies, they wish the government could do more and faster. Since December 2022, they have felt that reincorporation has been left behind. When asked about the main challenges of the new government and its peace policy 'Paz Total,' they consider that two major elements must be addressed.

First is drug trafficking. If the government manages to reach an agreement with major groups involved in drug trafficking, this would be a major step towards stopping the violence.

Second is the fulfilment of the peace accord. If the government implements the peace agreement quickly and accurately, other armed groups will perceive this as favourable.

If the Peace Agreement had been implemented as proposed at the time, violence would not have been exacerbated. One signatory of the agreement explains that some of his former comrades returned to arms because of the absence of guarantees – “*We have a large number of comrades who had to continue the war because of this...because there were no possibilities, no opportunities to work, and many people were forced to continue in these groups*”²⁴.

If we examine the percentage of progress made on reintegration, it has been very minimal. Absolutely minimal. Just consider the first point: land, which we just discussed. The fact is, there is no land for us. And what does that mean for us, the ex-combatants? Where are we going to live? Not even the current place

²⁴ Translated from Spanish, Personal Interview, May 3 2023.

*where we are having this conversation has been provided to us. I mean, we don't even have the land yet... Where are we going to cultivate? We do not have where and then we have to rent land to cultivate. That is a big problem – a signatory to the Peace Agreement*²⁵

Unfortunately, the consequences of not having implemented the Peace Agreement or not having included a specific point on access to land for ex-combatants during the Havana peace talks cannot be reversed. However, this experience leaves important lessons that, with appropriate political will, can be improved in a negotiation process with other armed groups, such as the 'Paz Total' policy being pursued by the current government. These lessons have to overcome the issue of understanding land access for former members of the guerrillas as a matter involving just ex-combatants. Signatories of the peace agreement are now part of a broad group: landless people. As they say, *“Like millions of Colombians, we ex-combatants also have no right to land”*²⁶. Therefore, initiatives aimed at addressing this issue must go beyond individual groups' demands and consider local specificities.

So far, the signatories of the Agreement enjoy representation in some of the bodies created by the peace agreement itself, as well as political recognition. However, this recognition has not been translated into improvements in their living conditions or the long-term construction of peace. To achieve this more ambitious objective, the problem of access to land, its concentration, and therefore its redistribution must be considered. If the peace agreement is considered a substantial step towards achieving a process of social change that leaves violence behind and leads to the democratization of life in the countryside. Likewise, disarmament and reincorporation policies must stop focusing on their limited technical and normative parameters and recognize structural problems related to access to resources, including land, for marginalized communities such as peasants and now peace signatories.

Peace means guaranteeing food sovereignty for rural inhabitants, the protection and restoration of the soils where agricultural production takes place, the generation of employment and income in the countryside and agriculture, and, in general, the reorganisation of space and production following their ecological and social conditions (Fajardo 2002). All of these elements are intertwined with the land, which is why Fajardo concludes *“para sembrar la paz hay que aflojar la tierra”-to sow peace you have to loosen the land. Without land, peace cannot be built.*

Just as the end of the armed confrontation and the armed conflict is an eminently political issue, so is the problem of land distribution. Land injustice is a political and social issue (Franco and Borrás 2021) far from being solved with technical recipes. The multiple injustices that were expressed during the armed conflict, such as access to land, have become more complex and have acquired new dimensions that did not exist 50 years ago. Resolving these injustices today surpasses the objectives set out in the FARC's agrarian program of 60 years ago, as well as those of the peace agreement's comprehensive rural reform. This requires new approaches based on social justice that does not segregate and fragment the land demands of rural inhabitants (Borrás 2020), including the signatories of the peace agreement. One of these alternatives, proposed by Agrarian Climate Justice and the 5Rs -Recognition, Redistribution, Restitution, Regeneration, and Representation- (Borrás and Franco 2018), could serve not only to overcome the armed conflict but also to outline fairer and more democratic futures for the countryside and all its inhabitants.

Finally, the fragmentation of land claims among different rural dwellers has prevented progress towards effective land democratisation. In addition to the struggles between peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendants, there are now also legitimate demands for land from the signatories of the peace agreement. Finding solutions for all the inhabitants of the countryside requires the redistribution of land, an imperative

²⁵ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, January 25 2022.

²⁶ Translated from Spanish, Signatory of the Peace Agreement, Personal Interview, February 18 2022.

in a country where land concentration is obscene. It involves recognizing the right to land of all rural inhabitants: indigenous people, peasants, Afro-descendants, displaced people, and signatories of the agreement. It also means restoring all the rights of those who were deprived, not just individual plots of land. Moreover, it requires the representation of all rural inhabitants and the regeneration of soils affected by harmful productive activities that damage both the soil and the people.

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