Violence and Pastoral Care in Putumayo, Colombia

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Chapter 11

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“[During the violence] we had to take a stand. We had to decide to accompany the community. To be a witness. . . . We had to collect the dead because no one else would do it. . . . When the guerrilla or the AUC took people, we had to go to them, we had to carry out pastoral dialogues. Sometimes we got them to release people, not always, but sometimes.”

— Putumayo parish priest

The southern Colombian state of Putumayo, a region of frontier colonization along the Ecuadoran border, has been the scene of entrenched violence and illegal drug production for more than three decades. During domination by the country’s largest and oldest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), peasant farmers in the area came to supply more than fifty per cent of the coca used in the world cocaine trade. Beginning in the late 1990s, violence spiked as right-wing paramilitary groups steadily gained control of small towns. At the same time, the United States orchestrated a major military counter narcotics intervention in the region, funding training and equipment for army battalions as well as aerial fumigation with chemical herbicides. Through these distinct phases of the conflict, local priests developed multiple forms of pastoral care in their efforts to both comply with their sacramental duties and respond to the violence besieging the communities in which they worked.1 Priests in Putumayo organized workshops, set up peasant and women’s organizations and trained local leaders. They met with guerrilla leaders to advocate on behalf of communities. As violence escalated in the region, priests registered abuses and killings, collected commemorative objects, interceded with paramilitary commanders, and assisted families with the retrieval of the dead. Throughout, they worked with transnational groups to secure resources.

This chapter examines Catholic pastoral care as a series of practices that have emerged in dialogue with secular projects for development, popular education, and human rights. In the case of Putumayo, the cohort of priests I discuss were influenced by liberation theology, but did not make theological study their focus, nor did they adopt the organizational forms associated with it, such as Christian Base Communities.2 Rather, they identified with the broader reform movement within the Church. “We were children of Vatican II,” one priest told me. “We identified with the communities. . . . I never understood how the church could stay limited to just four walls. We had a different vision. All the people here are the living Christ, and we had to bring them down from the cross. We understood the pain of the people.” This vision inspired priests to accompany communities, through their physical presence as well as through efforts to channel institutional concern and resources to them (see Roberts 2012 and Lamberty 2012). For many activists in both the U.S. and Colombia involved in such efforts, such accompaniment emerges from deeply religious roots.3 In this case, the political capital and legitimacy of priests, as well as their higher levels of education, national and transnational connections, and in some
cases semi-governmental status, allowed them to play a particularly powerful role in rural southern Colombia.

The priests’ legitimacy allowed them to represent community concerns to a range of authorities, central state officials as well as commanders of illegal armed groups. Priests enjoyed particular political legitimacy because of the minimal state infrastructure in this remote frontier region, making them often the only educated men attached to (legal) national networks who regularly visited. However, the increasing conflict made priests less able to intercede with armed commanders and play a mediating role in the region. As the guerrillas’ control of the area was contested by paramilitary forces, their abuses escalated, and they became less receptive to priests’ concerns. The nature of the armed groups also played a role in the decreasing ability of priests to advocate with local commanders. Paramilitary forces employed dramatically higher levels of brutality, operated with an overtly authoritarian vision, and arrived from distant communities, making them fundamentally less susceptible to pressure from priests and others advocating for improved treatment of the population.

The role of priests as legitimate political interlocutors with transnational publics became critical as the region became the center of U.S. intervention through Plan Colombia, which channeled hundreds of millions of dollars to the security forces in Putumayo. Many U.S. activists as well as officials viewed Putumayans with suspicion and fear because of their presumed criminality and widespread participation in illegal coca farming. At the same time, many U.S. solidarity networks that had developed during the 1980s peace movement in Central America, including faith-based groups, became interested in the region. Priests were thus particularly well positioned to connect to transnational political resources in the form of training, programs, funding, and solidarity efforts.

The priests profiled here were frustrated by their inevitable inadequacies in the face of the overwhelming violence and intense suffering of the communities in southern Colombia. But their efforts challenge us to conceive a counterfactual history, to imagine the devastating consequences if they had not acted even in the minimal ways they could. The impact of these efforts emerges over time, resurrected after intense persecution and substantial shifts in conflict dynamics. The creative strategies emerging from their attempts to confront the challenges facing the region—economic decline with the shifting coca crop, the massive influx of extractive industries and ongoing violence from armed groups—continue to inspire.

**Father Alcides Jiménez: Organizing Putumayo**

As a frontier region, Putumayo has been simultaneously remote and marginal and deeply implicated in national and transnational projects. The region is lowland jungle with a minimal population of indigenous groups and poor colonos (settlers) that was made into a department in 1991. As such, it lacks an entrenched political and economic elite on the scale of those in urban areas or regions with longer histories of settlement. Local political culture reflects an ethos of colonization, exploration, and creation. Waves of colonization were spurred in part by the area’s designation by the central government as tierras baldías, or empty, ownerless lands that were free for settlers who needed only a machete and a tolerance for backbreaking rural labor. The region played a central role as one of the “escape valves” for escalating land pressure, in the context of Colombia’s extreme land inequality and repeated waves of violence to dispossess small farmers from their holdings (Reyes Posada and Duica Amaya 2009). Historically Putumayo has been deeply enmeshed in transnational economic and political processes, including Catholic missionary efforts, quinine, fur, rubber and oil exploitation, and coca paste for
the illegal international drug market. Beginning in the 1970s, the wild profits of dramatically expanded coca cultivation brought thousands of small farmers into the region, where they settled into newly created villages and began organizing to secure state services such as roads, schools, and health centers (Torres Bustamante 2011).

Within Putumayo, the Catholic Church has played a disproportionately powerful role. In a frontier region with minimal state presence, the Church was positioned to fully exploit the special powers granted to it by the 1886 Constitution. From 1896 until the early 1970s, the Capuchin Order was authorized to provide education, build infrastructure, evangelize, and colonize what is now known as Caquetá, Putumayo, and Amazonas. In 1951, the area was upgraded to a new ecclesiastical administrative level, and the three regions were separated, with the Putumayo Apostolic Vicariate operating out of Sibundoy. During this period, the Catholic welfare program, Social Action, significantly expanded its programs, as it did throughout the country. By the 1970s, the first generation of local boys was educated and consecrated as priests, self-described “native sons” who were assigned to parishes and given significant latitude for local initiatives by then Bishop Arcadio Bernal Supelano. These priests worked to connect Putumayo farmers in remote hamlets to national and transnational networks promoting popular education, sustainable development, and human rights.

The work of Father Alcides Jiménez, a parish priest in the region from 1977 until his assassination in 1998, exemplified this process. His pastoral care emphasized the transformative power of collective participation, using the resources of the Church to encourage personal and collective transformation, as well as challenging existing social, economic, and political relationships. He prioritized development: of individuals’ leadership qualities, of women, of sustainable economic development programs, of community autonomy in the face of armed groups’ efforts to establish their authority. As a “native son” diocesan priest in a local parish, his pastoral power and ecclesiastical leadership and authority were not based on his hierarchical position within the Church but on his personal charisma and ability to marshal national and transnational resources and relationships for his people. He was able to simultaneously challenge some of the Church’s traditional tenets while mobilizing Church resources to support his projects and his transformative vision. One community leader fondly recalled that his nickname was “the Bishop, because he was the one who really knew what was going on, he organized everything.” Bernal Supelano, the actual bishop at the time, was described in interviews with Father Alcides’ colleagues as someone who “let [us] act.” He developed the first comprehensive pastoral plan to facilitate projects across the region.

Father Jiménez was the anchor of a cohort of priests, almost all born in the region, who were profoundly influenced by his vision of community development and pastoral leadership. In his writings, Father Jiménez traced his interest in community development and sustainable agriculture to both his study of Vatican II and to growing up on a small farm without electricity or many public services. His early career was spent in the neighboring Cauca region, home to Colombia’s most organized indigenous communities as well as many local peasant initiatives. Jiménez brought his experience working with alternative farming and indigenous efforts to recover traditional Amazonian plants to Putumayo. Based in Puerto Caicedo from 1983 until his death in 1998, he played a central role in the department by generating multiple local organizations and training programs.

Father Jiménez’ vision included women working as partners with their husbands and as beneficiaries of rural development programs. He created special leadership and training courses for local women. Through his rural development program Mujeres, Caminos y Futuro (Women,
Roads, and Future) he promoted a view of women as leading voices against coca cultivation, able to convince their husbands to plant food and cash crops to improve their families’ situation. This led to small loan funds and cooperatives for women, generating possibilities for economic independence. His mother played a central role in inspiring his respect for and advocacy with women. Another critical influence in this area was a lay Catholic missionary family from Austria that lived and worked in the parish from 1984-1985. Many local residents recalled the workshops on human sexuality, gender equality, and other social issues the couple offered, their living example as parents of small children who shared domestic tasks equally, and Father Jiménez’ ongoing commitment to family planning for rural women.

In 1987, women active in the parish founded ASMUM, the Municipal Women’s Association. Representatives of the group traveled to national and international conferences on feminism and development. Three participated in the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995. Upon their return, they shared their experiences of networking with women activists from around the world in local workshops. In 1996, ASMUM representatives also participated in the national feminist meetings in Bogotá that resulted in the founding of one of the country’s most important women’s collectives, the nation-wide pacifist, anti-militarist alliance, Women’s Path to Peace, known simply as la Ruta (la Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres). La Ruta organizes marches, workshops, and training for women around the country. It has a central office in Medellín and regional branches, including a small storefront in Puerto Caicedo. Many Putumayo members of the organization trace their awakenings to Father Jiménez’ training initiatives.

At the same time, Father Jiménez was promoting sustainable agricultural development. With minimal funding, mostly from Catholic-affiliated European development NGOs, he offered workshops on a range of topics including water filtration systems, basic health and first aid, malaria management and prevention, land and climate management, alternative medicine, and small-scale projects for Amazonian products. The training led to the establishment of wide networks of health and rural development promoters throughout the department. Parish leaders also established a community radio network with locally produced news as well as distance learning programs. It continues to broadcast to this day.

In addition to their development work, priests in the region began to work with a small but critical group of national and transnational human rights groups. The Bogotá-based Jesuit Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) sent a staff member to the region in the early 1990s to organize, together with a local priest, the region’s first human rights group. It was forced to disband in 1991 following the first wave of narco-paramilitary violence, but the staff member, Nancy Sánchez, remained in the region, working on community outreach with the public health agency. She maintained her ties to the national human rights community, particularly with MINGA, a Bogotá-based group founded in 1992 that combined legal services with grassroots activism in conflictive regions.

**Pastoral Dialogues with the Guerrillas**

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, the FARC was the major political power in the region. Its 32nd Front settled in Putumayo in the early 1980s while FARC was still a marginal group with minimal national presence. The remote region was logistically important because of the shared border with Ecuador and Peru. Within Putumayo, the FARC encountered minimal state resistance, no public services, and a ready base of social support in the growing population of colonos, many of who had experienced guerrilla leadership in other rural areas. Described by local residents as “the law,” FARC leaders came to control much of the social and economic life
of the region, maintaining a strong militia presence in hamlets and town centers and regularly patrolling rural areas. They used their military power to mediate disputes and enforce local contracts, as well as to organize community improvement projects. As one priest told me, “People depended a lot on them, there would be lines of people taking their problems to the commander, infidelity, conflict in the communities; the guerrillas took on the role of the state. They were the judges.”

During the years of FARC domination, local priests viewed guerrillas as both part of their broad religious community—as rural youth to be accorded the rights and obligations of ministry and pastoral care—and as military authorities with whom they engaged in delicate mediation and advocacy efforts on behalf of their parishioners. Many rural priests knew that their parishioners had family connections to the FARC. Priests carried out what they called “pastoral dialogues” with the guerrillas, which included traveling to their camps to conduct Mass and baptisms as well as meetings with commanders and troops. Such missions could generate problems with the state security forces; priests who traveled into guerrilla areas refused to allow photos of themselves to be taken. “You have to go baptize children, that is part of the job,” one priest told me, describing a baptism party organized by the commander with a musical band from Ecuador. “The bishop gave a short sermon and left without eating anything. He told them, ‘don’t ask my priests to do this because it is dangerous for them.’ But as a religious sacrament, the church has to do it.”

“In general we had good relations with the guerrillas,” one priest recalled, speaking of the time when the FARC were the uncontested power in the region. “There weren’t as many human rights violations as there were later, because the territory wasn’t under dispute.” Communication between priests and FARC commanders required judicious use of diplomacy. The commanders controlled travel in the region, maintaining riverine checkpoints and intelligence networks. “We weren’t interested in fighting with them,” one priest said. “It was impossible to get into the communities if we confronted them.” Into the 1990s, the Bishop met with FARC commanders to discuss the Church’s pastoral plan, in part to guarantee safe passage for priests in rural areas. “I had to say Mass with the guerrillas there, with their uniforms and their guns,” one priest recalled. “It wasn’t anything admirable, but we had to celebrate the Mass. We had to be careful. It was not that easy; you had to depend on the commander.”

At the same time, priests attempted to confront the guerrillas when they abused the community. “We took advantage of the fact that when the priest arrived for the Mass, everyone had to go and listen to him,” one priest said, and so moral instruction was provided through the sermon. Another priest described saying Mass for teachers killed by the FARC. In other cases, priests intervened when their parishioners were detained or accused by the FARC of crimes or infractions. The diocese maintained a fund to provide support for people fleeing the region. In some cases, rural priests were forced from the area if local commanders viewed them as threats. One priest told me of being accused at gunpoint by a commander of “trying to create leaders against the guerrillas, against their principles of communism” because of the Church’s community education program. In a meeting with the commander, he was further accused of failing to report to a requested meeting and failing to follow FARC “orders and orientation.” After armed FARC soldiers questioned his right to say Mass in a rural hamlet, and amidst continuing rumors of a possible guerrilla attack, the priest was reassigned.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the FARC used increased revenue from taxing the drug trade to fund a dramatic expansion, almost doubling its troops and increasing military capabilities. The FARC conducted itself more like a standing army than a guerrilla force, beginning with the 1996 attack on the Las Delicias military base in Putumayo. In this and later
attacks FARC captured hundreds of police and soldiers and held them as hostages. They began increasing the *gramaje*—tax per gram of coca paste produced—and mobilizing peasant farmers to oppose U.S. funded fumigation campaigns. FARC militias based in small towns became more abusive and violent towards the local population.

The beginning of U.S.-sponsored operations further destabilized the region. As the U.S. began to fund aerial spraying of chemical herbicides—ostensibly to kill coca plants but which also destroyed legal cash and food crops as well as jungle growth—in the neighboring state of Guaviare, peasant farmers began to organize protests. In 1996, the *cocalero* peasant marches paralyzed the region for several months, as peasant coca farmers occupied small town plazas and blocked major roads. They demanded an end to fumigation and an increase in state services. Many U.S. and Colombia policymakers claimed the marches were simply motivated by pressure from the FARC. In fact, however, the peasant leadership was attempting to claim citizenship rights while negotiating space for relatively autonomous community organizing in the face of extreme pressures from guerrillas and state security forces (Ramírez 2011). They wanted more state presence in their region, along with the full range of state services, benefits, and opportunities for participation in the political process. Putumayo priests mediated a settlement of these protests with an agreement known as the Orito Accords in which the state promised to dramatically increase public services in the region. Following the march, many of the leaders were killed or forced to flee.

The shifting dynamics of the conflict spurred local priests to play new roles, including confronting guerrilla commanders over escalating abuses and encouraging peasant autonomy and leadership. While peasant leaders attempted to mobilize for increased state recognition and services, the FARC was committed to limiting local autonomy and co-opting collective organizing. It called for a boycott of the 1997 elections, threatening and even killing candidates for local office. Family members of threatened politicians in Putumayo asked the bishop for help, and in response he traveled down river to speak to the commander of FARC’s Bloque Sur, Joaquín Gómez. “It was hard for us, talking about all the people who were killed,” one priest who accompanied him recalled. “The FARC said they had to kill people because they had no jails, only settling of accounts [*ajusticiamientos*].” Guerrilla commanders gave them the names of intended targets, putting priests in the position of communicating the threats to them. At the same time, the bishop attempted to explain the role of the Church in the region.

Meanwhile, new actors in the conflict were arriving in the region. Paramilitary groups were growing in strength throughout the country, and their first incursions into Putumayo came in the late 1990s, with threats and selective assassinations. In 1997, paramilitary leaders from northern Colombia, including the charismatic spokesman Carlos Castaño, announced the creation of the National Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which claimed to be a new national command structure representing regional groups. One year later, the AUC announced a military offensive into new regions of the country “according to the operational capacity of each regional group.” Putumayo was among the regions targeted. Newly created “mobile squads” carried out these operations, which included numerous massacres of civilians. Throughout the country, the AUC coordinated with, and received logistical support from, local military commanders. Paramilitary excursions into the south began with a July 1997 massacre in the Meta region. From July 15-20, 1997, some 200 gunmen from the AUC took control of Mapiripán, killed at least forty people, and threw their dismembered bodies in a river. After the massacre, AUC chief Carlos Castaño promised, “many more Mapiripáns.” The paramilitary forces that arrived in
Putumayo in 1997 were part of the AUC’s expansion strategy. They established permanent bases in small towns and carried out massacres and killings.\textsuperscript{11}

Coexistence with Coca Culture

Illegal coca cultivation and refining was clearly the central economic engine of the region, financing a range of secondary businesses, including restaurants, retail stores, and transportation services.\textsuperscript{12} Coca farming in Putumayo at the time paid better than any of the other options, such as corn, beans, or yucca. But the harvesters and farmers, while relatively prosperous compared to those growing subsistence food crops, lived a life that was a far cry from the glamorous extravagance of urban traffickers in Medellín and Cali. Many residents used small coca plots to supplement their income from legal food crops or from salaried positions. As was common in other kinds of agricultural production, the middlemen who brought rural products to their urban consumers made most of the profits; in this case that would be the \textit{traquetos}, or local traffickers, who bought coca paste from the farmers in the municipal centers and sold it for further processing.\textsuperscript{13}

In oral history interviews, residents expressed ambivalence towards the coca economy, reflecting with wonder on the opportunities and material rewards offered but wary of the many associated dangers. They described how the coca trade transformed the region into a vibrant economy, bringing riches, new people, and movement into a remote rural area. But they also recalled the violence, conflict, and mistrust it generated. Their criticism of \textit{la cultura de la coca}, or coca culture, was directed less at the coca-farming peasants than at those who grew rich as \textit{traquetos}, known for their flashy fashion, young girlfriends, conspicuous consumption—and violence.

For the Church, coca production presented a complex challenge. The vast majority of parishioners in Putumayo’s rural areas participated in the trade as farmers and agricultural workers, but the crop is entirely illegal in Colombia (unlike Peru and Bolivia which allow small farmers to grow limited amounts for indigenous use). According to one priest, “The church rejects drug trafficking, but we distinguish between coca and cocaine.” The priests I interviewed recognized the ritual use of coca by indigenous groups as legitimate, but lamented the violence and corruption associated with the international drug trade. “We give classes and workshops, with the participation of international organizations . . . and the National Bishops’ Conference about the serious consequences of the narco economy,” he continued, but admitted, “The problem wasn’t so much that people didn’t know that it was damaging but that it was economically viable. . . . It was possible to grow almost anywhere, and if you didn’t, you didn’t make any money.” These priests defined coca growing not as a “criminal problem, but as a social problem.” Through their sustainable development programs, Father Jiménez and his colleagues offered one of the only organized alternatives to coca cultivation in the region. At the same time, priests knew that donations sustaining their churches came from coca. “We knew that coca was selling for a good price,” one priest told me with a smile, “when the donations went up.”

During interviews, I also heard the many ways coca culture directly affected individual priests. The prevalence of illegal activity made priests vulnerable to charges of corruption. One priest told me of his fear that the local military would plant coca paste on him at a roadblock and then use that evidence to discredit his accusations of military-paramilitary collusion. In another case, a community leader told of a priest who had saved many lives by helping shelter residents who were threatened. Fearing for his life during the escalating violence, he would say Mass, “with a pistol stuck in the back of his pants,” according to one member of his parish. Eventually,
the community leader told me, Bogotá-based NGOs helped him flee to Canada with his married girlfriend. “He came back once,” she continued “in a private plane he contracted from Bogotá. People said, what is this guy into that he came in a private plane? People were saying he must have been drug trafficking in Canada.”

Father Carlos Palacios is perhaps the most infamous example of a local priest seduced by coca culture. A native Putumayan who dabbled in coca farming as a youth, he and his brother joined the priesthood and worked with Father Jiménez during his early years in the Puerto Caicedo parish. Palacios left the priesthood to marry his long-time companion shortly before the birth of his first child and began a career in politics. His legitimacy as a community-focused religious leader was a central factor in his successful campaign for governor. Late in his term, he was removed from office and investigated for corruption. He was sentenced to three years in prison, most of which he has served under house arrest in Mocoa, capital of the department of Putumayo. During a 2010 interview, he freely wandered the streets near his family compound in downtown Mocoa. When we went to a nearby store to buy bread and cheese, he was frequently stopped on the street and greeted with calls of “Hey, Father Carlos!” He told me proudly that he was still identified with his role as priest, and planned to work as a counselor in a Catholic school once he had served his prison term.

Escalating Violence and Increasing Paramilitary Domination

As paramilitary forces steadily gained control over urban centers, FARC commanders became increasingly paranoid and draconian, heightening the danger for priests who challenged their abuses. Deeply concerned about infiltration and betrayal, the guerrillas viewed any attempts to establish autonomous organizations with great suspicion. But as guerrilla abuses and drug trade violence increased, Father Jiménez, using a curriculum from Bogotá-based Codecal, an NGO devoted to participatory rural education, began a yearlong process of workshops with six other priests and approximately thirty-five community and peasant leaders to create a local Catholic peace network (Red de Formadores de Paz). National Catholic institutions, including the Bogotá-based Jesuit group CINEP, were promoting active neutrality in which communities resisted the presence of any armed actors (including state security forces) on their territory. Father Jiménez participated in workshops in which activists working with Colombia’s most famous peace community, San José de Apartadó, founded in 1997, described their strategies and experiences (Alther 2006). When the guerrilla commanders in Putumayo attempted to pressure communities to come out for another large-scale protest march in 1997, Father Jiménez urged community leaders to resist. Following his counsel, many peasants refused to participate, arguing that the previous marches had led to increased violence and poverty without any gain for the communities involved.

On September 11, 1998, Father Jiménez was killed by the FARC while saying Mass celebrating the end of Peace Week; the attack was widely viewed as retaliation for encouraging autonomous community organizing. One participant in the workshops he organized recalled his work promoting such independent groups as “more dangerous than being a human rights defender [who were also widely targeted]. In this rural area, [he was] giving workshops that people shouldn’t go into the war, that they shouldn’t use arms. . . . The FARC was mad because they thought that he was taking people away from them, that he was too critical of them. And he was very much against coca.”

The Height of the Violence
Between 1998 and 2005, Putumayo became an intense conflict zone, with guerrillas controlling the rural areas and paramilitary groups working with the security forces from the urban centers. In addition to their use of violence, paramilitary commanders regulated public space, individual comportment, and interpersonal relationships. They ordered communities to clean their streets and display specific decorations. Commanders intervened in local disputes, regulating domestic violence and punishing thieves. They held frequent large public meetings in the plazas to inform residents of their rules. I heard stories from many local residents about how commanders charged local businesses “taxes” (which some called extortion), as well as percentages of all government contracts. Any travel within the region required advance permission. Rural people were accused of sympathizing with guerrillas and were no longer able to travel to markets in town, while townsfolk were prevented from going to their farmland. Women from urban centers who worked as part of church, government, and community outreach programs told me they could not travel to meet with their rural counterparts. One lay Catholic agricultural extension agent said, “If the community committee [junta de acción communal] was going to go out, they had to get permission . . . because they [the paramilitaries] became like the state.”

Pastoral practices shifted in response to the changing dynamics of the violence. Workshops and sustained rural development initiatives were largely abandoned as too dangerous, particularly as catechists, health promoters, and agricultural extension agents were targeted by paramilitaries (and to a lesser extent, guerrillas). Some chose to focus on daily accompaniment, being present in communities during intense violence, serving as a compassionate witness to community suffering and registering abuses. Pastoral Social provided material and religious support for communities, confronted and publicly denounced abusive armed actors, including official security forces working with paramilitary groups in the area. Father Eduardo Ordóñez, head of Pastoral Social from 2000 until 2005, described its work as focused on three areas: documenting and in some cases denouncing abuses, providing temporary emergency aid, including food and rent subsidies, for displaced families and helping families with burial paperwork, transportation, and rites. They also developed connections with new international allies, who provided human rights training and accompaniment. “I learned about the issue of human rights not from the church,” one priest told me, “but from human rights organizations I worked with.”

In many cases, priests negotiated directly with paramilitary commanders for the return of bodies, an experience that highlighted the differences between paramilitary and guerrilla commanders. Paramilitaries were largely from distant communities, not embedded in local kinship networks, employed much more brutal methods and were largely impervious to priests’ claims to authority. “The commanders wouldn’t always agree to speak with us,” Father Eduardo told me. They wouldn’t return the bodies because “it was a way to demonstrate that the person that they killed was a delinquent, was an enemy, and that they could do what they liked with him. . . . [They] were the most difficult to speak with, more bitter, rougher, harder. They made us a little more terrified. . . . Some were more docile and nicer, but that was more in the guerrillas. Because in some ways, the guerrilla saw that the church did many things for the rural areas. The paramilitaries didn’t care about that.”

Father Campo Elías de la Cruz, who had served as a novice under Father Jiménez and was the most outspoken of this cohort, developed what he called a “prophetic voice,” explicitly linking his religious vocation with what he viewed as a moral duty to denounce paramilitary violence in the region. Even as he recognized that ministering to the security forces remained
part of his sacramental duties, he was aware of their role in the violence. “I knew that my work as a priest was to be there for everyone, for the soldiers too,” he told me. “I knew that there were things going on that weren’t right. On that short stretch of road between [the military base of] Santa Ana and Puerto Asís, so many bodies appearing there and it was such a short piece of road, right there near the base. I would talk about these things in the Mass, and the colonel didn’t like it. . . . I knew that the security forces weren’t doing the right thing and I would say it.”

As part of his “prophetic” denunciation he accompanied a peasant march to Bogotá. In a meeting with then president Ernesto Samper, he and march leaders described state support for paramilitary forces. Many of the leaders were killed upon their return to Putumayo. Fr. Campo Elías made similar reports during local meetings convened by state officials to discuss the escalating violence. He also worked closely with regional human rights ombudsman Germán Martínez to document cases and assist victims, including families seeking refuge in churches. During this period, the United States began sending millions of dollars for training and equipping elite Colombian army counternarcotics battalions, aerial fumigation with chemical herbicides and alternative crop projects for Putumayo farmers. As a result, U.S.-based human rights and solidarity organizations began to focus on the region as well. Local priests were a critical lynchpin in these transnational alliances because they were viewed as legitimate sources of analysis and insight into conditions there. Priests met with visiting researchers and activists and traveled to the U.S. on speaking tours sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, solidarity committees, and Witness for Peace. The first U.S. NGO delegation to the region in 2000 included representatives of the Washington Office on Latin America, the U.S. Committee for Refugees, and Colombian-based human rights groups. The Center for International Policy, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch reported on the situation as well. Witness for Peace brought delegations of Americans and wrote grassroots policy reports documenting the impact of U.S. policy.

In at least one case, international solidarity efforts played a decisive role in limiting paramilitary activity. Members of a large Witness for Peace delegation traveled to the town of Sibundoy, where paramilitaries worked closely with local police and military officers. “People were panicked,” Father Campo Elías recalled, following the appearance of graffiti threatening local residents. “You could see [the paramilitaries] bringing in weapons.” The priests convened a meeting with civilian and military officials, warning them they were responsible for the security of the local population and filing a report on the threat with government officials in Sibundoy and, with the assistance of MINGA, in Bogotá. A delegation from the town met with Colombia’s vice president to register its complaints. At the same time, Witness for Peace delegates participated in a Mass denouncing the atrocities and the role of the state. Following the resulting publicity, police and military officials who had been working with the paramilitary forces were transferred. “The Church played an important role, with Witness for Peace,” Father Campo Elías told me. “[The Witness for Peace representatives] spoke strongly during the Mass, and this helped make visible what was going on. . . . The police thought that no one was going to notice.”

This success was impossible to replicate in other areas of Putumayo. The area near Sibundoy had a longer history of settlement, meaning there was more social trust and cohesion, which facilitated collective action, and there was less involvement in the drug trade, meaning fewer resources were at stake. In other parts of the department, limited resources, widespread criminal violence, and the lack of robust civil society organizations prevented transnational NGOs from providing long-term accompaniment. Priests there were unable to advocate as effectively with paramilitary commanders who arrived from distant regions, were allied with
security forces and uninterested in respecting existing community authority structures. Father Campo Elías described one failed intervention when paramilitaries detained Church catechists participating in a human rights course:

We [three priests] went to the human rights course. Many leaders were coming. Two were taken by the paramilitaries. The mother came to us, saying, Father, they have taken my sons. So we said . . . we are going to . . . see if they will let them free. . . . We had to go walking down this rutted street, and we saw their weapons. We saw that the prisoners were crying. There were many armed men around, all dressed as civilians. One of the men said, “You don’t have any business here, get out.” Nelson said, “We are priests.” The man said, “You didn’t understand me, get out.” Alfonso said, “those men are church leaders,” and we got out of the car. The men that were tied up were crying, they couldn’t speak, but they were crying, and that was their way of asking us for help. There were a lot of people waiting in line to talk to the commander, one of them was shepherding the line, telling people when it was their turn. The mother was crying, she got on her knees, crying for her sons. The man pushed her with his foot, so she went backwards a little.

“Yeah, we know who the guerrillas are,” the commander said. “We investigate them.”

I said, “You have committed serious mistakes.” I was so afraid. But I said: “they are catechists, animadores, from the church.”

The man looked at me, a terrible look. He took his radio and gave the order for them to kill them [ejectarlos]. It only took fifteen minutes. They killed them, untied them and threw them in a ditch. I told Father Nelson, “We need to ring the bells at the church.”

[The paramilitaries] were right there, at the side of the church, they heard . . . everything we said. At the Mass I talked a bit harshly, about the value of life.

We called the bishop, we told him, “The Church is sleeping. How can you let this happen, that they are in their cars and motorcycles right outside the church, they are living next to the church and the Church does nothing?”

The army detained us when we were going back, and searched us. We argued with them, a harsh discussion with them.

In the middle of the night, the army came in to get the paramilitaries, but no one was there. They had everything well coordinated, they organized things together. They got them out of the church, they moved them somewhere else.

There were many cases of such encounters. Trying to get people out, teachers, peasants. I had to send in reports, how many people we got out.

As the violence worsened, Church authorities began taking more conservative positions in an effort to safeguard their personnel. Father Campo Elías recalled a message from the national Bishops’ Conference to “be prudent, that the church shouldn’t get involved in ‘that kind of stuff.’ They thought we should celebrate the mass but nothing else, not get involved.” By the early 2000s, the danger for outspoken priests was growing. Witness for Peace facilitated contacts with a church in Minneapolis, and Father Campo Elías spent eighteen months there before returning to Colombia, but not Putumayo. Other priests were sent to Chile or other parishes to escape the mounting pressure.

Witness to Violence in Putumayo
Local priests felt silenced by political violence and by the lack of support from the Church hierarchy. In later interviews, several discussed bitterly what they described as abandonment by the Church leadership in Putumayo and nationally. In one example, the network of lay missionaries (promotores) established by Father Jiménez lost the bishop’s support; the house where one group lived was given to a new group of charismatic promotores and the network dismantled. For many priests in the remote hamlets occupied by paramilitary forces that were enforcing vicious and arbitrary rules on local inhabitants, efforts to denounce specific cases seemed futile. In a June 2005 interview, a priest in La Dorada told me, “I am very disillusioned. . . So many people came to visit, so many reports filed with NGOs, ACNUR, the UN, and nothing changes, nothing happens. I thought something would change, but no.”

Accordingly, many priests developed a vision of pastoral care that avoided confrontation or public complaint, drawing on the long Catholic tradition emphasizing the importance of compassionate witnessing of suffering. Some of them did occasional low-profile work with national and transnational NGOs and multilateral organizations present in the region to safeguard local residents where possible. These entities included CINEP, the Quaker American Friends Service Committee (Servicios Andinos), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, or ACNUR) and the International Red Cross. For many living in small towns occupied by paramilitary forces, serving as a witness to the violence in anticipation of a future time when public accounting might be possible was part of their pastoral mission. For example, during a 2001 interview, the priest who replaced Father Alcides admitted that work with community organizations had been largely halted. At the same time, he pulled out a handwritten ledger that he was afraid to have seen even by local residents, in which he recorded all the deaths in the region. While unable to provide Catholic funeral rites such as Mass or in many cases even burial, he was able to accompany the dead through prayer, the secret ledger and communication with the family members if he knew them. Similarly, a La Dorada priest interviewed in 2005 also maintained a list of the dead. During the course of our interview he read some of the names for me and told me any details he knew, such as age, profession, or local family members. He also expressed his frustration with this limited system, noting that, “Of course many deaths are not reported. Or they are just rumors. People say, ‘the chickens are eating one over there.’”

Father Nelson Cruz’s Memory Museum (Museo de la Memoria) was another example of silent witnessing in Putumayo. As the parish priest in El Placer, he was asked by Pastoral Social to prepare a document about the situation for distribution to interested journalists, NGOs, and human rights organizations. He refused, arguing that a written account would endanger both him and local residents. Instead, he proposed using space within the church buildings to house a collection of objects related to the violence that could be observed and photographed by interested visitors. Pastoral Social accepted his proposal; the museum collection grew from donations by local residents and objects collected during Father Nelson’s pastoral trips to rural hamlets. All were labeled with the date and place they were found. They included grenades and other weapons fragments, uniforms and armbands from the armed groups, even items of daily use such as cooking utensils with bullet holes. The Museo served as a public acknowledgement of the toll of the armed conflict, even if it could not be articulated in the form of a complaint, and a demonstration that the Church accompanied residents during this time of violence. A reduced collection of objects remains displayed on a wall facing an interior courtyard inside the parish compound, and residents are currently discussing efforts to install the entire collection in a local memory house (casa de la memoria). Reflecting on his experience, Campo Elías mused, “Each
one has its way of working. Nelson was very smart, he had to remain silent. If he hadn’t, he would not have been able to stay accompanying his people?”

Father Alcides’ Legacy in Contemporary Putumayo

Many of the projects begun by Father Alcides lay dormant in the years immediately following his death, as paramilitary violence peaked between 1999 and 2003. But his legacy is felt in the local civil society and religious organizations that have emerged in the past decade after talks led to the demobilization of the paramilitaries. That opened up some space for organizing and dramatically reduced the levels of daily violence, although the conflict in Putumayo continues. The demobilization occurred after talks between the AUC leadership and government representatives, mediated by senior Catholic officials; by 2007 more than 31,000 paramilitary troops had passed through the process. In Putumayo, 504 members of the regional paramilitary bloc went through the official demobilization process on March 1, 2006. While reconstituted paramilitary forces remain active, the brutality by paramilitary groups occupying small towns has abated. The FARC continues to employ deadly landmines, forced recruitment, and intimidation, but the number of combat operations has greatly declined and the nightly 6 P.M. curfew has been lifted. Woman community activists who for several years couldn’t leave the urban centers have now begun traveling to rural regions once more.

The Putumayo Women’s Alliance (La Alianza de Mujeres del Putumayo) is one of the most prominent groups that emerged in part from Father Alcides’ decades of work. Women teachers and community leaders, many of whom had participated in his work, came together to support women survivors of violence in the region. At their first retreat, in November 2003, they adopted three themes to guide their work with women: human rights and armed conflict; women’s history and political participation; and social and economic development. With funding from a range of national and international allies, the Network holds workshops, forums, and meetings throughout the department and attempts to connect specific, women-initiated community development projects to those funders. The network also supports women under threat by using contacts with national and international NGOs.

With the support of the Catholic Church, the Alliance has focused on public commemoration—permanent memorials as well as marches—in an effort to claim not only the right to grieve but also public spaces for themselves as political actors. The “Wall of Truth” is one such effort. Each of the 170 bricks on an exterior wall of the Catholic Cathedral in Mocoa’s central plaza contains the name, occupation, and date of death of one woman killed violently in the department. There is no mention of the perpetrators and circumstances of death. The panel of bricks is set within a pastoral scene of blue sky, rolling hills, and regional flowers, the name of the Alliance in large letters across the top, the slogan “not a single one more!” along the bottom. The wall has become a point of pride and public encounter for the women of the Alliance, who gather there to sing, light candles, and reflect as part of workshops and meetings. They have built another wall in the neighboring town of Villagarzón, and additional walls are being planned.

A new Catholic youth group in Puerto Caicedo, inspired by la Ruta and the legacy of Father Alcides, has also staged periodic public events. Using teatro efímero (ephemeral theater), which they learned from Fundación Rayuela (Hopscotch), a Bogotá-based youth theater project, its members work with groups of twenty to thirty youths to collectively diagnose and analyze social problems in the area. They then script, design, and produce street theater productions based on those issues. Rayuela says this process involves human rights education and creates empathy and community through the public commemoration of specific forms of violence in
order to contest the multiple forms of authoritarianism at work in these communities. Following their initial training workshops, the Puerto Caicedo teatro efímero group now participates in collective actions as well as street theater productions. One example of their work was “The Colombian Situation,” performed on September 9, 2009, as part of the annual commemoration of the life and work of Father Alcides on the anniversary of his assassination. The work, performed in Puerto Caicedo’s central plaza, consisted of three “living photographs,” short scenes enacted within a large constructed frame. In the first, a peasant is found dead; in the second a displaced family flees; in the third, a masked man threatens peasant youth. Rayuela has also contributed to a repertoire of symbolic resources that “enact embodied memory,” drawing heavily on Catholic rituals of mourning (Taylor 2003). These elements include traveling displays of photos of the dead and disappeared, and installations in public plazas of religious funeral objects such as crosses, flowers, candles, and funeral invitations on newsprint, of the kind which are often plastered on street posts and walls, with the name, dates, and family members of those murdered. During marches they cover their mouth with small crosses made of sticks as a sign of being silenced; their uniform at these events is all black, or T-shirts with the slogan, No Más.

The Alliance incorporated many of these elements into its public commemoration of Father Alcides. In a recent silent march, they held life-sized photos of the priest’s face. Later, during a public gathering, they held photos of their dead family members. Along the central street, the teatro efímero group had installed empty chairs, shrouded with black tulle, holding small white wooden crosses; thin cement blocks plastered with the death announcements of local residents killed in the violence rested in front of them. Women walked wearing black, carrying crosses and umbrellas draped with white ribbons. The march also featured a moment of street theater, in which women enveloped in white cloth lay down on the street to represent the bodies of the dead and disappeared. Other women kneeled and embraced them, many in tears. These events are not simply cathartic performances of public grieving, but also establish new collective histories as well as constituting participants as public political actors.

Many of the priests who studied under Father Alcides are back in Putumayo, frustrated with the Church hierarchy. Critics of the current bishop point to the focus on implementing government grants for large educational projects, rather than community-based projects. They contrast priests from outside the region, who have returned to wearing the cassock, to the previous tradition of native-born priests who worked alongside communities in civilian clothing. They hope to revive the disbanded Peace and Justice Working Group (Mesa de Justicia y Paz) and the Border Mission (Pastoral Fronterizo).

Parish priests enjoy a range of political resources they can mobilize during times of crisis. Through their pastoral ministries, they are deeply embedded in local political dynamics as well as intimately connected to individuals’ daily lives. Those working in remote rural areas are frequently the only representatives of large institutions to maintain a regular presence. Through the Catholic institutional hierarchy, priests are connected to national and international networks offering funding and educational opportunities. Through both these institutional networks, and their local responsibilities and relationships, priests gain significant political legitimacy before powerful political actors ranging from national and international government bureaucrats to illegal armed actors. Yet their responses to violence and conflict vary. Examining the experiences of specific parishes, in this case in the southern Colombian state of Putumayo, reveals some of the factors impacting how and why they employ specific political resources,
illuminating the opportunities as well as the considerable constraints they face.

At the most immediate level, priests must weigh their pastoral obligations to minister to all—the powerful and the oppressed, the perpetrator, and the victim—with their understanding of their particular obligations to the disenfranchised. As in many areas of Latin America, in southern Colombia, priests were inspired by the Vatican II reforms and in some cases also the more radical teachings of liberation theology. Just as importantly, as “native sons”—the first generation of priests born in the region, educated in major cities and then returning—these priests developed ministries focused on marginal migrants, many of whom were involved in coca farming. They were perfectly positioned to take advantage of the paradox of Catholic presence in this frontier region. The Church in the jungle lowland border region of Putumayo was able to play a disproportionate role because of the region’s frontier characteristics, including minimal state presence and infrastructure. At the same time, individual priests were granted more latitude because of the relative unimportance of the region within the Church’s institutional hierarchy. Thus, individual charismatic leaders like Father Alcides were able to play a critical role.

At the same time, priests working in areas with entrenched illegal armed actors are profoundly vulnerable to attacks. Thus, their pastoral calculations also included constant evaluation of shifting dynamics in the conflict, including troop movements and guerrilla objectives, in relation to their relatively amorphous leverage over such groups. Priests were also forced to evaluate the relative political costs of their distinct pastoral strategies. Supporting efforts for autonomous organizing, independent of armed groups, and publicly denouncing their abuses resulted in lethal retaliation in Putumayo and in other regions around the country. According to the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, between January 1984 and September 2013, two bishops and eighty-four priests were killed in acts of violence, most of them by the paramilitary forces or the FARC.¹⁷

Many more priests were threatened and managed to escape death by fleeing or being transferred from their parishes, precisely because of the strength of the Church’s national and transnational networks. Such relocations weakened the ability of parish priests to intervene with armed commanders on behalf of their parishioners; their legitimacy depended on their established relationships, longstanding trust, and shared histories. Their ability to react was also profoundly transformed as new armed actors moved into these regions, such as the paramilitary forces that arrived in southern Colombia. As paramilitaries came to control urban centers, they proved even more brutal, arbitrary, and abusive in their treatment of the local community than the previous generation of guerrilla commanders. Some priests attempted to use their public leadership positions—in security councils, in Mass, and in meetings with public officials to denounce the violence affecting their parishioners. In other cases, priests chose to respond with private documentation and witnessing as they saw that public protests by their colleagues were ineffective in the face of escalating violence.

Transnational allies such as the U.S.-faith based group Witness for Peace played a critical role in increasing priests’ legitimacy with government officials as well as linking them to additional networks. Even as greater U.S. military intervention in the region contributed to escalating violence, it also led to greater transnational solidarity mobilization. The development of faith-based solidarity networks between the U.S. and Colombia faced many challenges. One of the most important was the limited number of U.S. religious workers in the country. Colombia was a net exporter of priests and religious workers, sending many to other parts of Latin America and Africa, leading to fewer of the connections between religious communities in the U.S. and Colombia, particularly within Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations that had played a
central role in the previous generations of U.S. solidarity movements.

Efforts to develop U.S. solidarity and accompaniment with Putumayo communities were further complicated by the illegal drug trade. Concerns were raised that U.S. activist participation in Colombia campaigns would imply tolerance of illicit drug abuse and trafficking. Critics of militarized drug policy were also often accused of sympathizing with drug traffickers and guerrillas. For U.S.-based groups attempting to establish institutional relationships with Colombian communities impacted by U.S. policies, the extensive criminal activity in the region was extremely difficult to navigate. But local priests, legitimized by their pastoral relationships and institutional ties to the Church, were perfectly positioned to advocate for their parishioners and help facilitate efforts by U.S. solidarity groups and activists on their behalf.

Developing projects with Colombian communities and priests also rejuvenated some faith-based initiatives that had emerged during the solidarity movement with Central America. Witness for Peace, which played a critical role in Putumayo, is one example. Originally founded in response to U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, during the 1990s the organization went into decline, with a budget reduction of forty percent. For many in the group, Colombia offered a return to their activist roots, with a focus on political violence directly related to U.S. policy.

A final example of the difference a parish priest can make in local response to violent conflict is the longer-term revival of community organizations inspired by Father Alcides. Beyond the priests that cite him as a mentor and teacher, the collective work of the Women’s Association of Puerto Caicedo, the Women’s Alliance of Putumayo and other peasant organizations demonstrate his ongoing legacy. Their resurgence and resilience—as well as frailty in the face of violence—point to the importance of deep and ongoing histories of such efforts and how the seeds sown bear fruit, long after the initial projects, in unanticipated ways.

Notes
1 This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted during eight research trips to Putumayo between 1999 and 2013, as well as interviews conducted with U.S. and Colombian activists and religious officials conducted in the United States. Many of the Colombians interviewed in Putumayo requested that their identity be concealed because of ongoing security issues in the region. Research travel was supported in part by grants from the U.S. Institute for Peace and the Colby Faculty Development Fund, in addition to the American University Center for Latin American and Latino Studies.
2 Christian Base Communities are small collectives of lay people who gather to reflect on spiritual teachings. They frequently evolved into political activism. There is a large literature examining the emergence and decline of liberation theology in Latin America; for some basic history see Berryman ([1987] 2013) and Smith (1991).
4 Plan Colombia initially contained more than US$600 million (of a total of a US$1.3 billion aid package first passed in 2000) for the “Push into Southern Colombia.” This aid included military hardware and training for the newly formed counternarcotics battalions of the Colombian Army, as well as aid for fumigation and development. These projects were extended over the next five years.
5 Scholars in a number of Latin American contexts have explored the importance of innocence as a fundamental category for solidarity campaigns supporting victims of human
rights abuses. In urban Brazil, critics of police brutality have been dismissed by accusations that they care only for the “rights for bandits” (Caldeira 2000) and criminals (Holston 2008). In Peru, the human rights community and local communities in conflictive zones engaged in extensive and controversial debates over the importance of innocence for defending victims of abuse (Theidon 2012). Following the imposition of sweeping antiterrorist legislation, NGOs adopted a “campaign for the innocents,” defending individuals wrongly imprisoned but refusing to take the cases of members of the Shining Path, even if they suffered torture while incarcerated. During the debate over the reach of the truth and reparations committee, legal advisors discussed what is known as the Clean Hands Doctrine, a legal principle that established eligibility for reparations depending on the degree of criminal involvement. In the Peruvian case, this debate focused on whether to provide reparations to families whose Shining Path relatives had been killed while in government custody (see LaPlante (2009).)

6 For more on this history, see Tate (2009).
7 For the early history of this region, see Stanfield (1998) and Taussig (1991).
8 While the Catholic hierarchy is generally characterized as conservative, and hostile to accompaniment projects, revisionist histories of Colombian Catholic Church have described significant progressive activism since the 1930s. See LaRosa (2000).
9 The national organization includes 300 organizations, including many of the most important feminist groups in Colombia (including Casa de la Mujer in Bogotá, and Vamos Mujer and Mujeres que Crean in Medellín); they also allow individual membership. See Cockburn (2007).
10 The most complete history of this period can be found in Ramírez (2011).
11 The Historical Memory Commission, created by the government as part of the 2003-2006 paramilitary demobilization processes, has produced the most detailed study to date of the impact of the violence on daily life in a Putumayo hamlet. Ramírez (2012) focuses on the Putumayo hamlet of El Placer, and is available in Spanish at http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/index.php/informes-gmh/informes-2012/genero-putumayo.
12 Most coca paste, also known as base, is the first refining stage in making cocaine, and the peasant families who grow the coca complete the process at home. (On industrial plantations, contract workers carried out a larger scale version of the same process.) Using a modified weed cutter, they shredded the leaves, mixed them with cement powder, then soaked them in barrels of gasoline. Hydrochloric acid was added to the liquid squeezed from this mixture to crystallize the alkaloid. The resulting powder, coca base, sold to middlemen in southern Colombia for about US$700 a kilo.
13 For more detail on the coca economy, see Swedish anthropologist Oscar Jansson’s (2008) work.
14 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia reported repeatedly officially informing the Colombian government of links between paramilitary and military forces in the Putumayo region during this period, to no effect. The 2000 annual report, released in February 2001, included this description of the situation in the region:

This Office also observed that paramilitaries were still operating at the Villa Sandra estate between Puerto Asís and Santa Ana in the same department, a few minutes from the Twenty-Fourth Brigade base. [The Office] was later informed that two raids had been
made by the security forces, apparently without result; yet the existence and maintenance of this position are public knowledge—so much so that it has been visited repeatedly by international journalists who have published interviews with the paramilitary commander. Reports received by the Office even speak of meetings between paramilitaries and members of the security forces at the Villa Sandra estate. (“Report of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Colombia,” E/CN.4/2001/15, February 8, 2001, Paragraph 134. Available at http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G01/110/61/PDF/G0111061.pdf?OpenElement.)

15 MINGA facilitated many of these trips and maintained extensive contacts with advocacy and activist organizations in Europe and the United States, sending staff on speaking tours and participating in advocacy campaigns targeting specific legislative initiatives in the United States and European Union. The growing legitimacy and profile of Colombian activists in Washington was demonstrated when MINGA’s executive director and three other activists won the 1998 Robert F. Kennedy Award for human rights and Nancy Sánchez, then MINGA’s Putumayo researcher, won the 2003 Letellier Moffit Award.


References


