



Chapter 5

Tourism and the Social Reintegration of Colombian Ex-Combatants

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ABSTRACT

Research on the role of tourism in post-conflict scenarios has suggested that it contributes to peace and reconciliation by providing common ground for antagonists to meet. However, not enough attention has hitherto been given to cases where one of the opposing parties consist of former combatants. This chapter draws on academic literature on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) to discuss how Colombian demobilised guerrillas are currently using tourism to assist their reintegration process. Based on document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observation, it is argued that tourism can contribute to the social reintegration of ex-combatants by making them visible and active agents in the process and supporting alternative settings where reintegration can take place. Ultimately, the chapter posits that tourism can assist non-conventional approaches to reintegration, which might increase the likelihood of ensuring a successful transition from war to peace.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-5053-3.ch005

INTRODUCTION

Peace and conflict scholars are increasingly drawing attention towards the need to research peace from a micro-level perspective in war-shattered societies. Traditionally, scholars have given priority to macro-level analysis focusing, amongst others, on peace treaties, national policies or international interventions for peacekeeping and peacebuilding (Autesserre, 2014; Lederach 1997). However, the lack of understanding of how peace is built and maintained on the ground might explain to a large extent why many post-conflict transitions fail (Richmond & Mitchell, 2011). Researchers interested in unravelling ‘peacebuilding from below’, recognise that no lasting peace can be achieved if local realities are neglected (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). Hence, they have focused on studying grassroots peace initiatives and local agency, and are advancing debates on the link between territorial configurations and peace to understand those everyday contexts (Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Donais, 2009; Paffenholz, 2015). Through their work, the locals and their spaces are now considered essential for the study of peace.

Tourism studies are particularly well-positioned to shed light on peace outcomes in micro-contexts, assessing how different actors use tourism to transform territories marked by violence and influence transversal processes of societal healing. The research line that addresses post-conflict tourism and reconciliation is of particular interest. Inquiries in this field has mostly yielded positive results, concluding that tourism can provide common ground for opposing parties to meet and work together in the aftermath of violence, as shown for the cases of Northern Ireland (Anson, 1999; Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2010), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Causevic & Lynch, 2013), Rwanda (Alluri, 2009), and Cyprus (Sonmez & Apostolopoulos, 2000). Yet, except for Northern Ireland, little is known about the background of those antagonists and their participation in violent acts during war-time. Specifically, the study of post-conflict tourism has not placed enough attention on a type of actor that played a key part in the conflict and is thus crucial for peace: the former combatant.

The idea to use tourism as a means in assisting the reintegration of fighters has been more seriously considered by national and international institutions, governments and ex-combatants themselves. The United Nations, for example, has encouraged the inclusion of ex-combatants as ecotourism guides or forest rangers taking into account their extensive knowledge of certain terrains, as has been done in Mozambique, Indonesia and Côte d’Ivoire (United Nations et al., 2013). Van Broeck, Guasca and Vanneste (2019) have pointed at several initiatives undertaken by Colombian ex-rebels, highlighting their increased involvement in tourism projects. In Guatemala and El Salvador, the ex-fighters also undertook their own tourism projects (Herrador-Valencia & Riera, 2016; Janzen, 2014), while in Namibia, the government employed their counterparts for wildlife protection and tourism promotion (McMullin, 2013 a; Metsola, 2006). Despite the multiple cases to examine, this line of inquiry remains underdeveloped.

This chapter sheds light on the role of post-conflict tourism in ex-combatant reintegration, and by doing so, contributes to advance the debate on the tourism-peace nexus. We draw on the Colombian case to explore, through qualitative research, how tourism is currently being used by demobilised guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC - *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) in their reintegration process, after signing the peace agreement with the government in 2016. The chapter also engages with the existing research on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, which provides a framework to understand the challenges that necessarily arise when trying to bring rebels back to society. Moreover, in line with the understanding of peace as being rooted in local realities, we pay special attention to the agency of ex-combatants and the spaces where their reintegration is taking place.

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