



# Grassroots masquerades: Development, paramilitaries, and land laundering in Colombia



Teo Ballvé

Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, 507 McCone Hall #4740, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 May 2013

Received in revised form 31 July 2013

Available online 5 September 2013

### Keywords:

Development  
Post-development  
Paramilitaries  
Colombia  
Violence  
Conservation  
Land  
State formation

## ABSTRACT

This article shows how paramilitaries and allied companies put grassroots development discourses of political participation and subsidiarity, environmental conservation, and ethnic empowerment to work in executing and ratifying their massive land grab in northwest Colombia. More than a case of trying to “whitewash” their malfeasance with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, I argue that the grassroots development apparatus—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—became utterly instrumental to the illegal land seizures. Moreover, when operating alongside practices of land parcelization, iterative transactions, producers’ cooperatives, and third-party intermediaries, grassroots development facilitated what could be called “land laundering.” In the process, grassroots development became a conduit for paramilitary-backed state formation in which projects of liberal governance commonly associated with the imperatives of institution building, good governance, and the rule of law became perversely compatible with the region’s economies of violence. With the World Bank increasingly concerned over the conflation of fragile states, violent conflict, and alarming land grabs, this article raises questions about how the grassroots solutions currently being endorsed by the Bank can in some cases actually facilitate dispossession, illicit economies, and violent political projects. The way paramilitaries harnessed grassroots development also has critical implications for debates about post-development.

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## 1. Introduction: Baby turtles and AK-47s

During a court hearing in 2007, authorities confronted a jailed paramilitary commander about his militia’s possible involvement in an ecotourism project based in Colombia’s northwest region of Urabá near Panama. The project hoped to attract tourists to a famous nesting ground for the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle. The area is also a hotspot for smuggled shipments of AK-47s and other munitions arriving from Central America (UNODC, 2006).

The paramilitary commander, nicknamed “El Alemán,” launched into a lengthy presentation that described how the ecotourism project was set up with a participatory cooperative structure. He said that besides “helping repair the community’s social fabric,” the project was intended as an environmentally friendly alternative to the area’s main economic activities: smuggling drugs, guns, and other contraband. El Alemán explained he even sent members of his militia to convince local campesinos to not eat the turtle eggs and to not bother the hatchlings (“los

animalitos”)—all this from a man facing charges for mass murder and drug trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

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

This article argues that grassroots development became the means through which paramilitaries executed and ratified their massive land seizures in Urabá. More than a case of trying to “whitewash” their plunder with fashionable and politically correct development-speak, grassroots development—its discourses, institutional forms, and practices—became utterly instrumental to the paramilitary land grab in Urabá. In the process, grassroots development made paramilitaries’ economies of violence paradoxically compatible with liberal strategies of state formation associated with

E-mail address: [teo@nacla.org](mailto:teo@nacla.org)

<sup>1</sup> Freddy Rendón Herrera, alias El Alemán, Court Hearing – Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz: Medellín, June 6 and July 10, 2007.

institution building, promoting good governance, and securing the rule of law. Indeed, while paramilitaries engaged in a scorched earth campaign of dispossession against peasant communities, the militias were simultaneously producing what one commander described as “states in formation.”<sup>2</sup> In short, the article argues that grassroots development became a practical, discursive, and institutional articulation—an apparatus—that helped make violent accumulation and liberal state formation mutually compatible.

Moreover, when operating alongside practices of land parcelization, iterative transactions, producers’ cooperatives, and third-party intermediaries, grassroots development became the basis of what could be called “land laundering”—that is, the process by which the illegal origins of a land acquisition are concealed. In Urabá, the laundering of stolen lands operated through symbolic, material, and everyday practices. Grassroots discourses gave paramilitary-supported projects an air of *symbolic* legitimacy. But more than legitimation, the discourses inherently implied and made possible a series of *material* practices and institutional formations that helped further obfuscate the illicit origins of the lands. In other words, land laundering is not the one-off conversion of the illegal into the legal, but rather an on-going, everyday process of blurring any distinction between the two. As the paramilitary onslaught approached its zenith in the late 1990s, Urabá became a major forging house for this legal alchemy.

The first section of the article defines “grassroots development” and traces its emergence within the economic and geopolitical shifts of global development trends. The second section focuses on how grassroots development became articulated in the context of Colombia and particularly in Urabá; the section also contextualizes the emergence of paramilitary groups. The third section, forming the bulk of the article, details two empirical cases—an oil palm plantation and a combatant demobilization project—that show how paramilitaries put the grassroots development apparatus to work in Urabá. By focusing on how paramilitary land grabbing and land laundering worked through a complex assemblage of private companies, NGOs, peasant associations, public officials, and government aid—defined below as an apparatus—the empirical section illustrates how grassroots development made paramilitaries’ illicit forms of accumulation and rule perversely compatible with liberal strategies of state formation. The concluding section considers the relevance of the argument vis-à-vis two landmark reports by the World Bank along with its potential implications for debates about post-development.

## 2. The grassroots development apparatus

Discourses, as the socially produced statements we use to represent knowledge about the world, are powerful in so far as they help construct topics in particular ways; they enable some understandings and practices, while limiting others (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1992, p. 291). Foucault, for instance, described how discourses of criminality in eighteenth-century France emerged in the context of demographic shifts, the hardening of private property relations, and intensifying capitalist accumulation (1975, pp. 80–91, 221, 270–300). The increasing problematization of crime and delinquency generated a mushrooming strategic ensemble of interlinked discourses, disciplines, policies, institutions, practices, and tactics that Foucault came to call an apparatus, a *dispositif* (Rabinow and Rose, 1994, pp. xv–xvi).

Applying Foucault’s insights about the interrelations between discourses, knowledge, and power, scholars have launched powerful critiques of the development apparatus (Ferguson, 1985; Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995). However, Hart (2001, 2009) has argued

those initial trailblazing accounts disregarded the tight and formative relationships at key turning points between “Development,” as a project of Third World interventions, and the on-going historical development of capitalism. In her view, both popular resistance and economic shifts (crises, in some cases) operating at multiple scales form integral parts of development’s dialectic. As detailed below, the emergence of grassroots development must be approached with similar understandings of how the course of development and capitalism are dynamically interrelated.

By “grassroots development,” I mean the apparatus—the strategic ensemble of discourses, practices, policies, institutionalizations, and tactics—that culminated and was cast as a “bottom up” alternative to the perceived failures of “top-down” development policies supported by governments and international agencies.<sup>3</sup> Grassroots development took root within aid institutions as a perceived alternative—or at least a corrective—to the failed one-size-fits-all macroeconomic policies and practices that had met with popular opposition in so much of the world in the 1980s and 1990s. A World Bank report from 1989, for instance, argued that the failures of top-down, state-led modernization, and import-substitution models demanded a fundamental course-correction. “Alternative paths have been proposed,” claimed the report. “They give primacy to agricultural development, and emphasise not only prices, markets and private sector activities, but also capacity building, grassroots participation, decentralization and sound environmental practices. So far such ideas have been accepted and tried only halfheartedly, if at all. The time has come to put them fully into practice” (1989, 37).

Grassroots development gained further impulse from the decline of the Cold War, the toppling of authoritarian regimes along with the related political surge of NGOs and social movements. Structural changes in capitalism related to the deepening debt crisis, the exhaustion of import-substitution, and the rising intensity of free-market reforms also helped open the way. Amid this confluence of factors, development policies and practices became newly problematized in ways that helped further crystallize grassroots development by connecting discourses around political participation and subsidiarity, environmental sustainability, as well as ethnic and women’s empowerment (R. Wade, 1997; Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Hart, 2001; Elyachar, 2005; Goldman, 2005; Asher, 2009).

Taking environmental concern as a proxy measure for gauging these broader shifts, consider that in just ten years (1985–1995) the number of environmental specialists on staff at the World Bank went from five to 162 and the Bank’s loan portfolio for environmental management ballooned from \$15 million to \$990 million during the same period (Wade, 1997, pp. 611–612). Outside the halls of the World Bank, the discourses associated with grassroots development—whether women’s empowerment or political subsidiarity—increasingly helped thread together the work of community groups, NGOs, multilateral lenders, government agencies, experts, and activists (Elyachar, 2005; Appadurai, 2001). In 1990, for instance, Colombia only had 26 environmental NGOs, but by 1994 there were already more than 400 (Winograd, 1993, p. 62).

In policy terms, the ground shifted decisively during the final throes of state-led developmentalism in the 1970s. In tracing the entwined historical trajectories of capitalism and development, Hart (2009, 123) explains how the internal contradictions of import-substitution, US geopolitical anxieties, and rising anti-systemic movements in the 1960s all helped shift the idioms and practices of development toward “Basic Needs.” Itself an

<sup>2</sup> Freddy Rendón Herrera, alias El Alemán, Court Hearing – Versión Libre, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Justicia y Paz: Medellín, June 6, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> I prefer “grassroots development” rather than related terms such as “sustainable” or “alternative” development. “Sustainable” has a primarily environmental connotation, while “alternative development” in Colombia refers to crop-substitution programs aimed at weaning farmers off of cultivating drug-related crops. Moreover, “grassroots” usefully identifies the underlying political rationality of the approach vis-à-vis problematized “top-down” strategies.

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