

Eric Javier Bejarano/Marc-André Grebe/  
David Grewe/Nadja Lobensteiner (eds.)

## **Movilizando etnicidad**

**Políticas de identidad en contienda  
en las Américas: pasado y presente**

## **Mobilizing Ethnicity**

**Competing Identity Politics in the Americas:  
Past and Present**

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Amor de Dios, 1 – E-28014 Madrid  
Tel.: +34 91 429 35 22  
Fax: +34 91 429 53 97  
info@iberoamericanalibros.com  
www.ibero-americana.net

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Elisabethenstr. 3-9 – D-60594 Frankfurt am Main  
Tel.: +49 69 597 46 17  
Fax: +49 69 597 87 43

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MULTI-SCALAR RESISTANCE AND TERRITORIAL DEFENSE  
BY AFRO-DESCENDANTS IN COLOMBIA:  
THE LOWER ATRATO CASE<sup>1</sup>

*Jairo Baquero Melo*

ABSTRACT

*This article presents an analysis of processes of social mobilization and resistance in the lower Atrato region, Colombia. Inhabitants of this region are mainly Afro-descendants who have sought to defend the territorial rights and collective titling that were legally established in the 1990s. However, the arrival of paramilitaries and the introduction of agro-industries, livestock and crops for illicit use have undermined those rights. Social organizations have sought the return of displaced communities. The article analyses resistance processes, emphasizing the role of multi-scalar resistance as a key component of social struggles linking several actors. It is argued that recent mobilization for territorial rights by Afro-descendants must be understood as a new phase in the long-term globalized struggles of the black population worldwide. However, those struggles are currently entangled with anti-capitalist and global environmental mobilization, and are challenging the nation-state territoriality.*

INTRODUCTION

Recently, scholars have remarked on the importance of the multi-scalar social mobilization for Afro-descendant social organizations (e.g. Escobar 2008; Oslender 2008a). Escobar (2008) claims the relevance of *redes* – networks – to articulate struggles of social movements in the Colombian Pacific lowlands, linking culture, nature, and the political project of a social movement – the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* –. Oslender (2008a), for his part, notes

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents preliminary findings and ideas. Further research and empirical data will be included within a chapter of my doctoral thesis at FU Berlin (funded by Desigualdades.net). The author thanks Nikolai Grube, Eric Bejarano, Jhon Antón Sánchez, Amanda Romero, Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, Eduardo Restrepo, Sérgio Costa, the Desigualdades.net network, and many other persons whose names I omitted for security. The author is also grateful to Nadja Lobensteiner and David Grewe for their comments on the first version of this article. The ideas expressed in this article are exclusive responsibility of the author.

the relevance of the “multiscalar<sup>2</sup> politics of resistance conducted by social movements” (2008a: 84) and the globalization of resistance as a survival strategy for black communities. However, those works focus on a general analysis of the Pacific lowlands, or the entire Pacific region. There is a dearth of studies on specific areas, such as lower Atrato in Chocó. Although certain studies do mention this region as an example in their analysis (Oslender 2008a), there is a lack of focus on the specific processes affecting lower Atrato. This paper investigates the case of this region as an example of multi-scalar social mobilization of Afro-descendants to defend territorial rights against dispossession and de-territorialization.

There is a phrase used by social leaders in Latin America that helps explain the existence of multi-scalar resistance in the region: “if they – governments, companies, etc. – globalize the dispossession, we globalize our resistance”.<sup>3</sup> The lower Atrato case exemplifies the situation of several territories in Latin America and other regions affected by land grabbing for economic interests. In this region, there are social struggles against global pressures to introduce monocultures and megaprojects such as the continuation of the Pan-American Highway – now called “*Transversal de las Américas*” –, which has been interrupted at the “Darien Gap” in lower Atrato. Therefore, multi-scalar resistance is a response to dispossession and de-territorialization undertaken by economic objectives such as global insertion and “progress”.

Social struggles are nothing new in Chocó. Since the 1970s and 1980s, social organizations have emerged there to struggle against foreign companies that sought to exploit natural resources such as timber (Restrepo 2011; Perea 2012). In 1991, a new Constitution was enacted which recognized the country as pluri-ethnic and multicultural. This gave rise to legislation that defined territorial rights for Afro-descendants. However, since 1996, vio-

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<sup>2</sup> I also use the concept of scale in this article, though the debate on this concept overflows the goals of this work. Scales may include the local, regional, urban, rural, nation-state, transnational, multinational and global – among others –. However, scales must not be taken as containers within which social struggles take place (Swyngedouw 1997). Also relevant are the processes by which the scales are established or transformed (re-scaling), avoiding seeing only binaries such as the local/global.

<sup>3</sup> “Si ellos globalizan el despojo, nosotros globalizamos la resistencia”. Intervention of a Peruvian social leader, *V Cumbre de los Pueblos*, Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, April, 2012 – translated by the author –. The leader denounced the social impact of the introduction of great-scale mining projects in Peru.

lence and terror has overwhelmed Chocó, enacted by paramilitary groups which on behalf of economic actors and their own interests displaced people in order to introduce agro-industrial projects. Even so, the various population groups returned to their territories, engaging in processes of resistance that were supported by national and international NGOs.

This article seeks to analyze processes of social resistance in lower Atrato, which aim to defend the territorial rights of Afro-descendants and mestizos and protect them from dispossession. Emphasized throughout this study is the importance of the multi-scalar forms of resistance because this has provided support and protection for communities, visibility for their issues, and put pressure on governments to halt aggressions. Here, multi-scalar resistance has included several mechanisms: documentation of cases of dispossession and violation of human rights of Afro-descendants and mestizos; accompanying communities in the terrain by national and international NGOs to produce spatial strategies of resistance such as the Humanitarian Zones; presenting denunciations at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for violation of communities' rights; making complaints to open criminal proceedings in national bodies against companies; and lobbying internationally to pressure the Colombian government to take action in favor of the communities.

The first part of this article presents a theoretical discussion regarding 'black mobilization' as globalized resistance, with implications for contemporary social struggles. It will then explain the legal shift that attributed collective territorial rights, followed by the processes of violence and land grabbing. The article then analyzes the evolution of the main organizational processes in the region. Finally, it will study the multi-scalar resistance in the region, finishing with some preliminary conclusions.

#### BLACK MOBILIZATION: HISTORICAL GLOBAL RESISTANCE AND RECENT CHALLENGES

A number of recent works have studied the increasing globalization of social protest and social mobilization.<sup>4</sup> However, one has to recognize that such

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<sup>4</sup> Edelman (2001) offers an overview of that literature.

globalized mobilization is not a new phenomenon. For example, as Martin (2005) argues, black mobilization against slavery and racism has been a globalized struggle for centuries. Additionally, Randeria (2002: 9) points out that the concept of “civil society” emerged at least since the nineteenth century in entangled processes, with the asymmetrical power interaction between colonies and metropolis.

In the new phase of globalization beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, social protest has been globalized around issues such as environmentalism, feminism, and opposition to free trade (Edelman 2001: 304). At the theoretical level, several concepts have been proffered to assist in the analysis of those trends, including, for example, those of “alliances” (Fox 2000), “advocacy networks of civil society” (Keck and Sikkink 1998), “entangled histories of civil society” (Randeria 2002), articulations in the Global South (Santos 1995; Cairo and Bringel 2010), globalization from below (Falk 1993), and *redes* (Escobar 2008).

Notwithstanding the high relevance of these conceptual proposals, with the exception of Escobar’s work they sometimes downplay the racial demands and struggles inherent in global processes. Martin (2005) has stated that the literature on global social movements propounded the existence of a new epoch of social protest because globalization changed both capitalism and social movement organizations. However, in his words:

absent from almost all of these discussions is activity related to Black or African Worlds. Here there is silence, with little commentary and even less analysis of struggles against racial oppression or inequalities. In the epoch of globalization, it would seem, little links local, antiracist protests in the Americas and Europe, much less movements within and across Africa. Indeed ‘race’ as a category of analysis seems to be fading away. The widespread attack on essential identities and rigid, racial categories, together with the post-colonial celebration of hybridity and cosmopolitanism, would seem to confirm that racial consciousness and protest has little place in the social science or the social movement community (2005: 8).

For Martin, this has been a long-term trend, with the exception of works by Wilson (1978) and Gilroy (2000). Also, Martin’s concern lies with the changing foundation of protest, previously focused on race and territory but more recently on class and culture due to globalization (Martin 2005: 8). Even so, Martin’s critique in this regard lacks recognition of the multiplicity

of issues linking global protests, including feminism and the environment. But he is assertive when he argues for the necessity of making historical analysis on “black movements that crosses national and oceanic boundaries” more visible (Martin 2005: 8). Struggles linking African and Afro-descendant populations have demonstrated how protest has moved to places where social inequality exists amidst colonialism, imperialism and globalization. Thus, an analysis of global social mobilization must remark that globalized struggles have been linked to abolitionist, anti-racist, and anti-discriminatory ends. The mobilization linking African and Afro-descendant populations can be taken as a global social movement, with different phases and stages (Martin 2005). It includes struggles in the Americas – e.g. the Haitian Revolution –, the ideology of *Negritude* (Sengor 1970), and Pan-Africanism (Jorge 1967). Recent Afro-descendant mobilization in the Americas can be regarded as a new phase in these struggles.

In this article I prefer to use the concept of race instead of ethnicity because the former more accurately explains historical processes affecting African and Afro-descendant populations. ‘Race’ carries a historical connotation that explains the emergence of social hierarchies since the sixteenth century through a confluence of processes that involve colonialism, dispossession of indigenous territories, slave trade and capitalist expansion. As Wade (2003: 22) claims, “the concept of race is most likely related to European history of thinking about difference, rather than a concept that describes an objective reality independent of social context”. The existence of race is an outcome of particular historical processes rooted in European colonization:

being identified as ‘black’ in much of the Western world is to invoke, at a distance or by immediacy, a long history of colonial conflicts, slavery, discrimination, resistance, etc. This does not mean that ethnic histories cannot be historical and contentious, but I think it is necessary to emphasize the history of race by calling it by its name (Wade 2003: 29; translated by the author).

For Wade, race and ethnicity<sup>5</sup> can be overlapped in theory and in practice (2003: 29-30). The recognition of race as category also aims to differentiate

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<sup>5</sup> The category of ethnicity also has a particular history, although it is more recent (Wade 2003: 23). The category of ‘ethnic group’ began to be used after the fall of scientific racism and the Second World War in reference to groups of people considered minorities within their

it from the process of “ethnization of blackness” (Restrepo 2004: 271) that began in Colombia in the 1980s, and was deepened by the expansion of multiculturalism. It is defined as the process by which groups of Afro-descendants “are imagined as ethnic community” (2004: 271).

By recognizing the historical base of global social struggles of Africans and Afro-descendants, one may observe the existence of various processes that affect or determine the contemporary globalization of social protest. Firstly, the use of the “multi-scalar resistance” category in this article refers to various processes. It is the ability of actors to challenge the supremacy of nation-state territoriality, which is reinforced by the participation of actors at several scales in defense of alternative territorialities. The participation of transnational social movements and NGOs is therefore crucial to enhancing the relative power of local communities. For their part, following legal reforms amidst multiculturalism in Latin America – ILO Convention 169 –,<sup>6</sup> Afro-descendants have been fighting for the right to self-determination and their consideration as peoples or tribal communities. Over the past few decades, indigenous and Afro-descendants have demanded the “reconceptualization of the nation or of ‘the imaginary of nation’” (Oslender 2008b: 105). Thus, multi-scalar resistance is also linked to the use that communities make of international law and international institutions to make allegations of abuses by states and economic actors.

Second, global class solidarity has been an example of global protest amidst capitalist expansion. However, to understand inequalities in a comprehensive way, analyses engaging with the issue of class must treat it as inextricable from other issues, such as racial hierarchization created by colonialism and its articulation in capitalism. Capitalist structures have clearly relied on racial hierarchizations (Wallerstein 1991). Historical processes of wealth accumulation were characterized by the colonial expansion of mining and plantations, using slave labor. Therefore, globalized resistance linked to anti-capitalist struggles is articulated alongside anti-racist struggles.

Finally, in recent decades social struggles linked to racial and ethnic demands have been articulated alongside environmental issues, which also

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nation-states. Ethnicity has been positioned as linked to the recognition of cultural difference (Wade 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Colombia ratified ILO Convention No. 169 on indigenous rights in 1989. The Constitutional Court established in 2001 that black communities are covered by the same ILO status as the indigenous in Colombia – Sentence C-169 of 2001 of the Constitutional Court –.

have had effects on the demands of Afro-descendant social movements. Recent decades have seen the construction of indigenous eco-identities linked to demands for territorial self-determination (Ulloa 2004). However, there is a hegemonic “Eco-Governmentality” which aims to command social actors to behave in specific way to achieve environmental goals (Ulloa 2004). The increasing territorial rights of indigenous peoples go hand in hand with the expansion of multiculturalism and global environmental law. Indigenous eco-identities can be articulated to, and co-opted by, this hegemonic apparatus. Even so, there are also counter-hegemonic forces and the eco-identities can be transformed into strategies of resistance (Ulloa 2004: 227). In the case of Afro-descendants, the legal shift that gave territorial rights involved environmental preservation as one of its aims. Yet the purported link between Afro-descendants and nature is also affected by conflicts and contradictions between cultural and environmental policies, Eco-Governmentality and hegemonic multiculturalism. The Afro-descendant communities are obliged to engage in productive alliances, green industries or the REDD<sup>7</sup> markets (Cardenas 2012), which can impair their territorial rights. However, the Afro-descendant eco-identities can also be important to articulate resistance at several scales. For example, contemporary land grabs have been associated with dispossession to introduce monocultures that foster deforestation, affecting communities’ ecosystems and violating environmental laws.

#### TERRITORIAL RIGHTS, VIOLENCE AND LAND GRABBING

In the early 1990s, the mobilization of Afro-descendant social organizations forced the introduction of Transitory Article No. 55 within the new Constitution of 1991, which required the state to design Law 70 of 1993 recognizing the territorial rights of black communities. It also recognized their traditional forms of production and the need to protect their culture. Decree 1745 of 1995 regulated the Community Councils as main authorities in these territories. This new legislation stated the connection between ethnic

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation’ (REDD) initiative added sustainable management, conservation of forests and increase of carbon forests stock to its ends (<<http://www.un-redd.org>>). It has been driven mainly by governments and economic sectors from the Global North.

rights and environmental preservation,<sup>8</sup> giving also new legal elements to social organizations to organize their struggles based on the ethnic category of “black communities”.<sup>9</sup>

Violence and terror first visited the region in 1997 with two military operations: the Genesis Operation and the Black September Operation. In February 1997 the Colombian Army carried out the Genesis Operation, an alleged counterinsurgency strike, against the 57<sup>th</sup> Front of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Attacks by land and air were supported by paramilitaries of the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU). The paramilitaries sought to displace communities – nearly 4000 people – and grab their territories to introduce agro-industries. Those who remained in the territory were advised by paramilitaries to leave because the war would continue. However, several local residents returned to the region to recover their lands and assets. Once there, they found their lands had been planted with oil palm monoculture. Amid violence, and seeking to secure the territory, several communities requested collective titling. In the region, since 1999, more than half of the land has been collectively titled.<sup>10</sup> Invasive and imposed actions put at risk the existence of communities. As asserted by Almarío (2004), an ethnocide is taking place in Chocó and the Pacific region due to the impact of the war on indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, represented in massacres, murders, disappearances and forced displacement. The war has jeopardized the communities, their culture and customs, and affected also their ecosystems by destroying biodiversity. Currently, several communities that remain in the territories are confined because the paramilitaries control flows of people and goods.

In the region, there have been two large agribusiness projects: oil palm along the Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó rivers, and the Multifruits plantain

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<sup>8</sup> Among the principles of Law 70 of 1993, one is “the recognition and protection of ethnic and cultural diversity and environmental protection taking into account the relations established by black communities with nature” – translated by the author –.

<sup>9</sup> The ‘comunidades negras’ are defined by Law 70 as “the set of Afro-Colombian families who have their own culture, a shared history, and their own traditions and customs in the town-rural side relationship, revealing and maintaining awareness of their identity, which distinguishes them from other ethnic groups” – translated by the author –.

<sup>10</sup> Over 700,000 hectares were titled, out of a total of 1,256,000 hectares which cover the municipalities of Riosucio, Carmen del Darien, Unguía, Acandí, and Belén de Bajirá. Calculations made by the author, based on Observatorio de Territorios Étnicos; Alfonso, *et al* (2011); and Corte Constitucional (2003).

project in Cacarica. In Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó, paramilitaries and entrepreneurs introduced thousands of hectares of oil palm (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2006) thanks to illegal titling of grabbed lands, subsidies from the government, and the participation of entrepreneurs from the primary goods sector. The oil palm economy encountered obstacles in the region due to the local resistance of communities and ‘butt rot disease’, which killed numerous plants. The lands, however, are still occupied by new settlers who represent employers’ interests. Community leaders asking for their lands to be returned have been murdered, as was the case with Manuel Ruiz and his 15 year-old son, killed in March of 2012. Meanwhile, in 2005, the Multifruits company – a company involved with paramilitaries – signed an illegal agreement with a pretended representative of the Community Council in the Cacarica river to use 20,000 hectares to export plantain and oil palm. Multifruits received funding from USAID<sup>11</sup> to foster productive alliances. The company devastated forests of the Community Council to introduce the monoculture. After the exit of the company by 2008, the community partially recovered a section of the territory, although paramilitaries continue to exert control.

#### SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS AND STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN LOWER ATRATO

In this region, organizational processes have existed since the 1970s. The Community Action Boards<sup>12</sup> were perhaps the first to seek to organize the population along the river basins to work for the needs of communities in the state’s absence and were concerned with health, education and maintenance of communication channels (Restrepo 2011: 50-51). In the 1980s, the Asocomunales, or Association of Community Action Boards, emerged. The interference of traditional political parties within these organizations obliged the population to create a regional organization to recover the initial aims of the Community Action Boards. Thus arose OCABA (Peasant Organization of lower Atrato), supported by local leaders and missionaries of the parish of Riosucio (Restrepo 2011: 51). Religious actors belonging to the Theology of Liberation have played a key role in organization processes in Chocó. The

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<sup>11</sup> United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

<sup>12</sup> Juntas de Acción Comunal.

Claretians and the Verbitas del Verbo Divino arrived in the region in 1977 (Perea 2012) and supported the organization of communities in middle Atrato after the arrival of logging companies. From this, the ACIA (Peasant Integral Organization of the Atrato) came into being. Members of OCABA followed the example of ACIA in establishing their organization. The main goal of OCABA in its first years was opposition to large timber companies, which carried out an irrational exploitation of forests (Restrepo 2011: 52-53).

Another organization was the Peasant Association of Riosucio Municipality (ACAMURI), created by dissidents from OCABA. It also was opposed to logging companies and – as with OCABA – attempted to establish a discourse that would not distinguish peasants by ethnic or racial criteria. However, the new Constitution of 1991, and Law 70 of 1993, created a shift in the identification and discourse of local communities, transforming also previous organizational processes and their language. Struggles over natural resources now were subsumed under the notion of territory, while the peasant identity was incorporated into that of black communities (Restrepo 2011: 54). For Restrepo, the reforms adopted in the context of multiculturalism gave rise to specific outcomes in lower Atrato. This region has been historically configured on a multi-ethnic basis, including Afro-descendants from other parts of Chocó, mestizo<sup>13</sup> peasants – called *chilapos* in the region –, a few *paisas*,<sup>14</sup> and the indigenous communities. There are black and mestizo settlements, although there have also been mixed settlements (Restrepo 2011: 56). Some mestizos also participated in the creation of OCABA (op. cit.). Given that Law 70 established the collective property for black communities – without considering that mestizo populations have lived in some areas –, various opinions and positions have been held in lower Atrato with regard to the presence of mestizos. A minority of Afro-descendants have claimed that they should abandon their lands. A more generalized idea within the territory is that they have the same rights as black communities because they have inhabited the region for decades and engage in productive

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<sup>13</sup> In lower Atrato, the term *mestizo* or *chilapo* is a racial category referring to a combination of factors: color of skin (different from that of the Afro-descendants from Chocó and the white *paisa*); an origin in Córdoba Province; a peasant culture; and also a shared history of forced displacement from Sinú by cattle ranchers (Ruiz 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *Paisas* are white people from within the country, descendants of the Spanish and *criollos* (Restrepo 2011).

practices similar to those of the black communities (ASCOBA 2010). In contrast to the general recognition of peaceful relations, Restrepo (2011) claims that tensions still exist between blacks and mestizos over the territorial rights of mestizos and their role in community councils.

The violence and forced displacement gave rise to new modalities of organization in lower Atrato (Valencia 2011), aiming mainly at the return of displaced people to their lands. After the military attacks, several people stayed in the forest '*encaletados*' – hidden – near their properties, waiting for the attacks to stop so they could return to their lands (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005: 85). Many of the displaced arrived in Turbo and Pavarandó, supported by the Diocese, the Center for Research and Popular Training (CINEP), the Inter-congregational Commission of Justice and Peace,<sup>15</sup> the Ombudsman Office, and the Solidarity Network of the government. In 1997, several communities of Salaquí, Riosucio and Curbaradó organized themselves into Peace Communities – *Comunidades de Paz* –, which declared these territories neutral in the war. However, armed groups have not respected the boundaries of these communities, involving its people in the conflict.

Meanwhile, in Cacarica, communities refused to declare themselves peace communities because they felt they were at war, demanded justice, and were not neutral to the conflict (Valencia 2011). This gave rise to the creation of the Communities of Self-Determination, Life and Dignity – CAVIDA –, which demanded their self-determination as *pueblo*. The Humanitarian Zones and Biodiversity Zones were created by the populations with support from national and international NGOs, mainly the Inter-Ecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJP) and Peace Brigades International (PBI). They began in 2001 and are defined as “a process of empowerment of displaced population for the achievement of their human rights, protection of their lives and the environment”.<sup>16</sup> They seek to protect the population from armed conflict by creating ‘fenced’ estates where a population lives during the nights, prohibiting the entrance of armed actors. Additionally, the Biodiversity Zones aim to guarantee food security.

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<sup>15</sup> It turned later into the Inter-Ecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJP).

<sup>16</sup> Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, “Zonas Humanitarias y Zonas de Biodiversidad: Espacios de dignidad para la población desplazada en Colombia”. Web. 01.12.2012. <<http://justiciaypazcolombia.com/Zonas-Humanitarias-y-Zonas-de>>.

In the Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins, the population returned between 1999 and 2000 with support from the Diocese of Apartadó Municipality, the Social Pastoral Agency of the Catholic Church and CINEP. Between 2002 and 2003, Humanitarian Zones of refuge were created, and in 2003 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights granted precautionary measures to several threatened leaders. The Humanitarian Zones have been constantly threatened and attacked by armed actors. Moreover, some Afro-descendant leaders who were not part of the Communities of Peace, or the Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones, focused more on ethno-territorial demands.<sup>17</sup> There exist also indigenous organizations in the region.<sup>18</sup>

#### MULTI-SCALAR RESISTANCE IN LOWER ATRATO

Social struggles in lower Atrato are a new phase and stage of long-term social struggles of Afro-descendants in Colombia. Despite its pluri-ethnic character and its inherent issues – as explained above –, the achievement of territorial rights was a kind of victory and step forward for Afro-descendants. Obstacles to the undertaking of territorial rights are also embedded in a complex of racial, class, and environmental conflicts at several scales. Multi-scalar resistance is different from humanitarian aid. The impact of violence and the humanitarian crisis since 1996 led to the arrival of humanitarian agencies. Forced displacement to municipalities such as Turbo mobilized many organizations, involving cooperating institutions such as the Spanish Red Cross.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> They created the Association of Community Councils of lower Atrato (ASCOBA) in 2003, whose discourse articulates ethnic, environmental and religious elements. The general goal of ASCOBA is: “to search for all communities and people a better and comprehensive quality of life, taking into account the construction and implementation of ethno-development plans that respond to the economic, social, cultural and political conditions of the population, in harmony with nature, based on Christian values and social justice”. ASCOBA, Web. 12.01.2012. <<http://www.ascoba.org.co/la-organizacion/quienes-somos.html>>– translated by the author –.

<sup>18</sup> Previously, only CAMISBA (Cabildo Mayor Indígena del Bajo Atrato) existed, but after the murder of several indigenous leaders sub-regional organizations were created, such as ASIKEK (Cabildo Mayor Indígena de Unguía), CAMICAD (Cabildo Mayor de Carmen del Darién) and ASOWOUDACH (Asociación Wounaan de Urabá del Darién Chocoano), in order to decentralize their complaints. Interview with indigenous leader, Curbaradó, Chocó, May 2012 – name reserved for security –.

<sup>19</sup> Observation in fieldwork, Quibdó and Urabá, 2011 and 2012.

Even so, multi-scalar resistance involves strategies of social movements and organizations articulated through several scales. In the following, I will explain various trajectories and examples of current resistance in the region involving actors at several non-fixed scales – e.g., local, regional, national, transnational –. Social struggles at a local level in lower Atrato have been intertwined with national and international actors and global struggles. The human rights violations, including symbolic and mass murders,<sup>20</sup> displacement and disappearances, resulted in the participation of national and international actors which have demanded that the Colombian government respect the communities' rights.

First, there has been an articulation of social mobilization that can be located within global struggles against capitalist expansion or against globalization. Specifically, the organizations have recognized that the military and paramilitary offensives have been linked to the introduction of economic projects and infrastructure megaprojects in the region, which continue the on-going insertion into global markets (Bouley and Rueda 2007). Land grabbing for the introduction of oil palm has encouraged multi-scalar resistance. For example, the Inter-Ecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace (CIJP) has denounced land grabs carried out by armed actors and agro-entrepreneurs to introduce oil palm crops. Thus, the CIJP has supported the social resistance of communities in the Humanitarian Zones, which represent spaces within the plantations to resist against that form of capitalist production. CIJP has remarked that the government has promoted cash crops as a strategy for development, encouraging land concentration and the commodification of ethnic territories (Bouley and Rueda 2007).

Second, the communities and NGOs present in the region have denounced the environmental harm produced by the introduction of cash crops. Monocultures and livestock have been introduced at the cost of deforestation and alteration of watercourses, harming several species of trees, mammals, reptiles and birds. The organizations have denounced the agro-industrial companies because they have violated legislation that regulates the use of soils and water supplies (Articles 3, 8, 77 and 78 of Law 2811 of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, the way in which the Cacarica community leader Marino Lopez was murdered is remembered by social organizations: "Marino was decapitated, dismembered and the paramilitaries played football with his head". Interview to AFRODES leader, Bogotá, September 2011.

1974). In an interview, a member of CIJP established that several legal processes accusing companies of violating environmental regulations have started. The organizations have also incorporated the language offered by Law 70 (e.g. Article 19) into their environmental demands. One of the aims of local communities that have returned has been the reforestation of areas affected by monocultures and livestock. The Biodiversity Zones – spaces of resistance supported by national and international NGOs – have aimed to protect and recover ecosystems and guarantee the right to food (Bouley and Rueda 2007: 3). The Ecumenical and Ecological Movements have included organizations in lower Atrato, the CIJP, and several actors from Europe, the U.S. and Latin America. In 2012, the ‘5<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Movement and Ecological Walk for the Lives and Territory’ was carried out with the participation of 110 activists from Europe and Latin America. They walked through the Curbaradó territories to commemorate 15 years of the Genesis Operation. They denounced the presence of cash crops, livestock and coca crops in Afro-descendants’ territories.<sup>21</sup>

Third, there are also long-term pathways associated with the role of the church in Chocó, which support social organizations against extractive companies and also articulate environmental demands (Restrepo 2011). The church has had a relevant role for organizational processes in Chocó, although those roles are complex and variant. Foreign priests have had a presence – e.g. the *Verbitas del Verbo Divino* –, supporting communities in the 1980s against timber companies (Perea 2012). Sometimes the church ‘replaces’ the state, providing services and protecting people.<sup>22</sup> One of the main NGOs currently supporting resistance processes in lower Atrato is the CIJP. This NGO combines in its goals and discourse respect for the International Law of Human Rights with the “evangelical nature of human dignity”.<sup>23</sup> The CIJP has accompanied in the terrain the Humanitarian Zones in Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó, alongside PBI.<sup>24</sup> CIJP also has a radical posi-

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<sup>21</sup> See: Web. 15.09.2012. <<http://justiciapazcolombia.com/5to-Movimiento-Ecumenico-y>>.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a priest, member of the Comisión Vida, Justicia y Paz, Diocese of Quibdó, September 2011 –name reserved for security–.

<sup>23</sup> See: Web. 15.09.2012. <<http://www.justiciapazcolombia.com/-Nuestra-Identidad->>.

<sup>24</sup> Peace Brigades International is a non-denominational independent NGO, which has mainly carried out observation and international accompaniment of organizations and communities in Colombia.

tion, refusing to receive funds from Plan Colombia or USAID. It has ties to the anti-globalization movement and with the Caravan for Peace.

#### ACTORS IN COLOMBIA, THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

An example of a network that has supported the demands of Afro-descendants in the region is the Afrocolombian Solidarity Network,<sup>25</sup> based in Washington, which includes actors from Colombia and United States. In the U.S., it has included AFRODES<sup>26</sup>-USA, WOLA, PCN, TransAfrica Forum, Global Rights, Comité Andino de Servicios and Iglesia Unificada de Cristo, as well as activists and academics. Additionally, the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington has played important roles in these alliances. Several actors have lobbied U.S. congressional Democrats regarding opposition to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), with allegations of human rights violations of Afro-descendants.

Transregional racial solidarity between Afro-North Americans and Afro-Colombians has played a relevant role, although it has not been free of issues. The Congressional Black Caucus certainly does represent an important ally of Afro-Colombian organizations.<sup>27</sup> However, one has to remark that the governments of the United States and Colombia took advantage of those continental ties, for example, to facilitate approval of the FTA. In 2006, members of the Black Caucus expressed solidarity with Afro-Colombians but stressed approval of the FTA on the basis of the creation of new social programs – linked to the Plan Colombia – in regions inhabited by Afro-descendants.<sup>28</sup> In October 2007, through Decree 4181, President Uribe's government created the "Commission for the Advancement of Afro-Colombian, Palenquera and Raizal People", coordinated by the Vice Presidency. In 2008, AFRODES denounced Uribe for attempting "to tout this outrageous Commission as evidence that Afro-Colombian concerns are being addressed

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<sup>25</sup> In October 2012, I conducted interviews with members of this network. Data will be included in my PhD thesis.

<sup>26</sup> Asociación Nacional de Afro-descendientes Desplazados. It has offices both in Colombia and United States.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with leaders of AFRODES and CIMARRON, Bogotá, September 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Semana (2006), "Si los pobres no se benefician con el TLC, no lo votaremos" (interview with U.S. Congressman Gregory Meeks).

as they push to pass the FTA” (Córdoba 2008). Thus, members of the Black Caucus were denounced for being allies of the Bush administration as it tried to approve the FTA. Even so, the FTA was finally approved in 2011.

This example reveals the complexity of the transnationalization of certain modes of cooperation. In the case of the FTA negotiation, we can see various elements: some Congressmen in the United States could have prioritized the national interest; or, there existed asymmetries of power relations which the cooperation failed to overcome; or, some Congressmen found the FTA positive for local communities, without considering its negative impacts. Additionally, national elites in Colombia have responded to demands made by the Black Caucus, mainly as requisites for achieving the ratification of the FTA with the United States. Thus, the Colombian government created institutions and legislation which have served only to meet a requirement; in practice, the violation of Afro-descendants rights remains.

Aside from global networks in the Americas, there are ties involving actors in Europe. There are NGOs that support communities in the Humanitarian Zones, such as PBI – with representatives from various countries –. In Germany, there is a network that integrates several NGOs.<sup>29</sup> In September 2012, they launched the campaign “Give us back our land, Mr. President!” which aims to denounce the current threats against Afro-descendant communities – and the murder of the community leader Manuel Ruiz – in Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó, a situation that has worsened amidst local elections.<sup>30</sup> Another European organization is the Colectivo Sur Cacarica in Valencia, Spain. It has conducted various activities to disseminate news of the situation in the Cacarica river basin, such as bringing young men from the region to tell their story in Spain through artistic performances.<sup>31</sup> There have been also ‘symbolic trials’ against the companies Urapalma S.A., Multifruits S.A. and Maderas Pizano S.A. in the Permanent Peoples Tribunal.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The network includes: Menschenrechte für Kolumbien (Kolko), Brot für die Welt, Forschungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Chile-Lateinamerika, Terre des Hommes-Deutschland, Robin Wood, Pax Christi, Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz, Aktion Friedensdorf, Nürnberger Menschenrechtszentrum (NMRZ), Diözesanrat der Katholiken im Bistum Aachen, Missionszentrale der Franziskaner, Aktion pro Colombia and FIAN Deutschland.

<sup>30</sup> See: Web. 15.10.2012. <<http://kolko.net/online-campaign/>>.

<sup>31</sup> See: Web. 15.10.2012. <<http://colectivosurcacarica.wordpress.com/>>.

<sup>32</sup> See: Web. 15.10.2012. <<http://www.semillas.org.co/sitio.shtml?apc=e1b-20155114-20155114&x=20155121>>.

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

After the recognition of territorial rights of Afro-descendants in the 1990s, paramilitaries introduced violence and terror to lower Atrato, seeking to grab lands to introduce monocultures and exert territorial control. However, several people have resisted dispossession by returning to their lands, with the support of national and international NGOs. The situation in lower Atrato encompasses issues of racial oppression, environmental unevenness, expansion of agrarian capitalism, violation of ethnic and territorial rights, and infringement of international humanitarian law. Thus, the encounter of different, entangled issues has produced support for local resistance, producing the support to the mobilization of communities at several scales. The territorial defense has been articulated around the goals of anti-racism, anti-discrimination, environmentalism, humanitarianism, and anti-globalization. Actions and discourses of national and international actors are related to one or several of those elements. This multi-scalar resistance has also challenged the territoriality of the nation-state by defending the territoriality of Afro-descendants and mestizos and establishing and mobilizing global networks.

In lower Atrato, organizational processes have been strongly supported by actors linked to the church. They have had a historical, complex and variant role in Chocó. Recently, as the case of the Inter-Ecclesial Commission of Justice and Peace shows, activities and support involve ecclesiastical and non-confessional actors, linking networks of global NGOs, activists and academics.

In short, multi-scalar resistance in Curbaradó, Jiguamiandó and Cacarica has proved to be a useful instrument for Afro-descendants. It has made visible dispossession and human rights violations; allowed for physical accompaniment of communities in the Humanitarian Zones and Biodiversity Zones; opened cases at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for violation of communities' rights by illegal parties and state agents; made complaints against companies to open criminal proceedings in national bodies; and lobbied internationally to pressure the Colombian government to adopt actions to halt aggressions. An outcome of this resistance is the enactment of various Autos by the Constitutional Court, which oblige the state to restitute the territories. Still, notwithstanding the advances achieved by linking different scales of resistance, great extensions of territories remain under the control of armed actors, and social leaders have been murdered. For these reasons, the communities are currently rejecting 'formal' restitution of the territory.

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