Understanding sustainability: Bottom-up perspectives on cooperatives established by demobilized FARC members

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Abstract

In November 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) and the Colombian government signed a peace agreement of historical significance. The agreement was the result of peace negotiations that had been initiated in 2012, and followed on a conflict that had lasted for 52 years. Apart from ending the violent confrontations between the FARC-EP and the Military Forces of Colombia, the agreement aimed to tackle the factors that had caused the conflict in the first place (Acuerdo Final, 2017). The biggest cause of the conflict is perceived to be the unequal distribution of land (Fajardo, 2015; McKay, 2018). Following this, the first part of the peace agreement concerns the Integral Rural Reform (Reforma Rural Integral, RRI), which aims to contribute to a stable and enduring peace by creating conditions for welfare on the countryside (Acuerdo Final, 2017). With this aim, the Comprehensive Rural Reform (RRI) stimulated the formation of ex-combatant cooperatives. Literature is critical about the functioning of the cooperatives. Nevertheless, little is known about their sustainability. To contribute to understanding the sustainability of the cooperatives established by demobilized FARC members using a bottom-up perspective, this study investigates which factors are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives. This thesis was based on a multi-sited analysis carried out during a three-month period of qualitative field work at different sites in Colombia. The data generation consisted of semi structured interviews, informal conversations and field notes. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded.

The results of this study consist of the organisational, economic, and political factors that are deemed important for a sustainable cooperative. With regard to the organisational dimension of sustainability, ex-combatant cooperatives face considerable challenges with the autocreation of a collective reincorporation in a context of an individualised vision or reincorporation favoured by the government, and with shifting their organisational structure from a vertical to a more horizontal one, fitting to the new, post-agreement context. Creating a new shared vision is paramount here, and can be enhanced by transparency from the board and member participation within the cooperative. As for the economic dimension, ex-combatant cooperatives create sustainability by diversifying their economic activities. Important challenges they face to reach sustainability is the lack of commercial knowledge and skills, and the stigma attached to them. With regard to the political dimension, political willingness, translating in policy that facilitates the collective reincorporation of ex-combatants is important to sustainability, but currently lacking. Furthermore, land ownership is deemed important for a sustainable cooperative, but also currently lacking. *Vida digna* and food sovereignty were identified as alternative terms to sustainability. Both terms underly several of the factors related to organisational, economic, and political sustainability. The main conclusions of this thesis are that sustainability, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives, is multidimensional, consisting of organisational, economic, and political factors. The concept of *vida digna*, although the term is not mentioned that much, is underlying many of the factors that are mentioned to contribute to sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. To enable ex-combatant cooperatives to be sustainable, and to contribute to a successful economic reintegration and a sustainable peace, ex-combatants need their reincorporation to be a worthy one. This entails safety, an income, and government compliance of the peace treaty. Considering the continuous challenges faced to achieve these things, it remains important to put attention to the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives.

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1. Research design

1.1 Introduction

In November 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) and the Colombian government signed a peace agreement of historical significance. The agreement was the result of peace negotiations that had been initiated in 2012, and followed on a conflict that had lasted for 52 years. Apart from ending the violent confrontations between the FARC-EP and the Military Forces of Colombia, the agreement aimed to tackle the factors that had caused the conflict in the first place (Acuerdo Final, 2017). The biggest cause of the conflict is perceived to be the unequal distribution of land (Fajardo, 2015; McKay, 2018). Following this, the first part of the peace agreement concerns the Integral Rural Reform (Reforma Rural Integral, RRI), which aims to contribute to a stable and enduring peace by creating conditions for welfare on the countryside (Acuerdo Final, 2017).

One of the ways to do this, that is mentioned in the RRI, is to create and strengthen cooperatives[1] in order to stimulate the solidary and cooperative economy (Acuerdo Final, 2017). With this point, the Colombian peace treaty deviates from the conventional Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) processes, in which reintegration of ex-combatants means their reinsertion in the type of society they dispute (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021). The FARC argues that this model would cause ex-combatants to become dependent on the state, while reincorporation via cooperatives is economically sustainable (Segura & Stein, 2019). Cooperatives thus form an important instrument to create a stable countryside, but at the same time, given their effort to create autonomy and perform beyond the state, form a way to tackle the national government's incompliance with important elements of the peace accords (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021).

At the moment of conducting the field work for this research project, it has been over five years since the agreement was signed. In these five years, a lot of things have happened. After 2020, around 130 cooperatives are active (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021). The state of these cooperatives however, is unclear.

1.2 Problem statement and aim

The peace agreement states that the cooperatives formed by ex-combatants can play an important role in increasing welfare on the countryside and thus contribute to an enduring peace (Acuerdo Final, 2017). Also, they serve to realize the substitution of illegal crops (Acuerdo Final, 2017). Further, as part of the peace treaty, the cooperatives form part of the project of reincorporation of ex-combatants in civilian life. Another important factor is the political dream that came along with being a member of the FARC-EP, and that is now reshaped to fit the new circumstances (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021). The peace agreement frequently mentions the concept of sustainability. For example, the agreement aims for a sustainable peace. Also, it is stated that the correct implementation of the Comprehensive Rural Reform (RRI) should lead to a structural transformation of the countryside that creates socio-environmental sustainability. Moreover, sustainable development is mentioned as one of the aims of the RRI.

About the current sustainability of ex-FARC combatant cooperatives however, literature is critical. This raises the question how the concept of sustainability of cooperatives established by demobilized FARC members is understood by ex-combatants themselves. This research project studies cooperatives established by demobilized FARC members. More specifically, this research aims to shed light on the ways the concept of sustainability is understood in the context of these cooperatives.

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[1] This thesis also includes foundations and associations, and other organisational forms. Since the term 'cooperative' is dominantly used for these comparable organisational forms, this thesis will also use 'cooperative'.

1.3 Research question and structure of the thesis

To contribute to understanding the sustainability of the cooperatives established by demobilized FARC-EP members using a bottom-up perspective, this study investigates which factors are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives. For a specification of the research participants, see chapter '2.1 Respondents'. The research is conducted in an exploratory way, which is a key characteristic of the Grounded Theory approach that will be used for this research (McCallin, 2003). The outcome of this study is a set of factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. After elaborating on the conceptual framework of this research, briefly discussing the concepts of sustainability and ex-combatant, the following chapter provides details on the methodology of this research. Subsequently, I advance with the results of the field work. The results are divided into four parts, starting with three identified categories of sustainability, being organisational, economic, and political sustainability. Thereafter, a fourth part will describe alternative terms that are used to refer to sustainability. After the results, the thesis is summarised and the research question answered. Also, the findings will be discussed in the light of what was already known.

1.4 Research context

When looking at ex-combatant cooperatives in Colombia, it is crucial to take into account the context. In their article about peacebuilding and the RRI in Colombia, Graser and colleagues (2020) point to the rising deforestation in areas where FARC-EP left, and the fact that "the agreement's implementation by the national state lacks sufficient progress" (p. 12). Moreover, although in 2018 the part of the country available for agricultural use of any form was expanded considerably, Graser and colleagues (2020) mention that "there are no specific regulations in the peace agreement for sustainable land use, like traditional or agroecological farming" (p. 11). This in turn, clears the way for a more intensive land use, and stimulates further deforestation.

The factors above decrease the chances of successful implementation of the RRI (Graser et al., 2020). Murillo-Sandoval and colleagues (2020) indicated that in the period after the peace agreement had been signed (2017-2018), there was a 50% increase in the area of forest disturbance in the Andes-Amazon Transition Belt, when compared to the period in which the negotiations for the peace agreement took place (2012-2016). Given their locations and practices, the ex-combatant cooperatives can play a role in dealing with environmental problems related to the type of land use. This, too, adds to the need of a better understanding of how the actors related to cooperatives themselves perceive the sustainability of the cooperative. Pointing to the importance of taking into account local perspectives, Graser and colleagues (2020) argue that effective implementation of the peace agreement "is a complex process that demands augmented inclusion of the interests of local actors" (p. 12).

1.5 Conceptual framework

In this study, no extensive and tight theoretical framework is used. The study follows a Grounded Theory approach, using inductive analysis as a principal technique (Bowen, 2006). That is, not a specific theory, but the data is the starting point of this research. This comes fort of the idea that theories are useful with regard to understanding research situations, but also "provide prescriptions of what to see" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7) and thereby affect our focus. I do argue on the other hand – in line with Goddard's analysis of Weber (1973) – that there is no such a thing as value-free science. Gilgun stated that at the start of a research, every researcher uses certain concepts, whether they know it or not, and whether they acknowledge it or not (as cited in Bowen, 2006). Blumer (1954) calls these *sensitizing concepts*, and adds that they can provide "an analytic frame, serving as a point of reference and a guide in the analysis of data with theory-producing potential" (p. 15). Sensitizing concepts lead the researcher to focus on some specific important aspects of a research situation (Gilgun, as cited in

Bowen, 2006). In other words, sensitizing concepts can be referred to as background ideas informing the research problem (Charmaz, 2003). Considering the aim of this research to explore which factors are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives, this chapter will elaborate on the concepts of *sustainability* and *ex-combatant*. The elaboration of these concepts will complement the theoretical foundation of this thesis. Also, I will touch upon how I worked with each of them during the research.

1.5.1   Sustainability

Sustainability is a broad concept that is used multidisciplinary. Moore and colleagues (2017), who aimed to develop a comprehensive definition of sustainability, mention that in scientific literature consistent definitions of the concept are lacking. They observe that in literature, multiple synonyms are used to refer to the concept and that there is no standard definition (Moore et al., 2017).

Also, Ruggerio mentions that *"[i]n the scientific literature, the term sustainability is most frequently used in relation with ecological sustainability"* (2021, p.8). He adds that social, economic, or project sustainability are mentioned, but that there is no general agreement about their meaning (Ruggerio, 2021). The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defines sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987, p. 43). In this research, the concept of sustainability lies at the core of what is to be explored. That is, the field work was aimed at identifying factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives. Following on this aim, during the research, the researcher tried to have a comprehensive view with regard to the concept sustainability. That is, before the field work, it was recognized that - although most often connected to ecological sustainability - the concept of sustainability is very broadly interpretable, and does not exclusively apply to one specific discipline or field. During the field work, this knowledge was used to prevent unintended steering towards an ecological interpretation of the concept of sustainability by the research participants. When asking participants about their perspectives on sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives, the researcher did not mix this with ecological terminology. The same goes for terminology that comes with other fields sustainability is being connected with in literature, such as economics, politics, and society.

1.5.2   Ex-combatant

Ex-combatants are the main actor group studied by this research. That is, most research participants had been connected to the FARC-EP before the peace treaty was signed in 2016. Given this role of the actor group of ex-combatants in this research, and the multi-interpretability of the concept, some theoretical elaboration of it is desired. People who have been member of the FARC-EP are referred to with different terms. In scientific literature, the terms 'signers of the (peace) agreement' (firmantes del acuerdo (de paz)), 'signers of peace' (firmantes de paz), 'former combatants', 'ex-guerrilleros', 'ex-insurgents', and 'ex-combatants' are used (see Vásquez Guzmán, 2022; Buitrago Patiño, 2022; Özerdem, 2012; Gutiérrez Henao, 2020; Cortés & Verschoor, 2021; and Dixon, 2022, respectively). Elaborating on each of these terms and their possible interpretational differences goes beyond the scope of this research.

During the field work of this thesis, the concept of ex-combatant was used in a broad way in the sense that it also included people who not specifically engaged in 'combat'. For example, apart from members who were actively engaged in combat in the forest, the FARC-EP also counted with what Herrera and Porch (2009) call 'milicianos', living in the cities and operating from there. During the field work, these people commonly referred to themselves as ex-combatants and were referred to with this term by other research participants (both ex-combatants and non-ex-combatants). For this reason, in this thesis, people who formerly served in the FARC-EP and took part in the armed conflict are referred to as ex-combatants. In cases of quotation in which another term was used by the interviewees, this alternative term was translated literally, maintaining the original meaning.

2. Methodology

As was introduced in the previous chapter, for this qualitative study, I made use of a Grounded Theory approach (GT). GT refers to "the discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 1), which is also called inductive analysis (Bowen, 2006). It was developed in the late 1960s as a response to the then dominant conviction that conducting research should be based on quantitative methodology (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis; 2019). In "The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research", Glaser and Strauss argue that at that time in sociology there had been an overemphasis on testing theory, coming at the expense of the desire to create theory. They challenge the deductivist way of conducting research, (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). According to them, the focus on mastering and testing "great-man" theory on the one hand limits the theory as a whole, and on the other hand hampers the development of new theories that can potentially serve to cover unexplored the areas of social life (Glaser & Stauss, 2017). Also, they argue that the distinction that is often drawn between qualitative and quantitative data is not relevant when concerned with creating theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017)

Following the Grounded Theory Approach, the ordering of different research practices in this particular chapter does not necessarily reflect a chronological order. Although some practices necessarily follow after others, the grounded theory methodology includes a certain non-linearity of the research process, in which the researcher can (and should) remain flexible with regard to their conclusions from the data and in which data generation and analysis alternate with each other (Charmaz, 2003). In other words, as Bowen describes it, there is "a continual interplay between data collection and analysis" (2020, p.2).

In this thesis, when talking about the process of using different methods to acquire data to be able to answer the research question, I use the term 'data generation', instead of the 'data collection' or 'data gathering'. Data collection, as well as data gathering, implies the data is there lying in the field, ready for the researcher to pick it up and use it for their research. Recognizing that the way in which a researcher interprets the observations in the field is affected by the relationship between the researcher and the observed (Given, 2012), speaking of collection would overlook these factors. In the continuation of this chapter, I will elaborate on the type of respondents that participated in this study, the methods that were used to generate data, ethical considerations, and strengths and limitations of the research.

2.1 Respondents

The study analysed the perspectives of both members and non-members of ex-combatant cooperatives. The members of the cooperatives in this study are mostly ex-combatants, some of them were referred to as 'victims', as they had not been member of the FARC-EP during the war, but had been affected by the violence. As for the non-member research participants, this group was comprised of both members of non-ex-combatant cooperative groups, and people not connected to any cooperative.

To approach the initial research participants, purposive sampling was applied. Access to the research area was arranged with support from the gatekeeper in the field[2]. As soon as the first data was generated, the data was subject to constant comparative analysis. This stands for a process in which new and old data is constantly compared with each other to form codes out of quotations and categories out of codes. This comparative process allowed for theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling forms an important piece of grounded theory and serves to reach theoretical saturation (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis; 2019). In the context of this research, the generated data allowed a nuancing focus, which allows research processes to be recursive and iterative rather than linear (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis; 2019). In line with the inductive character of this research, the main function of theoretical sampling is the generation of data, rather than representativeness or theory testing (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Another method that was used to get research participants is snowball sampling. Research

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[2] The primary gatekeeper is a fellow researcher, doing his PhD research at the WUR

participants with whom contact already had been established, were asked whether they knew other people relevant for the study. When applicable, the researcher approached these people for an interview, either directly or guided by the initial research participant. This guidance was meant to assure the secondary research participant of the trustworthiness of the researcher, that was communicated by the initial research participant in the form of text or voice messages, or a physical conversation.

2.2 Methods

This thesis is based on a literature study and a multi-sited analysis carried out during a three-month period of qualitative field work at different sites in Colombia. The decision to do a multi-sited analysis was planned, based on the idea of studying multiple ex-combatant cooperatives. While in the field, the multi sited research design appeared useful, since in one of the visited cooperatives theoretical saturation was reached relatively quickly. From March 11 until June 17, 2022, the researcher carried out the field work, residing in Santa Marta (March 11 – April 28), Bogotá (April 29 – May 9, May 20 – June 1), a small village in the province of Cundinamarca (May 9 – May 20), and Medellín (June 1 - June 17). In all these places, experiences and stories of ex-combatant cooperatives were collected to explore which factors are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of these cooperatives.

The main source of data generation consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with respondents as elaborated in the previous chapter. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for this. During the field work period, a total of 45 semi-structured interviews was conducted. Table 1 shows a distribution of the conducted interviews according to the place in which they were conducted, and whether the interviewees were ex-combatants or not. Apart from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher had informal conversations with ex-combatants, victims, and people not fitting in these categories.

City	Santa Marta	Bogotá	Village	Medellín
Ex-combatants	5	7	8	6
non-ex-combatants	1	8	8	2
Total	6	15	16	8

Table 1: Distribution of conducted interviews according to place and interviewee history.

Participatory observation was conducted occasionally throughout the entire field work period. The researcher participated in assemblies, classes about cooporativism, recycling city waste as part of an individual job of one of the research participants, and tree planting as part of a productive project. During these occasions, informal conversations formed an important source of data generation. Also, during the moments of participatory observation, and during the entire field work period, field notes were made. These notes were made in a paper notebook, but also in the form of voice notes in the researcher's phone. Field notes have the function to offer contextual information (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Also, depending on the number of reflective thoughts that a particular observation has been subjected to after writing it down, field notes can serve as a way to document the researcher's initial impressions of the observation (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). In general, when documenting the data, I focussed on two different aspects of the events. That is: What happens? And which meaning do I and other people give to it?

All 45 formal interviews were audio-recorded. Due to time restrictions, 31 of those were selected (based on their relevance for answering the research question) to be transcribed and coded. The remaining interviews were re-listened and the parts of the interviews most relevant for answering the research question were noted. During the analysis of the interviews, memos were made. While still in the field, in combination with constant comparative analysis, memoing served as a reflective element the early phasis of data analysis. Bowen (2006) refers to memoing as: "a continual interplay between data collection and analysis" (p. 13). Based on the observations made during this initial analysis, new

actors or variables were included in the data generation when deemed necessary (theoretical sampling). Later in the process of data analysis, generated data was coded. In the course of this process, the codes were categorized in a process of abstraction from the data.

2.3 Ethical considerations

With regard to ethics, several factors are to be reflected on. Starting with arguably the most important one, safety, it should be mentioned that since many of the respondents have belonged to an armed group for a long time, and many of them still have enemies, revealing contact information or generated data can possibly subject both the researcher and the research participants to risk. During the research, I accounted for this by making use of the data storage provider MEGA, using one-factor authentication to protect the generated data. Also, all research participants were anonymized by changing their names and by not mentioning the names of the cooperatives or organisations they participating in. Secondly, I agree with Ida Dupont (2008), about the fact that "(u)p until now, the focus of the discussion on our responsibility to research participants has largely been on the avoidance of unethical treatment of research participants" (p. 201) and support the idea that we should go beyond this. In this regard, here I reflect on the idea of reciprocity. Reciprocity is defined by Maiter, Simich, Jacobson & Wise (2008) as "an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties" (p. 305). In this project, I aimed to establish reciprocity in various ways. Firstly, when studying the collective reincorporation process in Santa Marta, I was requested to create an infographic to increase ex-combatants' understanding of collective processes. I created an infographic in which Elinor Ostrom's theory to manage the commons is presented in an accessible way, since this theory addresses common pitfalls of collective processes. The infographic was delivered to a research participant involved in guiding collective reincorporation process.

Also, by asking questions about the cooperatives, I hope to have stimulated the reflexivity of cooperative members themselves regarding their enterprise. In this way, my presence as a researcher in the field might have had an indirect positive effect on the consciousness about the benefits and needs of a successful cooperative.

2.4 Strengths and limitations

Regarding the strengths and limitations of me as a researcher, there are a few factors to comment on. In this section, I will elaborate on strengths and limitations connected to my positionality as a researcher and the method of snowball sampling.

2.4.1 Positionality

In this section, I shortly reflect on some of my situated knowledge as a researcher by touching upon the researcher's role as co-creator of data with the concept of positionality. I follow Merriam and colleagues (2001) in defining positionality as "where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (p. 411) and by recognizing its inherent capability to influence data generation. To limit the risk of overlooking "multi-dimensional power relationship shaped by the prevailing cultural values, gender, educational background and seniority" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 408), I shortly touch upon these aspects here. Characteristics of me as a researcher and as a person include, but not are not limited to: being born and raised in a rural part of the Netherlands, male, academically trained in the small city of Wageningen, and relatively young with an age of 23 during the field work.

With regard to the ways in which my positionality affected my research, my origin from a rural part of the Netherlands implies various things. First of all, I experienced that the rapport was influenced positively by my link with the Netherlands, since research participants expressed a positive attitude towards the country. When talking about the Netherlands, the support given to reincorporates by the Dutch embassy and good experiences with Dutch representatives of NGOs were mentioned.

Something is to say about the differences between the Dutch and Colombian culture. When comparing the scores of Colombia and the Netherlands (the researcher's country of origin) on the six

cultural dimensions from established by Hofstede, both countries had quite different scores on all 6 dimensions (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Although these differences could have caused communicational difficulties, or even miscommunications, I tried to be conscious of them. In practice, during the research, I experienced no troublesome cultural differences.

The fact that I have affinity with rurality increased the rapport during the field work in the village, due to the rural character of it. Rapport was increased during the activities that were performed, such as carrying wooden posts and planting trees. My origin from a rural region did not affect the research negatively, since it did not limit me from relating with the urban situation. A reason for this, I argue, is my prior experience with living in a large urban area in Colombia for 6 months. This brings me to the next point. My command of the Spanish language which allowed for the field work to be conducted without the intervention of a translator, which also increased the rapport with the research participants. The slight paisa-accent, from the Antioquia region, contributed to this. Added to this, I argue that my age, being a student, and my relative open character, increased respondents' willingness to talk about the research subject and their perspectives towards it. A slight negative influence on the research of these characteristics is that I believe that in some occasions it led to a story being portrayed more positively than the real situation. More concretely, initially, participants were keener to tell positive stories than negative ones, or current challenges. As the researcher became more known to the participants, however, more openness regarding negative stories was observed.

2.4.2   Snowball sampling

For the data generation of this research, one of the methods that were used to contact research subjects is snowball sampling. The snowball method is a very useful method to quickly increase the number of respondents. A pitfall of this approach however, is that the researcher to a certain extent loses the control over choosing the respondents, who in fact 'drive the sampling process onwards' (Noy, 2008, p. 332). I believe that the possible negative effects of snowball sampling were mitigated by the fact that this research did not rely on snowball sampling as only sampling method to interview people, and by using other sampling methods and additional means of data generation. That is, in this research snowball sampling was complemented with purposive, haphazard, and theoretical sampling. Moreover, field notes and participatory observations were made.

3. Perspectives on sustainability

To accurately answer the research question, that is, to identify factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives, it is essential to recognize that the concept of sustainability is perceived in different ways. In chapter '1.5 Conceptual framework' I have reflected shortly on one of the ways of perceiving sustainability. As we continue, we will refer to this way of perceiving sustainability as 'environmental sustainability'. Furthermore, the concept of sustainability will be categorized to explore the different identified sustainability-relevant factors, as mentioned by the research participants. The categorization is made based of several identified perspectives from which sustainability is perceived by the research participants. Each category is named after its relevant perspective. Three of them are identified as occurring most frequently, those will be outlined more elaborately in separate chapters. These chapters are organisational sustainability, economic sustainability, and political sustainability.

Before diving into the identified categories, it is important to state that dividing ex-combatant perspectives on sustainable cooperatives in categories mainly serves a pragmatic purpose. That is, categorization provides structure, and hence supports an accurate answering of the research question. Categorization of perspectives on sustainability does not aim to imply that the respondents can be divided according to which category they adhere to as a person. That is, the answers of one single respondent can be found in the different categories that were identified. Fitting respondents to a specific category would narrow down their perspective to one single type of sustainability, while often respondents had a broad perspective. This can be illustrated by an interview with a human rights defender, who was asked which criteria should be accounted for before a cooperative could be sustainable. She answered *"a human capital, a financial capital, a pedagogic capital, a political capital"*. Continuing, she elaborated on different factors, which were then fitted by the researcher to other, resembling answers.

Regarding the prevalence of the identified categories in the respondents' answers, a difference does exist. This will be touched upon later in the report. The factors discussed cannot and should not be entirely separated from each other. Some overlap between the categories is possible. When this is the case, I will refer to the relevant section in the other chapter.

The first chapter explores the organisational dimension of the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. In this chapter, I first dive into the contrast between the traditional DDR based vision on reincorporation favoured by the Colombian government and the collective form of reincorporation that is desired by ex-combatants. Subsequently, I describe the challenges arising from the FARC's transition from a vertical to a horizontal organisation and the practice of delegating as a way to tackle these challenges. In the third part of this chapter, I elaborate on the challenge of the lack of a shared vision experienced within ex-combatant cooperatives, and explore what is needed to create a new one.

The second chapter deals with economic sustainability. It starts with a section about diversification of economic activities, followed by ab elaboration of the role of an individual job, next to being a member of a cooperative. Thereafter the importance of knowledge and skills for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperative is tackled. At the end of this chapter, the way ex-combatants and their cooperatives are being viewed by non-ex-combatants, and the effect of this on their economic sustainability are described.

In the third chapter the ways in which this context the political context the perceived sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives is explored. First, I will discuss the often-mentioned concept of political

willingness and the observed lack of it. Thereafter, the rupture with the former FARC-EP leadership that formed the political party that is now called Comunes, is described.

The fourth chapter deals with alternative notions of sustainability not fitting in these categorizations, raised by ex-combatants. The concepts of *vida digna* and food sovereignty are described.

3.1 Organisational sustainability

In this chapter, I will present findings on identified factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative that fit within an organisational perspective on sustainability. When looking at their sustainability, the organisation of ex-combatant cooperatives is identified as very important.

> *"For me, a sustainable association starts from the organisational part, because we would not be sustainable if we would not have a good internal organisation."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant)

> *"Sustainability, that is why I tell you, sustainability is based on, depends on the administrations the organisations have... If it is a good administration, well, it is going to achieve it"* (interview Elías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

I will start this chapter by diving into the contrast between the traditional DDR based vision on reincorporation favoured by the Colombian government and the collective form of reincorporation that is desired by ex-combatants. Subsequently, I will describe the challenges arising from the FARC's transition from a vertical to a horizontal organisation and the practice of delegating as a way to tackle these challenges. In the third part of this chapter, I elaborate on the challenge of the lack of a shared vision experienced within ex-combatant cooperatives, and explore what is needed to create a new one.

3.1.1 The start: Collective autocreation

This first section deals with the contrast between the traditional DDR based vision on reincorporation favoured by the Colombian government and the collective form of reincorporation that is desired by ex-combatants. In the second part of this section, I elaborate on the ways mutual connections can serve ex-combatants' autocreation and facilitate their collective reincorporation. Lastly, the importance of a shared vision and ways to create it are tackled.

Autocreation vs the traditional DDR based vision

Many ex-combatants criticize the government for its individual approach to reincorporation. This approach clashes with their desire for an autonomous and collective reintegration (see Cortés & Verschoor, 2021). While the international community favours and facilitates collective integration by making available grants to groups of ex-combatants, the government appears to stick with a vision based from the traditional DDR model of reincorporation. In this vision, reincorporation falls in line with the development discourse and follows a neoliberal logic, considering individual projects and the market as the key to economic reintegration (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021). The consequence of the clash between those two visions is that the collective re-integration appears to pull the shortest end, as one interview mentions:

> *"The international community does actually want collective re-integration, but in fact it has already failed due to that [DDR] approach of the government."* (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

During the research, the researcher found several examples of the influence of the government's individual vision towards reincorporation. In one particular occasion a group of ex-combatants had already been formed and was starting to work as a collective. At a certain moment, the ARN (Agencia para la Reincorporación y Normalización, Reincorporation and Normalization Agency) however, acting

as the government's caretaker with regard to reincorporation of ex-combatants, caused this collective process to stop.

> "[A]t the beginning we were like a collective, that is, we went with the SENA[3] to work as a collective. But suddenly they [the ARN] changed the facilitator and she brought another program, that is, individual. So she started to move us. In other words, perhaps it does not convene the government when one is organised..." (Interview Héctor, ex-combatant)

The interviewee assumes changing the facilitator has been a conscious action and expresses that he felt like their rules of the game were changed. This makes sense when realising that the shift towards individual projects not only means losing past efforts, but also being put in a frame in which collective action is made impossible. Besides, although having one's individual project does offer ex-combatants the perspective of being able to make a living on their own, failure is always lurking.

> "So that was the ARN's mission. That one, they put in people's head: "No, the individual business." So the business... almost all of them have failed. [...] It is going to make you more like a slave. You don't have time to meet, nothing like that, because look, during the day the people don't go to meetings because they are working on their project" (Guido, ex-combatant)

Gradually, according to the interviewee, this makes people stick to the individual way of reincorporation. Autocreation and its merit becomes something that is not thought of anymore, let alone considered possible. This makes sense when zooming out, and looking at the situation of non-ex-combatant farmers. Once, the researcher had a talk with a man who had experience in consulting groups of farmers the collective commercialisation of their products. When asking about the current needs with regard to groups that are trying to start cooperatives, the interviewee responded that awareness regarding the possibility, and benefits for farmers of uniting into cooperatives was most important.

> "Raise awareness among the farmers, raise awareness among them. Make them, make them believe that they autocreate themselves, that they are capable [...] Cooperatives are good, they are good. What happens is that here the large landowners, the large cattle owners, have put into their heads that the farmer individually is not able. But if they unite themselves, they can." (interview campaigner presidential elections)

A different issue, that illustrates the rigidness of the government's traditional DDR based vision towards reincorporation, is that still at this moment part of the ex-combatants has not been officially registered as ex-combatants and is therefore basically left outside the peace treaty. One interviewee tells a story of a person who at the time was in charge of a list that was being created to register the ex-combatants in the area. Not only ex-combatants were added, also family members and friends of the person in charge of the list. Meanwhile, other ex-combatants who were not informed of the existence of such a list, were not registered. The following quote is the answer the interviewee gives to the researcher after having received the question whether he considers 20 urban dwelling group members a large number.

> "Well, at the moment it is not that much, because it could have been more, because here many people did not enter the process. That is, those who were in charge of the listing left many people out. For example, here in Santa Marta people were left out who do not appear as ex-

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[3] Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, National Learning Centre: Colombian public institution, organising trainings for ex-combatants

combatant, but they were. Urban but, they are there, living their normal live." (Interview Héctor, ex-combatant)

Without their status as ex-combatants being officially recognized, these people are basically left out of the peace contract. *"They don't receive the income [referring to the 'renta básica', a monthly income given to ex-combatants], they don't receive benefits, they receive nothing"* (interview Héctor, ex-combatant). In another interview, the interviewee tells that the list was created supposedly because in other regions of the country, people who had been applying for the benefits granted to ex-combatants by the peace contract turned out to be drug dealers. At the same time, he does not entirely agree with the decision to list the people who will be given access to the peace treaty, as he considers it unjust that people who have not fought in the war were added to the list, while some ex-combatants were not. This issue articulates the opportunities arising from autocreation and a collective form of reincorporation, as being part of a cooperative that maintains mutual contact prevents ex-combatants from getting isolated.

The importance of connections
The section above described negative effects of the government's DDR based vision on reincorporation and positioned a collective reincorporation in which ex-combatants autocreate their reincorporation on the other side of it. Connections between ex-combatants play an important role in this and are identified by ex-combatants as factors that contribute to the sustainability of cooperatives. The next section will elaborate on the ways mutual connections can serve ex-combatants' autocreation and facilitate their collective reincorporation.

Forging connections with both other (groups of) ex-combatants, and various kinds of non-ex-combatant organisations can be an important strategy to counter the individualised reincorporation as promoted by the traditional DDR based vision. An observation that was deemed important by the researcher is the following. Regarding sustainability of organisation, interviewees who were taking part in a group of ex-combatants that was struggling form a cooperative and stay together, hardly mentioned or even knew the names of some of the other ex-combatant cooperatives and nationwide ex-combatant organisations. Meanwhile, those cooperatives that had been relatively successful in securing financial support from among others the international community, seemed more connected. Talking about this with respondents from these cooperatives, they mentioned that according to them it had a lot to do with networks and connections. Comparing their situation with the mentioned groups of ex-combatants experienced difficulties with the formation of a cooperative, one interview mentioned: *"Because we can have a proper job... But there it is like a little island, like a little group."* (Fernando, ex-combatant, member cooperative). An example of the opportunities that arise thanks to the connections that exist between different ex-combatant cooperatives is the exchange of knowledge and experience between ex-combatants. In an interview with a member of an ex-combatant cooperative, the researcher asked what they had learned about setting up a sustainable cooperative during this process. The interviewee responded with an anecdote of some members of other cooperatives that had been expelled from their own place and arrived at the place of residence of the interviewee. These persons had joined the cooperative, and had brought a lot of experience and knowledge on projects that proved valuable to their own cooperative.

> *"But well like over there, there was a conflict, and they were forced to go because well, that was how live went. So, they had to leave everything behind and they came here. But they come with a set of knowledge about how to manage and how to apply for a lot of support through the association. And we? Well like I tell you, we are stuck there, so far still learning, so far still learning from them"* (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Next to situations like this example, in which individual ex-combatants connect with an existing cooperative, connections between two or more existing ex-combatant cooperatives are considered

very valuable for the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. To illustrate this, I will give the example of two ex-combatant cooperatives that are closely connected with each other. The respondents pertaining to these cooperatives told the researcher that they are constantly in contact with each other, supporting or helping each other when necessary, and exchanging knowledge and experience. Both organisations are members of the Mesa Autónoma de Reincorporación (Auonomous Table of Reincorporation, MAR), which has an important role here. The MAR, as described by one of the interviewees, has a connecting function for the ex-combatants on a national level and could be seen as an institution that serves as an instrument for building connections between groups of ex-combatants. The people behind the MAR actively try to reach out to groups of ex-combatants in the territories to bring them together. As such, institutionalizing the creation of connections, the MAR serves to counter individualisation of reincorporation aligned with the traditional DDR based vision on reincorporation favoured by the government.

> *"Almost every day we are talking about where we can support, so that it becomes a joint effort, so that it won't be just Asocunt[4] that is working so to say, but that we unite ourselves as MAR, that we unite even to be able to advance what is the political project to be able to articulate these efforts, to prevent that the people will get isolated. Because, well, in the end this is a collective popular effort and, well, that's what it's about, putting something together from the bases. So, all the time we have a constant communication between us, between those who are leading these spaces and these things we spread it in our groups."* (interview Valentina, human rights defender, organisation and cooperative member)

One of the main aims of the MAR, as was explained by one of its founding members, is to prevent the disappearance of current organisational processes. Moreover, as another ex-combatant mentioned, the MAR is actively stimulating the foundation of new ex-combatant cooperatives, also when there are specific needs. In Colombia, there is a gap between farmers producing products on the countryside and the commercialisation of those products in the city. ECOMUN[5], another institution that was formed to guide collective reincorporation of ex-combatants, and that has a function related to that of the MAR, has set up different intermediary organisations also consisting of ex-combatants.

At the end of this section, it should be noted that next to connections between ex-combatants, some cooperatives put a considerable effort in an outward orientation. According to members of these cooperatives, forging connections with non-ex-combatant actors serves mulitple goals that are related to ex-combatants' perspectives on sustainability of a cooperative in the organisational sense. That is, the connections can result in different types of support. For example, a relationship with the Vice-Ministry of Tourism, including a visit to the area, resulted in financial support for the cooperative. Also, both private organisations and other (non-ex-combatant) cooperatives are supporting the cooperative by sponsoring different types of projects, such as a pig farm. One ex-combatant described the links they are forging as friendships that can serve both parties in the future.

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[4] Asocunt (Asociación de construcción colectiva, unidad, y transformación en Colombia, Spanish for Association of collective construction, unity, and transformation in Colombia) is a cooperative formed by ex-combatants, with also non-excomatant members (e.g. indigenous people, or victims of the conflict who have not participated in armed groups).

[5] ECOMUN (Economías Sociales del Común, Spanish for Social Economies of the Common), is "the national cooperative umbrella project guiding social and economic reincorporation of ex-insurgents" (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021, p. 69). The relation between the MAR and ECOMUN goes beyond the scope of this research. What is important here, is that both organisations are considered instruments towards connecting groups of ex-combatants and their interests across the country.

> *"What happens is that we, since we are put, so to say in the MAR, and in the Mesa Nacional del café, with the Gobernación de Cundinanarca that is starting to know us, with the SENA, all organisations that we are starting to know, where there are convocations, where the people are following us on social media, where they see us on social media, we start to establish like these friendships"* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Connections with the national government fit into this image. They are established by the MAR and ECOMUN by dialoguing, and like the beforementioned connections with local governments and other non-governmental organisations serve to acquire support from these actors. In case of the national government, stakes are high and opportunities many.

> *"[T]here is the function of dialogue with the state to try to garantize situations. For example, the struggle for land, the struggle for housing, the struggle for worthy conditions, to generate productive processes that are adapted to the reality of the sectors. So of course the MAR, well, its function is that these processes do not die in the attempt, but on the contrary, strengthen the collective process. And we say that the collective process is the fundamental base of sustainability. So I believe that the Mesa fulfulls a decisive role. The Mesa Autónoma de Reincorporación [MAR] and ECOMUN"* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

3.1.2 Transition from vertical to horizontal organisation

The transition from a military to a non-military organisation that the ex-combatants of the FARC-EP have lived though is another important issue with regard to the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives that is brought forward by the respondents. This section will tackle the challenges arising from this and the practice of delegating as a way to tackle these challenges.

After the FARC-EP's transition from military to a political group, the traditional power relations were reconsidered. Some ex-combatants referred to this as a change from a vertical to a more horizontal power structure, in which the emphasis changed from following orders to sharing tasks and responsibilities. Officially, ex-combatants are not obliged to follow their higher-ranking colleagues anymore, as they were not part of a military organisation anymore. Nevertheless, not all ex-combatants appear to adopt this with ease, and many still tend to adhere to the traditional power structure. For those who do dissociate from the traditional hierarchy however, it implies more space to disagree and to express their own point of view, whether in line with the leadership or not.

> *"No, it is not like before anymore. The military life in which one followed in a line or in which one followed the hierarchy of command. That you had to do that. Since we are not anymore under that command and under that military hierarchy, it's your own free will to act according to your political point of view, like you want."* (interview Marco, ex-combatant, member Comunes)

Not everyone easily adapts to the new, more horizontal structure. An interesting story that illustrates the tension this transition creates, by highlighting the complex effects of hierarchy and obedience, is the following anecdote about obedience and disagreement. When a group of ex-combatants had set up a cooperative that owned a fish farm, they were supported by a group of representatives of the United Nations with the creation of a brand. Together with the participating ex-combatants, the representatives had created a brand that could be used in the commercialisation of the harvested fish. However, as the interviewee explains, the resulting brand had become very, but very, ugly. Upon asking the ex-combatants what they thought of the result, they answered that actually, they also considered the brand aesthetically displeasing. After asking why they had not mentioned this during the process of creating the brand, they responded *"that they did not dare to give critique, because they knew nothing about that"* (interview Carla, ex-combatant). The ex-combatants had felt intimidated by

the representatives' positions and not in the position to express critique. Especially directly after the signing of the peace agreement, many ex-combatants still appeared to adhere to the former organisational structure. One of the interviewed ex-combatants mentions that when in the peace agreements it is decided that cooperatives form part of the economic reintegration of those who laid down arms, many consider this an order that is to be followed, without critically considering the implications of this decision.

> *"So we all got into… all ex-combatants at that moment, in the different ETCRs[6] in which we were staying, we got into the dynamic of creating cooperative. At that moment, we had not even thought about which businesses we were going to create. In other words, we never asked ourselves that, but rather "create cooperatives, create cooperatives!"."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

As time goes on, for many ex-combatants this attitude gradually changes, caused by disappointments, and trying to adapt to the society. Ex-combatants become more critical towards the FARC direction, but also towards the use of cooperatives for reincorporation. This changed attitude is ill-fated for the organisational sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives.

> *"A lot of errors that we had to solve ourselves, but that resulted in nothing, being like, like false promises. But not only the government's fault, and let's say, the FARC direction's fault, but also our own shortcomings. Why? Because many times we neither had commitment. Before, we worked following orders, but after leaving the war, we did not let ourselves be commanded anymore. And that, that to work in a solidary way, a certain type of organisation is needed, and many people were not willing to contribute in that organisation anymore. So occurred what always occurs here and that is that only five or six end up working, trying to get something going and the rest of the people is not interested."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

The role of delegating

In the view of the described transition from a vertical to a more horizontally structured organisation, respondents mention that a leader who just by him- or herself takes on all responsibility for the cooperative, will not be successful in creating a sustainable cooperative. Roberto, who is considered one of the leaders in his area and member of the cooperative Asoturhepaz[7], adheres to this vision and points to the importance of delegating tasks. Interestingly, he mentions that during the war, this also contributed to a strong internal organisation. Today, delegating tasks can be a way of sharing decision making and as such deal with the transition from a vertical command-based structure to the current more horizontal structure.

> *"I think that we are sustainable because we have a good, a good internal organisation at this moment – just one minute ago I arrived, because we had a meeting. So on top of the fact that we are growing, we are delegating tasks. We are creating new committees; we have 54 productive lines and we presume that in the future these 54 productive lines of the association have to create committees. So we will create these committees and that is a form of being sustainable."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant)

The interviewee mentions that he is leading a team that is conducting tourism related activities, while another person is in charge of a coffee committee. The described idea of delegating tasks and handing

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[6] ETCRs (Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación, Spanish for Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation): sites in which groups of ex-combatant temporarily resided after signing the peace agreement.
[7] Asoturhepaz (Agencia de Viajes Hechos de Paz, Spanish for Travel Agency Deeds of Peace) is a cooperative in which victims of the conflict and ex-combatants work together to enhance ecotourism in their locality.

over a certain degree of control to the created committees has overlaps with the idea of decentralisation, a term used by another interviewee, when pointing to the importance of dividing power in the post-military situation.

> *"I believe that in what we can say to the other organisations and what really is a very good contribution, is the topic of decentralising the work, that is to say, like in many organisations in the end the board of directors decides and not really… it is a bit decentralising the work and looking how things can be done so that this [decentralisation] happens and work with the common people. […] We should not neglect the 'grassroots work' which is with the common people, that is to say, the people who are in thein the villages, in the municipalities, eh, people who want to organise themselves but do not know how."* (interview Valentina, human rights defender, organisation and cooperative member)

3.1.3 A shared vision

In the previous section, the end of the FARC-EP as a military organisation was tackled. Also, it was stated that the organisational structure changed from being vertical, to more horizontal, implying a reconsideration of traditional power relations. Another issue resulting from this change, is the lack of a shared vision. During the war, the FARC-EP shared a military vision (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021), which in the current situation is not applicable anymore. This section elaborates on the challenge of the lack of a shared vision, and explores what is needed to create a new one.

The importance of a shared vision

Having a clear direction in a cooperative was deemed very important by ex-combatant respondents. Mostly, leaders were argued to play a key role in establishing this vision, and making sure it is shared by all members.

> *"So, let's say that for the cooperatives to have success, the first, the primordial is leadership from within. So we have the cooperative right. We need leadership, but we also need to have teamwork. In other words, these people need to know where they are going to, right? They need resources, whether their own or from others. What if that is not there? Those things are super important. When there is no leadership in a cooperative, resources from outside may arrive, but those will burn. That would be a big lie."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

The researcher also spoke to a person that was involved with a non-ex-combatant cooperative about sustainability of cooperatives. The interviewee mentioned the importance of the principles of solidarity and internal democracy. This, according to the interviewee, implies among others that decisions should be taken in consensus.

> *"I believe that the most important things that [the farmer organisation] has had to be able to maintain itself in time through all these politics of extermination, of exclusion, has been to have some clear principles and some clear goals as an organisation. […] A vision, a mission, and some principles. The principles of [the farmer organisation] are key."* (interview Daniel, member farmer organisation)

The reduced organisational verticality in ex-combatant cooperatives, and therefore reduced rigidity and increased freedom of choice brings challenges with regard to the unity and cohesion as experienced by the ex-combatants. When the researcher asks a cooperative member which challenges they encounter in working towards a sustainable cooperative, he refers to the varying points of view of its members as a challenge.

> *"Sometimes it is hard, because sometimes it has been so hard that sometimes all of us don't think like the same. If we all would think a little bit, at least a little but the same, well then it would be different."* (Interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

The interview continues saying that in the illegality, they were like an organised family, but that when they entered the legal sphere they started to think differently. This accurately points to the loss of the shared vision ex-combatants had during the conflict, and the problems arising of a lack of a new shared vision. Another interviewee, Valentina, a human rights defender and member an organisation committed to women's rights and the peace process, perceives thinking differently as a strength.

> *"[I] believe that one of the former leaning points is to learn to work from the diversity. That is to say, we have women of all types, styles, cultures, religions, and political points of view that you want. And let's say that working from the diversity allows us to create something holistic, that creates a real change, because we have learned that through diversity of thought we can create something."* (interview Valentina, human rights defender, organisation and cooperative member)

An important condition for this is a clearly established strategy, as the interviewee points out later. Within this diversity in points of view, leaders take the role of remitting information to the members so that all go on the same road, and follow the same strategy. The organisation committed to women's rights and the peace process is different from the cooperatives that are the focus of this research, as it is not primarily set up to contribute to the economic reintegration of ex-combatants. Still, the lessons they learned with regard to successfully running an organisation can be useful for the organisation of ex-combatant cooperatives as well. When asked about key factors that indicate that an organisation is sustainable, Viviana answered: *"I believe that the most important is a work plan, a prioritization of objectives, and basic strategic lines"* When comparing this to the ex-combatant cooperatives, we see that especially in cooperatives with less strict hierarchical organisations, leaders fulfil initiative taking roles.

> *"So we went calling all those companions and we went explaining them, I went and met up with more than one and talked with them and explained the importance for us, what the association was about, that it was with the focus that they comply [with the promises made in the peace agreement]. Because for one to claim [their rights] is very difficult here and everywhere. In contrast, when someone does it in an organised or organisational form, well then things are easier. When we had gathered people, we organised an assembly. In the assembly a board of directors was chosen, through voting."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Establishing a shared vision

In the process of creating and maintaining a vision that is shared by all members of an ex-combatant cooperative, trust plays an important role. Ways of achieving this that recurred in conversations with ex-combatants were transparency – whether or not enforced by a supervisory board, and participation.

Transparency

In an interview with an ex-combatant cooperative member who had an organisational function, he told the researcher about a colleague that he had previously been a member of another cooperative, but left this cooperative. When the researcher asked why, the interviewee responds that many cooperative members don't feel represented, *"simply, to say it like this, sign here, we need your information and that's it"*. The interviewee says he thinks the other cooperative could have been just a small group benefitting from the inputs of all. (Interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member

cooperative). He continues to explain that this is not the way to go, as it will in the end lead to the failure of the cooperative.

> *"Because if one falls in the trap of doing what they want, not explaining anything to the people, the people get bored, the people withdraw themselves and in that way an association will never be able to sustain itself."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

When the researcher asks the respondent how in their cooperative this is tried to be prevented, he refers to the importance of transparent communication. In this way, members become aware of the cooperative's vision and feel represented.

> *"How we try to prevent that? We have to talk with the people, because like you say, many times organisations disappear because of bad information from jealous people who want to take control"* (Interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

In the mentioned example, when these jealous people are not able to obtain the control, they start to talk bad things about other members. In such a case, those who don't have their information clear, will believe them and lose track. To prevent this, board members try to keep the information provisioning within the cooperative transparent. In the cooperative, when there is a job offer, it is immediately shared in the group. They try to divide job offers equally, and look at who fits the offer, because otherwise people will say it always goes to the same. When members want to attend an event, the cooperative covers the costs of their tickets.

> *"That is to say, like I said you before, not hiding information for people, and when something appears, or when something is obtained. That what is obtained should be for everyone, not just for a small group. Well, yes, now it has been given to this person, and then when another job position is obtained, other people have to be searched."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Linked to the aim for more transparency, other interviewees prefer to the use of vigilance when asked about how to prevent a small group taking advantage of the cooperative's resources. Integrating this in the organisational structure has as an aim to prevent misusing resources.

> *"So we are going to create a supervisory board. We are three persons and these persons are those who are going to be observing how the director acts, how the treasurer acts, how the entire direction that is going to manage the cooperative acts. How are the resources, whether they are using them in a proper way, whether they are using them for the members, whether they are providing those for them, and whether the interests are not very high. So that good supervision will be there."* (interview Héctor, ex-combatant)

Participation

With regard to the question of how to prevent that certain people get spoiled and take advantage of the group's trust and resources, many interviewees plead for a participative approach, in which a leading figure plays a key role.

> *"Well, I think that it is done by giving that democratic participation, and also listening to each other, participating, opening these solidarity links of solidarity among ourselves, well that starts by defining a good leader."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant)

To facilitate participative decision making, assemblies are considered an important instrument, and also a way to prevent and mediate conflicts. Some interviewees mention that in general, WhatsApp groups are being used to communicate. In case of friction, this can first be issued in the chat, upon

which an assembly is issued. Expressing complaints or critique about the state of affairs within the cooperative is something that can be done during these assemblies. One interviewee mentioned that providing strong critique in assemblies is something the ex-combatants learned during the conflict.

> *"Yes, there is also a chat, you know, a WhatsApp, things are shared in there. Critique is also being given, uh let's say when people think things don't go well and aren't done well, then critique is being given in that assembly. I think that that is also something very important, let's say, something we learned during the guerrilla and something we now apply in daily life"* (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

Also in another ex-combatant cooperative, the importance of the possibility to express one's opinions is very deemed very important. When the researcher asked the interviewee how a person from outside could see that things in the cooperative are going well, his answer was focussed on member participation. In this context, it is considered very important that the one managing the cooperative is actively taking into consideration members' imput.

> *"So we do it very democratically, we do it in a participative way, we are doing it using everyone's input. So I think that we do not lose this standard for nothing in the world, and that is our… we don't want to do anything behind the associates' and the people's backs. Always with the people, always consulting with the people. Because it is another thing, that if I am governing behind the backs of the people of my community, compared to when I have a community that I consult, and receive their orientation, receive their opinions, when they advise me whether we should do something, or should not do something, saying, 'let's not do it', let's say no. Learning to say no, learning to say yes, yes we can. Well as well, all these things play a part in a democratic participation.* (Interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Again, group meetings are used as a method both to express problems and to work towards a solution. Interesting to note, is that in this cooperative, not only board members but also ordinary members can request a meeting. In other ex-combatant cooperatives, the researcher observed something similar, though this possibility was not equally emphasized in all cases.

> *"It can be convoked by every board member of the association, or every member of the association can convoke a meeting with the board or among everyone. So it is convoked and they simply go to the board and the board, well, we listen what the problem is, and then we do our best to find a solution, we assign ourselves tasks, we set goals for ourselves, to solve every inconvenience that we have or everything that we have to do."* (Interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

3.2 Economic sustainability

By far the most prevalent interpretation of sustainability of a cooperative was of an economic nature. The economic dimension is considered very important in the perspective ex-combatants have towards sustainability of a cooperative. An illustration is the large talk on agroecology during the visit of the agroecological farm Tibares, but pointing out that what really made the farm sustainable was the production of eggs. When the researcher asked an ex-combatant who was taking part in another cooperative, what sustainability meant to him, and how this links with the cooperative, he again stated that financial viability is seen as crucial factor for the sustainability of the cooperative. Additionally, the interviewee mentioned how to acquire economic resources for the ex-combatant cooperative.

> *"Well brother, we really in matters of let's say finance, we have been, let's say, economically bad, because maybe we have done bazaars, small parties, lotteries, but they already started to run projects through the association. So maybe already, step by step, the results will show*

themselves, but not yet. But at the moment the people are organised and doors have been knocked at so that they perhaps start to know us and to help us." (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

According to ex-combatants, putting to the front the economic purpose does not stand in the way of the identified social purposes. Rather, it can be seen as an enabling and necessary factor for other forms of sustainability. For example, in the case in which the interviewee explained that the production of eggs made the agroecological farm sustainable, the production of eggs allowed the family residing in the farmhouse to receive an income and therefore maintain them. Since the family is responsible for the maintenance of the farm, and paying them allows them to continue to exercise their tasks, perceiving the production of eggs as sustainable fits in the idea of sustainability as the ability to maintain itself in time. Added to this, generating an income has added benefits in terms of providing employment, which is also seen as an element of sustainability. A sustainable cooperative therefore, creates an income for those running it, and as such sustains itself.

The chapter starts with a section about diversification of economic activities. The second section elaborates on the role of an individual job, next to being a member of a cooperative. The third section is about the importance of knowledge and skills for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. The fourth and last section is about the way ex-combatants and their cooperatives are being viewed by non-ex-combatants, and the effect of this on their economic sustainability.

3.2.1 Diversification of economic activities

Diversifying economic activities is considered important by ex-combatants for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. According to respondents, diversifying serves to distribute risks. Should one of the sectors be unsuccessful, then the focus of the cooperative can be shifted towards the more successful ones. In this section, I touch upon the main ways this is being achieved, starting with project funds from institutions as a source of income for ex-combatant cooperatives, and continuing with ecotourism, and organising lotteries and bazaars.

Project funds from institutions

Ex-combatants have received 8 million Colombian pesos from the Colombian government "to start an in individual or collective productive project" (Acuerdo Final, 2017, p. 74), this has initially been an important investment source. In the context of cooperatives, financial supports from other organisations are added to this.

> *"Let's say, the project with the fish, he got that project. That indeed was for ex-combatants. He received 8 million and he invested it in the fish project, so there we are with that. So for me that is what sustainability is like. The association, that it serves one because well, other organisations collaborate or... like that"* (interview wife Celestino, former member cooperative)

Applying for financial support from institutes is an important source of financial resources for the ex-combatant cooperatives. To qualify for financial support from institutions, cooperatives have to formulate projects. Project formulation skills are therefore an important factor with regard to securing an influx of financial resources to the cooperative, and with that, approaching economic sustainability.

> *"[O]ne of the first challenges we had is, how to formulate a project. In this moment we still do not know it, neither are we more experts in it, but we are in that process of learning to formulate projects. Why? Because we are learning that, we are learning that there are convocations, from several institutions there are convocations to get some resources for the community. But if we do not learn to formulate it, we are nowhere."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Some members of ex-combatant cooperatives place the projects at the front of what is needed for economic sustainability. Moreover, they see the government and international institutions as actors enabling these projects to take place. An illustration of this is a respondent who mentions both the individual projects that are part of the peace treaty, and a collective project.

> *"For one to have economic sustainability, there are some parameters. For that, I believe that well, starting with projects, yes or no, productive projects, whether they are collective or individual. We here in this case, we have a few similar projects - we, well, those who signed the peace agreement - that the government gave us through the signing of the peace agreement. Apart from that, we also have a project, already collective, of the association as such, that project is supported by the Norwegian embassy."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Apart from the Colombian government, providing the individual project money as established in the peace agreement, private institutions, the United Nations and embassies as mentioned as examples of institutions that provide project funds. The case of the agroecological farm provides an example of support from both international and national institutions. Establishing the farm was financially supported by the United Nations World Food Programme (UN WFP). The farm has a theatre for educational purposes, the chairs of which are donated by a Colombian foundation. A set of furniture, chairs, tables, and parasols, were purchased with financial supports from the District Institute of Tourism.

> *"That was the district institute, that was a… we also presented ourselves to that… to that programme, to that contest. Various organisations were there and we got the preference there. We won a credit of more or less 25 million pesos and we did the project."* (interview Timo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

A final note at the end of this section is that, based on the beforementioned, one could get the idea that projects are considered a linear source of income. That is, to be sustainable, cooperatives need to start a sponsored project for a certain frequency. Money attributed to the project serves as an income for the members of the cooperative until the project has finished, at which point a new project is needed. This assumption is not supported by several interviews. These interviewees tell the researcher that after the project, the idea is to re-invest the initial returns of the project, and in that way continue the project without external support, creating circularity.

Ecotourism

With regard to economic sustainability, one ex-combatant cooperative is setting up a range of ecotourism activities. These activities have an educational nature and allow visitors to become familiar with the historical events that have taken place at the relevant site. The cooperative that is running these activities, is set up by both ex-combatant and non-ex-combatant members. Multiple actors benefit by the tourist visits, among those are among others the guides who show the historical sites, and the women selling food, as was mentioned by an inhabitant of the locality: *"There the woman prepare the food and sell it. Of course, this is always a great support for the association, for the women who work.".* Some consider the tourism branch as an important source of opportunity for the future.

> *"We have many beautiful touristic sites nowadays. The tourism of the countryside, that is… I believe that is what is taking the lead, the most important thing, and we don't know how to exploit it. So we think and mount a very strong agency that will be able to generate… and that would also generate employment, training of a lot of companions and y believe that that could be very sustainable. That is the essence of that we are going to start, we are going to get it on track between Asocunt and Asoturhepaz."* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Many cooperatives use lotteries as a source of income. One interviewee told the researcher: *"Sustainability, like I just said: we are living from a miracle. Because we don't have money.".* Later in the conversation, he explained that with living from a miracle, he meant that they are working with their own resources. Organising a monthly lottery is then used as a way to get some additional income. The interviewee explains that each ticket costs 10.000$, and that he sells it to his neighbours, to make more money for the association. The money is used to pay for the transport and the food for the members, when they need to leave to work. With this they survive and make papers, but they cannot do large projects, which falls into place when recognizing that for the larger projects, external financial support is needed. When the researcher asked the president of another ex-combatant cooperative about the topic of sustainability, he was answered in terms of how the cooperative sustains itself. That is, at the moment, the cooperative mainly sustains itself with *"activities like lotteries and bazaars"*.

3.2.2   The role of an individual job

The previous section has elaborated on different ways of acquiring resources for the survival of an ex-combatant cooperative within the framework of the cooperative, the importance of which is clear. The extent to which a cooperative can and should account for the income of its members however, is something on which perspectives differ. In this section, I will elaborate on the role of having an individual job for the economic sustainability of an ex-combatant cooperative, in relation to the economic function of the cooperative itself.

During the field work, the researcher encountered views that were critical towards financial support from institutes as a source of financial resources for the ex-combatant cooperatives. One respondent mentioned that although a lot of cooperatives exist, the way in which many of those function, is problematic.

> *"Something you can see at this moment is that most cooperatives exist on paper, and that in the second place there are one or two, or sometimes three ex-combatants who are really fulltime working on that and who are also getting paid for that you know. But then again [they are getting paid with resources] from the international community, not because the cooperative generates this income. So actually, it kind of becomes an NGO that is just consuming money of the international community and that is not initiating something. In a many cases, not in all cases."* (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

This quote implies criticism towards ex-combatant cooperatives that are financially dependent from NGOs and have little added value. Still today, according to some respondents, many ex-combatants appear to hold a view on what is a cooperative that does not match reality. When the researcher asked which things according to the interviewee would characterize a sustainable cooperative, she answered among others mentioning one of the challenges still existing.

> *"I also think that many ex-combatants actually do not have a right idea about what a cooperative is. And in the beginning, it was dished up a bit as a solution for our financial situation. And so all those cooperatives, those would provide work for everyone, you know. And what you see now a bit is that well, a cooperative, you have to contribute something to it every month. Because the first 2/3/4/5 years it does not at all deliver profit. And it is not really aimed at profit anyhow. Well, some people can make a living from it, there are people making a living from it, but in general that is not the goal of such a cooperative. So, I think sometimes people feel betrayed by that. Like that they had actually expected that within 6 months it would be a real super company and that they would all go to work within that company. And now it becomes clear that that is not the case, and that all of us just need to go to find work. You*

know, and that is something that is often not thought about. We have not thought about that in Havana, like yes, people just need a job." (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

This is important, because it touches the perceived meaning of a cooperatives. While many ex-combatants see a cooperative as being able to become the very source of income for its members, others argue that in general, this is not the main goal of a cooperative. In other words, opinions regarding the economic function of cooperatives differ considerably. As the interviewee correctly mentions, there are people who do make a living related to their membership of a cooperative. Nevertheless however, according to other ex-combatants, members of cooperatives should actively consider having or searching a job next to their activities as cooperative members, since in general being a member of a cooperative takes time, that is not paid, and does not offer a direct solution to the large economic insecurity that is present.

> *"How do I pay my way? Being in a cooperative takes time. Who pays you that time, if you have to search for rent, if you have to search for food? So neither do we have guarantee of work, do we? There is no guarantee of work."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

In line with this observation, some ex-combatants take it a bit further and argue that instead of trusting the cooperative to support the basic needs of its members, ex-combatants who are considering to become a member of a cooperative, should try to have their basic needs satisfied first.

> *"I have a house now, I have a job at the university and as well a social network around me, you know, in the city? And yes, you cannot expect people to arrive in a city, look for a job, have a roof over their head, uh… have a daily meal… and then also engage in politics, and then also start a cooperative enterprise. That is just not possible. So I think that those kind of things that well, it was just way too ambitious. And that uh… I would recommend people to first satisfy their basic needs, and only then switch to other things, like a cooperative enterprise."* (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

A view that corresponds with the idea that having an individual job next to while being a member of an ex-combatant cooperative is very important for its economic sustainability, but that contrasts the idea that the condition of a job should be met before a joining a cooperative, is the following. In one of the interviews with ex-combatants, the interviewee explained that while some of the members of the cooperative he belongs to, have an individual source of income, others do not. One respondent gives the example of himself, having a clothing store that went bankrupt during the covid-19 pandemic. For the respondent, and other members who do not have a job, the cooperative aims to help finding a suitable job and therefore a source of income.

3.2.3   Knowledge and skills

This section aims to highlight the role of knowledge and skills for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. The section is devided in two parts, starting with an exploration of the challenges associated with the lack of commercial and technical knowledge and skills as observed by ex-combatants, followed by an elaboration of effiorts of training to tackle this issue.

A lack of knowledge and skills

Knowledge is considered an important factor for reaching sustainability, as one ex-combatant mentioned *"the large flaws that we have for sustainability is the lack of technical training and assistance"* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative). When asking the same interviewee about what they learned with regard to establishing a sustainable cooperative, he explained the following.

> *"Well, at the moment in ECOMUN we are trying to generate spaces of articulation and [to arrange] that the people have a certain technical and organisational and financial advice. Because another thing is that, since in the wartime economy there was no control, the accounting was done with, let's say, the money in the pocket. Ah, but now, now every expense with invoices, everything with stamps, with electronical invoices and with accounts."* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Multiple members of an ex-combatant cooperative mentioned the difficulties faced by people who have left the countryside due to threats they received there. It is not unusual among ex-combatants to have lived 20 or 30 years in the forest. These people have always depended on their knowledge and experience on the countryside for an income. From one moment onto the other, they are inserted in a completely different environment, where they face the task to mount cooperatives. At their new place of residence, their skillset and knowledge does not align with the necessary abilities and skills in the urban areas. Although ex-combatants do posess valuable knowledge, in many cases this does not match the one needed in the capitalist market.

> *"In this case the people who are in the process of reincorporation need economic sustainability to be able to survive and to be able to face the challenges that is brought by the process of reincorporation into the society again. Those are challenges that this type of population faces. […] So here the people from the countryside are ending up in the miserable areas of the larger cities. Why? Because a person who leaves the countryside does not have, does not have that knowledge of the city. He or she does not understand that form of working in the city which is different. So they will end up in the miserable areas"* (interview Elías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

The fact that many ex-combatant cooperatives lack commercial and market knowledge has led to several commercial flaws. Something that has occurred and that is often mentioned by interviewees, is that there have been mismatches between the products produced by ex-combatants, and the demands of the market. Over time, this has resulted in the loss of a lot of resources, energy, and motivation, as was mentioned by ex-combatants. Moreover, some consider it the main factor currently preventing ex-combatant cooperatives from reaching economic sustainability.

> *"Today, we do not… we produce and we do not know who to sell to. We have lost harvests, we have lost services, we have lost products because we do not have anyone to sell them to. And we have even accumulated debts, because many times, people put their money in these cooperatives and there is nothing to sell, or rather no-one to sell the products to. So, there are a lot of difficulties causing the topic of commercialisation to really be the bottleneck, without finding certain alliances."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

In addition to the lack of commercial knowledge, leading to mismatches between the products produced by ex-combatants, ex-combatants mentioned experiencing a lack of technical knowledge. This also leads to loss of a lot of resources, energy, and motivation.

> *"And when I say lack of technical assistance, [I mean] lack of technical, administrative, and financial assistance, and assistance in project realisation. So, we are going to cultivate, but we never start looking at the costs, which is an element within the realisation of a project. Before you think of… at the moment of thinking about a productive project, you have to think about the costs, right? To see if those are justified or not, if it is going to work or not. So the people like the idea of "ah, we are going to plant strawberries", and then they start to plant strawberries and afterwards they get into difficulties. First the technical assistance, after that*

the inputs, after that the commercialisation, and when they start to do the math, they lost money." (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Settling in a new environment can include a climatic change as well, that can in turn unexpectantly affect a cooperative. An example is provided in which a change of environment, together with a lack of the right technical knowledge resulted in rather negative outcome for an ex-combatant cooperative. An ex-cooperative had the idea to raise broilers and sell them to the visitants of the farm they were managing. 200 chickens were bought together with their food. Unfortunately, however, quickly after, some of them died and at that point it did not take long before all 200 broilers had died.

"[T]he chickens died. We lost that money, it was not sustainable, and not even starting and so… Well, what is the case, well, the thing is that there the requirements to maintain chickens are different. One requires criollo chickens, adapted to a colder climate. Well a few things that only afterwards the technical expert told us: 'no, how could you be so brute', and there are more examples like that one." (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Adding to the importance of having the right knowledge and skills are the difficult circumstances in which (also non-ex-combatant) cooperatives in Colombia find themselves. This is also mentioned by a non-ex-combatant entrepreneur, who had also been a member of a cooperative in the past, that has failed. When the researcher asked him about the general financial and business-related hardships experienced by interviewees, he expressed his personal observation.

"I tell you, here the people fail, everyone fails. You mount your little business. All microentrepreneurs, here what they do is fail." (interview Bryan, entrepreneur, former member cooperative)

The merits of training

To tackle the observed lack of technical and commercial (market) knowledge, many interviewees referred to the need of education and training. With regard to the commercial skillset of ex-combatant cooperatives however, training has had some positive outcomes.

"[T]hey had difficulties to, for example, even the costs. They had bought a chicken to sell a chicken and that is not profitable here. They had not calculated the costs of… the costs of producing the fodder, the other things that needed to be produced. So these kind of things, afterwards with an on-site training they realised that, and they improved these processes. So today for example, they already charge a better price for their products." (interview María, ex-combatant)

Having mentioned this positive result, the interviewee mentions some concrete fields that could be improved to make the cooperative more secure. She mentions the question should be asked what the cooperative wants to produce, and whether there is a demand for that product. Should that not be the case, ex-combatants could look to ways how to transform the product in ways that increase their market value.

In an interview with another member of an ex-combatant cooperative, the researcher asked what they had learned about setting up a sustainable cooperative during this process. To that, the interviewee responded that some members of other cooperatives had been expelled from their own place and arrived at the place of residence of the interviewee. This person had also joined the cooperative, and had brought a lot of experience and knowledge on projects that proved valuable to their own cooperative.

> *"But well like over there, there was a conflict, and they were forced to go because well, that was how live went. So, they had to leave everything behind and they came here. But they come with a set of knowledge about how to manage and how to apply for a lot of support through the association. And we? Well like I tell you, we are stuck there, so far still learning, so far still learning from them"* (interview Celestino, ex-combatant)

Also, activities of the cooperative itself can help facilitating the growth of knowledge within ex-combatant cooperatives. Here we also see the facilitative role some ex-cooperatives aim to take for its members. Next to offering members a platform to find a job or a place of residence, a cooperative can also guide the distribution of knowledge and trainings with the help of external experts or representatives. This can be particularly helpful when focussed on non-agricultural topics, as where the knowledge gap from ex-combatants originating from the countryside often is the largest. On the other hand, however, agricultural projects are also set up by the cooperative, here the cooperative plays an organisational role, collecting the ex-combatants' and adjusting their needs to the circumstances in the field. Information is provided by outside actors. When an ex-combatant leading a cooperative was asked how sustainability was characterized, he gave the following explanation.

> *"Like I explained you, through projects. In the first place, we organise the companions, right? An introduction is given to the companions, depending on what [type of project] is entering. Are we going to mount a productive project of clothing fabrication? Good, we have people from SENA, specialists, so that the companions get an introduction in the topic and they will be doing it the right way. At the moment these topics are being done depending on the project that is running. If it is a shop, well likewise, if it is a project of clothing fabrication, likewise, if it is agriculture, as well. So we, associates, like we are here, we have various project initiatives. For example, we also have a… we are probably going to do an agricultural project as well. We are just lacking some details. It is a piece of land over there that we can work on. That piece of land, is the land we will work on and we have to improve the soil. For whom do we improve it? For the owner of the land and so that we can cultivate the land."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Paperwork is another challenge to a lot of members of ex-combatant cooperatives. Both with regard to the process of legalisation of a new cooperative, and the continuation and extension of activities of already set up cooperatives. According to multiple respondents, completing the right paperwork required for example to legalise a cooperative, is quite intricate. Given the fact that ex-combatants in particular face a larger than usual difficulty to work with this successfully, and increasing their capacity to do so contributes to their reincorporation, support from government actors responsible for the practical implementation of the peace agreement on this is highly valued.

> *"[B]ut really up until this moment we have been doing paperwork, working on documents to be able to get legalised, because everything is paper. We… we did not understand that. […] The SENA has trained us a lot, the ARN has supported us a lot, the Gobernación wants to support us. This week, we will be going to Manizales to a meeting on rural tourism, we are going there with everyone."* (interview ex-combatant, president cooperative)

3.2.4   Public image

The way an ex-combatant cooperative is perceived by the outer world, affects their economic sustainability. Many interviewed ex-combatants mentioned the negative effects of the stigma they carry, while at the same time the visibility of the cooperative was considered important for its sustainability. In this section, these two topics will be explored.

Something that is difficult for ex-combatants not only from a social and political perspective, but also from an economic one, is the stigma they carry, having been part of an armed movement. In this section, I will not elaborate on the formation of the stigma, but rather on its consequences, and in this case particularly those affecting the self-perceived economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives.

When asking interviewees about the differences between ex-combatant cooperatives and their non-ex-combatant counterparts, dealing with the stigma was an often-mentioned additional challenge for ex-combatant cooperatives. This applies especially with regard to the commercialization of their products.

> *"[L]et's say that a cooperative of reincorporates has the difficulty to deal with the stigma, many times, yes. So, because of that, I said to the companions: it is not that one is ashamed, no, we are not ashamed, but one has to be strategical in these issues of commercialization. Not everyone does… understand our struggle, right? On the contrary, they view us as terrorists, because that is the way the right-wing propaganda always is. So that, that to me seems to create a lot of difficulties."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

The stigma laying on ex-combatants can affect them in different ways, being more directly or indirectly. One that is very direct, is the boycotting of products sold by ex-combatant cooperatives. A very clear example of this is given by Santiago, who is working with ex-combatants to facilitate their (collective) reintegration. He explains that many of them have fine skills that they learned and improved during their time in the FARC-EP, and that they are using these skills to make products of high quality. Nevertheless however, some people will not buy these products, for the reason that they are produced by ex-combatants. This weakens the ex-combatants' economic position, increasing the probability that they will resume the armed struggle.

> *"[S]o there is a stigma, because for example the clothing and the bags that they make carry the brand name 'La Montaña'. So, the people: 'ah, that is from La Montaña, that is from the guerrilleros, I don't buy it'. So, that is the other thing that has to be done, to remove those stigmas, to consider that they are already in the legal context, and that they are searching a way to make a living in this context. Every hitch that is caused to that effort means slowing down their sales, causing them to not have a form to maintain themselves and oblige them to retake arms again. So it's a large effort. […] It is not the same to be able to be able to go out and freely sell a product, that is, without the objection of society 'don't buy it, because he/she is an ex-guerrillero', to go out in an unconcerned way to sell a product that is good. So, there as well, the possibility for employment for them is rooted."* (interview Santiago, facilitator)

Another example of a way in which many ex-combatants see themselves being treated differently than non-ex-combatants is the difficulty they face when trying to open a bank account. Matías, a member of an ex-combatant cooperative tells the researcher that although in the end their cooperative did succeed in opening a bank account, it took them a long while and a lot of effort and struggle. Having said that, many ex-combatant cooperatives encounter the same type of problems.

> *"So to enter from 'las bases', from the farmers, to enter into the economy is almost an utopia. And thus for us, to get into that process has been very difficult, because moreover, spaces that are necessary for reincorporation in an economic life have not been created, until the point that they even deny us to open a bank account, even to enter the very plundering and financial economy… But you need to open a bank account so that resources can arrive in our organisations, and it is not opened, due to the fact of marketization, due to the fact of*

stigmatization, fundamentally, on the side of the financial sector." (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Visibilisation

The negative image that many people have of ex-combatants, is not the image ex combatants want to spread. Instead, as was argued, by showing their practices and products as ex-combatant cooperative, the image people have of them might improve. Multiple times, respondents referred to the importance of the visibility of an ex-combatant cooperative for its sustainability. When the researcher was talking with an ex-combatant who was involved in the organisation of the agroecological farm, and asked him about his perspective towards the sustainability of the farm, he mentioned the image people have of them is important, and that the aim is to improve this image.

> *"Sustainability goes from what is produced, sustainability goes from what we produce, and the capacity to commercialize it, to let them [unspecified] know that we are producers of very decent products."* (interview Mateo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

An example in which the visibilistation of an ex-combatant cooperative and its products appears to be successful, is the foundation of a shop in the historical centre in Bogotá. In this shop, products produced by ex-combatants, but also indigenous communities, are sold. The shop is located in a mall with other types of stores around, attracting different types of customers. When the researcher asked a prominent ex-combatant member of the cooperative linked to the shop one month after its official opening (April 29, 2022), he was told the shop was sustainable. Visibilisation was deemed important with regard to the economic sustainability of the ex-combatant activities. In his conversation with the researcher, the interviewee pointed to the fact that the shop has contact with over 150 cooperatives in the country, and the advantage this brings.

> *"So, in that sense it has been very visibilised. I think that the element that allows a commercial exercise like this to sustain itself, requires a lot of propaganda, a lot of visibilisation."* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

In an interesting project with regard to visibilisation that was encountered, ex-combatant producers of all kinds of products are presented to businesses with which they can possibly establish a partnership. Ex-combatants producing items tend to have a hard time connecting with businesses, the secretary tries to lower the threshold.

> *"So they take it [their product] to the business fair and there, in some 'stands' they show the products that they produce, that they have. And the Secretary invites the private businesses so that they get to know and see the products and these products get sold on a large scale to those businesses."* (interview Santiago, facilitator)

3.3 Political sustainability

As mentioned before, the context of setting up ex-combatant cooperatives after the peace agreement cannot be disconnected from the political context at that time. This chapter will dive into the ways in which this context affects the perceived sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. First, I will discuss the often-mentioned concept of political willingness and the observed lack of it. Thereafter, the rupture with the former FARC-EP leadership that formed the political party that is now called Comunes, is explored.

3.3.1   The basis: Political willingness and the observed lack of it

Many ex-combatants mention the idea of political willingness to refer to the extent to which the government is willing to support the reincorporation of ex-FARC-EP combatants. Political willingness

was deemed important for the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives, due to its far-reaching implications. This can be very concrete, as one interviewee mentioned: *"Because this, this thing of political willingness translates in various things: in resources, in education, land."* (interview María, ex-combatant). In general, interviewees expressed their frustration about the low political willingness on a national level. But on a local level as well, political willingness was said to be low. For example, in one of the departments the researcher visited, a leftist governor had been appointed. This, as one of the interviewees mentioned, gives opportunities to the ex-combatant cooperatives. According to the interviewee however, in many other places this is not the case.

> *"I don't know if you have noticed the political movement here in Colombia, but here everything depends of political willingness and the majority of the people here do not have political willingness. It [the initiatives organised by the local government] is because it is an alternative, one could say leftist, government."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

Arguing that the currently, the political situation in the country is far from ideal and that there is no political willingness to support the collective reintegration of ex-combatants, a respondent mentions that the right policy is lacking. Something that is important to note here, is that the institutional framework is linked with social and political policies. According to the respondent, the current institutional framework, in which there is no political willingness, translates in a lack of social and political policies that allow the ex-combatants to pursue their project of transforming society. This, according to her, is the main problem preventing ex-combatant cooperatives to be sustainable.

> *"[T]here isn't a policy. That is, it is not about having money, cash money, but there is a lack of social policy or inclusive public policy, really aimed at, um, like we say, at the ex-combatant population, like, at the society as a whole, because it is not only our problem that we want to solve, we want that society itself improves. So, I repeat, it is a matter of resources that does not mean economic resources in terms of money, but sufficient resources to transform like the lives of the members of the association, but also society as a whole."* (interview Regina, ex-combatant and politician)

The following two subsections discuss several ways in which political willingness and the observed lack of it is observed to affect the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives will be discussed, divided over the topics of the peace treaty and land ownership.

3.3.1.1 Relation with the peace treaty
The peace treaty and the commitment towards complying with it was often mentioned by ex-combatants when talking about sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. In this section, I will elaborate on that issue, tackling the role of the government, followed by the hope on an alternative government, and closing off with ex-combatants' mentions of own responsibility.

Role of the government
The government's incompliance of the peace treaty is identified as the most important factor with regard to the identified lack of sustainability of the peace treaty, that is connected to the sustainability of the ex-combatant cooperatives forming part of it. According to many ex-combatants who were interviewed, the government's incompliance affects multiple facets of sustainability. Without the government's commitment, they argue, sustainability is hard to reach.

> *"For me, sustainability is to go beyond… well if we talk about it, you could speak of different, different fields. But, for example, in these moments, the sustainability of us, reincorporates, is precarious. Precarious, because there was an agreement, some things were postulated, but there was neither a follow up, nor a compliance. […] But there is an incompliance, well there is*

no sustainability with regard to the peace agreement, and the compliance towards the reincorporates is even way less, because obviously a lot of companions in many territories are going through even more difficult situations that others decide to integrate in the FARC again for that same reason, because there is no guarantee, there is no compliance, and apart from that, well there are attacks from different armed groups and also the state." (interview Sofía, ex-combatant, organisation and cooperative member)

While the FARC-EP has officially been dissolved, armed dissidents continue to be active. FARC dissidents and other armed groups that are active in areas not controlled by the government appear to be a refuge for ex-combatants who have become disappointed in the available possibilities for reincorporation.

"They have an agreement with a supervision by the United Nations, of a number of entities that are watching whether Colombia does comply. But still, they are not complying with a lot of things. Because of that reason many of them are re-starting [the armed struggle]. So I am not justifying it, but it could be one of the reasons, the reasons because of why the process is fluctuating, because it is not progressing. On paper, they all say that they are complying, but in practice they aren't, because they fill it up with technical terms, with documents and with a number of things that go out of the context of an agreement to support them. That is the big problem, that there is no practicability of sustainability in the medium or large term in what they are doing" (interview Santiago, facilitator)

One of the points in which ex-combatants do not trust the commitment of the government, is safety. For example, one interviewee mentioned: *"This government, they disagree with the agreement, they are against it, so the insecurity has become worse"* (interview Héctor, ex-combatant). At the same time, safety is also perceived to be one of the challenges faced by ex-combatant cooperatives to becoming sustainable. Although the feeling of insecurity among ex-combatants may lead to the formation of a group and as such stimulate the formation of ex-combatant cooperatives, concrete insecurity does have a negative impact on the functioning of existing ex-combatant cooperatives in the sense that safety decreases with people's identity as ex-combatants becoming more visible, something that is more likely when connecting oneself to a cooperative.

"So what are fearing is... Like you know that at this very moment we are in a difficulty of insecurity. That is, the peace was signed, but while one is complying, the state is not complying, so we are like… we, ex-combatants, have already 330 deaths on our side" (interview Héctor, ex-combatant)

Something that does only add to the ex-combatants' impression of being neglected by the government or even a certain feeling of betrayal, is the issue of paramilitary groups. According to the interviewed ex-combatants. These groups pose a relevant security threat to ex-combatants. Moreover, the peace treaty with the FARC-EP has changed the power relations on the countryside to the benefit of the paramilitary groups. When speaking about the paramilitary groups, one interviewee mentioned: *"They have taken the places where the FARC were… They are here now"*. In a response to that, the researcher asked: *"And the State?"*. To which the interviewee replied: *"The State helps them and that is like a… Here the police, the majority of them know who they are and where they work, all of them. They have a relation."*

At the time of the field work, presidential elections were about to take place. A change in the political power dynamics, as a consequence of the leftist presidential candidate winning the elections, was suggested many times as a necessary development for a sustainable future, in which political willingness is better than in the current situation.

> *"We do believe that the way to solve conflicts is through dialogue, not political exclusion, and we have seen it in other countries and I believe that it is possible. What happens is that here in Colombia there is no political willingness from the national government. That is why today we are hoping for a more alternative government that guarantees those conditions."* (interview Daniel, member farmer organisation)

Own responsibility

As we have seen, the lack of commitment of the government with regard to among others the implementation of the peace agreement is considered a huge barrier for the construction of sustainable cooperatives by many ex-combatants. It should be noted, however, that the government is not the only actor considered responsible for this sustainability. That is, although less frequently observed, also commitment from actors like the Colombian society, and ex-combatants themselves is deemed important.

> *"[C]ommitment, most of all. Both commitment from them [institutions] and from us, to continue contributing to the peace process, and the reincorporation and reconciliation."* (interview Guillermo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Also, ex-combatant cooperatives themselves can play a role in the process of building a sustainable peace. Reconciliation is considered an important aspect of ex-combatants active in cooperatives. One of the ways in which this is done is through community work. A concrete example of this is the agroecological farm that is set up by one of the ex-combatant cooperatives. The farm organised a range of activities that are aimed at reaching out to the community.

> *"The idea to start a farm originated from the process of sociability and reintegration, of going to the communities, so that the community knows that indeed, that the reincorporates aren't such a bad thing"* (interview Mateo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

3.3.1.2 Land ownership

Land ownership is important to ex-combatants and their cooperatives. As mentioned earlier, a large part of those who signed the peace treaty, have an agricultural background. (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative). In many conversations with ex-combatants, the current situation regarding land ownership among ex-combatants was mentioned as an example of the issues that demonstrated the lack of commitment to the peace treaty of the government. Having a considerable impact on what is described as economic sustainability, the unavailability of land to ex-combatants is among others ascribed to political unwillingness, which is considered a barrier on the way to political sustainability. In this section, I will elaborate on the role of land ownership in the perceived sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives, starting with a short description of the problem as it was identified by the research participants. Secondly, I will touch upon the role of the government in the identified problem, and finally, I will mention some practical issues that also play important roles.

The problem

When talking about sustainability and the identified needs to achieve this, land ownership was often mentioned by ex-combatant interviewees. The reason for this is the historical link many ex-combatants have with the countryside, given their agricultural background. What often followed, was the note that the current situation regarding land ownership is far from ideal. This can be illustrated by the following quote, in which the interviewee expresses the importance of land ownership, and his concern about what will happen ex-combatants will end up without land.

> *"The thing is that the majority of the ex-combatants who signed the peace agreement are farmers, we are farmers. For the majority of the companions, the reason for entering the FARC*

was that they got to know the FARC in the territories and fell in love with the FARC, and they linked up with the FARC. And others, very few, who are from the universities, and who like the ideas and who studied, and also entered the FARC. So, at this moment, what we need most in this process of reincorporation is... no, because they give us a basic rent, 900.000 pesos. It's enough, you could go and do some groceries and finished, there you have your groceries. But the day that they stop this money, of what are we going to... of what are the boys going to live? If we do not have a study, if we do not have land. So, the thing the government should... what they should think of most, with regard to the ex-combatants, is to give them a piece of land so that they can work." (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

To add to this, as was mentioned in the introduction of this report, the first part of the peace agreement concerns the Integral Rural Reform (Reforma Rural Integral, RRI). This section of the agreement is about creating conditions for welfare on the countryside to contribute to a stable and enduring peace by (Acuerdo Final, 2017). Ex-combatant cooperatives are an important part of this, and hence, in some interviews about sustainability, interviewees raised the topic of the RRI and its implementation. The impression they get is that the government does too little to implement the RRI.

"And very importantly, the first point of the peace agreement hasn't been developed, which is the Integral Rural Reform, that could lead to modernization of the countryside, a bit. But it hasn't been touched, after five years of the agreement. And even fewer real solutions of land ownership, or land usage by ex-combatants." (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

When the researcher asked one interviewee about the problem of land ownership, she answered that its impact is huge. In chapter '3.2 Economic sustainability', the value of projects for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives was explained. Since a lot of the projects that ex-combatants apply for are of an agricultural character and require land, being unable to access land also decreases these opportunities for ex-combatants.

"The thing is that the issue of the land is not just one. It is a vicious circle. [...] They, for example, ask you to do a productive project and in that project, they ask you for land. Hahah. So with that productive project, if you don't have the land, they are not going to approve it, So that is why I tell it is a vicious circle." (interview María, ex-combatant)

Similarly, when ex-combatants want to apply for a loan, having a piece of land can increase their possibilities of getting one.

"But let's say, I think that speaking about the reincorporates, the best that the government can do is what I tell you brother, sweating their guts out to locate land for the people. Land, so that the people work on what is their own, because then you are already having the land. I have this piece of land, look, those are two hectares. So there you can go to the bank and you can say look, I have this, this writing, this land and I need to work, so I need you to lend..." (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

The way in which a piece of land is used influences the perceived sustainability of an ex-combatant cooperative, this is illustrated by the following situation. In the group of ex-combatants that was in the process of setting up a cooperative, some members were in the possession of a piece of land that they used for crop production. This was useful to them in an economic sense. Meanwhile, in the cases in which an obtained piece of land is used by ex-combatants not only to cultivate crops, but also to facilitate residence, it provided them with many additional benefits. As in such a case, ex-combatants

are able to live in relative proximity to each other, an ex-combatant cooperative would be free from the organisational difficulties that come with a geographical dispersion of its members.

To conclude this section, another way in which land ownership was mentioned to have an important positive effect sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives was through its role in increasing the sense of belonging of ex-combatants with a place. One of the interviewed ex-combatants, while talking about the merits of being able to cultivate one's own products based on one's own piece of land, mentioned that the possession of land could mean the difference between abandoning a project or continuing it.

> *"Which is part of the fundamental objective of what sustainability should be. If you don't have a sense of belonging of your business, of your productive project, of your farm, no matter how small, in the first place. If it is not yours, because the land is what gets you attached, well then easily, with the first change, with the first problem you have, you leave it because it is gone. And there a large number of resources coming from the international community go away."* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Government distrust in the issue of land ownership

Most interviewed ex-combatants mainly blame the general lack of commitment by the government for the fact that ex-combatants and their cooperatives keep facing difficulties with obtaining land. In this regard, the impression is that the government can improve the situation, but simply does not want to. Many ex-combatants phrase this as a lack of political willingness.

> *"Really, what I feel is that there is no political willingness of the government to provide lands, because moreover, it did not end up in the agreement either. In the agreement are 10 million hectares that would have to be provided to the… to everyone, but there wasn't a special portal or anything. It was like: well, the ex-combatants are going to have access to land. Now recently, a notification was published about that there is a route towards access to land for ex-combatants. But no such a route exists, because it is the same procedure that every normal citizen should follow to obtain a house, that is [to get a] loan from a bank, to do a programmed saving, to have a financial closure, which of course here in Colombia is impossible with the salaries that you have."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

Their status as reincorporates, does not necessarily offer a lot of advantages to the ex-combatants with regard to obtaining land. The researcher was told that although substantial financial resources can be obtained from institutions, ex-combatants are not allowed to use donated money to purchase land. According to some interviewees, the amount of land present in the country should not be the problem. Pointing towards the inequality of ownership, some interviewees referred to the large amount of land in the possession of few people. In some interviews, this was directly linked to the idea that the government supported this type of land division, in other interviews the government was seen as more passive, and remaining aloof. Anticipating the end of the basic rent (900.000 cop per month for each registered ex-combatant) one interviewee mentioned that he expected that economic sustainability could become problematic. Also, he pointed to the role that a piece of land could play in this, and the difficult attitude of the government in this.

> *"[T]hey do not search a solution to that. So tell me, so many wastelands, owned by the landowners there, which aren't even being cultivating. And so many people that would like to have a bit. It is not about large extensions of land that I'm talking, like that they have to give me 100 hectares today. No, only one, two hectares, for you to have your little house and to be able to work there. Then they tell you: well, here you have your piece of land, now you have a decent housing. And from there you can start to live and maintain your family. But this is something that is never talked about, and when we address it, they wash their hands, saying:*

no, the thing is that it isn't in the agreement." (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

As was mentioned before, part of the government are also the members of congress that were installed after the peace agreement was signed. Also, with regard to the problem of land ownership by ex-combatant cooperatives, trust in this group of people, that was installed in congress to officially represent demobilised ex-combatants, appears low (for more on this, see section '3.3.2 Rupture with the party').

> *"We don't have land, but we have five persons in congress making money. Here the people oin congress make a lot of money. If they are so… if they are so FAC, then why don't they reserve some money those ten morons and buy land, each month for a different one, an ETCR. Those are populist actions, all right. But the people, what do they need? Land, because they are there making 40 million, not because they are so brilliant. No, it is because the blood of how many thousands of persons that got lost along the way."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

Practical issues

Added to the observed government neglect, also when the government does make an effort to locate land to ex-combatants, obstacles present themselves. For example, the researcher was told an anecdote in which the government had decided to purchase land for a group of ex-combatants. As soon as the owners of the land got wind of this intention, they raised the price of the land manifold. The interviewee called the owners greedy, supporting the idea that they price rise was not necessarily aimed at preventing the ex-combatants to acquire it, but rather to make great earnings out of it. The end result however, as the interviewee told, was that the land was not sold and the ex-combatants remained without land.

Another obstacle that was identified regarding the role of land ownership in the perceived sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives, is that in some cases, the land attributed to ex-combatant communities does not qualify for agricultural cultivation. This poses concrete problems to ex-combatants according to whom selling products cultivated on their land could play an important role in making their cooperative sustainable. In a concrete example, a group of ex-combatants was positioned in a natural reserve, preventing them from exercising agricultural activities.

> *"So we ask for land, and we end up having various difficulties with the land issue. Firstly, where the ECTRs are located, a lot of it was natural reserve, natural, reserves… reserves? […] So? Nothing could be done there, they could not buy, they could not sell, they could not plant."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

As the interviewee continues, she tells the researcher that at a certain point, the ex-combatants did manage to acquire land. In this case, the interviewee stressed the fact that their own leaders had enabled obtaining this land, seemingly without support from the government or other external actors.

> *"[The leader] said to the people something like: 'There is nothing here, we are going to receive 2 million pesos. Let's save the money and buy our own land.' So, they actually, without asking anyone for permission, indeed held an assemble among themselves and after they had taken the decision, the leader said to Pastor, who was at the time responsible for, let's say, the locations of the ECTRs, he said: 'We are going'. So Pastor [asked]: 'Where to? But where to, how, when, where to?' And he said: 'Yes, we are going, because nothing can be done here.' They purchased a piece of land and arrived there and started to build their houses. Today they are like… they have already built roads."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

Sadly, the leader figure mentioned in this quotation had been assassinated the week before the interview. Despite this loss, the move has been successful for the group. The interviewee mentioned that apart from the violence, which currently poses the biggest threat for this group, these ex-combatants *'don't have to worry about a thing'* (interview María, ex-combatant). The acquired land offers ex-combatant cooperative a certain autonomy, allowing them to exercise the actions that pertain to the different types of sustainability that were identified.

> *"They took care, built their houses, they even divided themselves in squadrons, which was how we divided ourselves, militarily speaking. So they divided their zones like that in squadrons, they have regulations in case, let's say, they want to hand over pieces of land to another person, they have their own norms, and moreover, they have developed productive projects. A lot of them have fish, a lot of them have chickens, they sell them together, some separate. In other words, that… that to me seems like a successful reincorporation process. Why? Because the people have land."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

3.3.2   Rupture with the party

After the signing of the peace agreement, several former FARC-EP members were granted a place in the Colombian congress. The idea was that they would defend the interests of those who had been part of the FARC-EP and had now re-entered Colombian society. However, during the research, most interviewees clearly showed their disappointment towards their representatives in congress.

Position of the former FARC leadership

When the peace agreement had just been signed, ex-combatants were still quite loyal to the former FARC-EP leadership, that hat largely converted into the political party FARC (now called Comunes). Apart from a form of economic reincorporation (see chapter '3.2 Economic sustainability') starting cooperatives was by many seen as the continuation of the political dream after having laid down arms (see also Cortés & Verschoor, 2021)

> *"Because the [peace] agreement says it, and well, we also said that from the point of the social and solidary economy it is, it is a political project of ours. So, of course, because the agreement says it, because we believe it is a form of economic reincorporation that can function…"* (interview María, ex-combatant)

The interviewee describes that at the time of signing the agreement, ex-combatants were very enthusiastic about the ideas proposed by their (now political) leaders. However, most of the interviewees were very clear about the fact that their trust in the people currently fulfilling national positions had vanished.

> *"And the commanders who are leading that, and let's say Timochenko, all the commanders, Pastor Alape, they have neither done anything for the ex-combatants. They haven't… they haven't made an effort to implement the agreement so that everything that has been firmed is accomplished."* (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

According to most interviewees, both the task of representing the interests of the common reincorporates, as using their position to ensure the right implementation of the peace agreement is heavily neglected.

> *"Yes, take into account that we used to have some bosses of ours, they accommodated themselves well in the government, with good escorts, with good incomes, with good positions. And we, who were the ones who defended them, the ones who were the brothers and sisters, we were the ones who sustain the casualties, we were the ones who were at their sides.*

> *Nowadays, we are totally rejected by them. So, there we realised that that was not the way to go anymore, that we had lost our credibility with them. We do not have these links of trust with them anymore, and this entire brotherhood was lost.* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

An anecdote illustrating the current relationship between many ex-combatant cooperatives and the former FARC-EP leadership, is about an ex-combatant cooperative that had constructed a touristic trail, aimed to educate visitors about the history of the place as well as the natural environment. One of the ex-combatants involved in this process, tells the researcher that they have received little support from members of the political party Comunes during this process. Also, he expresses his distrust about the intentions of the people from the party.

> *"They want to come and show off, that they were the ones [making it possible], Comunes. Do you understand me? Yes, they are going to say that to the people. So, we do not agree with that, brother, because they have never been here. Maybe if they would have come and shown their faces, to greet us or something like that, well... but no. So no way."* (interview Celestino, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

With regard to party membership, with the end of the armed conflict, prior FARC members are not obliged to follow orders from higher ranked individuals anymore. In practice, also implies that former ex-combatants are not necessarily affiliated to the political party Comunes, and that they can even become a member of another political party. This freedom is illustrated by the following quote from one of the ex-combatant interviewees.

> *"But since the decision to be a member [of a political party] or not, flirting or looking once more... you can be attentive to the development of a political party or you can perhaps not [choose to be] be an active member of Comunes, you can say: I am going to the UP, or to Colombia Humana, or to the Partido Verde. That is your decision. No, it is not like before anymore."* (interview Marco, ex-combatant, member Comunes)

Unfortunately, however, this freedom of choice is not experienced at every level, and from talks with other interviewees, the researcher observes a certain intolerance regarding viewpoints that go against the central leadership. To illustrate this, one ex-combatant told the researcher about their removal from the party, because they disagreed with its political decisions.

> *"So, the idea of 'you also make mistakes', means expressing that we do not agree with many of the political decisions that they have taken. It has cost us our membership of the party, they removed us."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

Different ways of dealing with the situation

When things turned out to be different than expected, for many ex-combatants the disappointment was very large. During the researcher's talks with the ex-combatants, some of them did clearly express their frustration about this development. Another interviewee, who had been present during the peace negotiations in Havana, and had already more realistic expectation from the political activity of the former FARC-EP leadership, spoke of a mourning process, tied to the process of disconnecting from the former FARC-EP leadership.

> *"The process of disconnecting from what before were the commanders, that is really a mourning process, and today, people are still dealing with that. They are dealing with that a lot, I notice that every time again and again.* (interview Carla, ex-combatant)

For some, the decreased trust in the national political leadership that is present in a lot of ex-combatants, also has affected the trust in cooperatives. Pointing to the way ex-combatants were motivated to sow a lot of seeds and aim for export: *"They put this very much into our heads"* (interview María, ex-combatant), (for an elaboration on the horizontal versus vertical leadership, see chapter '3.1.2 Transition from a vertical to a horizontal organisation'), some ex-combatants say that their negative experiences with building cooperatives the way they were instructed to do, took away their trust in cooperatives as a way to reach sustainability.

> *"Today not that much anymore, we don't believe in that as much but… (laughs 'inconveniently') not me personally, but yes, in that moment we believed it, and we believed that it was the form to establish our economy."* (interview María, ex-combatant)

In some already established ex-combatant cooperatives, the developments in national politics have resulted in a certain reluctance towards this form of defending the interests and ideals of ex-combatants.

> *"Some have bent over a lot towards the side of the party and politics and all those things. And others have not, well, we don't spend a lot of time on politics, because here in Colombia, if we analyse it, politics haven't brought us to the good side."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

This reluctance seems to translate into a different way of shaping the political, resembling a phenomenon that could be described as prefigurative politics, defined by Moreira Fians (2022) as referring to "the strategies and practices employed by political activists to build alternative futures in the present and to effect political change by not reproducing the social structures that activists oppose".

> *"So, we preferred to construct something very beautiful with the communities, because this seems more, more beautiful to us. Hence, the social work that we are doing is not that political, but rather social."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

The reluctance towards traditional politics on the one hand, and the desire to change society for the better on the other hand, results in an interesting mindset. In response to the researcher's question what politics had brought the interviewee, he mentioned the negative sides of it, concluding with a future oriented attitude.

> *"In general, it has armed us, and it has made us having ourselves killed for political ideologies. So, now that has ended among us, it has divided us, we keep contributing to politics, but not so much at the front anymore. We don't defend those political banners that we defended with a rifle anymore. But what we want is to construct our Colombia, our organisations, our families. We have to build these things according to what we think."* (interview Roberto, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

3.4 Alternative terms for sustainability

So far, we have explored different categorizations of the factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives. Some elements, however, do not lend themselves to fit in one of the identified categories. They are relevant in the sense that they are, in some cases directly, connected with the respondents' perspectives on sustainability. In this chapter, I will elaborate shortly on each of them, tackling *vida digna*, food sovereignty, and agroecology.

3.4.1 Vida digna

As we have already seen, according to many ex-combatants, although considered very important, sustainability goes beyond the economic. In some interviews, the respondent connected this broader interpretation of sustainability with the concept of *vida digna*. *Vida digna* can be translated as worthy life. This concept, although broadly interpretable, also has quite specific implications. These facets of *vida digna* do fit in some of the three identified categories, but will be shortly mentioned here as well.

The interviewees who used the concepts of *vida digna* and *buen vivir*, connected them with reincorporation and perceived them as a part of what is sustainability. This gives the concept a rather holistic character, that is also heavily linked to the peace agreement. When an interviewee was explaining what sustainability meant to her, she mentioned that she sees it as a very broad concept. Also, she added the term *vida digna*.

> *"Yes, we don't strictly call it sustainability. What we do postulate is that we agreed with a peace, a peace, a peace agreement that is sitting, let us say it like this, that is sitting at the basis of a worthy life, for overcoming violence and situations of exclusion of the majority of Colombians. When you translate this to the term sustainability, what we are talking about is that sustainability is, is a situation of balance. Balance with regard to nature, life, social conditions."* (interview Regina, ex-combatant and politician)

This concept of a worthy life is also referred to with the words 'buen vivir', meaning 'to live well, and is implicitly an important part of the peace agreement. That is, according to one of the interviewees, sustainability is correlated with the concept of worthy life, and both concepts find each other in the right implementation of the peace agreement.

> *"And I am going to elaborate more. When we talk about point three [of the agreement], which is the part of the reincorporation, we are talking about reincorporation in accordance with... about economic, political, and social reincorporation, in accordance with our interests. And our interests are just those conditions for a worthy life, 'buen vivir', we also call it. So, for me, the sustainability has a correlation with the worthy life. The idea of 'buen vivir' has a correlation with the term sustainability"* (interview Regina, ex-combatant and politician)

Vida digna reaches beyond the economic dimension of sustainability. According to ex-combatants who used the term, a cooperative should satisfy social and environmental needs. The following quote illustrates this, mentioning an interpretation of sustainability that is linked with the concept of *vida digna*.

> *"I think sustainability has to go beyond this, and that sustainability has to think as well about not just being economically sustainable, but also like I just said: sustainable with regard to creating conditions for a worthy life for those who are [involved]. But moreover, not just living conditions for the human being, but for nature, for the environment, for life itself. In other words, go beyond the mere capitalist thought of profit. In this way, for example, I can create a business that generates me resources and provides me with an income. Well, but if I am sacrificing the environment, will it be sustainable? Ah sustainable for... for me, but not for life itself, for the human being and in a general context, for the environment."* (interview Matías, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

The connectedness between an economic interpretation of sustainability and what is called worthy life, is also expressed by another ex-combatant. To be able to live a 'worthy life' can be an important aspect of a sustainable cooperative, but having economic sustainability as a condition.

"Well that it is not in vain, that it produces some income and that it produces a solution to the problem of unemployment. That, let's say, the families that are linked to this project can live in worthy conditions, having a more or less favourable income" (interview Timo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

Something that is also important to note, is that the concept of a worthy life, when used to refer to the sustainability of an ex-combatant cooperative, does not just apply to the members of the cooperative. On the contrary, according to ex-combatant and politician Regina, one of the aims of a sustainable ex-combatant cooperative should be to be in a good relation with external actors.

"Of course, we look for the members to be, or to have some conditions of worthiness and if you want, of sustainability, but not just inwardly focussed, but also, and mainly, outwardly. That is why the activities of Asocunt are always in relation to the community and the territory." (interview Regina, ex-combatant and politician)

When referring to a what is a worthy life, several concrete topics are mentioned. These topics are also connected to the three identified categories of sustainability. Here they are given as examples of what respondents understand by worthy life. Worthy living is associated with alimentation, residence, employment, salary, emotional stability, and land.

"Now, when we talk about sustainability of life, we talk about all lives, don't we? Of living beings, but in particular human beings. And talking about sustainability of human beings, well we are talking about some conditions of dignity in which people live. That is, well, including nutrition… the things in Colombia we call the fundamental rights for all Colombians, that is to have a place of residence, worthy living, worthy employment, worthy salaries, job stability, emotional stability. Eeh, since we, Colombians, are that much connected to the rurality, it is fundamental that the rural communities have land. And a sufficient amount of land to produce their food, even to provide for the national food market, and why not the international food market" (interview Regina, ex-combatant and politician)

3.4.2   Food sovereignty

Another term used to describe sustainability was used by a non-ex-combatant, who is an active member of a farmer organisation. When asked about sustainability in the context of cooperatives, the interviewee mentions that instead of sustainability, other concepts are used in the organisation.

"Although the word sustainability we almost do not use a lot. We almost do not use it. We talk more about the topic of balance, of sovereignty. Those are other concepts." (interview Daniel, member farmer organisation)

Food sovereignty was said to be associated with the topic of commercialization and also the topic of land ownership, which is connected to the agrarian reform. The importance of food sovereignty for the perceived sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives is also reflected in answers from ex-combatant interviewees, who expressed that food takes an important role in their perspectives on sustainability. The best illustration of this are perhaps the efforts made to establish an agroecological farm in at least one ex-combatant cooperative. When asking one of the contributors of the farm what sustainability meant to him, he mentioned the ability of people and communities to produce and consume their own food, using own resources, implicitly touching the concept of food sovereignty.

"That is to say, that the person can help to generate their food. And not just the person, but that the communities can go to get involved in communitarian projects with community gardens that allow people to reduce their expenses from their drained pockets, and they themselves can bring to their houses: legumes, vegetables, some poultry products. So, they

themselves can go and take from what they cultivate, that is sustainability." (Fernando, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

According to different interviewees, food prices in Colombia are rising. This, according to the contributor of the farm, adds to the urgence of food sovereignty. He mentioned efforts were made to teach people how to cultivate, and also to establish seed banks, where people can obtain seeds to cultivate in their small places. Other activities taking place at this farm are the spreading of knowledge, which fits in the statements of those who are involved. That is, sustainability in a cooperative also means reaching out to the social environment, spreading its practices and ideas.

Like *vida digna*, the concept of food sovereignty as used by the respondents also has a holistic character. Not only was it used in a context of autonomy, but also as a way towards a different economic system.

> *"So, we at the agroecological farm are also projecting a model of a different society, of a different economy, that is sustainable, that is based in food sovereignty, that does not just think about the gains of a small group. That is why the model of a solidary economy, a circular economcy, an alternative econmoy is the solution to the vital necessities of the workers, to the vital necessities of the Colombian people"* (interview Timo, ex-combatant, member cooperative)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this research was to identify factors that are important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives. The empirical chapters tackling the results of this research have done so in an elaborate way. This final chapter summarises the most relevant conclusions of the research, and as such answers the main research question. Also, the results will be confronted with existing literature and recommendations for further research will be provided.

Factors that were important for a sustainable cooperative, according to members and non-members of the ex-combatant cooperatives, in most cases were quite specific, each being relatable to a specific dimension of sustainability. In this thesis, sustainability was categorized in the dimensions of organisational, economic, and political sustainability. An important conclusion here is that sustainability was perceived in a much broader way than the ecological interpretation of the concept, that is dominant in literature (Ruggerio, 2021).

Firstly, with regard to the organisational perspective of sustainability of cooperatives, the collective form of reincorporation that is desired by ex-combatants sharply contrasts with the traditional DDR based vision on reincorporation favoured by the Colombian government. The DDR based vision is aimed at an individual form of reincorporation. Autocreation by forming cooperatives, preventing ex-combatants' isolation, is seen as an important instrument to counter this. This fits to the idea of seeing ex-combatants' political struggles in the reincorporation process "as struggles for autonomy" as Cortés & Verschoor (2021, p. 51) argue. Also contributing to countering government efforts to individualise reincorporation, whilst serving the exchange of knowledge, experience and resources between ex-combatants and non-ex-combatant actors, is the creation of connections between ex-combatants and their cooperatives. The transition from a military to a non-military organisation that the ex-combatants of the FARC-EP have lived though, creates tension between a vertical organisational structure based on command, and a horizontal one favouring collective decision making. Delegating tasks proves a method to adapt to this new situation. Also, having a new vision that is shared by the members of an ex-combatant cooperative is deemed crucial for its organisational sustainability, because taking over the State is not the aim anymore. As Cortés and Verschoor (2021, p. 50) argue, this former political dream has shifted "toward more localized and pragmatic political projects". In this context, ex-combatant cooperates that want to be sustainable need a new shared vision. To create a new shared vision, leaders are needed that are transparent and enable members to participate in the decision-making process. Following this important role of leaders in the post-conflict context, I agree with Cortés and Verschoor (2021), about the importance of leaders for co-creating (with the members) a shared future of their cooperatives.

Secondly, being economically sound is of core importance of the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. To enhance what is called the economic sustainability, cooperatives engage in a diverse set of economic activities. Acquiring project funds from institutions was considered most important to enable collective economic reincorporation, but also ecotourism, lotteries, and bazaars were applied. Some ex-combatants criticize the dependence on project funds from institutions for the economic sustainability of cooperatives, arguing that this is not sustainable since it only means profiting from donation money, and that having an individual job is vital to reach a sustainable cooperative. This is important, since it suggest that a sustainable economic reincorporation for ex-combatants is rooted outside activities performed by the cooperative.

Another factor very important for the economic sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives, is the possession of the right knowledge and skills. Because most ex-combatants have been cut off from

Colombian society for a long time, they lack the knowledge and skills necessary to make an ex-cooperative economically sustainable. Cortés and Verschoor (2021. p.63) argued that many ex-combatant cooperatives "still have an excessively optimistic view of entrepreneurial, market-oriented schemes sold to, and naively accepted by, FARC-EP's delegation during the Havana peace talks". I agree to this and observe that this attitude is gradually changing, in line with the learning process mentioned by Cortés and Verschoor (2021). To add to this, I observed that the shift from a naively optimistic, to a more realistic attitude regarding the logic of the neoliberal market differs considerably among ex-combatant cooperatives. Cooperatives that were more advanced in this regard had the possession of a large and solid network of connections.

Thirdly, the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives is highly affected by the political context in Colombia. Political willingness is mentioned to be low, resulting in a lack of resources, education, and policies facilitating the collective reincorporation of ex-combatants. Also, it underlies the lack of commitment of the government with regard to the implementation of the peace agreement, which is considered a huge barrier for the construction of sustainable cooperatives by many ex-combatants. Overcoming the challenge of the low political willingness is possible, as is proved by a successful case of autocreation of an ex-combatant cooperative that was described by (Cortés & Verschoor, 2021, p.61) highlighted their "independence from the government" as one of their main skills. Recognizing the weight of the lack of political willingness in ex-combatants' perception of sustainability, I do argue that while possible, it remains hard to reach a sustainable collective reincorporation with the current degree of political willingness. In this regard, further research aimed at the autocreation of reincorporation beyond government services, such as the case described by Cortés and Verschoor (2021) can prove useful to more deeply explore the factors enabling this independence.

Land ownership is another issue caused by the low political willingness, and the lack of it among ex-combatants is hampering the structural transformation of the countryside described in the peace agreement. Its importance arises from the agricultural background of many ex-combatants, with a skillset not adapted to an urban context, and from the positive effects of the sense of belonging that land ownership creates. The former FARC-EP leadership has been converted to a political party (Comunes) and several members have been granted a position in the national government. Currently, ex-combatants do not feel represented by their former leaders anymore, leading to a decline of trust in cooperatives as a way to reach sustainability among some ex-combatants, but also a future oriented attitude among others.

Some ex-combatants, instead of talking about sustainability, use alternative terms, that ostensibly could not easily be fitted to a specific theme. In this research, respondents used the concepts *vida digna* (Spanish for worthy life, and also referred to as buen vivir) and food sovereignty. For the research participants, *vida digna* refers to a situation in which both members and non-members of the cooperatives are enabled to live in conditions of worthiness, counting with the right alimentation, residence, employment, salary, emotional stability, and land. Taking this into account, I argue that the concept of *vida digna*, although the term is not mentioned that much, is underlying many of the factors that are mentioned in the organisational, economic, and political sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives. Regarding the sustainability of cooperatives, I argue that ex-combatants desire a worthy reincorporation.

Ostensibly, the contrast between an economic focus on sustainability of cooperatives on the one side and *vida digna* on the other, touches a discussion in literature about the contrast between *buen vivir* and sustainable development. Ruggerio (2021), in his review of principles and definitions of sustainability and sustainable development, poses these two against each other, pointing out that the term *buen vivir* contrasts the idea of sustainable development, that has become hegemonic. He links sustainable development to Western culture, in which humans are seen as the central element of the

universe, while the term *buen vivir*, finding its origins in South American indigenous cultures, has a vision in which humans take their place next to other living beings with which they should be in balance (Ruggerio 2021). He explains that the concept of *buen vivir* goes beyond the "satisfaction of needs and mere access to services and commodities" (Ruggerio, 2021, p.8). Of the identified categorizations in this research, the economic interpretation of sustainability was dominant. That is, most research participants connected sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives to financial stability in the long term. Economic security, however, is also an integral part of a *vida digna.* Moreover, multiple respondents explicitly mentioned that the economic focus should not be at cost of the environment. Based on the findings of this study, I argue that the economic dimension of sustainability as shaped by the respondents of this research, is more connected with the concepts of *vida digna* and *buen vivir* than that of the sustainable development.

Graser and colleagues (2020, p.11) mentioned the lack of specific regulations "in the peace agreement for sustainable land use, like traditional or agroecological farming" leading to an increase in the use of rather intensive ways of land use, increasing deforestation in formerly inaccessible territories. Considering their attitude towards the natural environment, based on the idea of *vida digna*, ex-combatant cooperatives can play a potential role in reducing these negative effects.

Another term that was used instead of sustainability, was 'food sovereignty'. The term food sovereignty is rather holistic as well, in the sense that it represents multiple factors related to the different identified dimensions of sustainability. Food sovereignty as proposed by the respondents of this study refers to the idea that consumers and communities of consumers should have a greater impact in the production of their food, and as such become less dependent on the current producers. Not only the production, but also the commercialization of the produced products should be in the hands of the farmers themselves. To make this possible, land ownership is mentioned to be an important contributor to food sovereignty.

Based on the ideas that were expressed about food sovereignty, I argue that, although it was not explicitly mentioned by the respondents of this study, autonomy plays an important role in this. Here I agree with the Masioli and Nicholson (as cited in McEachern et al., 2022), who state that autonomy is connected to the concept of food sovereignty. McEachern and colleagues (2022) argue that food sovereignty plays a key role in the way to self-determination of indigenous peoples. Comparing the position of indigenous groups in a context that is culturally and normatively different than their own, with the situation of ex-combatants after re-entering Colombian society, I argue that food sovereignty can be of equal importance in paving the way to self-determination of ex-combatants in the post-agreement context. That is, food sovereignty can support ex-combatants in the autocreation of their own reincorporation process.

To conclude, sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives is perceived in many different ways. The concept of a worthy life is underlying many of the factors deemed important for sustainability. Following this, to enable ex-combatant cooperatives to be sustainable, and to contribute to a successful collective economic reintegration, which in turn increases the possibility of a sustainable peace, it is important for ex-combatants that their reincorporation is a worthy one. This means a reincorporation that allows ex-combatants to live in a context of safety, an income, and government compliance of the peace treaty. Considering the continuous challenges faced to achieve these things, it remains important to put attention to the sustainability of ex-combatant cooperatives.

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