

Reflection on Study Abroad in Colombia

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Peacebuilding often asks how societies can move forward after violence. But what happens when moving forward comes at the expense of justice? This summer, I spent 16 days in Colombia exploring that question with a group of fellow USU students. Through various site visits, lectures, and discussions, we learned about Colombia's efforts to heal from decades of conflict and build a more sustainable future. However, as the trip unfolded, I began to see that the terms "healing" and "justice" were not quite the synonyms I had thought them to be.

Among the mothers I met was Blankita, whose son Julián was only nineteen when he was killed. When the Truth Commission came along, Blankita was hopeful. After years of searching for answers about her son, she believed that she might finally get the truth about what happened. But that hope was not fulfilled. The process did not bring the answers or accountability she had spent nine years fighting for. Instead, she described being met with lies, mockery, and disrespect from the soldiers involved. She was silenced and unallowed to challenge anything the soldiers said.

Before meeting Blankita, I had understood Colombia's Truth Commission as a remarkable example of justice through truth and restoration. Sitting across from someone whose experience of that process felt so incomplete, I began to wonder whether restoration had been allowed to overshadow accountability. For Blankita, truth was not enough and I was no longer sure that it should have been for me either. Because if a process recognizes a victim's suffering but does not require those responsible to fully answer for the harm they caused, can it truly be called justice? That question stayed with me and led me to think more deeply about why a country emerging from conflict might choose truth commissions and reconciliation over widespread prosecutions.

The answer, I began to realize, lies partly in one of peacebuilding's most important ideas: *interdependence*. We are taught to see interdependence as a foundation for peace because people and institutions rely on one another and therefore must eventually find ways to live together. But Colombia made me question whether the same interdependence that makes peace possible can also complicate justice. What happens when wrongdoing is so widespread that holding everyone accountable through traditional punishment becomes impossible? In a conflict that lasted for decades and involved thousands of people across armed groups and institutions, a society cannot simply prosecute everyone who participated and expect to function afterward. At some point, the need to rebuild a functioning society places limits on what accountability can realistically look like.

However, as the trip continued, another layer was added to my understanding of justice. During a lecture on Colombia's geography and food, our speaker, a chef, explained how deeply the country's geography shapes the lives of its communities. What began as a conversation about food soon turned to food insecurity during the conflict. We learned that the effects of the war went far beyond physical violence. Displacement, poverty, and limited access to food left many people struggling to meet basic needs. That conversation eventually brought us back to the false positives and the circumstances that led soldiers to participate.

Where we begin the story changes who we see as responsible, who we see as a victim, and ultimately what we believe justice requires. And so, my thinking about punishment and accountability changed again. I had wanted justice to be something I could define clearly, almost like a formula: harm is committed, responsibility is established, and punishment follows. But Colombia made that much harder to defend. Accountability still mattered to me, especially after hearing Blankita's story, but I could no longer separate it from the circumstances surrounding the harm.

I began to see that accountability cannot look the same in every context. Justice must consider both the harm that was done and the conditions that made that harm possible. What Colombia ultimately taught me is that justice cannot lose sight of accountability, but accountability itself cannot be separated from the context in which harm occurs. The scale of violence, the conditions that produced it, and the needs of the people affected all shape what accountability can and should look like.

There is no universal set of steps that can be checked off and called justice. The danger, I think, is believing

that there is. Justice is not a destination that a society reaches once it has established a truth commission, held a trial, or signed a peace agreement. It is an ongoing process that must respond to the people and communities living with the consequences of violence. In this sense, justice is a verb: it requires continual action, reflection, and adjustment.

As a student, peacebuilder, and young activist, this has changed how I think about the work I want to do moving forward. If pursuing justice is at the core of why I care about peacebuilding and social change, then I must be willing to continually examine what I mean by justice and what it requires of me. Colombia reminded me that justice is not something I can define once and then apply everywhere. It is something I must keep questioning, pursuing, and putting into practice.