



ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION:

Second chances change lives

To give visibility to the economic reintegration into civilian life of former combatants, show what is being done and how it is done: This was the aim of the research undertaken by Merlin Patricia Grueso, professor at the School of Business and Management of the Universidad del Rosario. Her study found that the model implemented by the Sodexo company is not only successful, but it would be worth replicating and systematizing. She drafted a guide so that Colombian businessmen may see how second chances change lives.

By: Inés Elvira Ospina
Photos: Leonardo Parra, Sodexo

According to the *Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización* (Agency for Reintegration and Normalization – ARN), of the more than 60,000 persons in the stage of reintegration, only around 1,700 have a formal job. While that figure does pose an enormous challenge for Colombian society, it also makes one think about the companies which are offering new opportunities to those who were involved in the armed conflict.

“There is something very valuable in this creation of jobs. It does not only change the life of the person who was involved in the conflict, it also changes that of his family, and of course, has repercussions in society,” states Merlin Patricia Grueso Hinestroza, professor at the School of Management and Business at the Universidad del Rosario, who led the research which resulted in the *Guide to sound practices for linking persons in the stage of reintegration to the labor market in Colombia and maintaining them, based on the “Employment with Support” model*.

The study, which resulted in a book, set out to encourage the participation of Colombian businessmen in the economic reintegration of the people going through that process,

through the design of a guide to sound practices. “Even though it is a complex subject to deal with, we found that there were many prejudices against them, due to ignorance, and that some businessmen were willing to commit themselves but did not know how to do it. That is why we decided to investigate the subject,” explains Grueso, a member of the University Council of the Universidad del Rosario.

Due to the confidential nature of the data, the researchers had to enlist the support of the *Agencia de Reincorporación* and the Agency suggested they have a look at Sodexo, due to its model of labor inclusiveness and its large number of such workers: 100, when their study began in 2016. This company provides on-site services of food, cleaning and maintenance, among others.

Reconciliation and forgiveness in real life

The first task was to study the model of inclusion implemented by Sodexo since the demobilization, 13 years ago, of the combat-

ants of the *Autodefensas Armadas de Colombia* (Armed Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – AUC). The first surprise came when they compared what that company had done with models which were being implemented in other parts of the world, because they found it was very similar to the model of “Employment with Support” proposed by the European Union.

“I was very surprised to learn that what we had been doing in a somewhat intuitive way corresponded to a model which had already been established,” remarks Dalida Villa Vanegas, leader of the “Solutions Alliance” of Sodexo, for whom one of its wise decisions was to foster a permanent involvement in the lives of the beneficiaries.

An example of that was seen when the time came to think about including the demobilized members of the FARC guerrilla (the previous opponents of the AUC). “We asked the former members of the AUC what they thought about it and their answer struck us as incredible: ‘Don’t ask us. If you gave that opportunity to us, we don’t have the right to tell you not to give it to them,’” Villa Vanegas recalls. The same happened when the project also wanted to include the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, “they were somewhat afraid of meeting up with someone they might have harmed, but they likewise said it would be wrong to deny them the opportunity,” she adds.

In the opinion of professor Merlin Patricia, this scenario is one of the most valuable aspects of the study. “It is here that you begin to understand the reality of everything we are hearing every day about forgiveness and reconciliation, ideals which many of us Colombians do not easily live up to. They have a valuable lesson for us: It is not worth persisting with hatred and resentment,” she stresses.

The next step was to make the work which Sodexo does better known. To undertake a systematic effort to show what is being done about reintegration and economic reincorporation to businessmen and the general public, how it is being done, its scope and different aspects, and the number of people whose lives are being transformed.

The experiences of 64 of the 100 persons involved in the program enriched the study. The remaining 36 had already finished their training and they were in another scheme of accompaniment. The fact is that the “Employment with Support” Model of Sodexo provides a differentiated attention, in accordance with the stage the beneficiaries are in and their particular situation. In addition to their work, when they enter the program they must par-



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ticipate in different kinds of activities which train them and develop their skills. As they advance and graduate, there is less and less focus on the accompaniment the program provides.

Opposite shores, similar attitudes

As the study advanced, it found that the people who are part of the employment program at Sodexo (persons in the process of reintegration and victims) face similar difficulties, even though they were on opposite sides during the conflict.

The head of the study explains that the world of work places them in a common framework, but the capacity to handle the logic of a society which is new to them are strange. “For example, they plasticize a bank card or when they are sick, go to a drugstore for an injection instead of their health insurer. But, despite all that, they manage to enter into that emotional socialization, which is very recoverable,” she highlights and states that, in general, the study found that they are optimistic persons, with a valuable second chance.

Of course, they are not alone in the process. The Sodexo model implemented a series of principles for all of its activities and practices which give them tools to assimilate their new life. Among them, for example, there are ones for self-determina-



tion and individuality, two crucial aspects which help them to rebuild themselves.

Another similarity between those who once thought of each other as enemies or those who were in the middle of the conflict as victims is the way they look at urban life and enjoy the city from a different standpoint. For them, going to parks or public places without anxiety is novel: Hence, activities which allow for that link are included in the program.

The guide assesses whether companies are prepared for the program

“We found that the ‘Employment with Support’ Model is one of the most effective ones. We believe that it is the first time this problem has been studied outside of Europe and with different populations, in a special conflict like our own,” professor Grueso explains. That is why it was decided to add a guide to the research, which explains the model applied by Sodexo, step by step. “To give that experience a name and an embodiment not only shows that it can be done but how to do it,” she remarks.

The Sodexo model consists of five phases which enable the businessman to play a more leading role. It details what the

company has to do and also some tools to facilitate its implementation.

The guide suggests, for example, that the process start with an evaluation of the company to determine whether it is prepared to receive persons on the way to reintegration. It advises the company to handle the process with a committee which includes senior executives and once it arrives at a positive diagnosis, decides on the jobs it will assign to the beneficiaries. “The design of that job must ensure that it is meaningful, because that is what the study generally showed,” professor Grueso explains.

The study also offers measuring tools, guides, recommendations, diagnoses and other means to make sure that the businessman is not left on his own. “This study gave visibility to practical exercises which are useful and the testimonies of those involved. It also provides tools which show how to do it and that is very valuable, because the companies are very pragmatic and want a specific scheme, with a guide to applying it,” stresses Mayra Iglesias, a professional and specialist in the Co-responsibility Group of the ARN, who was involved in the research from its start.

In the opinion of Iglesias, the publication is a striking testimony which helps businessmen to believe that they can help the ex-combatants. “It helps us to make them more aware that what is required is not an additional resource, nor a matter of higher expenses, but an investment, not only in their company but the future generations,” she says.

What's next

The results have yielded a number of ideas that may be useful in the future. “We recently opened a line of research which is known as vocational psychology, which involves marginal populations with social disadvantages: It is already beginning to be applied, with refugees from Syria. In Colombia, we have a similar population: The victims of forced displacement in our own conflict and we are interested in studying their working experience,” the researcher Merlin Grueso tells us.

To do that, they have already contacted the Victims Unit of Colombia, which also has a model of inclusion in the labor market. It is a big challenge, since, according to the estimates of that institution, the number of displaced persons in Colombia is 8,816,304 and nearly 50% of them are of working age. However, they face the same problems as those who have demobilized: The consequences of being uprooted, lack of skills and the prejudices of the general public due to ignorance of their situation. ■