

COMMUNITY AND RESPECT FOR LIFE (A): THE ROLE OF NESTLÉ COLOMBIA IN SOCIETY¹

"The vicious and endemic cycle of violence and impunity in Colombia must come to an end."
United Nations

It was September 2018, and Antonio Nuñez Lemos arrived in Bogotá as the Market Head of Nestlé in Colombia.

After more than 27 years at Nestlé, he would take on the responsibility of leading the company nationwide and sustaining the growth trajectory the business had built in recent years. One of his main challenges would be to solidify that growth over the long term, strengthening Nestlé's presence across more than 20 categories. But that wasn't what weighed most heavily on Antonio's mind.

He had led technical and operations teams in countries such as Spain, France, Mexico, and Chile. His focus had always been on results, designing and implementing strategies to optimize resources, and improving production efficiency and quality. And, of course, he had always cared deeply about people—his teams. Before being appointed chairman of the Colombian market, he had served as Vice President of Operations for the Americas Zone. Yet even with all that experience, he had never faced anything quite like this.

The atmosphere at Nestlé Colombia was extremely tense. In May 2018, three Nestlé workers from the Bugalagrande plant had been murdered just days before labor agreement negotiations were set to begin. Adding to the tragedy, another murder had occurred that September, coinciding with Antonio's arrival. The victims were members of the plant's most prominent labor union, and although no link was ever established between the murders and union activity, Nestlé—despite its policies on protecting union rights and worker safety—was once again under scrutiny for its role in defending union leaders. The risk of slipping back into the dark period between 2005 and 2012, when union leader Luciano Romero was killed, felt very real.

Antonio was convinced that action was necessary—but how should they go about it? What role should Nestlé take in response to these murders? What did society and the company's workers expect from them?

¹ Work document prepared by Professor Rocío Reina. June 2025.

NESTLÉ AND COLOMBIA

In Colombia, a large portion of society had long felt the weight of deep inequality. As a result of that unrest, the 1960s and '70s saw the rise of groups like the FARC², ELN³, and EPL⁴—Marxist-inspired movements that sought agrarian reform and social justice and engaged in armed conflict against the government. In response to the insecurity in rural areas, paramilitary groups emerged, supported by businesspeople and ranchers, with the aim of combating the guerrillas. This armed conflict only deepened the crisis in a society that was becoming increasingly divided and polarized.

Moreover, during the 1980s and '90s, drug trafficking spread across the country. Armed groups—both paramilitaries and so-called revolutionary movements—saw it as an opportunity to finance their operations, making an already complex situation even more difficult.

The armed conflict in Colombia had claimed more than 9 million victims. Its consequences and scars were still deeply present in Colombian society in 2018. After Burkina Faso, Colombia ranked second in the world for organized crime, and it was the most dangerous country for human rights and environmental defenders. Activism often clashed with powerful interests, making it a deadly pursuit.

Nestlé was established in Colombia in 1944 and by 2018, it had been operating there for over 70 years. The company began operations at the Bugalagrande plant in Valle del Cauca, about an hour from the Pacific coast in the southwest of the country. That facility would become the most important plant in the country.

That region of the country accounted for 70% of Colombia's coca cultivation. At the time, the country had an average of 280,000 hectares planted with coca. The factory was located near the Pan-American Highway, a route used not only for the transportation of goods and people but also for weapons, migrants, U.S. dollars, and all kinds of illegal merchandise. Historically, these had been the routes through which drugs traveled from southern Colombia to the Pacific and from there on to Mexico. This was where the drug cartels had set up their operations in the 1980s and '90s. And remnants of that mafia culture still lingered.

As a multinational company with plants in various rural areas of the country—such as Caquetá, Valle del Cauca, and Cesar—Nestlé had faced challenges stemming from the armed conflict, paramilitarism, and drug trafficking. Nestlé Colombia had always

² The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP) was a Colombian insurgent guerrilla organization on the far left, grounded in the ideology and principles of Marxism-Leninism and Bolivarianism.

³ The National Liberation Army (ELN) is a Colombian insurgent guerrilla organization involved in drug trafficking and classified as a far-left terrorist group operating in both Colombia and Venezuela.

⁴ The Popular Liberation Army (EPL) was a Colombian insurgent guerrilla organization on the far left, rooted in the principles and ideologies of Marxism-Leninism, and a participant in Colombia's internal armed conflict.

remained committed to the company's core values and principles, which were especially important in guiding its operations through the country's turbulent conditions. However, the company had not been immune to criticism.

The official unionization rate in Colombia was low—around 7%. At Nestlé, it was 100%. More information can be found in Exhibit 1. As Antonio put it, *"This means that Nestlé is a company that places no barriers on people who choose to join a union."* In Bugalagrande, 80% of unionized employees were members of Sinaltrainal⁵. That union had documented numerous cases of violence against its members. Between 1986 and 2009, at least a dozen workers and union activists linked to Nestlé were murdered. The union accused the company of failing to take effective measures to prevent these crimes and even went so far as to accuse Nestlé of turning a blind eye. The murder of Luciano Romero in 2005 marked a critical turning point in the situation. This was the context in which the company was operating.

THE ASSASSINATION OF LUCIANO ROMERO

In 2005, a union leader named Luciano Romero, who had been an employee of Nestlé Colombia, was brutally and savagely murdered. The incident caused a major outcry, occurring in a context marked by intense paramilitary activity and violent clashes between the state and guerrilla forces. And, as Antonio explained:

"In that context, a connection emerged—one that, at the time, Nestlé failed to grasp fully: union leaders could become targets of paramilitary groups, who viewed them as enemies of the state."

When a union leader carried out their duties denouncing company practices, standing up for workers, and so on, these were activities that would be considered part of legitimate union representation in any other country; however, in this context, it could be perceived as an attack on the economy and the government.

Luciano Romero felt persecuted, left Nestlé, and entered a refugee program. He traveled to Spain and eventually settled in Asturias. In 2005, after receiving an invitation, he decided to return to Colombia to participate in a conference focused specifically on the union situation. Shortly after his return to Colombia, Luciano was kidnapped. The next day, he was found murdered in an absolutely brutal manner.

All of this triggered a powerful response from Sinaltrainal, the union Luciano had led, both in Colombia and across Europe. In Europe, Sinaltrainal succeeded in gaining the attention and support of unions in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Beyond the media outcry it sparked, the situation also led to legal actions being initiated against

⁵ The National Union of Food Industry Workers (SINALTRAINAL) is a Colombian food industry union founded in 1982 and affiliated with the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia. It represents workers in the food industry, particularly those employed by multinational companies like Coca-Cola and Nestlé.