Advancing a public security approach for local communities in violence-prone areas in Colombia

Marika Theros
Andrea Guardo
Ben Acheson

Conflict and Civicness Research Group at LSE

Civic Engagement Project. Civic Engagement Project.

About the Civic Engagement Project:

The Civic Engagement Project (CEP) led this research and engagement, as well as provided support to the communication efforts of the governors in COP16. CEP adopts a bottom-up approach to communities combined with high-level policy advisory. CEP has extensive experience in supporting and advising local stakeholders on peace, security and ceasefire processes at multiple levels. This includes designing methodologies for community engagement, promoting the inclusion of civil society and communities in peace and security processes, creating multi-stakeholder platforms for policy and operational change, and integrating communications across all efforts. Leveraging its global networks and partnerships with key practitioners and experts, especially from Global South contexts experiencing violence, CEP mobilizes expertise from diverse contexts for joint analysis, process design, and improved communications.

Through this global network, CEP is laying the groundwork for a Global South Forum on Peace and Security that will bring together diverse partners and expertise from across the Global South, as well as traditional peace and security stakeholders. By bringing together diverse and complementary perspectives and expertise with strategic communications, CEP supports stakeholders navigating the intersection between the technicalities and politics of peace and security processes.

About Conflict and Civicness Research Group:

The Conflict and Civicness Research Group (CCRG) at LSE is part of LSE IDEAS, the foreign policy think tank for the London School of Economics. CCRG is one of the world's leading centers for the study of conflict, peace and how communities within conflict affected societies can be empowered to participate in transitions to peace and human rights. The CCRG's collective of interdisciplinary scholars uniquely straddle academia, policy, and practice. As a whole, the group has decades of experience that is shaped by the changing nature of conflict and peace processes from the conclusion of the second world war, through to the end of the Cold War and the 'War on Terror', into the present era of global fragmentation and populism's resurgence.

About the report:

This report outlines opportunities to address current peace and security challenges affecting local communities, particularly Afro-descendant and Indigenous, within the current context through a localized human security approach. By integrating insights from field visits, engagement with key stakeholders, and community consultations in late summer 2024, this memo offers actionable recommendations to operationalize an integrated peace and security effort and reduce violence in selected sub-national areas. It is based both on national-level discussions but also the particularities of the challenges and opportunities of two regions – Nariño and Chocó – and outlines proposed pilot projects in both regions.

About the authors:

Dr. Marika Theros is Director of the Civic Engagement Project, Policy Fellow at LSE IDEAS, and Co-Founder of the Civic Ecosystems Initiative.

Andrea C. Guardo is a policy adviser and international development practitioner on human rights, civic space, peace and security. Previous work experience includes OSF, USAID, the U.S. Institute of Peace, CIVICUS, the Colombian Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development and the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia.

Ben Acheson is a security and mediation expert, and former NATO official. Other previous experience includes Head of Emerging Threats at Meta, Conflict Adviser in the OSCE, and adviser to the President of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iraq.

Acknowledgements:

During a march, hundreds of people walked carrying photographs of their murdered relatives, demanding justice, case clarification, and an end to the relentless violence that continues to take their loved ones. Quibdó, Colombia. Photo: Fernanda Pineda/Paramo Films

View of a stilt-house settlement where hundreds of families live in the municipality. Tumaco, Colombia. Photo: Fernanda Pineda/Paramo Films

SUMMARY

Colombia is once again poised to lead in innovation, finding new ways for societies to address complex organized violence, similar to its achievements in 2016 when the country ended a decades-long war, significantly reducing violence and shifting drugs policy. Globally, peace and security models are evolving, with governments, foundations and international actors trying to keep pace with these new dynamics. Colombia and its partners have a critical opportunity to develop new approaches for better outcomes and demonstrate how to adapt and respond to complex violence. An integrated model for localized peace and security that acknowledges the changing nature of organized violence and incorporates innovations centered on community agency, offers a more effective path to reducing violence and enhancing people's security.

While some success has been achieved in reducing homicides and negotiating ceasefires, persistent insecurity, poverty, and lack of clarity continue to affect local people, particularly Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities who still face violence and socio-economic exclusion. The opportunity lies in operationalizing its human security approach outlined in its National Defence and Security Strategy to address immediate safety concerns while also fostering long-term peace, security and development. By localizing efforts to build territorial peace and security in violence-prone areas such as Chocó and Nariño, Colombia can develop practical ways to bridge the gap between the national peace and security efforts and local realities.

This report presents recommendations for key initiatives to advance Colombia's ongoing peace and security efforts, particularly those focused on enabling security forces to operate effectively within the existing peace architecture and in the event of a no-peace scenario. The recommendations are based on analysis of Colombia's evolving peace and security environment, informed by insight-sharing field visits and engagements with key actors in Bogotá, Tumaco, and Chocó. They also directly respond to specific support requests from various stakeholders, including local communities and the Commissioner for Peace.

Key Recommendations

1. Develop community-informed peace and security metrics and indicators;

2. Advance the operationalization of human security, through a pilot/localized effort at tactical level that inform potential adaptations at policy level;

3. Develop territorial ceasefires and violence de-escalation efforts to enable local co-construction of peace;

4. Strengthen women's agency and inclusion across peace and security initiatives by deepening analysis of how armed groups use gender-based violence for social control and integrating those insights into new peace and security metrics and responses;

5. Convene a regional meeting of defense ministers to communicate a rights-respecting approach to security in an evolving regional and global security environment;

6. Transformative Communications for a Changing Context;

7. Support key governors highlighting the security, development and biodiversity nexus;

8. Advance financing and development for territorial peace and security;

9. Maintain momentum and strengthen legitimacy on local and national peace initiatives by elevating community actions in a national 'Visioning Process' of territorial peace;

10. Support a Peace and Human Security Forum to pioneer a 'Global South Approach'

OVERVIEW

In July and August 2024, a diverse team conducted a visit to Bogotá, Tumaco and Chocó supported by OSF and in partnership with the Colombian organization Social Development Group (SDG).[1] The team brought a wide range of expertise, including both academic and practitioner perspectives on peace and security, extensive experience in Global South contexts, and direct involvement in multiple peace processes at local and national levels. The team members had backgrounds from human security, including community, civilian institutions, and security sector perspectives.

The team, beyond the overarching task of sharing insights from other Global South contexts, set out with two primary objectives:

1. **Identify key elements required for an integrated peace and security framework that prioritizes the protection of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.**

2. **Explore the feasibility of a pilot project in Colombia's Pacific region (in Tumaco, Chocó or Buenaventura) for integrating a public security strategy that better protects communities in the context of the current peace efforts.**

To achieve these aims, the team engaged with over 50 individuals during the visit, including high-profile national actors such as the Commissioner for Peace, governors, local community leaders and church officials addressing daily violence on the ground. The team also engaged with key stakeholders including military and police forces, at both strategic and operational levels. All meetings were guided by a tailored engagement methodology developed specifically for the trip. Initial framing questions acknowledged Colombia's peace and security achievements to date, while also addressing emerging challenges, such as the evolving security environment and the fragmentation of armed groups. Subsequent questions were tailored to each stakeholder, focusing either on operationalizing human security at the local level or on adapting to the changing nature of conflict and violence at a national level.

Community consultations employed human security methodologies to explore how communities navigate violence and gather their perspectives on peace and security. Draft guidelines developed prior to the consultations were refined and validated in collaboration with partners. To cement new relationships, the team revisited influential stakeholders – including security officials – at the end of the trip, to share initial findings and analysis.

Overall, reception to the presented ideas and insights was overwhelmingly positive. The team identified a range of potential opportunities and received direct requests for support from various actors, including three specific requests for support from key stakeholders responsible for advancing the government's peace agenda: (1) Support in helping security forces adapt for territorial peace; (2) Support with ceasefire management; and (3) Support in ensuring women's inclusion.

[1] A planned visit to Buenaventura was not possible this time.

CURRENT CONTEXT & ANALYSIS

The engagements confirmed both the challenges and opportunities within Colombia's current context. The political environment is fragile, partly due to the challenges of building on the success of the 2016 national peace agreement and the heightened focus on peace and security as a central issue leading up to the 2026 Presidential election. While concerns about increasing polarization of Colombia's political landscape were raised considerably, there was also acknowledgement that such challenges are inherent to peace processes, which are deeply political. Specific challenges identified include:

- A **disconnect between national and regional perspectives** on ceasefires, echoing the 2016 plebiscite where urban communities largely opposed the peace agreement while violence-affected communities voted in favor.[2] In Bogotá, concerns revolved around the ambitiousness of the Paz Total initiative, especially the dialogues with multiple groups and the sequencing of ceasefires prior to a broader agreement, which some fear could lead to greater insecurity. This contrasts with the views of communities, local leaders, and other stakeholders who see ceasefires and violence-reduction efforts as essential steps to address the fragmented violence, implement the 2016 agreement, and create space for humanitarian, developmental, and security investments in the territories.

- A key question raised by independent institutions and other stakeholders concerned the **legality of convening peace dialogues** with criminal groups and dissidents of FARC who failed to fulfill the commitments agreed in the 2016 peace accords. While the Constitutional Court has clearly defined the scope of the Paz Total Policy[3] - focusing on the submission of high-impact criminal groups to justice - these tensions underscore the need for ongoing government collaboration with key institutions, including the Attorney General's Office, existing transitional justice mechanisms, and the intelligence and security sector. Given Colombia's experience with the 2003 paramilitary peace accords[4] and nearly two decades of implementing the Justice and Peace Law,[5] Colombia is now well-positioned to develop innovative solutions to these important challenges that balance peace efforts with criminal accountability.

- Growing concerns among stakeholders that a 'poisoning of peace' could take hold, potentially triggering **a backlash** similar to the shift seen in 2002 following the failure of the Pastrana government's peace initiative.[6] Former security officials highlighted the risk of 'false positives' if a narrative of failed peace gains traction, warning that such a narrative could promote hardline security approaches that exacerbate violence for communities.

[2]NACLA. "Beyond October 2: Possible Futures in Post-Referendum Colombia." 7 Oct 2016, Available at: https://nacla.org/news/2016/10/07/beyond-october-2-possible-futures-post-referendum-colombia; Indepaz, "El Resultado del Plebiscito en Cifras." Oct 2016, Available at: https://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/el-resultado-del-Plebiscito-en-cifras.pdf

[3]Constitutional Court of Colombia, Judgment C-525 of 2023. Justices Natalia Ángel and Antonio Lizarazo. 17 Aug. 2023, available at: https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2023/C-525-23.htm

[4]Comisión de la Verdad, "La Desmovilización de las AUC." Available at:https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/la-desmovilizacion-de-las-auc

[5]International Crisis Group. "Correcting Course: Victims and the Justice and Peace Law in Colombia." 30 Oct 2008. Available: https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/correcting-course-victims-and-justice-and-peace-law-colombia; See also: En Vivo. Habla Fiscal LUZ ADRIANA CAMARGO y GERSON CHAVERRA Presidente Corte - Justicia y PAZ #Focus

[6]Inter-American Dialogue, "The Difficulties of a Peace Deal: Lessons from Colombia's Failed Negotiations (1999-2002)," 16 Dec 2015, available at: https://thedialogue.org/analysis/the-difficulties-of-a-peace-deal/

However, most consultations with diverse stakeholders indicate a general, if varied, level of support for Colombia's renewed peace efforts, highlighting the need to consider the paramount security challenges facing local communities as well as security institutions in the geographies most affected by violence and crime. In 2017, armed groups—both insurgent and criminal—began to capitalize on the vacuum created by FARC's demobilization and the incomplete implementation of the 2016 peace agreement.[7]

In violence affected areas, communities were caught between differing multiple illegal armed groups competing for control over resources, territories and populations. In this context, integrating a human security approach with localized peace efforts allows security operations to be tailored to the specific mix of violent groups and security threats in different regions, enhancing the effectiveness of security and peacebuilding efforts at the local level.

This support for peace efforts underscores the importance of operationalizing human security within the security sector, especially through its integration into Paz Total, the national peace strategy.[8] A growing number of actors support this approach, recognizing the need for both national policy development and localized actions to advance human security at the community level – and providing an opening to build a broader coalition and leverage the significant capacity and knowledge built during the 2013-2016 negotiations.

This situation presents a **window of opportunity** to reimagine human security operationally and capitalize on the fertile environment, which is conducive to making human security more practical and implementable. This is especially true within Colombia's security architecture, which while robust, responds to traditional security approaches. Also, it currently remains open to adopting new methods to secure peace and address the violence and insecurity experienced by communities – especially in light of the evolving nature of armed groups and the changing dynamic of Colombia's conflict and crime.

Beyond this opportunity to operationalize human security, several recurring themes and insights emerged from the engagements. While some dynamics specific to Tumaco - where Governor-led peace initiatives are more advanced - compared to Chocó, where communities take a more active role, many common themes were identified across all field visits. Some of the most noteworthy include: changing dynamics of violence, challenges in coordination, the need to center communities in peace and security efforts, and localizing territorial peace to advance security nationally.

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE

The evolving security environment in Colombia and the changing nature of the conflict were widely discussed. Central to these shifts is the proliferation and fragmentation of organized violent and armed groups that blur the lines between political and criminal activities. The terms 'atomization and mutation' were used to describe how a landscape once dominated by the FARC has devolved into disparate groups with fluctuating links to one another. These groups increasingly focus on criminality rather than political motives or national agendas, which is frequently cited as a major challenge.

[7]United Nations, "Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia." 27 Dec. 2017, paragraph 21, Available at: https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/en_-_n1745936.pdf

[8]Leiden University, "The Policy of 'Paz Total' (Total Peace) in Colombia: Challenges, Failures, and Opportunities, 28 Feb 2023, available at: https://www.leidensecurityandglobalaffairs.nl/articles/the-policy-of-paz-total-total-peace-in-colombia-challenges-failures-and-opportunities

A significant shift is the way these violent actors exert social control over communities, particularly Afro-descendent and indigenous populations, not only a territorial control. For instance, the recruitment of children was frequently cited as supporting the group's rapid expansion while leaving communities trapped in a painful dilemma - resisting recruitment to protect their children, yet fearing reprisals from armed groups or the risk that the children already taken may be targeted by government forces. Communities struggle to navigate this control and are often forced to negotiate with these groups to mitigate insecurity and protect themselves in the absence of support from state forces.[9]

This scenario highlights the need for security forces to adapt their metrics to the evolving environment, as measuring violence solely through homicide rates inadequately captures social control and other forms of non-fatal violence (e.g. forced recruitment, displacements, coercion, confinement and isolation of entire communities, gender-based violence, etc.). It also underscores the need for security operations and strategies to evolve in response to the impact of social control on the strategic capacity of armed groups – making civilian protection essential to weakening their control, gaining a strategic advantage, and strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions.

A rising threat is the group known as Clan Del Golfo (CDG), which many communities view as a consequence (and mutation) of the inadequate response to the paramilitaries in the 2003 agreement and post-2005 period, as well as the security vacuum created post-2016 after the FARC demobilized. Former security officials have warned about the limited understanding of this group and the growing threat it poses in light of the changing dynamics of violence - requiring further analyses on the group's strategies and impacts on communities.[10] The growing integration of criminal business organizations with insurgent groups, similar to the Haqqani network with the Kandahari Taliban in Afghanistan, has prompted new forms of hybrid warfare,[11] where criminal organizations adopt insurgent tactics and insurgents leverage criminal networks to extend their reach, creating a far more resilient and dangerous adversary- requiring more innovative and demanding approaches to peace.

CHALLENGES IN COORDINATION

The evolving nature of Colombia's conflict demands a tailored approach that adapts to the fragmentation and diversity of actors and processes involved. Although localizing peace and security processes can address the unique challenges of each territory, they are part of a broader ecosystem of negotiations and cannot be treated in isolation. Evidence from other contexts, for example, demonstrates that peace and security initiatives in one area may create stability while shifting violence in another, as in Syria; similarly, national level dynamics can undermine or support a local agreement.[12] Adopting an integrated approach that compiles all local agreements within a national framework can help practitioners track how they interact with one another and impact security across local geographies. This necessitates a flexible architecture capable of managing and coordinating multiple, overlapping negotiation, dialogues and ceasefire processes, as well as improved coordination across the institutions responsible for advancing security, peace, development and environmental policies at both local and national levels.

[9]Studies underscore that community interactions with armed groups are complex, and are a pragmatic response to immediate threats which doesn't indicate support or affinity for these groups; see,e.g., Conciliation Resources, 'In the Midst of Violence: Local Engagement with Armed Groups,' May 2015, https://www.c-r.org/accord/engaging-armed-groups-insight/midst-violence-local-engagement-armed-groups

[10]The Clan del Golfo is also known as the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia, Gaitanistas), which is the group's self-denomination. For further information on CDG, their strategies and how they interact with communities, please see, e.g., Fundación Ideas para la Paz. "Una mesa con el Clan." October 2024, available at: https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/fip_clandelgolfo_final.pdf and reports by the International Crisis Group, "Fear and Silence: Life Under the Gaitanistas," April 2022, and "The Unsolved Crime in 'Total Peace': Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas." October 18, 2023, both available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean

[11]For further reading on the intersection of organized crime and insurgency in modern conflicts, see, e.g.: Ucko, David H., and Thomas A. Marks. "Organized Crime as Irregular Warfare: Strategic Lessons for Assessment and Response." PRISM, vol. 10, no. 3, 2023.

[12]Kaldor, M., Theros, M., & Turkmani, R. (2022). "Local agreements - An introduction to the special issue." Peacebuilding, 10(2), 107–12, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2042111

A lack of optimal coordination within the government, and between the government and its stakeholders, was frequently cited as a concern. This includes disconnects between the Ministry of Defense and the military, between Bogotá and regional governors, and between communities and security forces.

Another challenge is the absence of a cohesive approach to negotiations with armed groups, leading to armed groups negotiating at both local but also national levels. This can result in groups being strengthened nationally, even if they only have a subnational powerbase. Or conversely, broader-based groups may seek to gain concessions locally to strengthen their position at the national level, as may be the case with Segunda Marquetalia.[13] These coordination issues undermine peace and security efforts and underscore the importance of localizing peace and security initiatives within a national framework.

Security forces, local officials, and community leaders alike highlighted the need for clearer guidelines and improved coordination between national and local levels. Current attempts to negotiate a series of bilateral ceasefires in preparation for negotiated settlements would benefit from more cohesive coordination. Although communities generally support ceasefires, there are concerns that some ceasefires seem to benefit armed groups without reducing social control over communities. Improved coordination and trust-building between communities and security forces could be facilitated by establishing *deconfliction architecture* that includes community involvement. Depending on context, deconfliction architecture can, for example, provide either direct or indirect communication channels between the parties or multiple stakeholders, to enable advance warnings, explanation of motives for movements, and resolution of violations in ways that also promote trust building socialization of 'the other'. Successful deconfliction architecture from other experiences (e.g. Syria, Somalia and Afghanistan) can provide insights that may be useful in tailoring to the Colombia context.

THE NEED TO CENTER COMMUNITIES IN PEACE & SECURITY EFFORTS

Despite slow progress and a polarized political environment, there is a clear commitment to peace at all levels in Colombia, as evidenced by recent attempts to establish ceasefires with various groups coupled with reduction in homicides over the past six months. At the same time, current ceasefire efforts also highlight how peace efforts tend to be traditional 'top-down' initiatives focused on armed actors rather than communities. With the changing character of the conflict and increasingly criminal focus of armed groups, this leaves communities unprotected and still facing different forms of violence and social control, even when the ceasefires between armed actors are successful. In this environment, communities perceive the ceasefires as providing respites from violence and insecurity in the short-term, but with little limited impact on violence reduction and peace in the long-term.

Criticism has been raised that traditional ceasefires empower armed groups, enabling them to consolidate power, while leaving security forces unable to act. This underlines the need for more community-centric efforts, whether through ceasefires or other initiatives, to ensure they address community safety needs and the drivers of violence. This could include supporting security forces to be more proactive in trust-building and community security - essentially better operationalization of human security.

Efforts should also focus on working with communities to strengthen their agency and influence prevailing narratives by ensuring integration of the different forms of violence they experience and their solutions, especially within the security sector response. This approach could help develop new security metrics informed by community experiences. Raising awareness of gender-based violence as a form of social control is particularly pertinent and would support the Commissioner for Peace's request for support on women's inclusion.

[13]El País. "Key Developments in the Peace Process with Segunda Marquetalia and the National Bolivarian Army Coordinator." 27 Nov 2024, available at: https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2024-11-27/claves-del-proceso-de-paz-con-la-segunda-marquetalia-y-la-coordinadora-nacional-ejercito-bolivariano.html

All these activities form part of a broader attempt to integrate human security and adopt more bottom-up approaches across Colombia's peace and security architecture.

LOCALIZING TERRITORIAL PEACE TO ADVANCE PEACE & SECURITY NATIONALLY

The peace and security context in Colombia's Pacific Coast offers a critical opportunity to localize territorial peace within a flexible, nationally managed framework to address the unique security challenges of each area. Nariño and Chocó, long affected by state neglect, poverty, resource extraction and violence, were identified by Colombia stakeholders as having favorable conditions for localizing efforts, including:

1. **Ongoing peace negotiations at local level that have gained support from diverse actors locally and nationally**

2. **Ceasefires that have reduced violence**

3. **Influential local leaders who are well-connected**

4. **Strong communities committed to engaging in dialogues, pressuring actors to stay in negotiations, and demanding localization/territorialization of peace and security efforts**

5. **A crisis in the cocaine economy that could support a transition from illicit to licit economies, incentivizing peace and protecting lives**

The challenges and opportunities for localizing efforts differ between Nariño and Chocó. In Nariño, a well-developed vision and process for localizing peace have already taken shape,[14] reflected in agreements reached with various armed groups and a strategic approach to harness shifts in the political economy to create incentives for peace. In contrast, while a localized approach to ceasefire and dialogue processes has not taken shape in Chocó, the Governor has put forward a developmental vision for peace that reflects community needs and aspirations.[15] Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó are also well-organized, collaborating on peace, development, and security issues by drafting their own visionary documents and humanitarian agreements, which lay a sound foundation for sustained, locally-driven processes. These parallel efforts in each region highlight distinct paths toward peace that are responsive to local needs and dynamics, yet they share a common commitment to empowering communities and ensuring that local voices shape the peace process.

In both geographies, localizing peace and security in ways that center and empower communities must be carefully managed through an integrated approach.[16] The proximity of these processes to communities can increase their risks of violence and retaliation from armed groups. Moreover, these efforts require national-level oversight and flexible management, as they are part of a broader ecosystem of peace and security processes that cannot be isolated. Actions in other regions or at the national level can shift dynamics or derail efforts if not carefully tracked, managed and understood.

[14]El País. "Key Points of the Peace Process with the Segunda Marquetalia and the National Bolivarian Army Coordinator." November 27, 2024. Available: https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2024-11-27/claves-del-proceso-de-paz-con-la-segunda-marquetalia-y-la-coordinadora-nacional-ejercito-bolivariano.html; Government of Nariño, Colombia, 'The Departmental Council for Peace, Reconciliation, and Coexistence will be the Overseer and Builder of the DNI: Dialogue, Negotiation, and Implementation for the De-escalation of Violence and Territorial Transformation." 22 July 2024. Available at: https://narino.gov.co/noticias/el-consejo-departamental-de-paz-reconciliacion-y-convivencia-sera-el-veedor-y-constructor-del-dni-dialogo-negociacion-e-implementacion-para-el-desescalamiento-de-la-violencia-y-la-transformacion-t/

[15]El Colombiano. "Without Food, There Will Be No Total Peace in Chocó: Nubia Carolina Córdoba, Governor." 15 August 2024, available at: https://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/con-hambre-no-habra-paz-total-en-el-choco-nubia-carolina-cordoba-gobernadora-PA23107228

[16]See, e.g., Kaldor, Mary, Theros, Marika & Turkmani, Rim, (2021) War versus peace logics at local levels: findings from the Conflict Research Programme on local agreements and community level mediation. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112593/1/CRP_war_versus_peace_logics_at_local_levels_published.pdf

A rural woman travels from her village to the Quibdó market to sell the products she has grown on her farm. Quibdó, Colombia. Photo: Fernanda Pineda/Paramo Films

THE WAY FORWARD & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The evolving nature of violence and conflicts necessitates innovation in peace and security processes. Colombia is already advancing innovative approaches to tackle these new challenges. The following recommendations address key challenges across various levels – community, territorial, national, regional – and policy sectors. They focus on strengthening the security dimension of peace, enhancing the security sector's response to the changing character of violence and improving communities' ability to safely and meaningfully participate in and shape the policies and processes that impact their human security.

DEVELOP COMMUNITY-INFORMED PEACE & SECURITY METRICS & INDICATORS

There is broad consensus that current metrics, which prioritize homicide statistics, are overly narrow, limited in scope, and fail to adequately capture the dynamics of violence and peace. This presents an opportunity to collaborate with Colombian partners to develop more comprehensive, human security-focused metrics and indicators. These metrics should be developed through a participatory approach, where metrics are informed by communities themselves and translated into usable indicators for security forces.

Innovative metrics can capture the multifaceted nature of violence, particularly the different forms of social control exercised by armed groups over communities. This includes forced displacement, child recruitment, and gender-based violence. Similarly, improved security indicators, rather than traditional metrics such as high-level captures and kills (e.g. high value targets), can ensure that security operations are aimed at reducing insecurity and prioritizing civilian protection. For example, clearer definitions of aggression and attacks against communities, as suggested in consultations, can enable security forces to respond to the complex realities on the ground.

This pioneering work could also serve as a valuable model for other conflict-affected regions worldwide, where similar challenges exist in developing effective security metrics.

OPERATIONALIZE HUMAN SECURITY AT BOTH STRATEGIC & TACTICAL LEVELS THROUGH PILOTS IN NARIÑO AND CHOCÓ

Given the imperative of improved coordination, a two-fold approach is necessary to advance the operationalization of human security at both the national and local levels, accounting for both peace and no-peace scenarios. Delivery of insights and options for operationalization will be most effective through respected senior ex-security officials. Some of them expressed interest in supporting future projects. Additionally, selected international security experts and practitioners can be brought in to offer advice and serve as a challenge function, offering external perspectives and constructive critiques. For example, senior members from military, special forces and the intelligence community identified can provide practical advice to Colombia's counterparts on key challenges, developments and innovations related to peace and security efforts.

At the local level, this pilot effort would engage the ground-level leadership of security forces, to propose viable adjustments to their current operations to proactively protect communities and build trust.

Recent military operations illustrate the Colombian security force's capacity to adapt its focus to a range of emerging threats, including those beyond traditional security concerns such as drugs. For example, the military has responded to the rising threat caused by criminal networks and organized violent groups for environmental protection – targeting activities like illegal deforestation, mining and land exploitation.

Advancing pro-active human security operations will involve working with security leaders and commanders to:

a) Translate the various expressions of violence that impact communities into security indicators and metrics;

b) Map out the unique security challenges of a particular territory; and

c) Offer options for proactive operations to respond to the most critical violence affecting local communities;

A key corollary to this effort will emphasize trust-building between security forces, local civilian institutions and communities through productive communication focused on tangible outcomes. To date, while *ad hoc* dialogues may have eased tensions between security forces and communities, they have proven ineffective in building trust and legitimacy or addressing the immediate security concerns of communities. Similarly, military interventions intended to protect communities have produced mixed results—often providing short-term security while generating long-term risks, such as retribution from armed groups once security forces leave. This effort would aim to increase responsiveness by establishing communication channels that allow security forces to adjust operations based on human security principles and the unique challenges faced by communities. It would also articulate and facilitate the coordination required between the different roles played by security and civilian institutions, including military, police, intelligence, governors, mayors and negotiators.

At the national level, the focus will be on supporting efforts of adapting strategy and policy development to strengthen future operations, informed by insights gathered from the field and operational levels. Tangible options for integrating human security into campaign planning will be developed by drawing on feedback from local security forces and communities during the pilot phase, ensuring that recommendations reflect ground realities. This could include designing appropriate mandates and directives that reflect local, field-level requirements in order to enable more proactive, community-centered operations. By feeding field-level insights into national policy, the initiative ensures that future strategies are responsive to the unique security challenges of each territory. Key stakeholders in this process would include the Commissioner for Peace and the Ministry of Defense, who would integrate these ground-based perspectives into broader policy frameworks.

DESIGN CEASEFIRES & VIOLENCE REDUCTION MEASURES TO ENSURE THE MEANINGFUL AND SAFE PARTICIPATION OF COMMUNITIES AS CO-CONSTRUCTORS IN REGIONAL DIALOGUES

Despite challenges around the establishment of bilateral ceasefires, Colombia is innovating around measures for de-escalation of violence included in ceasefires and regional multi-stakeholder dialogue processes. In Nariño, for example, a bilateral ceasefire agreement reached with Segunda Marquetalia included a set of de-escalation measures that affect the security of communities such as demining and limiting forced recruitment of children.

At the regional level, a current challenge is how to ensure ceasefires and de-escalation measures enable space for the multistakeholder "regional co-construction of peace" and in particular, the direct and meaningful participation of communities.[17]

At the national level, this requires a flexible, integrated approach that can track the different processes across geographies within Colombia's wider ecosystem of negotiations to understand how they interact with one another and impact security across local geographies.

Work around these challenges would involve shaping and proposing recommendations on:

- sequencing and coordination between different regional negotiation tables and national actors (including a system that compiles all local agreements within a national framework to track processes over time and space);

- options for territorial, multidimensional and multipurpose ceasefires to enable humanitarian space and measures that address the violence and insecurities experienced by communities (and not only the state and armed groups);

- deconfliction architecture and implementation modalities – that involve multiple stakeholders including security forces, officials, armed groups, and community representatives - to monitor violations and ensure ceasefires hold;

- ceasefire management, including the end of ceasefires and subsequent processes (a direct request by key Colombian stakeholders for support);

- ways to agree security arrangements to prevent a vacuum that can be filled by other groups taking advantage of the ceasefire.

Ensuring safe and meaningful regional co-construction with communities must consider dynamics of violence and social control over women, indigenous and Afro-descendent communities. This means recognizing that armed actors continue to be present in the territory during and after ceasefire processes, which can limit the important role played by communities in shaping and advancing peace and security in their territories. Such an effort could include supporting an independent and widely respected actor, like the Church, to accompany and provide a protective umbrella to communities self-selecting their representatives, preparing for the regional dialogues, and/or engaging in ceasefire monitoring and verification.

STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S AGENCY & INCLUSION IN PEACE & SECURITY

Colombian women and the women's movement played a pivotal role in shaping the 2016 peace agreement, successfully advocating for the inclusion of gender-specific issues. Today, Afro-descendent and indigenous women, and women's groups affected by violence in the Pacific region, are actively navigating and managing insecurity in their territories. Among many different actions, they are reaching out to armed groups to negotiate with them on issues of import to women, families and communities while also mapping and tracking the different forms of violence impacting their security. In the territories, the ability to operate, survive and resist has been dependent on maintaining strategies of silence and invisibility, which while protecting them, inadvertently limits their agency and participation in Paz Total. At the same time, armed groups and violent actors are increasingly using gender-based violence, including human trafficking and sexual violence, as a tool to exert social control over communities and degrade their ability to resist.

[17]Gobernación de Nariño, "Se firmó segundo acuerdo de la Mesa para la Co-construcción de la Paz Territorial de Nariño," 18 Oct 2024, disponible en: https://narino.gov.co/noticias/se-firmo-segundo-acuerdo-de-la-mesa-para-la-co-construccion-de-la-paz-territorial-de-narino/; PARES (Fundación Paz y Reconciliación), "Primera sesión de la Instancia para la Co-construcción de Paz Territorial en Nariño," 3 Aug 2024, disponible en: https://www.pares.com.co/post/primera-sesi%C3%B3n-de-la-instancia-para-la-co-construcci%C3%B3n-de-paz-territorial-en-nari%C3%B1o?utm_source=chatgpt.com

There is an urgent need for all actors involved in advancing peace and security to better understand how the types of violence that target women relate to the strategies and actions taken by violent and armed groups to exert power and influence. This involves making visible these types of violences against women and ensuring they are included in both the development of new security metrics informed by communities, countering the current tendency for GBV to be overlooked or dismissed as a cultural or social problem. Key objectives include:

- integrating GBV into peace and security metrics

- supporting security leadership to shape and implement operations that more proactively and intentionally address this type of violence;

- protecting women to support their agency and power in dialogues and other peace and security efforts;

- supporting efforts of women to include GBV and social control as an agenda item in the regional dialogues.

DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE AN ALTERNATIVE REGIONAL APPROACH TO SECURITY THAT IS RIGHTS-RESPECTING

There is an urgent need to advance and communicate alternative peace-centered and rights-respecting approaches. The evolving security environment, marked by fragmented violence and the rise of transnational crime, has spurred a resurgence of authoritarian agendas and hardline security policies as a solution. These developments can be seen both globally and regionally, as in El Salvador, Ecuador, Argentina, and Peru.

Convening a regional meeting of Defense Ministers from Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Guatemala presents a valuable opportunity to build consensus on and communicate an alternative people-centered, rights-respecting security approach that advances new instruments to address the rise of violence across the region – as opposed to populist or authoritarian responses.

TRANSFORM COMMUNICATIONS FOR A CHANGING CONTEXT

Across all lines of effort is the centrality of communications in managing expectations, building support and sustaining momentum at multiple levels – locally, nationally and internationally. Integrating communications across efforts – rather than as a supplement – recognizes that peace and security processes are not merely technical exercises but deeply political processes that require effectively conveying progress, setting expectations, and elevating accountability and inclusivity measures to multiple stakeholders in ways that align with political and lived realities. Communication strategies, ideally formulated at the outset of lines of effort, are central to building the necessary political coalitions required for peace, while also facilitating confidence-building measures and de-escalation with adversaries.

The engagement of diverse constituencies – locally, nationally, and internationally – across all recommendations supports efforts to foster trust, mitigate opposition, and communicate progress. For external audiences, opportunities to engage with respected international voices that support a different approach to security (even through some of the recommendations listed here) can create a multiplier effect through third-party validation.

An effective communications strategy requires a thorough plan that identifies goals, analyzes assets and risks, and is dynamic in its approach under changing circumstances. Research demonstrates that more successful approaches do not take a top-down approach of selective information sharing, and instead utilize different assets, audiences, and actors to harness communication networks in order to achieve key policy objectives – and, importantly, to spread awareness of those successes, as well as to manage expectations or explain unpopular decisions.

HIGHLIGHT THE SECURITY, DEVELOPMENT AND BIODIVERSITY NEXUS

It is important to make visible the unique contextual drivers of instability and violence in the Pacific. The governors of Nariño and Chocó highlighted the extraction of natural resources by organized armed and criminal groups as a major driver of violence in their department. The UN Conference of the Parties (COP16) hosted in Cali provided an important opportunity in the near-term to improve understanding of the interconnection between poverty and inequality with illicit economies, such as gold mining, cocaine production, human trafficking and other predatory activities that increase vulnerabilities of Afro-descendent and indigenous communities to violence and insecurity. Strategies to protect these department's rich biodiversity and the environment need to consider the interconnection between poverty, human insecurity and inequality with illicit economies.

In October 2024, local governors of Nariño and Chocó participated in the UN Conference of the Parties (COP16) in Cali to raise awareness of these drivers both locally and globally, and how it impacts their communities. During COP, there were significant funding envelopes promised to advance conservation and preservation of the environment in their departments, including region-specific Multi-Donor Funds. This created opportunities for the departments of Nariño and Chocó, and their leaders, to leverage international partnerships to improve not only biodiversity conservation, but also security and development outcomes. As implementation comes to the fore, including new projects and funding flows, the need for transparent, accountable and inclusive implementation and communications to communities will become paramount, in lockstep with the sustained engagement with the international funders and policymakers.

ADVANCE FINANCING & DEVELOPMENT FOR TERRITORIAL PEACE & SECURITY

A public security approach that integrates sustainable and inclusive territorial development—focusing on creating economic opportunities, prosperity, and livelihoods while addressing the political economy of violence—is essential for tackling the multidimensional insecurity faced by Afro-descendent and Indigenous communities. Despite being rich in natural resources and biodiversity, largely due to the environmental protection and ancestral practices of these communities, the regions of Nariño and Chocó remain underdeveloped and insecure. Both areas suffer from an acute lack of infrastructure and insufficient development, with local communities experiencing multidimensional poverty stemming from historical injustices, systemic neglect, and ongoing violence. Addressing these challenges requires not only a security and development framework but also a deeper rethinking of how financial resources are allocated, governed, and made accountable at the regional level to ensure investments effectively serve local needs and are not captured by predatory interests and violent groups.

Local officials and community leaders highlighted that even communities receiving financial transfers and development investments continue to face pervasive insecurity and violence. This underscores the need for systemic territorial transformation, rather than piecemeal development projects or isolated investments. Without ensuring security and addressing the underlying political economy, financial resources risk being captured by violent groups rather than benefiting communities.

For example, weak enforcement of security guarantees for local actors engaged in transformative policies, such as the coca substitution program (PNIS) and the Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDETs), have limited the impact of these policies in delivering peace dividends to local populations in contested areas. Addressing these challenges requires understanding and altering the system of incentives that sustain violent groups—whether to negotiate peace with them, disrupt the conditions that allow them to regenerate, or target their economic and governance power bases in a no-peace scenario. Without shifting these dynamics, new groups will continue to emerge, reinforcing cycles of violence and instability.

While involving communities in the creation of regional development plans has been a critical step, lasting transformation requires more targeted and politically aware actions across local, national, and international levels. To effectively support community-driven development (CDD), several actions are necessary: mobilizing resources, allocating public finance at appropriate levels, addressing bottlenecks in service delivery, and recognizing and empowering community leaders and councils in the decision-making and delivery process. Additionally, providing security to local actors, communities and civilian institutions taking part in these processes is critical for successful implementation of CDD. This requires coordinating actions and resources across multiple actors: military and civilian, local and national, and public, private, and popular.

Key stakeholders in this process include local officials, relevant institutions, ministries, civic groups, communities, and international partners.

Systemic territorial transformation goes beyond previous efforts like the Consolidation Policy by integrating security and development to produce sustainable outcomes across sectors such as infrastructure, safety, and livelihoods. It requires engaging with the knowledge of local communities and regional governments to address local dynamics and political economies to ensure a clear understanding of power structures and economic incentives that shape governance and violence. Such an approach centers on local agency and political economy dynamics to enhance state legitimacy at the community level from the bottom-up, rather than simply extending state presence from the national center. Achieving this requires expertise in policy and programmatic approaches that ensure resources and services meet local priorities, with development plans and funding aligned with community decision-making.

BUILD MOMENTUM AND LEGITIMACY BY ELEVATING COMMUNITY ACTION IN A NATIONAL 'VISIONING PROCESS' ON TERRITORIAL PEACE

Recognizing Colombia's successes to date is imperative, including ongoing community action around peace. Future peace and security work must harness and build on efforts undertaken so far. Communities in Tumaco and Quibdó are particularly advanced in this regard.

For instance, community groups in Quibdó have, amongst other initiatives, formed an 11-point 'Humanitarian Agreement' that articulated some of their concerns and wishes for ground-level de-escalation of violence.

There is value in ensuring that these community-level efforts are not siloed but instead elevated to influence broader processes, discourses and decision-making. Effective engagement and communication of these initiatives at local and national levels can draw attention to the needs and demands of affected populations, maintaining momentum while laying the foundation for broader and long-term dialogues. These efforts can also feed directly into formal negotiation processes and policy formulation, ensuring that community voices shape the direction of peace and security efforts.

Supporting communities in communicating their views more widely (whether directly or indirectly) not only amplifies their agency but also strengthens the design and legitimacy of peace processes. Rooting them firmly in the aspirations and needs of communities experiencing violence and insecurity enhances their relevance and legitimacy. Evidence from Northern Ireland also demonstrates how such 'visioning' documents, where one group captures their vision of peace, can prompt responses and visioning from other actors, communities and stakeholders, including armed actors, who share their own needs and interests with their constituents.[18] This reciprocal indirect engagement can foster mutual understanding, even without direct dialogue, and enable the identification of consensus points as well as divergences, which, in turn, help shape agendas at negotiation tables and broader national discourses and dialogue on peace and security.

SUPPORT A PEACE & HUMAN SECURITY FORUM TO PIONEER A "GLOBAL SOUTH/ MAJORITY APPROACH" TO PEACE & SECURITY, WITH COLOMBIA AT ITS CENTER

As violence and conflict become increasingly complex, traditional top-down approaches to peace and security are proving inadequate. While the UN has introduced new operational concepts and mediation guidelines for localized peacemaking,[19] there remains a lack of comprehensive guidance on addressing the multidimensional nature of violence, particularly where criminal agendas dominate, or on 'the how' to integrate localized approaches into a national framework.

Many international fora continue to prioritize traditional mediators and experts from the Global North, overlooking expertise from the Global South and leaving a gap in fully understanding these evolving dynamics.

Colombia is leading the way in innovating peace and security strategies for today's complex environments, alongside valuable new approaches and insights that have emerged from experiences and places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, Thailand, and in Latin America. There is a real opportunity to bring together diverse experts and practitioners from the Global South, along with traditional peace and security experts, to harness these untapped experiences and innovations to advance more relevant approaches to organized violence.

Launching a Global South-led Peace and Human Security Forum, with Colombia at its center, would create a much-needed platform for joint analysis, strategy development, and solution-building. The Forum would promote exchange on experiences and applied insights on people-centered security, local ceasefires and multilayered agreements that respond to and protect communities, and community-driven reconciliation and development. In the short to medium term, this forum can take advantage of current opportunities to apply insights, prevent backsliding and start institutionalizing adaptations in approaches to people-centered peace and security to ensure resilience to changes in national and geopolitical environments. By highlighting Colombia's leadership, the Forum could advance a people-centered security model, while empowering Global South practitioners to lead the conversation on reshaping peace and security and on offering viable alternatives to traditional top-down approaches.

[18]Ben Acheson, 'What will peace look like?', In In Search of Peace for Afghanistan, edited by the Heart of Asia Society, 2021, available at: https://kakarfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Sample-of-In-Search-of-Peace-for-Afghanistan-Final-Final-March-17.pdf

[19]See, e.g., United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), "Engaging at the Local Level: Options for UN Mediators." 2022, available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/11/2209214-dppa-local-mediation-practice-note.pdf