



HUMAN SECURITY IN COLOMBIA: FOUR OPPORTUNITIES FOR A STRATEGY SHIFT

Andrea C. Guardo

January 15, 2025

About the Author

Andrea is a Colombian policy adviser with extensive experience leading human rights, rule of law, and civil society programmes. She is particularly interested in the ecosystems driving sustainable development and peacebuilding; as well as in the political-economies fuelling armed conflicts and violence. Andrea has worked globally on developing people-centred approaches to public security and preventing democratic backsliding at the Open Society Foundations, and innovating ways to expand civic space at the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS). She has also provided strategic advice to the U.S. Institute of Peace in Colombia and led groundbreaking programs in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Dr. Mary Kaldor for her expert editing of the draft, and to Dr. David Lewis, Dr. Iavor Rangelov, Donald Chisholm and Philip Rauber for their insightful comments and discussions.

Introduction

The government of Gustavo Petro and Francia Marquez, which took office five months ago in Colombia, inherited a country with enormous security challenges, particularly affecting key populations like civil society leaders, indigenous, afro-Colombians, and rural *campesinos* in conflict-torn geographic areas. They were elected by 11.2 million votes (50.4% of the total), largely from the same at-risk populations, in the highest turnout of the last 20 years (58%), including nearly one million new young voters. Petro and Marquez also received a clear citizen mandate to bring about security changes and lasting peace, as in February 2022, 94% of Colombians perceived the security situation was deteriorating. In the first months, they have swiftly changed narratives and taken actions that bring hope about a transformation in Colombia's security paradigm. Yet, the security situation continues to be serious. In the first four months, 58 human rights defenders have been killed despite the prompt efforts to protect them. Thus, turning the human security concept into concrete improvements demands substantial shifts in security policy and filigree-type implementation that consider potential risks and avoid unintended results.

A clear, suitable security policy is necessary to reduce violence and build peace. While the government bid for "Total Peace" in Colombia will require a separate, in-depth analysis, it is essential to consider the potential for a human security approach to provide the security needed to tackle the enduring, complex web of armed conflict and organised crime in Colombia. This document presents four opportunities arising from recent government actions that indicate a well-oriented vision. However, given that the real chance for change is in the details, the present analysis considers the intrinsic risks of each opening and put forward some policy recommendations to bring about positive security transformations.

The paradigm shift of human security

Despite the politicization of the debate in Colombia, human security offers a holistic approach that addresses the increasing targeting of civilians in the five current armed conflicts, the mixed political and criminal drives of armed actors, and the varied violence they use to sow fear among people. While human security is widely understood as broadening the concept of security to economic, environmental, and other dimensions, it also has relevance for transforming the conventional responses to persistent armed

conflicts, the role and nature of military interventions, and security sector reform, so as to protect people's life and integrity more effectively. Hence, NATO and various members, like the UK government, have integrated it into policy, recognising the changing character of conflicts and the growing "targeting of civilians in warring factions' tactics and objectives." As Mary Kaldor states, human security means "a change in the very nature of military operations. It would mean giving priority to saving lives over the goal of defeating an enemy." This makes it a valuable framework for countries with multiple violent actors and pervasive violence against rights defenders and civilians like Colombia. Moving the axis of security from safeguarding only the state's territorial sovereignty to protecting also people's '*freedom from fear and want*' could be the best way to weaken organised-violence groups (OVGs), dampen down violence, and build peace. However, it will depend on concrete measures and will not be free of risks.

Opportunity 1: Shift strategy from controlling territory to building state legitimacy among populations in contested areas

President Petro announced that vulnerable citizens would no longer be treated as criminals. Hence, drug users will receive health attention, and coca growers will be able to access the Crop Substitution Policy created by the 2016 peace accords; this is the *Integrated National Program for the Substitution of Illicitly Used Crops – PNIS*. The PNIS was developed, to some extent, jointly with the rural farmers (*campesinos*) who have high stakes in coca production because it provides their livelihoods but, at the same time, it exposes them to violence. The massive enrolment and compliance of thousands of *campesinos* in the policy, despite suffering continued violence by OVGs, signals an increased, new form of state legitimacy. Unfortunately, it has also increased the killings of civic leaders who have promoted the policy.

In Colombia's fragmented conflict, OVGs contest not only the state's military power but its entire legitimacy among local communities. Currently, there is a historic opportunity to build state legitimacy through people's engagement in the state-building processes and reset relationships between security sector institutions and citizens involved in what were considered previously illicit activities. By involving local people in public policy-making, including in security policy, Colombia could transition from "*bringing state presence* to the

territories affected by the conflict” to *building the state* locally along with local communities and institutions.

The risk is that the government continues to focus on controlling the territory rather than building legitimacy among people. This may lead to military deployments that do not make people feel safe or to the arrival of external officials and private investors who engage local people as passive recipients rather than as shapers and makers of their own state and livelihoods. While roads, schools, and economic opportunities are necessary, the key to building legitimacy is to engage local people as citizens with dignity, agency, and a right to shape the services they receive. In security policy, it is essential to get rid of stereotypes, that is to say, the idea that certain types of citizens are seen as suspect criminals. Instead, security strategies need to prioritise the greater risks taken by those citizens who ‘side with the state’ in contested areas – rural and urban – and resist the various forms of violence linked to OVGs’ informal governance. Indeed, although most security providers have committed to protecting former FARC combatants and PNIS leaders, it is very difficult to change the deep-rooted culture and behaviour.

How can legitimacy be built among populations ruled by OVGs? Security operations need to prioritise countering the control OVGs exert through fear and criminal governance.

Opportunity 2: Counter OVG’s control of populations’ fears and wants

President Petro affirmed the civilian leadership over Security Councils, and 65 *Puestos de Mando Unificados por la Vida* (Unified Commands for Life), which are local operational and decision-making spaces formerly led – in practice – by the military. In the past, the response to OVG attacks on civilians (i.e., massacres) was often perceived as over-militarised and focused on protecting the state’s strategic infrastructure (i.e., oil pipes) while local communities remained vulnerable. This is why the involvement of various local civilian authorities in developing context-tailored security responses, with a clear mandate to protect local people’s life, is a reason to hope.

However, a shift of power from national-level military to local-level civilian institutions needs to take into account the enormous power OVGs may exert over local mayors. Rather, a great opportunity consists of building a joint response to the complex security threats. The aim is to undermine the power of the OVGs to control people’s fears and

wants. They achieve this through 'armed strikes,' violent targeting of activists, attacks on civilians, and illicit economies. OVGs control of people is a great source of power. They grow and expand their troops by recruiting local children and youth, secure their territorial control by confining local communities, and the thousands of families involved in coca production are indispensable for OVGs' economic power.

Thus, the Colombian military and police need to prioritise their operations to effectively protect local populations and counteract the control that OVGs exert. For instance, countering child recruitment, human trafficking, community confinement, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence that grant OVGs control over thousands. This may weaken illegal groups even more effectively than targeting their organizational heads (a.k.a., High-Value Targets) or seizing their assets, which are both quickly replaced.

The critical risk here is instrumentalizing local communities as collaborators or intelligence sources in security operations, which up to now have caused the killing of many local people. Models of "co-responsibility," where civilians are asked to participate in security tasks, involve a disproportionate burden for people in areas where OVGs exert coercion or governance. The challenge is to strike a balance between civilians defining priorities and the military or police operations tackling them. Coordinating the roles of the police and the military around this community protection priority is another challenge. Human security needs robust coordination among intelligence, criminal investigation, and the justice system to prosecute those responsible for ordering crimes and dismantle the power structures – illegal and legal – behind the violence.

How can the state counter OVGs' control over populations? We need data on how this control is exerted. To do so, community knowledge, data, and coping mechanisms must be valued.

Opportunity 3: Citizen-driven metrics and indicators to address human security needs

Thirdly, the Petro-Marquez government has committed to fully implementing the 2016 peace accords with the FARC. Although the agreements do not include a Security Sector Reform, it brings a '*human and holistic security*' concept. It creates a system to guarantee the security of communities and opposition leaders locally, where civil society has a

meaningful decision-making role. Also, President Petro selected the military and police chiefs under strict criteria of respect to human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL). In other institutions, he appointed directors who have faced security threats or have extensive experience working with at-risk and local communities. Likewise, the government endorsed an Emergency Plan to Protect Civil Society Leaders submitted by various human rights groups. These actions open prospects for a systemic approach to protection involving state and community mechanisms, which goes beyond protecting peoples' bare life to ensuring they can exert their rights and activism free from fear.

Unfortunately, despite the prompt implementation of the abovementioned plan, the first 100 days of government did not have the expected reduction in the killings of civic activists. However, it is too soon to evaluate the plan's impact. The risk in these participatory efforts is that the knowledge and contributions of women and local communities continue to be considered for 'soft security' and stay in separate compartments, while traditional security experts, often warriors and male, continue to dominate what is seen as 'hard' security strategies. Ensuring that women, LGBTI+ citizens, rural *campesino*, indigenous, afro-Colombian people, and every citizen enjoy a life free of fear requires data to capture the types of violence that affect them individually or collectively. For instance, women and girls in some OVG-controlled areas of Colombia experience continued sexual violence by gangs that go underreported and only become visible through the health system. Rural citizens often experience control of their social life by armed actors through illegal curfews, mobility restrictions, coexistence rules, and penalties. The forced recruitment of indigenous children by OVGs has caused numerous children to commit suicide and threatens the survival of entire communities. The challenge is to find safe ways to gather feedback and integrate local people's knowledge and mechanisms into systemic strategies. Another challenge is ensuring that citizen-generated data and knowledge influence security priorities, strategies and operations.

How can knowledge from at-risk citizens be integrated into security strategy and metrics if their relations with security providers are fractured? Relationships need to be transformed.

Opportunity 4: Transform human behaviours and relationships

On a concrete action, the President announced that the performance evaluation of police and military chiefs would count massacres and homicides of civic leaders occurring in their jurisdiction. Certainly, once security strategies are oriented to counter OVGs control of local people and build on citizen-generated data and knowledge to address the security needs of specific population groups, the next necessary step is that security providers' behaviours follow the plan.

The indicators announced by the president may drive security providers to protect citizens and may deter their potential inaction, co-optation, collusion, or misconduct. As a critical risk, however, indicators can unintentionally incentivize security providers to make deals with OVGs to keep indicator counts low. They may also lead criminals to use other forms of violence (i.e. massacres) to sow fear among citizens. For instance, an excessive focus on the number of homicides of human rights defenders may lead to an increase in other forms of violence to silence defenders without increasing the homicide count. For example, death threats, attacks on family members, and symbolic violence (i.e. beheadings). Therefore, the challenge is developing a system of incentives and behaviour-changing measures that avoid unintended effects.

In line with this, the new government is currently exploring various reforms at the institutional level, including the creation of a new Ministry of Peace, Security, and Coexistence to oversee the Colombian Police and other civilian institutions, ensuring the benefits and well-being of lower-rank police; and eliminating fees for them to access the official career and the high-rank levels. Recently, after seven young police were killed in a conflict-affected area, President Petro asked for the removal of all young, less experienced personnel from high-risk areas. He also emphasized the need to strengthen the relationships between police and local communities as an essential form of security. This raises hope for improved management of security's human and relational aspects, which are determinants of a well-functioning security system. The risk is the various advantages OVGs may gain from all these well-intended measures.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The current moment opens space to transform the security sector's mindsets, relationships, and behaviors affected by decades of armed conflict in Colombia. President Petro, a former guerrilla and 30-year-long senator, and Vice-president Marquez, a rural environmental woman activist, embody in-depth knowledge and credibility to lead thorough and sensitive transformations. However, the devil is in the details of policy and actions.

The human security paradigm seems a right fit for Colombia's immense security challenges, and the new government will open space to advance long-needed structural changes. The broad support the government has quickly gathered from citizens, diverse political sectors, the U.S., and other key international partners favours a balanced and thorough security policy design. An important, urgent action is to deepen the understanding of human security applications in various world areas and involve diverse knowledge and expertise beyond the traditional security connoisseurs. Colombia cannot afford to go back on the progress made by the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda and its own gender and ethnic chapters of the 2016 peace accords. Likewise, designing safe consultative, data collection, and co-creation processes need innovative approaches and skills.

Security sector reforms need to focus on service delivery to populations significantly affected by insecurity, crime, and violence and with whom institutions' relationships are particularly fractured. A system of behaviour-changing incentives may assist in this purpose. Performance evaluations, promotions, training opportunities, and placement should be linked to community feedback, and indicators of success should be associated with citizens' priorities and perceptions. It is necessary to change the potential biases and behavior of security providers toward key citizen groups (i.e., indigenous, afro-Colombians, protesters, activists), facilitate dialogue with them, and design sustained processes of citizen oversight and public accountability. Peer intervention programs may mark the difference between 'rotten apples' and institutional culture.

In upcoming months, the Petro-Marquez government will need to carefully craft models of security governance where the roles of civilian authorities, the military, police, and local communities are conducive to effective security for all citizens. The model should clarify roles and responsibilities to guarantee protection for citizens in urban and rural areas where OVGs and gangs exert some control over populations or seek to. While military and law enforcement strategies should have a human security focus, lessons from other countries advise against the direct involvement of the military in public security. Lastly, although President Petro's "Total Peace" plan creates hope for a peaceful Colombia, it certainly has impacts on security that deserve separate analysis, along with the prospects, risks, and careful policy development it will require.

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