

Peace and Development along the Colombia-Venezuela Border Strengthening Civil Society

The Peace Accords have not brought definitive peace to Colombia's border departments. Civil society members from marginalised areas face challenges associated with Colombia's transition into a post-FARC period, and the spill over effects of the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis. Adopting a borderland lens allows for insight about the day-to-day realities that characterise the security landscape of Colombia's most vulnerable communities – that is, it makes civil society claims visible.

Many individuals – particularly women, indigenous communities, and children – have not fully experienced “peace”, as their security landscapes remain unstable. These peripheral territories have historically been epicentres of armed conflict due to their strategic location for illegal economies; this dynamic continues today. Fighting between FARC dissidents, the ELN, the EPL, and other violent non-state groups creates insecurity throughout the territory.

The UNHCR estimates that 1,032,016 Venezuelan migrants and refugees, as well as 250,000 returnees, have come to Colombia. After arriving, they find FARC dissidents rearming, and other non-state actors strengthening. Recruitment of Venezuelans who are looking for income has become a common scenario.

In November 2018, CONPEACE and Universidad Simón Bolívar co-hosted a workshop with the collaboration of the UNHCR, in Cúcuta, Colombia, and brought together academics, members of international organisations, and civil society.



Zulver, Julia. *International Bridge Simón Bolívar*

Through a series of dialogue tables, we were able to identify both the concerns of, and best practices adopted by, members of civil society.

Based on the civil-society workshop, the CONPEACE team has identified three key challenges faced by civil society on a daily basis:

1. **Mitigating the humanitarian crisis amidst ongoing insecurity;**
2. **Enhancing grassroots cross-border cooperation;**
3. **Integrating migrants and building assistance strategies.**

These are avenues of action all stakeholders can pursue to strengthen civil society. This can contribute to peace and development along the Colombia-Venezuela border.

1

Mitigating the humanitarian crisis amidst ongoing insecurity

Challenges

The borderland is a historically marginalised territory where the state has little presence beyond that of the armed forces. Non-state armed groups take advantage of this situation by securing control of the territory – and its illegal economies. Concurrently, the migrant population coming from Venezuela is threatened by this insecure landscape.

Non-state armed groups like the National Liberation Army (ELN), Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and the FARC dissidents have reorganised and strengthened in these territories. They are actively recruiting border-dwellers and migrants looking for an income. This pattern continues to undermine security landscapes along the border, and contributes to local dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Peace Process.



Idler, Annette. *Catatumbo*

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Simplify bureaucratic processes and invest in resources for documentation

Despite monitoring and controlling the registration of Venezuelan migrants through the *Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza* and *Permiso Especial de Permanencia*, these efforts are rendered incomplete due to excessive bureaucracy.

Continue to offer streamlined *jornadas*

Coordinating the efforts of state institutions and organisations to register people is also an effective way to help migrants obtain documents.

Expand the efforts to engage in up-to-date fieldwork

Grounded research helps to understand and visibilise local economic and political dynamics, as well as community-led initiatives. For example, the UNHCR has visited the regions and identified, involved, and empowered local actors to replicate the UN's practices in their own contexts.

2

Enhancing grassroots cross-border cooperation

Challenges

Local governments and state representatives lack data and information about the migration crisis and are not always well-informed or equipped to successfully inform and guide incoming migrants about their rights and access to resources.

Furthermore, while there is governmental and organisational assistance in urban areas, this does not extend to rural areas. As the gap between the Venezuelan and the Colombian governments widens, so too does the possibility of developing a cooperation plan.



Idler, Annette. *Puerto Santander*

Avenues of Action

Build a sense of community

Reinforce and generate social and cultural activities between border inhabitants.

Reinforce and develop local cross-border alliances

This as a response to the absence of the state. For example, the Bari indigenous community in Colombia has allied with the Bari in Venezuela to create the Great Bari Nation; this will allow the community to consolidate what they consider a binational territory.

Provide information with accessible language and be creative in the use of information channels

The border-dwellers, state representatives, and receiver communities should be effectively informed about the resources they can access. This includes Facebook, Whatsapp groups, and radio.

Actively monitor the *trochas*

Many migrants currently pass through unsafe and illegal crossings to avoid inspections and bureaucracy. Monitoring allows for an expansion of data about irregular migration patterns based on the realities of border dynamics.

3 Integrating migrants and building assistance strategies

Challenges

There is a struggle to integrate demobilised FARC rebels into society at the same time as receiving Venezuelan migrants. This is worsened by ongoing economic instability in rural territories; a lack of long-term opportunities for both receptor communities and migrants creates local tensions.

Some government and NGO projects create reliance on aid handouts, and do not focus on long term development plans that foster leadership in local communities. There is a lack of articulation between these projects, duplicating efforts and creating a “carousel dynamic.”

There is a lack of access to healthcare for migrants, leading to outbreaks of preventable diseases. The lack of mental healthcare is particularly concerning.

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Give individuals empowering and dignifying experiences

Food, housing, and cash payments avoids reliance on handouts.

Strengthen the current cooperation programmes and create more capacity-building strategies

The government and local organisations should join efforts. For example, institutions like the Church have a holistic understanding of the communities and can effectively streamline access to assistance.

Include new participants in the creation of development plans

Creating economic initiatives that include migrants can strengthen the local economy.

Further reading available at conpeace.vvw.ox.ac.uk/related-publications

1. *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War* Annette Idler
2. *Towards a Shared Vision of Peace* Alba Magali et al. in *Lasa Forum*
3. *Venezuela: a humanitarian and security crisis on the border with Colombia* Annette Idler in *The Conversation*
4. *At Venezuela's border with Colombia, women suffer extraordinary levels of violence* Julia Zulver in *The Washington Post*

CONPEACE

Hosted at the University of Oxford's Changing Character of War Centre, CONPEACE focuses on changing security landscapes in marginalised spaces, especially during transitions from war to peace. Founded and directed by Dr Annette Idler, CONPEACE's interdisciplinary research bridges the gap between marginalised communities and political power centres, using bottom-up methodology based on extensive fieldwork, theoretical frameworks on non-state order and regular cross-stakeholder fora.

Case Studies

The following case studies highlight concerns shared by members of civil society during the workshop's roundtable event. These local realities visiblise the double impact of the migrant crisis and the reconfiguration of Colombia's security landscape.

LA GUAJIRA

-The desert landscape makes it even easier to establish illegal crossing points between the two countries. Mafias have gathered along these *trochas*, stealing, threatening, and murdering those crossing the borders, and fuelling illegal economies (drugs, weapons, human trafficking).

-The binational Wayúu community is currently receiving relatives from Venezuela, but there are worries that this could lead to inter-ethnic disputes regarding land titles.

CATATUMBO

-The indigenous territory is threatened by *campesinos*, who invade the land, often to grow lucrative coca crops. This region serves as a strategic corridor for illegal economies.

-Due to lack of state response, the Bari indigenous community has been forced to establish a dialogue with the non-state armed groups in order to claim protection and ensure the sovereignty of their territory.

CÚCUTA

-The Yukpa indigenous community does not have legal recognition in Colombia; they illegally occupied land in Cúcuta after migrating from Venezuela, which resulted in violent repercussions from the local community and repeated deportations.

-Despite homicide rates decreasing by 26% since 2016, perceptions of insecurity in Cúcuta have steadily risen. Theft has also increased by 20% since 2016.

ARAUCA

-FARC reincorporation camps have not received all of the assistance promised by the government. This has led some former rebels to rearm with the FARC dissidents, and leaves others open to threats and violence from other violent non-state groups.

-The illegal trafficking corridor between this region and Apure (Venezuela) has led to the strengthening of the ELN in this part of Colombia.

