

# Peace, development, and community protection in the borderlands

## Borderland communities in Colombia face a triple crisis:

1. Insecurity in the context of poor implementation of the Peace Agreement, profitable illicit economies, and the reconfiguration of armed groups.
2. Humanitarian emergency linked to the massive arrival of refugees, migrants, and returnees from Venezuela.
3. The Covid-19 pandemic aggravates historic social exclusion and more recent xenophobic tendencies towards Venezuelan people in the country.

These three dimensions intensify existing problems of development and insecurity, particularly among the historically most vulnerable and victimised population. This includes women, youth, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and marginalised border communities.

In November and December 2020, CONPEACE convened eight virtual online conversation groups. For this exercise in cross-stakeholder dialogue, 31 members of communities, NGOs, local governments, state agencies, and international organisations working at the Colombia-Ecuador and the Colombia-Venezuela borders gathered to analyse the challenges of development, peace, and community protection – challenges that are exacerbated amid the triple crisis.



Figure 1: Participants at virtual focus groups, Nov-Dec 2020

Furthermore – in the context of selective presence of the Colombian State and the violence that derives from territorial struggles between armed groups – we identified mechanisms of mutual support, peace, development, and protection created by communities in the border areas to confront the challenges identified and associated with the triple crisis.

This toolkit was prepared after presenting our results during another cross-stakeholder virtual dialogue in February 2021, inviting all participants from the previous groups to verify the analysis. As a result of this analysis, there was consensus that our observations reflected the realities experienced in border communities.

CONPEACE hopes that this analysis discussed in conjunction with local actors can stimulate horizontal learning processes between local communities at the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador.

## Cross-border peace and development plans

### Challenges identified:

- Short-term approach, politicisation, and lack of political continuity and participation, for example in the current implementation phase of the Peace Agreement’s Development Plans with Territorial Focus (PDETs).
- Resources focused on short-term humanitarian assistance are detrimental to lasting development processes.
- Lack of local planning mechanisms and spaces and institutional articulation on the border.
- Lack of mechanisms for citizen consultation and participation.
- Inconsistent coordination between local communities, the state, NGOs, and the international community - the level of coordination among these stakeholders tends to vary depending on the region and the issue in question.



Photograph by Dáire McGill: Political participation mural in Municipio La Paz, Cesar (2019)

### Best practices:

- Community measures for development, integration, and peaceful coexistence
  - The indigenous-peasant alliances in Nariño work hand-in-hand in establishing local development plans.
  - The [Redes Multisectoriales](#) in La Guajira that promote integration between migrant and host communities through art, learning, and communication campaigns against hate, xenophobia. These include creating spaces of dialogue for marginalised groups such as LGBT+ communities.
- Alternative entrepreneurship networks
  - [Asociación Salto Angel](#) (together with international community) supports and advises communities to generate employment through financial education.
  - Groups such as [Mujeres Víctimas Emprendedoras](#) (Cesar) or [Asociación Granita](#) (Arauca) contribute to local economic empowerment with a differential approach.
- Building trust and relationships with local governments and other actors
  - A cross-border [development plan](#) with a focus on cross-border actions was created in Villa Rosario with the support of the government office for border issues *Gerencia de Frontera* and the World Bank.
  - Local coordination with the [Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows](#) (GIFMM) with a territorial and ethnic focus considering the specific needs of these populations.

# Community protection measures with a differential approach

## Challenges identified:

- Limited and unequal protection due to the selective presence of the state that focuses on biosecurity in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic rather than on citizen security.
- Reconfiguration of armed groups and high levels of violence in a context of uncertainty aggravated by border closures. Moreover, there is an increasing criminalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable populations and their leadership.
- Disincentives to organising at the local level and threats to social leaders.
- Poor institutional support and excessive bureaucracy in accessing protection mechanisms.
- Selective focus on individual protection of leaders and absence of communal security schemes.
- Militarisation of security measures aggravates tensions and risks of human rights violations.

## Best practices:

- Local instruments for community security and human rights protection
  - Peace communities that prevent the presence of armed actors resisting the logic of conflict.
  - Guardias Indígenas and Guardias Cimarronas as collective self-protection mechanisms. These have at times helped ethnic communities to prevent armed actors' entry into their territories. Women's ethnic organisations such as the [Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu](#) also contribute to community safety and the defense of human rights.
  - Humanitarian shelters as temporary protection spaces for leaders or other threatened citizens.
- Local mechanisms of community justice and peaceful conflict resolution
  - Justice in Equity and Justice Terminals which are centres for peace, reconciliation and conflict resolution.
  - Coexistence manuals and security committees at the local level (some with a cross-border focus) providing support to migrants and returnees to strengthen the social fabric through the construction of coexistence rules and support to facilitate access to rights.
- Programmes for economic stimulation and inclusion in the educational system to reduce dependence on the illicit economies and to prevent recruitment of armed groups.

## Conclusions

*'The analysis reflects what we live in the territories'*

According to the people who have participated in this exercise, many of the most effective and appropriate community mechanisms were developed and implemented by the communities themselves. This is especially the case when the central state has not had an effective presence. However, communities expect the state to contribute more effectively because there is a limit to what they can do without institutional support.

The state has to ensure that all its institutions (particularly the military and the police) respect human rights in the border regions and support rather than hinder community organisation.

Community leadership is key even at the cross-border level. For example, informal dialogues between communities on both sides of the border strengthen the peaceful exchange between Colombia and its neighbours and have contributed to the prevention and resolution of conflicts. The peace, development, and citizen security of borderland communities would be improved if people were involved in building the state from the grassroots up with the active support of the government at all levels. This is already being done with cooperation between the government and the communities around service provision, and such participation can be extended to provide solutions to the problems related to the triple crisis. Nevertheless, participants demand that the state provide more and better support and this is key to sustaining the protection, peace, and development mechanisms in the long term.

The final analysis provides short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations for strengthening the capacity of border communities to face the triple crisis and improve their security and development:

### Short-term:

- Advocate for national and local authorities to respect the human rights of everyone in the border areas, increase the protection mechanisms for social leaders, human rights defenders, and former combatants.
- Ensure that commitments made in the Territorially Focused Development Plans (PDET) and the National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS) are fulfilled.

### Medium-term:

- Strengthen the Community Action Boards (JAC) as a space for cooperation from the local level made up of those actors who know the territory and have a clear idea of the daily dynamics.
- Give continuity and formalise the existing local and cross-border cooperation mechanisms with the support of the International Community.
- Develop collective protection measures instead of following individual protection schemes.

### Long-term:

- Borders should remain open and cross-border cooperation (in particular economic and social exchanges with neighbouring communities) should be strengthened.
- Promote structural changes such as strengthening local participation and citizen oversight to have more local control over the objectives of that participation and the targeting of development and security resources.

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## CONPEACE

### From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace

Hosted at the University of Oxford's Global Security Programme, the CONPEACE Initiative focuses on changing security landscapes in marginalised spaces, especially in border regions 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 a bottom-up methodology based on intensive fieldwork, conceptual frameworks on non-state order, and regular cross-stakeholder fora.

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