

CONPEACE

From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace

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Ensuring People-Centred Security in Colombia's Borderlands

Recent CONPEACE research based on exchanges with civil society, fieldwork and cross-stakeholder forums indicate the presence of various threats to people-centred security in the borderlands. Chief among these are the high levels of poverty and inequality that threaten security and sovereignty among rural populations. Geographic isolation at the *margins* continues to be highly correlated with social *marginalisation* – and these communities continue to be excluded from participation as equal and active citizens. In addition, the Colombian government is not doing enough to protect human rights, provide vital public services, create spaces for active citizenship, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities in these marginalised spaces.

All of these are serious threats to people-centred security, which in the current context are exacerbated by limited efforts to implement the Havana peace agreement and the mass arrival of migrants and refugees – including Colombian returnees – from Venezuela. Violence against Venezuelan nationals has risen sharply and incidents of xenophobia have been documented in various parts of Colombia, mainly in Cúcuta and Arauca, as well as Ecuador and Brazil.

Armed groups are (re-)organising and recruiting and new spheres of control are being established particularly in some border regions where the existence of fractured communities, weak governance, lack of opportunities and impunity make the use of violence a low risk/high reward behaviour.

CONPEACE has identified three key challenges for security in borderland areas as a result of a cross-stakeholder consultations:

- 1 Understanding the interaction of migration and people-centred security;**
- 2 Improving policy coherence and coordination among and within the government, civil society, and international organisations;**
- 3 Integrating the perspectives and initiatives of local communities into the creation and implementation of policy and practice.**

There are avenues of action all stakeholders can pursue to address these challenges and help bring about stability in Colombia's borderlands.

1

Understanding the interaction of migration and people-centred security

Challenges

The mass arrival of people from Venezuela – migrants, refugees, and returnees – has been occurring for some years, and has increased considerably recently. 40% of Venezuelans remain in Colombia, equating to 1.1 million people in 2018; while 40,000 Colombian returnees were documented in 2017. Even if they decide to settle in a different city, the border regions are crucial corridors having direct affectations for people-centred security because most of these territories still have not overcome the negative effects of armed conflicts.

This influx of people has severe consequences for people-centred security, both for existing and incoming communities. There are significant levels of poverty, and a shortage of adequate housing and livelihood opportunities – all problems exacerbated by the arrival. These socio-economic factors create the conditions for violent non-state groups to reorganise and recruit in a context where viable livelihood opportunities are scarce.



Julia Zulver, 2019 Borderland Area, Tres Bocas, Catatumbo

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The migration crisis and the armed conflict should be studied as intertwined phenomena and not as isolated events.

Continuous field visits should be made to the legal crossing points and *trochas*, and the reports of local communities, civil society, international organisations, and academia used as the knowledge base for more appropriate policy and action.

Re-establish and create channels of communication between Colombia and Venezuela.

This is essential to mitigate the people-centred security concerns that accompany mass migration. While the current political climate in both countries makes this communication difficult at the official national level, efforts should be made to establish informal channels of communication and sub-national links at the local level.

People-centred security

The approach to security that takes into account the daily experiences and perceptions of individuals and communities.

2

Improving policy coherence and coordination among government, civil society, and international organisations

Challenges

There is a lack of coordination among different actors in border regions, and this exacerbates the problem of weak governance. Forty-seven state institutions have been involved in dealing with the current wave of arrivals from Venezuela but these efforts are late and limited responses to deal with the scale of the problem. Government, civil society, and international organisations are also acting in an uncoordinated manner, duplicating efforts in some dimensions and in certain places, while other areas are being neglected.

Lack of operational coordination is matched by policy incoherence. Disputes take place about the status of people arriving from Venezuela, with the Colombian government reluctant to accept them as refugees. This is incoherent given the Colombian government's position that Venezuelans are suffering repression at the hands of a dictatorial regime – making arrivals undoubtedly refugees or asylum seekers. Furthermore, the UNHCR considers most recent arrivals to be refugees.

Double Crisis

Double impact on citizens' security due to ineffective implementation of the Havana Peace Accord and the mass migration from Venezuela.



Juan Masullo 2019, Illegal settlement outskirts of Riohacha, Guajira

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The government should assign a borderlands committee.

The committee's main task would be to tackle the current double crisis. It would focus on the borderland areas with different institutions and agencies to ensure coherence and coordination both within the government and between the state and international and civil society actors.

Colombia's migration policy should become more coherent.

It should acknowledge Colombia's dual role as generator and receiver of migrants, and contemplate issues of double nationality for border dwellers, the ability to work and access services while awaiting the outcome of nationality, citizenship, or asylum claims.

Implement the Havana Peace Agreement.

Implementing the victim-centred provisions of the peace agreement could reduce tensions that are rising due to the perception that Venezuelans are being given access to goods and services in preference to victims of the armed conflict.

3

Integrating the perspectives and initiatives of local communities into policy and practice

Challenges

There remains a pronounced centre-periphery divide in Colombia, and this can be seen in responses to the Venezuelan crisis. While the two governments have broken diplomatic relations, this is complicating the search for sustainable responses to mass arrivals of migrants, refugees, and returnees. Communities living in the borderlands, however, accept the need for cross-border dialogue and liaison. Binational indigenous communities are especially attuned to the need for this, with ancestral lands often crossing the border, while many non-indigenous travel across for work, education, or retail, as well as having family connections.

There is also some concern among border communities that the current focus on arrivals from Venezuela is diverting attention from peace agreement implementation. Considerable frustration exists that the promises to extend government provision of public services, rights, and security have not been fulfilled.

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Strengthen solidarity, memory and reconciliation among local communities.

Draw on the diverse experiences that local communities have of armed conflict, economic cycles and best practices. This will facilitate the creation of alternative narratives and analytical lenses to better document borderland dynamics and strengthen reconciliation efforts in the region.

Use the media and government communications to report the experiences of local communities.

These reports should be used as a tool to transmit the perspectives and experiences of local communities into political discourse in order to improve policy and practice. As well as shaping state policy at the national, departmental, and municipal level, there is the potential for comparative case studies and horizontal learning among communities across Colombian territory.



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Hosted at the University of Oxford's Changing Character of War Centre, CONPEACE 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 bottom-up methodology based on intensive fieldwork, conceptual frameworks on non-state order and regular cross-stakeholder fora.

