

## CONPEACE

From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace

POLICY BRIEF • APRIL 2020

# The Double Crisis in the Colombian Borderlands: Addressing the Humanitarian–Security Nexus

## Insecurity and humanitarian emergency: why we must act now

The Colombian borderlands face an unprecedented double crisis: in a context of post–Peace Accord insecurity, Venezuelan mass migration has triggered a massive humanitarian emergency. The world’s second largest refugee crisis after Syria intersects with violence and crime and jeopardises peace and stability in Colombia.

The reconfiguration of violent non–state groups and ongoing conflict has exacerbated the situation for migrants, refugees, Colombian returnees, and impoverished receiving communities. Mass displacement, violence, and human rights violations are endangering the lives and well–being of those groups.



Dáire McGill, 2020 Political participation mural in Municipio La Paz, Cesar

In February 2020, CONPEACE held a cross-stakeholder forum at the Embassy of Canada to Colombia in Bogotá. Almost 50% of the participants were women. Representatives of the Colombian government, the international community, civil society, and academia (see figure 1) discussed the challenges and possible solutions to the double crisis. Their perspectives have informed this policy brief.

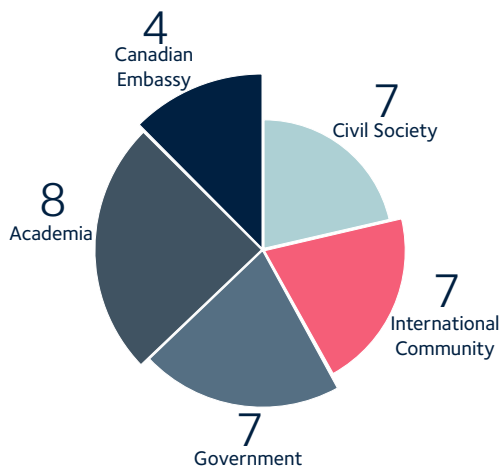


Figure 1: Representatives stakeholder groups 2020 Forum

## 1 The humanitarian crisis: mass migration, poverty, and the lack of resources in the borderlands

The current influx of Venezuelan migrants, refugees, and Colombian returnees as well as ongoing massive displacement (see figure 2) poses challenges for stability in the country and the wider region (see figure 3). Migration flows have also led to a humanitarian crisis that has aggravated existing shortages of health care services, food and drinking water, education, and shelter. This poses a threat mainly to the most vulnerable parts of the population.

While Colombia is still a net-producer of migrants, it is the first time that the country is also on the receiving end of migration. This situation has overwhelmed many of the already marginalised receiving communities. Fear is spreading – at times fuelled by xenophobic media discourses – as impoverished sectors of the population compete over scarce resources. The lack of economic opportunities turns Venezuelans into easy targets for exploitative labour practices and criminal activities.

## 2 The security crisis: the reconfiguration of conflict and a precarious peace

The reconfiguration of violent non-state groups and Colombia’s illicit economies has increased uncertainty and violence in the borderlands. Conflict actors and criminals intimidate existing residents, migrants, and refugees. Human rights violations, internal displacements, and confinement are part of everyday life in departments like Nariño. Historically marginalised and vulnerable sectors like indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, LGBT+, women, and children suffer most from the double crisis.

While the mass movement of people is not the explanation for Colombia’s instability, it exacerbates the existing security crisis. It is also putting the peace process in jeopardy, with Colombia facing significant challenges of re-establishing new modes of conviviality. These complex interdependencies therefore call for a joined-up policy response that addresses the humanitarian emergency (e.g. providing shelter, food, and improving access to healthcare services), improves security, and tackles deep-seated structural problems such as access to basic services and resources.



Figure 2: Movement of people to and within Colombia 2019 (Own elaboration with UNHCR data)



Figure 3: There are approximately 4,730,00 Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Latin America (2020) (Own elaboration with UNHCR data)

## Avenues of Action

There is a disarticulation between the central government and local communities, as well as the international community when it comes to responding to the double crisis. Furthermore, the state's monopoly of violence and overall presence remains limited, impacting on citizen security of geographically marginalised communities. This leads to a lack of confidence, which is the problem hindering more effective policies to address the double crisis.

Acknowledging the complex dimensions of the double crisis is critical to save lives, improve well-being, prevent destabilisation in the borderlands, and reduce the potential for future armed conflicts or regional turmoil.

In order to mitigate the effects of the devastating humanitarian and security situation in the borderlands, CONPEACE has identified four key avenues of action:

### A. Coordinated and locally-informed responses to the humanitarian and security situation.

- **The government should launch comprehensive people-centred initiatives to improve citizen security.** Civilian and military institutions need to monitor cross-border flows, guarantee safe and ordered forms of migration, and ensure access to formal asylum

applications. The state needs to expand access to basic services to improve the physical, mental, economic, social and cultural security of migrants, refugees, returnees, and receiving communities.

- **The government and international community need to improve responses to the humanitarian emergency.** It is vital to expand and strengthen the support given to refugees, migrants, and returnees through healthcare, education, food, and shelter.
  - **The international community must continue to provide humanitarian support, advice, and technical expertise.** Partnerships between governments and international organisations would increase efforts and raise financial support to assist Colombia and for immediate humanitarian action.
- B. Empowering, differential, and gender-sensitive responses as well as emergency support for refugees, migrants, returnees, and receiving communities (with a specific focus on women, LGBT+ communities, and the poor).**
- **The government must provide protection measures to the most vulnerable sectors of society.** It further needs to develop mechanisms of political incorporation of women, youth, LGBT+, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and economic support for the poorest parts of the population.

- **Civil society and government must assist all marginalised groups equally to enhance successful integration.** To avoid xenophobia and rivalry between marginalised sectors, different groups should not be played off against each other, and emergency measures should be complemented with deeper structural reforms improving the situation for all Colombian residents and those on the move.

- The government needs to expand legal guarantees for migrants and refugees. This includes special work and residence permits.

**C. Expanded dialogue between different state levels, and between state authorities, citizens, refugees, and migrants.**

- The government must improve the coordination of policy responses with local authorities and open dialogue mechanisms to local civil society actors. Policymakers should listen to citizens experiences and invite local communities, refugee organisations, and academics to the *Mesas Migratorias* (Migration Roundtables) and *Consejos de Paz* (Peace Councils) to guarantee a more democratic, and legitimate way of addressing the double crisis.
- Civil society and academia should provide advice to state authorities and hold policymakers accountable. Participation in government-sponsored fora, or the creation of local dialogue spaces at the community level, are key to provide effective policy solutions to address the double crisis. Oversight is crucial to guarantee the rights of all citizens and those on the move.

- Civil society should create networks of solidarity between Venezuelans and Colombians. To counter stigmatisation and improve mutual support, migrants and refugees need to be integrated into local communities through social and cultural events. Further, cross-border civil society dialogue and cooperation must be expanded.

**D. Increased awareness and resources to understand and address the double crisis.**

- The international community must offer support to complement local and national government policies by setting up an Integrated Assistance Centre for refugees and countering prejudices through existing campaigns such as *Somos Panas Colombia*.
- Researchers should provide national and international stakeholders with up-to-date and locally grounded knowledge on the humanitarian–security nexus in the borderlands. Empirical data should be collected in the regions most affected by the double crisis to better understand the existing situation and the potentialities to face these.



## CONPEACE

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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.

