

# Towards Peaceful and Safe Futures: Overcoming Conflict and Crisis in Colombia and Beyond

## 1 A cross-stakeholder event to address Colombia’s triple crisis

This virtual forum held on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2021 on the triple crisis of insecurity, humanitarian emergency, and public health in Colombia followed the CONPEACE cross-stakeholder methodology to bring together representatives of the Colombian government, Canadian and European Embassies in Colombia, European Union, United Nations, academia, and civil society.

This triple crisis is caused by three intersecting factors:

- i. insecurity: the continued reconfiguration of violent non-state groups in the context of ongoing armed conflict and flourishing illicit economies;
- ii. humanitarian emergency: the spill-over effects of the social and political crisis in neighbouring Venezuela;
- iii. public health: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and public policy responses.

The triple crisis threatens many communities at the country’s margins, undermines Colombia’s peace process, and jeopardises stability in the wider region.

CONPEACE researchers shared key findings and policy implications of their evidence-based research to help identify steps to mitigate the triple crisis. Our approach follows three steps (figure 1): first, facilitating dialogue among different sectors to increase understanding of the triple crisis; second, acknowledging the advances in mitigating the negative impacts; and third, working towards a consensus on the best possible avenues of action to effectively address the humanitarian crisis and to define a roadmap towards sustainable and inclusive peace, security, and stability.

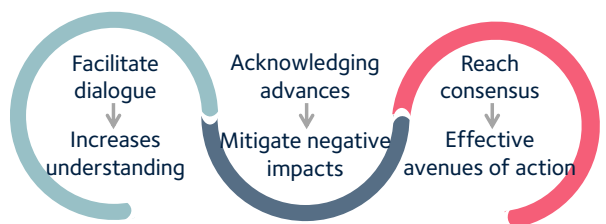


Figure 1 CONPEACE Cross-stakeholder approach to address the triple crisis

## 2 The CONPEACE research agenda on the triple crisis

The CONPEACE director presented the programme's research agenda on the "border effect" and the triple crisis in Colombia. The research finds that the re-ordering of violent non-state groups, the socio-political crisis in Venezuela, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have deepened the gaps between the centre and the margins and undermined people-centred security. The interdependent nature of these factors has made it more difficult for local, regional, and national authorities to guarantee comprehensive state presence and the protection of citizens.

### Policy Implications:

- Stabilisation efforts need to account for interactions among various violent non-state groups rather than considering each group in isolation.
- Peacebuilding efforts need to account for the re-ordering of group constellations in the post-peace accord period.
- Security policies need to complement a focus on "body counts" with a focus on people's perceived insecurity.

### Border Effect:

The border effect is characterised by "the confluence of weak state governance, a low-risk/high-opportunity environment, and a propensity for impunity, which arises from the transnationality of borderlands in vulnerable regions and their distance to state centres." It can take shape in four mechanisms:

- border as facilitator
- border as magnet
- border as deterrent
- border as disguise.

Idler, Annette. *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

## 3 Four CONPEACE areas of research and key policy implications

### 3.1 The nexus between security and citizen participation in border areas

#### Findings:

- Overly militarised security approaches often decrease rather than increase citizen security as inhabitants are perceived as collateral damage or enemies of the state.
- Violence does not occur at random but is targeted at specific social sectors or groups for specific reasons such as the maintenance of existing, often corrupt, economic links.
- Forms of participation that challenge entrenched orders often trigger violence in response.
- Enhanced citizen participation has the long-term effect of increasing people-centred security.

#### Policy Implications:

- Electoral participation should be empowered to improve the social, racial, and gendered diversity of representation in decision-making bodies.
- Mechanisms for robust citizen audits and supervision should be strengthened.
- Communities' social fabric should be strengthened so that security challenges can be discussed and diagnosed locally, and actions taken to avoid or mitigate them.
- Neighbouring communities should participate together in programmes that build trust and reconciliation in areas severely affected by armed conflict.

- The national government must properly support – politically and financially – the bottom-up PDET and other initiatives.
- Community perspectives should be integrated into municipal and departmental plans, as well as into Colombia’s National Development Plan and National Security Policy.

### 3.2 Gendering the Border Effect

#### Findings:

- The border effect contributes to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).
- The border effect makes women vulnerable to prostitution and sexual exploitation.
- The border effect hinders access to support systems.

#### Policy Implications:

- Assessments of the triple crisis in borderlands must adopt a gender lens to visibilise and address the vulnerabilities women, girls, and the LGBTI community face as a result of the gendered power dynamics that dominate in these territories, and which are exacerbated by ongoing insecurity and the humanitarian crisis.
- Colombia’s state institutions and international humanitarian organisations need to systematically develop and integrate their ability to register, document, and collect gender-sensitive data on SGBV.
- Decisions to close the border and to reduce humanitarian aid will have disproportionate impacts on women, girls and the LGBTI population including their exposure to SGBV, in public spaces like *trochas*, and in neighbourhoods and households. Adopting a rights-based approach to decisions like these is vital in territories where we know that

women, girls, and the LGBTI community are exposed to specific dynamics of insecurity due to their gender.

- The international community can play a role in mitigating the gendered crisis in the border-lands by supporting the grassroots women’s organisations that often perform the lion’s share of SGBV prevention and response work, through the designation of funds and resources to support their work, and the provision of technical assistance.

### 3.3 Security governance transformation and challenges at Colombia’s borders

#### Findings:

- The location of communities at the border increases their vulnerability.
- Border closures exacerbate the impact of the “border effect” with negative effects on both national security/stability and citizen security (in particular for migrants, refugees, returnees, and marginalised receiving communities).
- Communities and their leaders lack protection (e.g. in areas contested among violent non-state actors) due to a selective absence of Colombian state institutions.
- Citizen distrust in the Public Force increased, for instance as a reaction to police violence, attempts to criminalise protesters and social leaders, and the absence of effective protection mechanisms.
- Two security logics exist in Colombia, citizen security at the urban centres and a national one at the periphery, with national security fostering militarised security governance.

#### Policy Implications:

- Respect Human Rights.
- Rethink security from a bottom-up perspective.

- Redefine security from a people-centred approach respecting differential security needs.
- Recognise the political dimension of security sector reform.
- Reformulate the country's security architecture.
- Reconnect the reform of the security sector with wider reform agenda in the light of the Peace Accord.

### 3.4 Uncertainty amidst the changing security landscape

#### Findings:

- Prior to the peace accord, the FARC, the ELN and other armed actors established shadow citizenship in many marginalised areas that allowed them to impose behavioural rules.
- In the aftermath of the peace accord, many communities faced uncertainty because shadow citizenship no longer held, new armed groups began to compete for the territory, and the state did not fill this power vacuum sufficiently quickly.
- Illicit economies enhance uncertainty and further erode the social fabric.

#### Policy implications:

- The government needs to mitigate uncertainty among local communities via stable civilian presence and lasting structures on the ground.

#### Shadow citizenship:

Shadow citizenship is a social contract-like relationship in which armed actors provide public goods and services and define the rules of appropriate behavior while citizens socially recognize their illicit authority.

Idler, Annette. *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

- The government needs to gain legitimacy among communities previously controlled by the FARC by providing services and embracing local knowledge.
- Fostering social fabric among communities and building trust relationships between communities and the state are essential to ensure the long-term prosperity of Colombian society.

## 4

### How can research be translated into effective policies and programmes?

Senior representatives of international organisations in Colombia highlighted the effects of Covid-19 in limiting institutional presence and allowing armed groups to expand. It was argued that the social protests evidence an increased government-society divide, with peace accord implementation considered the appropriate path to respond to social demands and to dismantle violent groups and networks, in particular the commitments to guarantee political participation and transitional justice. The representatives remarked on the need to include local knowledge to address marginalisation and human rights violations. There was a special emphasis on illicit economies like mining and the strengthening presence of non-state armed groups on both sides of the border. Also, there is a pressing challenge to create lasting solutions to a deficient participation structure in which civil society does not feel represented, and how to properly channel civil society concerns to ensure a comprehensive democratic system where human rights are protected, and security is ensured.

## 5 Achievements and potential in addressing the Triple Crisis

The migration crisis can be transformed into an opportunity for development. Measures to do so include integrating Venezuelans into Colombian society e.g. via the Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan migrants and refugees approved by the Colombian Congress in February 2021 to regulate the migrant /refugee community and to develop databases that can register the needs and potentials of the migrant, refugee and returnee community.

Some participants highlighted Colombia's potential role as a stabilising force in Latin America, its example of peacebuilding, and its commitment to multilateralism and the values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Following this perspective, it is imperative to protect human rights amidst legitimate societal protests and to continue implementing the Peace Accord, an action that would help resolve underlying social and economic problems.

## 6 The way forward: towards policies and programmes informed by evidence

The event concluded with the European Union highlighting eight main issues: putting human rights at the centre of peacebuilding because violence and armed conflict often arise due to violations of rights; the need to protect human rights defenders and ensure the National

Commission for Security Guarantees operates; inclusion of societal diversity; implementing the peace accord in full; the need for a holistic view of security that does not generate more violence and human rights violations; the urgency of a deal with ELN; the importance of transitional justice; and the key role of Colombia for the EU and other international partners.

In this final session participants called for human rights to be at the centre of peacebuilding, which implies prioritising a holistic security perspective understood as a that includes guaranteeing access to basic services for all. Participants stressed the urgency of implementing the Peace Accord as the key guideline to ensure security and peace and pointed to the importance of Transitional Justice that encompasses what Colombia needs at the moment in terms of security, livelihood opportunities, participation, and guarantees of non-repetition. Members of the international community urged the Colombian government to increase attention on effectively implementing the Peace Accord as the most feasible manner to ameliorate the current unrest as well as to resolve underlying structural problems.

Participants highlighted the importance of Colombia for regional stability. Since the peace accords, the country has been an example of a society in transformation with elaborate and comprehensive avenues of action for resolving conflict and building peace. Mitigation and resolution of the human insecurities through reduction in organised crime and armed conflict would have positive impacts throughout the Andean region and improve the possibilities of constructive cooperation with neighbouring countries.

Therefore, the international community stressed their commitment to continue supporting the country to improve inhabitants' lives through timely and effective implementation of its commitments under international law, the 1991 constitution, and the Peace Accord.

Forum participants stressed the relevance and timeliness of the CONPEACE research agenda and the importance of research based on extensive fieldwork in the geographical margins, as well as its salience outside borderlands. Participants highlighted the importance of evidence-informed guidance and evaluation of security, humanitarian, and development policies and programming in the country.

CONPEACE is strongly committed to continuing its rigorous research engaging with all sectors of Colombian society and the international community. Our aim is to advance towards a long-lasting peace for all Colombians – as well as for those seeking refuge in the country – by closely monitoring the situation, conducting in-depth fieldwork, facilitating dialogue, and providing policy-relevant analysis and advice on the triple crisis. In this way, we can continue strengthening our contribution towards building more peaceful and safe futures in the country and the wider region.

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## CONPEACE

### From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace

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.

