# Colombia's Changing Security Landscape
## View from the Borderlands

Despite the FARC's demobilisation in 2017, Colombia still faces numerous security challenges, undermining the implementation of the peace agreement that the Colombian government signed with the FARC in 2016. The National Liberation Army (ELN) and other violent non-state groups continue to engage in lethal tactics; this was made clear with the deadly bombing of a Bogotá police academy in January 2019. These groups engage in ongoing recruitment as they attempt to control territories – rich with illicit crops – and trafficking routes that were formerly controlled by the FARC.

These conflict dynamics primarily affect the country's margins. In borderland areas we see the disconnect between Colombia's political and economic centres and its peripheries. Day-to-day dynamics in the margins are often dictated by violent non-state groups who establish rules of behaviour. These communities develop their own solutions to live with the constant threat of violence, in the absence of state protection.

The current Venezuelan migration crisis – in which millions of migrants flow across the border into Colombia – further challenges the peace agreement implementation. This threatens a successful transition from war to peace.



Zulver, Julia. *San Miguel Putumayo*

Based on fieldwork and a cross-stakeholder meeting in Oxford in October 2018 that brought together representatives from Colombian civil society, government, international organisations, and academia, CONPEACE has identified three key challenges for security in the borderlands:

1. **Bringing people-centred security to marginalised territories;**

2. **Reducing the negative impact of the illicit economy;**

3. **Mitigating the impact of the Venezuelan migration crisis.**

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

# 1 Bringing people-centred security to marginalised regions

## Challenges

The state's civilian institutions remain absent across many parts of Colombia. Communities feel this phenomenon through a lack of basic services such as healthcare and education. Government initiatives to bring the state to marginalised areas are often considered "quick fixes", with limited time horizons rather than sustainable long-term solutions coordinated with other agencies and organisations.

Our cross-stakeholder consultations and follow-up fieldwork found that the post-accord implementation context requires that the state build its legitimacy in the eyes of all its citizens. The absence of key judicial institutions, like the prosecutor's office (*Fiscalía*), undercuts the state's ability to apply the law, diluting its claim to legitimacy and its claim to a monopoly on the use of violence.



Idler, Annette. *School in Arauca*

## Avenues of Action

### Guarantee justice and civilian rights protections

This is best achieved through the presence of the Public Prosecutor's Office (*Fiscalía*) in all municipalities.

### Provide the local Attorney's Office with resources

The Local Attorney's Offices (*Procuradurías Distritales y Provinciales)* need to be able to identify the material and intellectual perpetrators of the assassinations of social leaders.

### Enhance the visibility of local problems

Strengthening the role of the Ombudsman (*Personero*) is essential in order to establish a clear focal point for defending and guaranteeing civilian's rights.

### Strengthen the participation of social movements and local initiatives

Supporting Community Action Organisations (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*) helps bolster local legitimacy of the government.

## 2 Reducing the negative impact of the illicit economy

### Challenges

The peace accord involves reducing Colombia's illicit economies, particularly the cocaine business. Despite focused government attention to crop-substitution programmes, however, 2017 saw more coca cultivation than ever before in Colombia's history. Various non-state armed groups violently compete to fill the power vacuums left by the demobilised FARC. This causes insecurity in marginalized communities. These actors operate in urban and rural zones and engage in the use of landmines and forced recruitment.

Territory belonging to *campesinos*, indigenous communities, and Afro-Colombian people is often considered valuable because of the strategic location in hard-to-reach Colombian hinterlands, as well as the special legislation that protects it. This means that these communities disproportionately face ongoing violence, threats, and assassinations, particularly in areas with crop-substitution programmes.

Physical, psychological, and sexual gender violence is increasing along the Colombia-Venezuela border, particularly for Venezuelan women. Human trafficking networks are also getting stronger, and this is likely to increase. Irregular migration statuses make it difficult to assess the extent of these issues, effectively leaving Venezuelan women (in particular) "invisible."

### Avenues of Action

#### Prioritise coca substitution programmes in critical areas
These areas can be identified through risk reports done by the local communities and the Ombudsmen.

#### Promote 'bottom-up' agro-development initiatives
Empowering local communities to establish alliances with the private sector reduces their reliance on illegal activities.

#### Raise awareness about the risks of illicit businesses
Information prevents potential victims from getting involved in illicit businesses such as human trafficking.

#### Generate data on the dimension of human trafficking
This could be achieved through alliances between national and international institutions such as the UNHCR, the Ombudsman's Office, and Colombian Migration Office (*Migración Colombia)* to effectively address the problem.

# 3 Mitigating the impact of the Venezuelan migration crisis

## Challenges

The cross-stakeholder forum and follow-up fieldwork highlighted the ways in which the spill-over effects of Venezuela's crisis affect the entire region, undermining Colombia's peace deal implementation. The political situation in Venezuela, and the deficiency of articulated measures against transnational organised crime between Colombia and its neighbouring countries, makes regional co-operation difficult. The migration crisis affects all of South America, and fuels criminality, poverty, health crises, and unemployment for communities in the border regions. Xenophobic tensions arise as millions of Venezuelans attempt to integrate in Colombian social and cultural life.

This creates a favourable scenario for transnational organised crime. Violent non-state groups continue to strengthen their presence in other countries and engage in illicit businesses. These groups control many illegal border crossing points, which they use to extort money and recruit migrants.

## Avenues of Action

### Establish a dialogue between local cross-border civil society groups

Active groups along and across the Colombia-Venezuela border should inform and generate solutions to shared situations, instead of waiting for national laws or decrees.

### Generate effective communication tools

Local communities should be informed regarding the implementation of the peace accords and the support mechanisms available to the migrants, to spread accurate information on how to seek assistance.

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

**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_

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# Case Studies

Although there are similar challenges across the borderlands, regional differences create variance in the impact of each issue. Based on stakeholder consultations held by CONPEACE, the case studies below outline what local civil society representatives consider to be the main people-centred security challenges in their regions.

## TUMACO, Nariño

-In urban areas, organised crime is diverse and widespread. Multiple actors have moved into rural areas where FARC used to dominate, creating uncertainty and leading to community tensions. A resident told CONPEACE that with the FARC "you knew there was a structure, communication between the different sections, and who the commander was. This is no longer possible."

-FARC used to mediate internal conflicts but now this task has been taken over by rivalling armed actors, whose rules change rapidly and unexpectedly.

-Coca growing has increased, and Venezuelans are increasingly recruited to be *raspachines* (coca pickers), or to join organised crime.

## CÚCUTA, Norte de Santander

-The region was one of the biggest voters for Duque in the 2018 elections; indicating that there is hope in the new government.

-Local dynamics are amplified by the region's history of suffering, given the confluence of distinct conflict actors. The violent non-state groups currently present are now fighting for abandoned FARC territory.

-Communities are calling on the state to mitigate the migrant crisis. Approximately 152,000 Venezuelans are now settled in different parts of Norte de Santander, representing 18.6% registered migrants in Colombia.

## SAN MIGUEL, Putumayo

-The border area of Putumayo is a corridor for different types of illegal activity, above all because of a lack of state presence along the river that divides Ecuador and Colombia.

-Although the 48th Front of the FARC demobilised in 2017, dissidents of this group continue to operate in this area and are directly involved in the drug economy.

-Non-Colombian groups, like the Sinaloa Cartel, also now operate in the area.

## FORTUL, Arauca

-The absence of the state features a lack of investment into healthcare, housing, and education. It further features a lack of justice institutions, including judges and prosecutors.

-Both the public and civil society deal with an influx of misinformation about how to respond to the migration crisis.

-Given the increase in crime figures, informal work, and criminal gang recruitment, there is a rise in the stigmatisation of, and xenophobic behaviour toward, the Venezuelan population.