



QUARANTINED IN THE CROSSFIRE

**How the COVID-19
Pandemic is Shaping
Conflict in Colombia**

Key Findings and Implications

Drawing on 23 participatory workshops and 25 semi-structured interviews, with a total of 138 participants from 18 municipalities, we find COVID-19 and response measures in Colombia discernibly exacerbated pre-existing drivers of conflict. We mapped three main pathways through which the pandemic affected violence and instability:

1. **The very measures imposed by the state to contain the virus significantly affected its ability to fulfill key functions, creating a void that illegal armed groups have exploited.** Security presence decreased in conflict-affected areas, human rights protection institutions became inaccessible to victims, crucial peace process programs were delayed, and schools were closed for months. In conflict-affected communities, the response to COVID-19 created an important window of opportunity for illegal armed groups to increase their presence and social control. In this context, and having lost school as a protective space, minors were increasingly recruited into illegal armed groups or the illicit economies they control.
2. **COVID-19 containment measures affected civil society and families, with increasing victimization and disruptions to important human rights work.** Women, girls and boys suffered more frequent abuse and sexual violence at home during the lockdown. Young victims of these violences often abandoned their household and became more vulnerable to recruitment into illegal armed groups. Civil society groups and their constituents have been largely unable to gather because of movement restrictions imposed by the state, illegal armed groups or their neighbors. As a result, important platforms for participation and advocacy were lost, and social leaders lost capacity to verify violations of human rights and accompany their victims.
3. **The pandemic increased insecurity through its detrimental impact on economic hardship and the growing reliance on illicit economies dominated by illegal armed groups.** Unemployment in urban areas and increasing difficulties for agricultural livelihoods cornered many into illicit economies, which went largely without disruption from COVID-19 responses. Youth and vulnerable households had to increasingly turn to the coca value chain. Many who had begun illicit crop substitution schemes re-sowed coca fields, faced with lack of progress with the PNIS state program.

The findings from Colombia demonstrate that conflict is not immune to pandemic shocks and that public health responses cannot be disassociated from existing challenges and drivers of insecurity. States must consider the differentiated impacts that measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and movement restrictions will have in conflict-affected areas, so that mitigating measures can be taken in parallel. Bold and holistic responses are necessary to prevent one crisis from feeding the other.



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

Colombia



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

Colombia has been facing compounded crises in recent years. The country has faced the global COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of challenges with ongoing insecurity and armed conflict, of delayed implementation of the crucial peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla, and major structural socio-economic challenges. The country has been hard hit by the pandemic, with one of the highest infection rates and death tolls in Latin America, despite having implemented stringent and prolonged containment measures.

Globally and nationally, the impacts on instability, conflict and violence of the pandemic and responses to the public health crisis are only beginning to be understood (Inks and Lichtenheld 2020, Pardo Calderón et al, 2020). This study is part of an ongoing effort by Mercy Corps to understand the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to regular analysis in all its countries of operation, Mercy Corps has conducted research to examine and map out the diverse ways in which COVID-19 may be impacting conflict. This case study presents findings from research conducted in Colombia as part of a larger effort to analyze conflict dynamics stemming from the COVID-19 crisis.

Emerging data from the three cases suggests that these effects are far from uniform: the virus and public health responses have affected different countries and populations to different degrees and in different ways. There is little evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has directly created or triggered new armed conflicts. Rather, our findings indicate that the responses to the pandemic have intensified and exacerbated pre-existing causes of conflict and instability. It is the impact of state and societal responses to the pandemic, not the public health effects of the virus itself, that has been intensifying conflict drivers.



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Mercy Corps

In Colombia, the array of measures, including lockdown, has directly resulted in a dramatic economic crisis and highly significant changes to state capacity, diminishing state presence and service provision. These two impacts of the public health response have in turn deepened, through diverse and often interlinked causal mechanisms, pre-existing drivers of conflict and violence. Containment measures decreased state security presence, leaving major governance voids in remote areas, which have been swiftly filled by illegal armed groups (IAGs).¹ Movement restrictions constrained the operations of civilian institutions, hindering human rights protection mechanisms for victims and progress with the 2016 peace accord. School closures negated crucial protection for minors who have been increasingly exposed to recruitment into illegal armed groups and illicit economies. The prolonged lockdown weakened civil society and fueled an increase in gender-based violence (and child abuse). The economic crisis had a profound impact on livelihood strategies, pushing many vulnerable Colombians to turn to illicit crops to survive. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic and public health responses did not transform the nature of conflict drivers, but they deepened critical pre-existing vulnerabilities.

› *This is like when something has been hidden, buried, and it rained and water ran through until eventually water unearths it. And that is what happened, COVID made our country's real problems visible.*

— A social leader, Cauca²

¹ We use illegal armed group (or IAG) as the generic term to describe all non-state armed groups operating in the country, regardless of their political, criminal, or paramilitary nature.

² 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca

Background

Timeline of Key Events in the Pandemic in Colombia

Despite enacting prolonged and stringent containment measures, Colombia has been severely affected by the pandemic. With a population estimated at 50 million, as of June 1, 2021, the country reported 3.43 million COVID-19 cases and 89,297 confirmed deaths — 175 per 100,000 inhabitants. The staggering death toll places Colombia as the fourth hardest-hit country in Latin America, behind Brazil, Peru and Mexico (Ritchie et al., 2020). Colombia's first coronavirus case was reported officially on March 6, 2020, although there is speculation that the first death may have been weeks earlier on February 15 (Reuters, 2020).

On March 17, 2020, the Colombian government declared a state of emergency to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak and mandated a *national quarantine* (or lockdown). While the initial decree was for a 19-day lockdown, the quarantine was renewed several times, lasting over five months — until September 1, 2020 (IMF, 2021). All but essential workers were mandated to work from home, including public officials (Ministerio de Justicia y del Derecho, 2020). Following a new wave of cases, curfews were mandated in larger cities where intensive care units were near (or over) capacity in January 2021 (IMF, 2021).

Restrictions on international and inter/intra-regional mobility were also severe. The country enacted stringent border restrictions throughout 2020 and into 2021. From March 2020, international arrivals were mandated to quarantine for two weeks, while entry into the country was banned to non-citizens and non-residents (Cobb, 2020). Colombia allowed limited international air travel from September 19, 2020, while land and sea border restrictions remain in place until June 1, 2021 (IMF, 2021). For months, Colombia had a policy, which local governments could adapt, of alternating mobility rights for essential activities (such as purchasing food or going to the bank), depending on the last number on citizens' ID (Guerrero, 2020).

Schools were closed on March 16, 2020 and re-opened partially on September 14, 2020 — after a six-month closure (UNESCO, 2021). Since then, schools have been operating under a hybrid on-site and online model (*modelo de alternancia*), but only in those regions where the epidemiological data was considered sufficiently low-risk (Medellín Aranguren, 2021). During the time schools were physically closed, pupils were expected to continue their education online, or by following tailored programming on the radio and television. To compensate for the closure, the program that provides nutritional complements to children in all public schools (PAE, in its Spanish acronym) was allowed three routes to adapt: distributions of items to cook at home, ready meals, and a food voucher (Cerdán-Infantes et al., 2020, p. 25).

The experience of COVID-19 restrictions varied significantly within the country. The areas in which we collected data are regions where state presence is weak, and governance is determined by a complex and highly localized interaction between state policies (including municipal and departmental levels), local community self-organizing, and control exerted by illegal armed groups. The response to COVID-19 is no exception. The communities we studied in Catatumbo and Cauca have experienced lockdowns, movement restrictions, quarantines, and limitations on economic activities that emanated from state directives described above, but also from rules imposed by illegal armed groups and from autonomous citizen self-organization to contain the virus. Our workshops and interviews evidence widespread concern that local public health services, poorly equipped and concentrated in urban centers, would be overwhelmed rapidly should the virus spread. In this context, both illegal armed groups and communities sought to self-protect and played important roles in the response. This dynamic is critical to understand the impact that the pandemic had in conflict-affected communities, as we describe in detail below.

Conflict in Cauca and Catatumbo pre-COVID

In the last four years, the drivers of instability in Colombia have been in flux. The Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a peace accord in 2016, after several failed attempts in the last decades. The peace accord brought a negotiated end to the longest internal armed conflict in Latin America, establishing a six-point framework for: (1) socio-economic transformation in rural communities, (2) wider political participation, (3) disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of FARC members, (4) addressing drug trafficking, (5) acknowledging and compensating victims — the sixth point is implementation of the above issues.

The conflict has become more fragmented as illegal armed groups that are still operational have adjusted to successive processes of demobilization. Already in 2006, the demobilization of some paramilitary groups shifted the balance of power in conflict-affected regions. This shifting scenario became more complex since 2017 and the demobilization of FARC. The pandemic coincides with a period which already entails substantial reconfiguration of power relations among illegal armed groups who were not part of the peace process (e.g. the ELN and EPL) or who abandoned it (FARC dissidents), paramilitary organizations (Gaitanistas and Gabos), and drug trafficking cartels. In the past four years, the myriad guerrillas, drug cartels, paramilitary groups, and criminal bands (BACRIM) have sought to fill voids left in previously FARC-controlled territory (CINEP, 2018, 2019; ICG, 2017, 2019; Morales & Salom, 2020).

The competition over control of territory, communities' social life, and the rents from the drug economy has resulted in violence towards security forces, among illegal armed groups, and against civilians. Social leaders engaged in a wide range of issues have suffered increasing levels of violence since 2017 in both Cauca and Catatumbo (ACLED, 2021, pp. 21 – 23; CINEP, 2018; ICG, 2020). The drug trafficking economy, rooted in the cultivation of coca,³ continues fuelling conflict. Via a mixed approach of forced eradication and consensual substitution of illicit crops, Colombia's land surface dedicated to coca decreased in 2019 for the first time in decades (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020). However, the coca value chain has become increasingly concentrated, with areas like Catatumbo and Cauca actually increasing their total hectares of coca fields. In these areas, the killings of social leaders and beneficiaries of crop substitution programs are common, especially amidst territorial disputes, as are rights violations by security forces seeking to forcefully eradicate fields (Arenas & Vargas, 2020; ICG, 2021).

In addition, the spillover effects of the Venezuelan crisis have deepened insecurity, especially in the border region of Catatumbo. As of January 2021, Colombia hosted 1.7 million Venezuelans refugees (UNHCR, 2021). Because of mass displacement and state fragility in Venezuela, the border offers opportunities to generate income for illegal armed groups through the control of routes for the drug trade, oil and gasoline smuggling, and people trafficking. The potential for generating rent has led to fierce competition among Colombian illegal armed groups, but also with Venezuelan actors (Morales & Salom, 2020). Venezuelan civilians on both sides face stark choices: coping with a severe political and economic crisis or becoming refugees in Colombia, where they lose social protection and have few livelihood opportunities. Amidst increasing vulnerability, Venezuelans are becoming more susceptible to instrumentalization (taking up non-fighting roles) and recruitment by illegal armed groups (Valencia et al., 2020). Despite being granted Temporary Protected Status in March 2021, the vulnerabilities Venezuelans and their host communities face remain numerous.

3 Coca is an ancestral crop in South America and a natural stimulant. From its leaves, cocaine can be extracted through chemical processes and, to stymie drug production, its cultivation has become illegal in Colombia and several other countries.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

Methodology

In this report, we focus on understanding what causal relations and linkages exist between COVID-19 and conflict in Cauca and Catatumbo. Our data collection focused on identifying a diverse set of communities and respondents. We looked for variation across gender, age, ethnic identity (indigenous and Afro-Colombian) of participants, and identified respondents in communities that presented diverse combinations of characteristics: rural and urban, degrees of control exerted by illegal armed groups, prevalence of illicit crops and economies, and cross-border dynamics. The study draws on 23 participatory workshops and 25 semi-structured interviews, with a total of 138 participants (56 male, 82 female) from 18 municipalities. Data collection was conducted from December 2020 to February 2021.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data, based on systems analysis and process tracing to identify pathways and connections that link COVID-19 with conflict and violence, either directly or indirectly. As relevant, we also reviewed secondary literature and existing databases to complement our data and to triangulate and further contextualize our findings.



Figure 1. Map of Colombia with Cauca and Catatumbo highlighted

Findings: links between COVID-19 restrictions and conflict drivers

Restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have had fundamental impacts that in turn deepened drivers of conflict and instability in Cauca and Catatumbo. First, social distancing measures such as lockdowns, work-from-home directives and movement restrictions have severely diminished the state's presence and capacity, particularly in rural areas. Second, the prolonged restrictions on movement and social gatherings have affected civil society cohesion and family relations. Third, like in most countries, COVID-19 containment measures have resulted in dire economic hardship and impacted trade, consumption, and people's ability to work, especially for those who rely on informal livelihoods. The byproducts of COVID-19 responses on the state, patterns of social interaction, and the economy are at the heart of the three key pathways that connect the pandemic and instability. These direct impacts have affected the operation of illegal armed groups, social and family cohesion, and communities' reliance on illicit economies.

Pathway 1: State presence, illegal armed group activity and insecurity

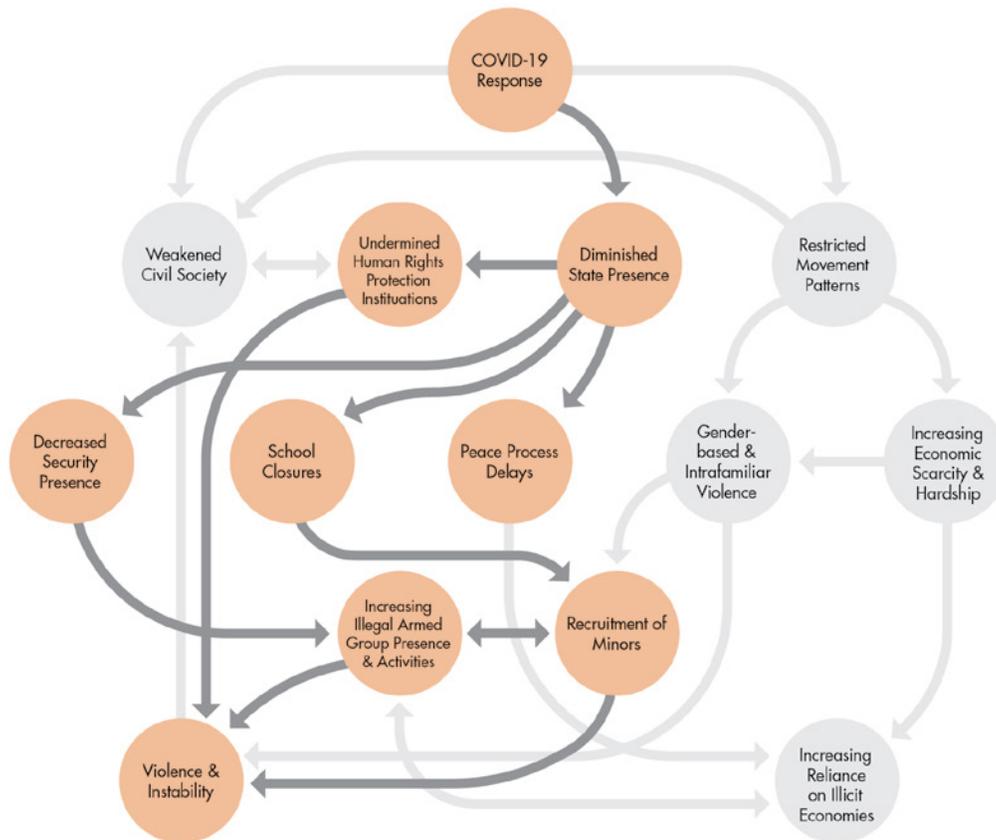


Figure 2. System map linking COVID-19 and Conflict drivers. In red, Pathway 1 factors.

COVID-19 restrictions impacted insecurity by exacerbating the presence, activities and control by illegal armed groups. Changes in the presence of the state have deepened governance voids, which at times pre-dated the pandemic but often were a result of the diminished presence of the state in remote areas during the pandemic. These increasingly ungoverned spaces have been exploited by an array of illegal armed groups operating in Cauca and Catatumbo, including criminal, insurgent and paramilitary actors who each operate in their own distinct ways. This section focuses on shared patterns identified through our data which link the influence of these actors and responses to COVID-19. The patterns present some geographic variation and are prominent in rural areas, but were observed in both Cauca and Catatumbo.



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

COVID-19 and strained presence and capacity of governance actors

The responses to COVID-19 have directly impacted the presence and operation of governance actors. The very measures imposed by the state to contain the virus significantly affected its ability to fulfill key functions. The Colombian state was constrained in its capacity to provide security, civilian services, and ensure institutional presence in remote areas — each of these affected conflict dynamics differently. Communities described four major effects of diminished state presence and capacity that relate to conflict and instability.



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

The first consequence of weakened state presence was diminished capacity to ensure the security of remote areas. In the municipalities we researched, imbalances in the presence of security forces were common pre-COVID-19, but were exacerbated by the pandemic. For instance, participants from El Carmen and Patía, among others, felt that security presence has been a constant deficit, regardless of the pandemic's impact.⁴ For example, a workshop participant from El Carmen described that the area "is controlled by the ELN and state security presence has always been intermittent. El Carmen historically has been at the heart of the conflict [...] Now, even though the urban center is somewhat spared, the rural area is the epicenter of combat."⁵

More widely, the overwhelming sense across our focus areas was that state security presence had further reduced specifically as a consequence of the pandemic.⁶ Community members observed that even conflictive actions, such as forced eradication of illicit crops, have been put largely on standby in their towns.⁷ While for a minority the absence of security forces signaled a respite from frequent clashes between the army and illegal armed groups,⁸ for most participants the withdrawal of military forces is understood to have provided greater operational space for illegal armed groups. For example, in El Tambo a workshop participant noted: "This presence [of IAGs] is associated with the absence of the National Army, who also went into lockdown. There were reports of contagion among their battalions and, because of it, they didn't play their role."⁹ The apparent withdrawal of security forces from these remote communities is seen to have created a window of opportunity for illegal armed groups to act more freely and with impunity. For instance, a resident from Teorama indicated that:

》 *"Illegal armed groups have strengthened their power. It is not even through the use of force, but because of the void left by the state, who withdrew forces and actions to avoid infections among its troops. This prevented an escalation of violence, but also left communities unprotected from possible human rights violations."¹⁰*

4 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

5 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

6 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors;

7 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

8 W1 - Female, Catatumbo

9

10 W1 - Female, Catatumbo



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COVID-19 restrictions also had tangible impacts on an already precarious institutional civilian presence. With stay-at-home orders and movement restrictions, Colombian state officials put activities in remote communities on pause, at least until late 2020.¹¹ Respondents in our study felt that the state’s institutional presence had decreased during the pandemic, even though they are located in areas with historical deficits in this regard.¹² Public servants across sectors were unable to deploy, engage with communities in person and accept members of the public at their premises for many months. Many state programs and services (for instance, local infrastructure improvements, social protection programs, or technical assistance to agricultural producers) turned to virtual platforms. Citizens from remote communities struggled to access services and to navigate their requirements and bureaucracy without in-person assistance.¹³

The second impact of diminished state presence stems from these constraints on civilian institutions, which severely disrupted human rights reporting and protection mechanisms.¹⁴ Community members who have been victimized during the period of the pandemic have faced significant obstacles to reach institutions and file reports. Our respondents felt particularly impacted by the effects of the Human Rights Ombuds Office and the Victim’s Unit having to work virtually, cancelling their visits to communities.¹⁵ Colombians from remote communities faced difficulties understanding, navigating and making use of virtual means of reporting and seeking protection from instances of victimization.¹⁶ Virtual attention was the only support route available for months. As some institutions reopened to in-person attention, movement restrictions (by either state, illegal armed groups or community committees) continued to make it challenging for victims of human rights violations to physically reach

11 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo
 12 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors
 13 W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo
 14 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca
 15 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo
 16 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca/ W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

institutions, when they eventually did open to the public.¹⁷ Civil society leaders, who often play a crucial role accompanying victims and supporting them to navigate state human rights institutions, have also seen their capacity to reach victims decreased with restrictions to move freely.¹⁸ For example, female social leaders from Popayán told us in a workshop: “With the lockdown it was difficult to advise and accompany victims. It became a challenge.” [...] “Victims would go to their representatives [secretarías o enlaces de víctimas], but without working offices, they don’t know enough about attention routes.”¹⁹

As a result, community members and experts with whom Mercy Corps spoke believe that major increases to human rights violations are going under- or unreported.²⁰ The lack of reports undermined effective mechanisms for the protection of communities, such as early warnings by the *Defensoría*²¹ and protection protocols for threatened social leaders via the Protection Unit.²² The absence of these state officials from remote communities together with the strengthened presence of illegal armed groups, to which we turn below, made it riskier and much more difficult to seek protection. Community members described in our interviews and workshops how neighbors have been threatened and killed for seeking state protection, as available attention mechanisms are not immediate enough to mitigate risks.²³ A participant in Tibú described it poignantly:

» *“The presence in our communities of armed groups makes it difficult to report cases of human rights violations, in many cases communities do not report or ask for support because the perpetrator of violence is closer than protection institutions and out of fear they do not report.”²⁴*

With minimal protection in vulnerable communities, many social leaders and community members became internally displaced to survive. As this respondent from El Tarra explained: “What is most serious is that there is no way to seek government protection, one ends up displacing to avoid problems, and from there one tries to help the communities.”²⁵

17 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
18 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo
19 W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca
20 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca
21 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo
22 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca
23 I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca
24 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo
25 W21 - Mixed, Cauca



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

The third key knock-on effect of diminished state presence has been the interruption or delay to crucial reforms mandated by the 2016 peace accords between FARC and the Colombian state. The Colombian peace process had been mired by slow implementation prior to the pandemic,²⁶ so now many community members believe that the institutions responsible are using COVID-19 as an excuse to justify delays which predate the public health crisis.²⁷ The advent of social distancing restrictions due to the pandemic deepened this crisis, with delays and disruptions becoming systematic.²⁸ As a workshop participant from Sardinata told us:

”There were already problems with delays and poor execution, but the pandemic worsened them. Public officials did not come back to communities out of fear of infection and that meant activities stopped being implemented. It was not until the end of 2020 that some institutions started to have some presence again.”²⁹

The most commonly referenced explanation is that COVID-19 movement restrictions prevented public officials from working in the field and substantially slowed the implementation of key programs, namely local development funds (PDET, in its Spanish acronym) and the illicit crop substitution scheme (PNIS, in its Spanish acronym).³⁰



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

The impact of these disruptions, however, varies from one program to another. While both are described as experiencing severe disruptions during the pandemic, respondents are more positive about the progress with PDET projects.³¹ It is likely that the difference is because these funds are de-centralized and municipalities play a key role in implementation, often leveraging municipal development funds.³² PDET activities may have therefore been less impacted by movement restrictions. Substitution of illicit crops via PNIS, however, is seen as progressing particularly slowly or not at all. Combined with a context of economic crisis, increased presence of armed groups, and decreased state security presence, PNIS shortfalls have made many families withdraw from the program and re-sow coca, a dynamic that is further detailed below in Pathway 3.³³

The fourth major consequence of weakened state capacity on drivers of instability and vulnerability is the suspension of in-person education. School constituted a crucial protective space for children, especially from recruitment by illegal armed

26 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

27 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

28 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

29 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo

30 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

31 I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo

32 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca

33 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca



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groups. To prevent the spread of the virus, in-person schooling was suspended and replaced with virtual education. Not attending school in person in remote areas with substantial illegal armed group presence entails losing an all-important protective space and supervision from teachers and other adult staff.³⁴ In addition, across our research areas, connectivity is a significant barrier: many families lack the means to access the internet (a laptop, tablet, or phone), they struggle to afford data packages, and internet infrastructure is poor or disrupted intentionally. As participants from Sardinata cogently noted:

”Many children in the rural areas, even in the urban center, have not been able to progress with their studies because of poor connectivity; they don’t have a computer and in some areas there is no signal. [...] “Armed actors use devices that block the signal in some zones.”³⁵

The impossibility to study online has resulted in mass school dropouts, particularly of the most socio-economically vulnerable children.³⁶ Our respondents saw this educational crisis as a crucial driver of child recruitment, to which we turn below.

Feeding mistrust: the impacts of perceived state abandonment

Altogether, these impacts of the response to COVID-19 on state security presence, protection mechanisms and service provision have undermined trust in government further among Colombians. Civilian state institutions have traditionally been largely absent or constrained to urban centers in Cauca and Catatumbo. It is plausible that communities largely felt the absence of the state more acutely. The pandemic was a moment of crisis with greater need for social protection but to which the Colombian state was not able to respond effectively.

34 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors /W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo

35 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

36 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

Nationally, 30% of Colombians are estimated to have received some form of relief from new COVID-specific programs (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 20). In our focus areas, some community members reported receiving food distributions from departmental and municipal governments or international agencies.³⁷ However, many respondents described these efforts as insufficient (lasting at most a couple of weeks)³⁸ and often perceived that relief was being distributed following political or clientelar interests.³⁹ A resident from Popayán complained: “Food items [mercados] purchased at a departmental level started to be distributed along political lines. That means that they would be given to the candidates who were going to win in the cities. It is really cowardly, one can’t play with people’s needs.”⁴⁰ Others lamented not having sufficient knowledge or support to request available humanitarian relief through virtual means, such as the Ingreso Solidario cash transfer program.⁴¹ Respondents who were also victims of the internal armed conflict lamented that victims enrolled in the *Familias en Accion* program were not eligible for these exceptional COVID-19 distributions.⁴² In many cases, respondents declared having received no relief.⁴³



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Communities expressed a deepening sense of abandonment due to inadequate state provisions and a lack of protection from violent actors. The absence or ineffectiveness of security forces reported in our data is fueling a perception, in the worst cases, that state security forces and institutions are in collusion with illegal armed groups to permit their activities,⁴⁴ that illegal armed groups control or have co-opted local government,⁴⁵ and that the coca economy finances those getting to power.⁴⁶ In some of our interviews and workshops, the absence of security forces was seen to have increased the grassroots legitimacy of illegal armed groups, who frequently replaced key state functions and were able to deliver services to gain trust of the community.⁴⁷ The perception of abandonment by the state⁴⁸ makes the threats by illegal armed groups and the appeal of involvement with them (in the coca economy or via direct recruitment) even greater.⁴⁹

Filling the void: illegal armed group presence, competition and control in remote communities

Shifting power dynamics and competition between illegal armed groups are not new and pre-date COVID-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated this driver of instability. Colombians have coexisted with these ebbs and flows of insurgent groups and drug trafficking cartels for decades, especially since the 2016 accord in areas traditionally held by FARC. For instance, in

37 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo
 38 I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo
 39 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
 40 I20 - Male expert, Cauca
 41 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca
 42 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca
 43 I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca
 44 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca
 45 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo
 46 W19 - Mixed, Cauca
 47 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo;
 48 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca
 49 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

Sardinata, Teorama, Patía and Buenos Aires, a power vacuum had already originated from the demobilization of the FARC and so is not a COVID-generated phenomenon.⁵⁰ However, even in those municipalities, respondents perceived that the presence and control exerted by illegal armed groups had grown over the course of the pandemic. A resident of Buenos Aires told us:

› *“This [IAG control] has increased, with massacres, not only of social leaders, also of youth. [...] Movement restrictions, curfews help with lockdown because one can’t be outside, but these groups take advantage of this period. For example, distributing leaflets, threatening, sending audios to male and female leaders and many have left the community. We’ve seen selective murders.”⁵¹*

Across research sites, community members were concerned that the control these groups were able to exert had increased as COVID-19 responses provided a window of opportunity. Many lament that security improvements post peace-agreements have been fading.⁵²

Increased control by illegal armed groups was an incremental process, deepened progressively by the evolution of responses to the pandemic. Our respondents perceived that in the initial period of the pandemic, illegal armed groups were concerned with the risks of mass COVID-19 contagion. These actors were initially cautious and focused on self-caring. In areas like El Tarra, it appears that caution led illegal armed groups to self-isolate and reduce their activities.⁵³ Generally, participants understand this initial approach to the risk posed by the virus as a self-interested mitigation tactic, to prevent disease among their ranks or illicit crop workers.⁵⁴ Combined with a reduced state security presence, this initial period of the pandemic provided some respite in communities used to frequent armed clashes, such as around Teorama, where a workshop participant explained:

› *“There was also a decrease in the actions taken by IAGs. So, faced by the exit of troops from the area, there were no clashes. In reality, it seems that both sides were more worried about COVID-19 than about attacking each other... they had a common enemy, a more powerful one.”⁵⁵*

50 I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

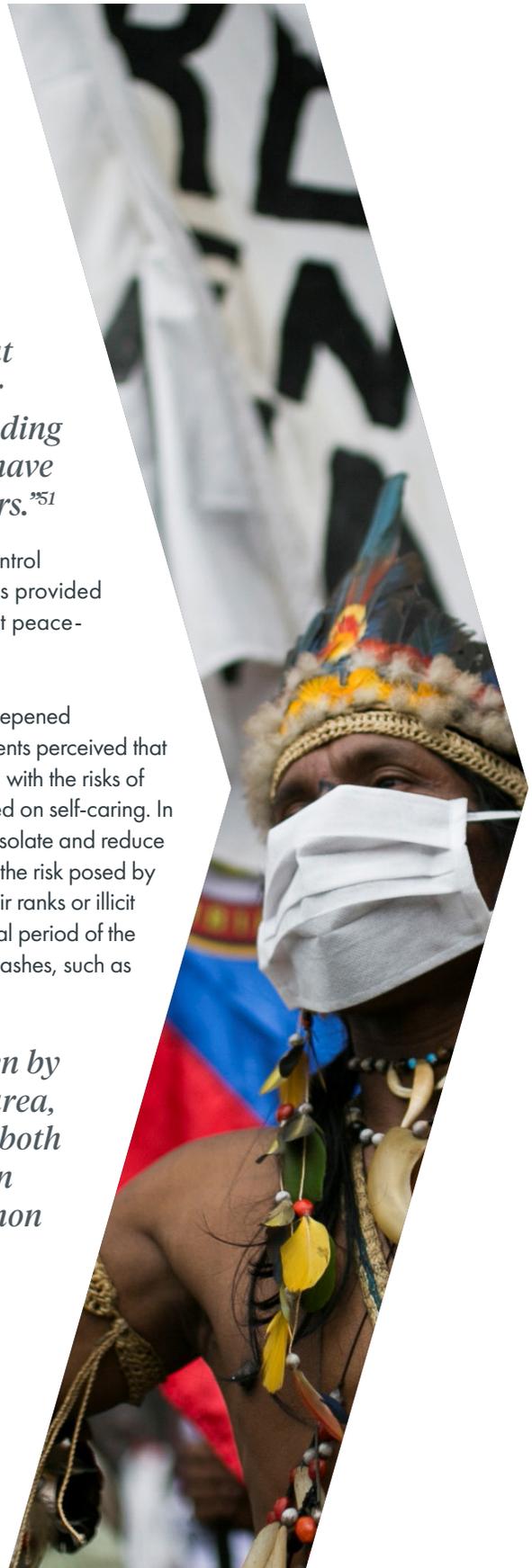
51 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

52 W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

53 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

54 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

55 W1 - Female, Catatumbo



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

This initial caution by illegal armed groups rapidly gave way to more proactive involvement in responding to the pandemic in their communities of influence. Coinciding with the period of most stringent state-mandated restrictions, illegal armed groups established roadblocks to control entries and exits into communities, mandated the use of masks, established rules for trading and opening shops, and even engaged in COVID-19 awareness campaigns.⁵⁶ These actors did not always impose measures of their own design. At times they enforced the very restrictions enacted by the Colombian state to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including lockdowns.⁵⁷ However, taking over measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 provided a window of opportunity for armed groups to become more involved in community life, as summarized by a human rights defender from Popayán:

› *“Illegal groups took advantage of COVID to take up positions in the communities, carrying out so-called clean-ups [killings] and decreeing mandatory curfews — those who were seen outside after 6pm were considered a military target.”⁵⁸*



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Reports of illegal armed groups sanctioning with violence those who did not comply with their COVID-19 rules were common in our interviews and workshops.⁵⁹ For instance, in Buenos Aires, respondents in a workshop noted:

› *“At the beginning of the pandemic, they promoted a mandatory lockdown with threats. So to tensions caused by fear of contagion, we had to add fear of infringing on rules imposed for which the only sanction was death.”⁶⁰*

In El Tambo, participants described how:

› *“the restrictions were imposed by armed groups, who imposed curfews, biosecurity measures and controlled entries and exits into villages in the municipality. The phrase ‘you either care for yourself, or we will take care of you’ was used to enforce these measures.”⁶¹*

56 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca/ I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

57 W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca
58 I20 - Male expert, Cauca

59 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

60 W18 - Mixed, Cauca

61 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

However, COVID-19 was not just an opportunity to reassert control through coercion, it provided an opportunity to shore up legitimacy. For instance, respondents from Sardinata and Tibú indicated that, in response to the increased vulnerability of community members, illegal armed groups provided some relief in the form of food items and construction material.⁶² Expert interviewees have also noted that as a relief measure some actors declared an amnesty on extortion fees.⁶³

Overall, it is clear from the dynamics described by our respondents that enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures became a novel driver in an already existing conflict scenario, following patterns of interaction between illegal armed groups and communities that pre-dated the pandemic. The adjustment by illegal armed groups to the realities of the pandemic mirrored the tactics employed prior, such as restrictions on mobility, which have affected community members in areas of Tibú, Buenos Aires or Patía for years.⁶⁴ Eventually, as the first period of lockdown subsided nationally, starting in September 2020, the focus of these actors on containing the spread of COVID-19 decreased substantially. While their grip on many of our focus communities remained tight, illegal armed groups did lessen COVID-19 restrictions and even shifted in some cases from encouraging to banning mask wearing as a security precaution.⁶⁵

Most importantly, it is not only that groups already present were able to ramp up their operations and consolidate control, but competition became fiercer. Respondents explained that the vacuum left by diminished state presence facilitated the emergence and consolidation of actors that were new to their area, increasing competition for territorial control during the period of the pandemic.⁶⁶ Most frequently, the groups entering our respondents' area were new to their community, but not unknown to the Colombian conflict. For instance, in Argelia, the void left after the FARC demobilized was filled by the ELN, who clashed with the Carlos Patiño group of FARC dissidents — who are seen to have gained the upper hand during the period of the pandemic.⁶⁷ In Sardinata, it was the EPL (or *Pelusos*) who confronted the ELN once the FARC demobilized.⁶⁸



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

62 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo

63 I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict

64 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

65 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

66 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; I1 - Female government official, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;

67 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

68 I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo

However, an emerging trend during the pandemic deserves close monitoring: the arrival of entirely unknown groups in the territory was reported in several municipalities. This is noteworthy because it is unusual for community members to not be able to identify which illegal armed groups are active and exerting control in their area, as traditionally these groups seek recognition and legitimacy for their operations. Our respondents described activities by illegal armed groups who were entirely unknown, who did not identify themselves or did not claim responsibility for actions such as political assassinations of social leaders in Algeria, Buenos Aires and El Tambo, for instance.⁶⁹ Participants from Popayán, Patía, and Tibú did describe these new groups as Mexican, and speculated that these unknown groups are drug trafficking cartels, focused on illicit economies.⁷⁰ As a respondent in a workshop in Patía explained:

”This was a FARC area, with the peace accord this group withdrew and the vacuum was filled by the ELN. Now the [FARC] dissidence wants to return, but the ELN will not abandon what it had gained so easily. To this, we have to add the arrival of Mexican drug trafficking groups who also want some of the profits from coca.”⁷¹



Luisa Gonzalez/Reuters

This finding provides further evidence for the growing influence that Mexican drug cartels are gaining in both Cauca and Catatumbo. Mexican drug cartels have had connections in Colombia for decades, but until recently their operational presence was minimal — limited to identifying viable partners, establishing supply routes and making payments (ICG, 2019, pp. 14 – 15; Miranda, 2019). Early warnings from May 2020 by the Human Rights Ombuds Office and other civil society organizations cautioned that several Mexican cartels were exerting control themselves in different areas of the country (Arciniegas, 2020; El Tiempo, 2020). Our findings are consistent with these initial reports and highlight that Cauca and Catatumbo are among the areas affected and will require close monitoring in the medium and long term. Competition or the emergence of a new actor entails heightened vulnerability, as it means new ‘rules’ and patterns of interaction between the illegal armed group and civilians. Community members need to re-learn and re-adapt their survival and self-protection strategies.⁷² Competition between illegal armed groups debilitates social organizations and leaders particularly as they frequently become military objectives in contexts of dispute, for their perceived affinity to one or another group.⁷³ These areas are at a particularly high risk of mass violence and human rights violations.

69 I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca /

70 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo;

71 W21 - Mixed, Cauca

72 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

73 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

The gender-differentiated impacts of illegal armed group presence

Even in areas controlled by a single actor, increased illegal armed group presence comes associated with a variety of forms of victimization, human rights violations and manifestations of violence. Beyond the violent enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures described above, in both Cauca and Catatumbo, respondents described increased instances of threats, forced displacement, kidnapping, disappearances and attacks by illegal armed groups against civilians.⁷⁴ In particular, community members playing a role in social organizations, defending human rights or advocating for neighbors faced increased vulnerability. Threats against leaders, including with leaflets or WhatsApp audios were common impacts of increased illegal armed group activity, pushing many to flee from their homes during the pandemic.⁷⁵ Many of our respondents describe how, frequently, neighbors are killed for their leadership role in their community.⁷⁶ The increasingly criminal nature (lacking explicit political motives) of some of the new groups further compounds the vulnerability of social leaders, as activists perceive that their lack of ideology makes them less reticent to use violence against key members of the community who could threaten their control.⁷⁷ This targeted violence has weakened grassroots organizations and networks, as the increased risk against leaders has made many reconsider their role in the community.⁷⁸ This weakened social organization and vulnerability of leaders brings about greater silence and compliance by communities, further consolidating the control of illegal armed groups.⁷⁹



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The impacts of the growing presence of illegal armed groups are highly gendered and influenced by age. The increased presence of illegal armed groups heightens the vulnerability of minors greatly. Our respondents found that the pandemic has seen a substantial increase in the recruitment of minors, described further below. Recruitment is not the only form of victimization for youth. It was notable that community members have grown increasingly worried about patterns of violence aimed directly at youth.⁸⁰ No consistent explanations could be gleaned from our interviews and workshops, but several elements appear to be feeding this trend. Increasing participation in illegal armed groups, involvement in petty criminality (which illegal armed groups often seek to control), and assumption of community leadership roles by young people were all reported to be fueling a perception of youth as a threat for illegal armed groups.⁸¹

For women and girls, the forms of victimization from illegal armed groups unfold differently. Respondents across research areas described an increase in femicides (particularly of women in leadership positions)⁸² and in sexual violence⁸³ perpetrated

74 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

75 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo

76 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

77 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca

78 W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

79 W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

80 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

81 I3 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo/ W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Colombia; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

82 W17 - Female, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

83 W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

by illegal armed groups during the period of the pandemic, especially in Cauca. Nationally, the number of homicides has decreased in Colombia between 2019 and 2020, according to National Police data (Policía Nacional de Colombia, 2020, 2021). However, it is notable that the number of murdered women in Cauca grew by 13% (in Norte de Santander, where Catatumbo is located, it decreased by 8.3% — broadly in line with the national trend). The reasons behind this reported growth in femicides are also uncertain, but could partially be explained by the increasing role that women have taken as community leaders, as this interviewee from Popayán and civil society leader indicates: “I don’t know if it’s because as women we have become more empowered in many activities: in our home, in our society, and in the community, and if that is why we are those hit the hardest now.”⁸⁴

A return of mass recruitment of minors

The effect of COVID-19 responses on state capacity has also resulted in a substantial worsening of recruitment of minors into illegal armed groups and the illicit economies they control. Recruitment of minors was a form of victimization that was progressively fading and had shown signs of improvement nationally (González Cepero et al., 2020) and in some of the communities included in our study.⁸⁵ However, it is one of the most consistent impacts that respondents observed since the pandemic started, a period during which they understand recruitment to have grown substantially.⁸⁶ This pattern of victimization has an important gender component in this period, as in our workshops and interviews participants also evidenced that girls were increasingly being recruited, often as forced sexual companions.⁸⁷

Recruited minors take on a variety of roles within armed groups, not only as fighters. Many young persons are recruited into armed groups via the coca value chain and other roles in drug trafficking.⁸⁸ They are also being recruited often for menial or logistical tasks (as cooks, cleaners, couriers, or patrols).⁸⁹ Some are being recruited in urban areas or municipal centers like Popayán or Sardinata, mostly by criminal gangs.⁹⁰ However, most cases of recruitment of minors are happening in rural areas, with little security presence.⁹¹ In a workshop, a resident in Tibú explained: “recruitment of minors

84 18 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

85 12 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; 115 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

86 18 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 125 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca

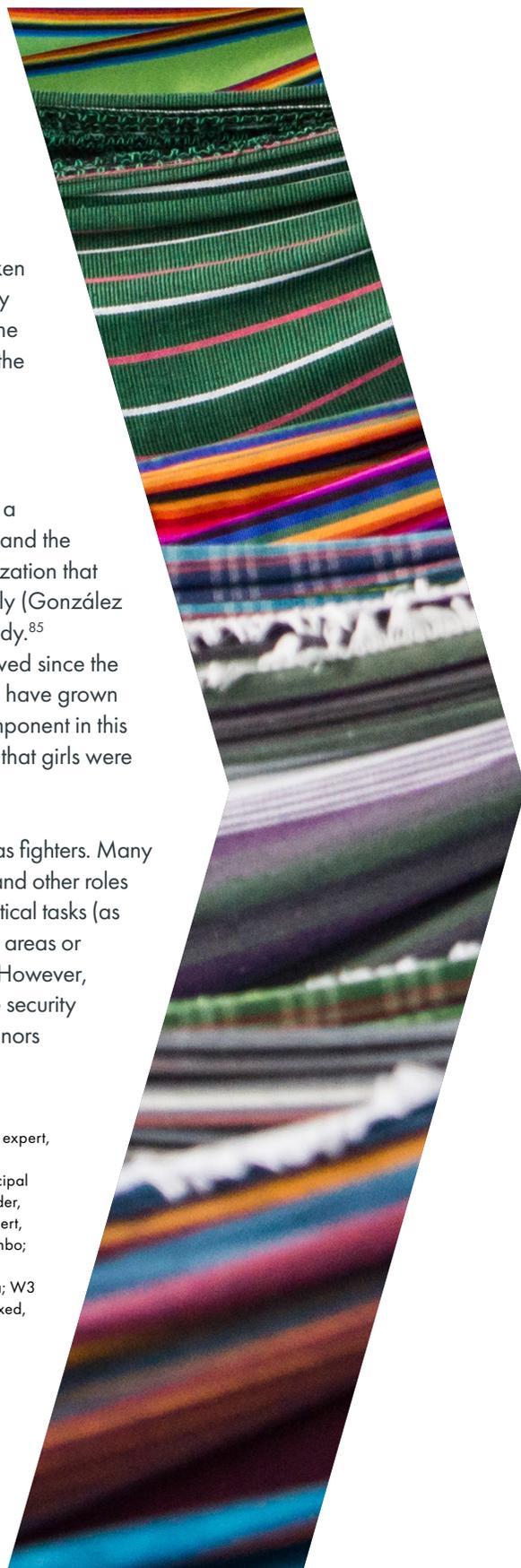
87 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; 110 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; 19 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

88 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 12 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; 124 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

89 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

90 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

91 125 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 117 - Male expert, peace and conflict; 19 - Female



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continues happening and showed an increase during the pandemic, because we didn't have any presence or support from international organizations or the state."⁹²

Responses to the COVID-19 crisis have impacted drivers of recruitment directly and indirectly. One of the factors that heightens the risks of recruitment is if the area is being disputed by several illegal armed groups (González Cepero et al., 2020, pp. 15 – 19). Competition between groups is a risk multiplier that, as described above, has been magnified by responses to the pandemic and diminishing state presence. In this context, many of our respondents perceive that illegal armed groups are more actively seeking to recruit to increase their strength, which includes minors, adults, and both Colombians and Venezuelan refugees.⁹³ The link between competition among illegal armed groups and recruitment is consistent with the fact that there is not solely one group that is described as being behind the increase. Research participants have witnessed recruitment by the ELN, FARC dissidence, such as the Carlos Patiño group, paramilitaries, and at times new groups which they were unable to identify.⁹⁴

What has fundamentally changed for our respondents, which directly stems from the COVID-19 crisis, is the loss of prospects and protective spaces for youth. Illegal armed groups become more appealing when youth increasingly lack confidence in their prospects for the future.⁹⁵ Illegal armed groups frequently recruit by force and intimidation,⁹⁶ but they also attempt to attract youth voluntarily by offering better life conditions (Semana, 2020a)⁹⁷ or by appealing to the sense of purpose, belonging and adventure that youth can gain from joining them.⁹⁸ The pandemic has meant the closure of spaces for socializing and for youth to engage positively with peers and their community, which respondents in workshops in El Tarra and Teorama found to explain increasing vulnerability to these forms of recruitment.⁹⁹ In parallel, but in a less direct manner, the economic pressures which have resulted from the pandemic and its responses (to which we turn subsequently), are also contributing to recruitment. For several of our research participants, economic need was a crucial motivator for young people to link themselves to illegal armed groups or the illicit economies they support.¹⁰⁰ A respondent from Santander de Quilichao described how economic need among families has forced many children to have to work outside the home, which also increases their exposure and vulnerability to illegal armed groups and recruitment.¹⁰¹ Overwhelmingly, however, the factor feeding a lack of prospects for our respondents has been the physical closure of schools and educational centers.

In addition to diminished prospects, school closures have meant a loss of protection that has rendered minors and youth more vulnerable to recruitment during the pandemic. With school closures, they have lost a crucial protective space, sheltered from illegal armed groups, where teachers and other adults can monitor their behavior and often identify early signs of recruitment risks. An expert we interviewed, who works directly with victims of recruitment told us:

》 *“Recruitment of minors by armed groups was very marginal, but it intensified a lot since March. This is because at home there is no protection, there is no school, there are no teachers or leaders of JAC [community development committees] who can protect, nor is there army presence.”¹⁰²*

Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

92 11 - Mixed, Catatumbo

93 I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca /

94 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

95 I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca;

96 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

97 I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

98 I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors

99 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo

100 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

101 I14 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

102 I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

The barriers imposed by shifting education to remote methods were insurmountable for Colombia's poorest families. While older youth have seen vocational training through the SENA (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*) discontinued,¹⁰³ children faced barriers to continue their education virtually. Communities across Cauca and Catatumbo reported having experienced mass school dropouts due mainly to connectivity challenges.¹⁰⁴ Data from the OECD's PISA 2018 surveys showed that only 20% of students from Colombia's poorest quintile of families had a computer (García et al., 2020, p. 3). In August 2020, fewer than 10% of Colombian households with youth under 25 reported having been able to acquire an electronic device for their education since the national quarantine began (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 48). Our findings resonate with figures published by the Ministry of Education that evidenced a drop in the total number of children enrolled in school of over 100,000 by August 2020 (Semana, 2020b). The year 2020 closed with an overall reported dropout rate of 2.2% nationally (Medellín Aranguren, 2021). The Colombian Statistics Department (DANE) estimated 4.5% of families had not continued with any education because of the pandemic (El País, 2020). Given the huge economic inequities between regions, it is likely the proportion in areas such as Catatumbo and Cauca is much higher than national estimates.

103 W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

104 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

Increased intra-familial and gender-based violence and its links to armed conflict

The most direct link between pandemic responses and levels of violence was observed by respondents (overwhelmingly female ones) at home. Women and children are suffering a differentiated impact during the pandemic. Not only are women burdened further with having to take on children's education and additional caring responsibility, but they are increasingly victims of intra-family and gender-based violence.¹⁰⁷ Across Colombia, 7% of households surveyed in August 2020 reported being worried about physical violence by their partner since the pandemic began (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 66). Several factors, in view of our respondents, are driving this dynamic: the prolonged period of lockdown, added to the stress produced by a profound economic crisis and fear of COVID, and a perceived increase in drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism.¹⁰⁸ Our respondents' view of the causes behind increased violence resonate with research into drivers of gender-based violence globally. Periods of drastic change and crises (e.g. the stress over economic hardship) can undermine abuser's sense of control, who may seek to re-assert power over aspects of their lives they can affect directly, in this case by perpetrating violence against partners and/or children (Weil, 2020; Sheppard, 2021). Women, girls and boys in Cauca and Catatumbo were suffering more frequent instances of sexual violence at home during the pandemic, in our participants' experience.¹⁰⁹ In addition, it is concerning that these cases appear to be severely underreported, because of difficulty reaching institutions who offer support for victims.¹¹⁰

The increase of violence against women and children alone is a serious impact of the pandemic. However, in the communities we studied, it is also connected to wider dynamics of armed conflict. As a consequence of family disputes and violence, many victims abandon their home.¹¹¹ These tensions and increased vulnerability are seen by respondents in our workshops as feeding recruitment into illegal armed groups and pushing minors and young people towards illicit crops.¹¹² For young women, being forced to marry, having to assume traditional gender roles, and suffering sexual violence are all drivers of recruitment into illegal armed groups.¹¹³ As this participant in a workshop in Patía describes:

Y *“Young women see armed groups as an option to free themselves from paternal or maternal care, because sometimes it is mothers who are most violent against them. This did not start during the pandemic, but lockdown and intra-family violence worsened these situations.”¹¹⁴*

107 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo;

108 W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

109 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca

110 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca

111 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

112 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca;

113 W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

114 W21 - Mixed, Cauca



Miguel Samper/Mercy Corps

A weakened and more vulnerable civil society

In the areas we studied in Cauca and Catatumbo, civil society organizations and social leaders play critical functions to attempt to compensate for the state's uneven presence, to support victims of human rights violations, and as grassroots peacebuilders. During the pandemic, these community-based organizations, victims groups and growers associations have seen their capacity severely diminished. Even if in some areas community groups have been key players in the containment of the virus, those activities often caused further friction with their neighbors and even illegal armed groups.

Many community members described how in their area, it was neighbors who took on the control of the pandemic. In areas where this was the case, communities organized roadblocks to prevent outsiders from entering and insiders from exiting. These initiatives were undertaken mostly on community's own accord, often drawing on previous networks and organization experience, such as community committees or JACs (*Juntas de Acción Comunal*), grassroots organizations, indigenous groups or even campesino groups.¹¹⁵ However, the restrictions were not always popular and caused friction between neighbors, because they impacted their ability to work and trade,¹¹⁶ or because they restricted the capacity of other social leaders to verify violations of human rights and play their organizing roles.¹¹⁷ Similarly, frequently, illegal armed groups tolerated or actively supported these efforts by communities,¹¹⁸ but they also became a source of conflict where they were perceived as obstacles to transport supplies and inputs for the drug trade.¹¹⁹ Altogether, grassroots COVID-19 mitigation lost strength after a few months, as the effort was difficult to sustain by the few engaged neighbors or because municipal governments demanded that communities desist from imposing restrictions above those legally enacted by the state.¹²⁰

115 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 16 - Female expert, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

116 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca

117 111 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

118 120 - Male expert, Cauca; 112 - Female expert, Catatumbo; 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 17 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 122 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

119 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 124 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo

120 15 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; 16 - Female expert, Cauca; 116 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; 121 - Male expert, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; 115 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

More generally, however, civil society groups and their constituents have been largely unable to gather because of movement restrictions imposed by the state, illegal armed groups or their neighbors.¹²¹ Social organizations have lost impact in spaces like the *Comité Territorial de Justicia Transicional (CTJT)* or *Mesas de Víctimas del Municipio*.¹²² These spaces are important platforms for participation and advocacy around peace process activities and on behalf of the population of victims. Virtual platforms have not been effective means to coordinate and get grassroots participation in political processes.¹²³ The restrictions on movement have also greatly diminished the role that civil society played verifying violations of human rights and accompanying their victims.¹²⁴

This decreased role of civil society is compounded by the increasing levels of violence that social leaders have suffered. This trend pre-dates the pandemic but has continued or even has grown in Cauca and Catatumbo.¹²⁵ The greater presence of illegal armed groups made it riskier for civil society organizations to verify or report human rights violations.¹²⁶ Many leaders are desisting from these roles, faced with growing insecurity, or are having to resort to displacement to safeguard their integrity.¹²⁷ In part, research participants see this heightened risk for social leaders as a consequence of decreased state support, security presence and diminishing protection.¹²⁸ But other drivers appear to be that during periods of lockdown and movement restrictions leaders could not have the backing and protection of neighbors.¹²⁹ The trend of both increasing victimization of social leaders and decreased cohesion of social organizations is a cause of concern to most of our respondents. Leaders play a crucial role in local development, facilitating and/or demanding access to state-run programs and services (including those stemming from the peace process), and they are crucial advocates for the rights of victimized community members. Grassroots leaders also have an important protective impact as they have the legitimacy to mediate between communities and illegal armed groups, which helps avoid violent escalations against civilians (Alther, 2006; Kaplan, 2017).¹³⁰



Blue Sky/Shutterstock

121 I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

122 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

123 I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

124 I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca

125 I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca

126 W20 - Mixed, Cauca

127 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; I9 - Female Afro-Colombian leader, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I16 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

128 I6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W5 - Female indigenous, Cauca;

129 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo

130 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

Pathway 3: Economic hardship and illicit economies

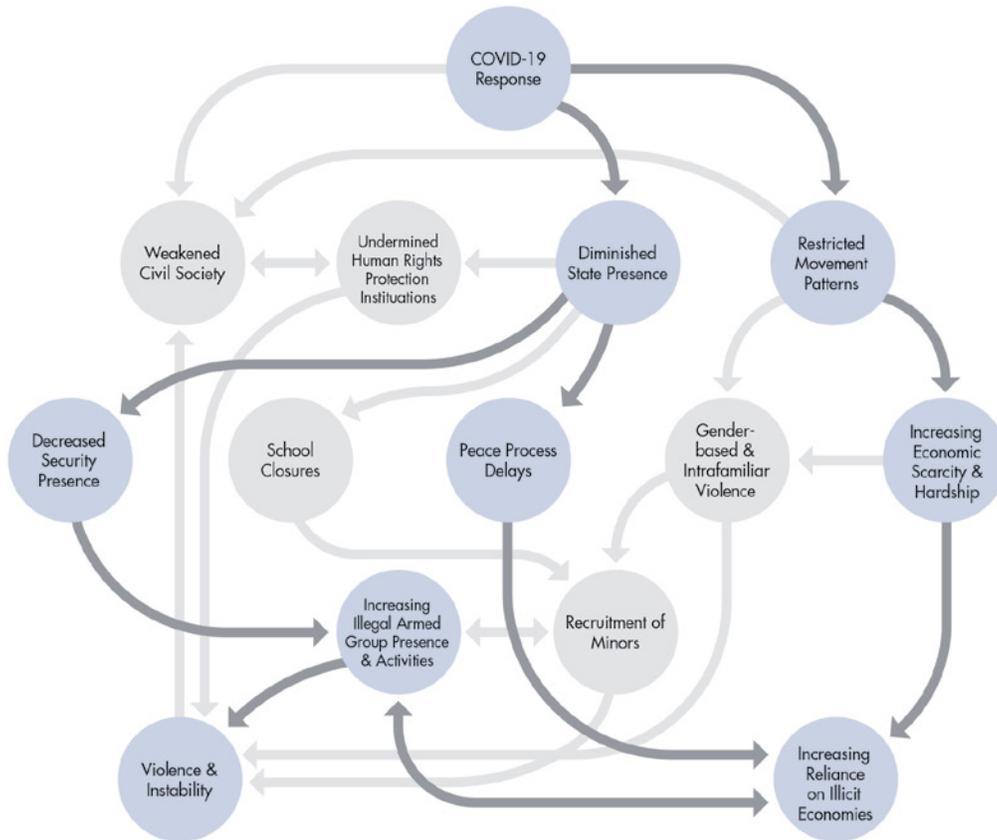


Figure 4. System map linking COVID-19 and Conflict drivers. In red, Pathway 3 factors.

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing insecurity through its impact on economic hardship and illicit economies. The advent of COVID-19 responses without remedial support has exacerbated socio-economic vulnerabilities. Concretely, an unemployment crisis in urban areas and increasing difficulties for Colombians depending on agricultural livelihoods have cornered many into economies that went largely without disruption from COVID-19 responses. In rural Cauca and Catatumbo, this meant mostly a growing reliance on illicit crops, predominantly coca.

COVID-19 responses and economic hardship

As has been the case globally, lockdowns, movement restrictions and limitations on businesses and trading have caused a severe economic crisis in Colombia. Participants in our study described how restrictions have brought with them the bankruptcy of numerous businesses, major increases in unemployment and generalized losses of income even for those still employed.¹³¹ Nationally, 73% of households were reporting losses of income in August 2020 (Warren et al., 2020b, p. 56). The impacts have been widespread, and have affected both the formal and informal economy.¹³² However, informal livelihoods were hit particularly hard. In surveys conducted in mid-May 2020, 49% of workers in formal employment reported having worked in the previous week, while that figure decreased to 26% for Colombians in informal jobs (Warren

131 I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I17 - Male expert, peace and conflict; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca; W2 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo
132 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo

et al., 2020a, p. 31). The disruption of state-run programs also fed the unemployment crisis further, as opportunities for public employment or via international cooperation halted.¹³³

The economic impacts of the pandemic were compounded by ongoing difficulties brought by the mass displacement of vulnerable Venezuelan refugees into already precarious economies. Ongoing economic vulnerability has fueled tension between hosts and Venezuelans over scarce resources. Participants in our research expressed sympathy for the plight of Venezuelans, but were also concerned that their arrival was making employment opportunities scarcer and overwhelming public services.¹³⁴ The fact that there is greater supply of labor and that, being more vulnerable, Venezuelans are willing to work for less is seen as a driver for decreasing salaries.¹³⁵ Venezuelans were overwhelmingly seeking income through informal livelihoods, increasing competition in a reduced market for those Colombians who also rely on the informal sector.¹³⁶ While these dynamics pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents in Santander de Quilichao and Sardinata, for instance, explained that with increased movement restrictions, Venezuelans who would have otherwise moved onwards to other urban centers or even countries, have been forced to stay put in their communities.¹³⁷

There are important differences in the economic impacts of the pandemic in urban and rural settings in the regions we researched. Overall, extreme poverty in Colombia has gone up by 3.2 percentage points (reaching 12.8% of the population in 2020), while poverty grew 6.9 points in one year (to 42.6% of the population) (DANE, 2021, p. 6). However, our participants perceive that unemployment did not increase as markedly in rural areas, where COVID-19 restrictions were reported to be less strict.¹³⁸ In contrast, the consequences of the crisis are so dire in urban centers that many participants described how patterns of internal migration had begun to shift, at least temporarily. Many rural households had settled in urban centers and gained employment in towns and cities prior to the pandemic. With the advent of mass unemployment, many of those urban dwellers began to return to their villages of origin, where family support networks and the lower living costs could see them through the crisis.¹³⁹ This return from urban to rural areas has been an important coping mechanism, but in the medium term it further strains these local economies, which were fragile enough in the first place to push many to migrate to cities.

In rural areas, licit agricultural livelihoods were severely disrupted. Movement restrictions implemented by the state, community members and/or illegal armed groups made it increasingly difficult for producers to reach markets.¹⁴⁰ Across the country, 49% of households that rely on agriculture declared in May 2020 having to change their operations because of challenges transporting and selling their produce (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 31). Restrictions also affected the support available to make licit crops viable. Respondents in Tibú and Patía, for instance, described how technical support for growers provided by state officials and NGO workers decreased.¹⁴¹ In El Carmen, community members felt that a crucial difficulty was that the state's Agrarian Bank stopped outreach to help growers in remote communities access flexible credit lines.¹⁴²

This economic crisis has made it increasingly difficult to meet basic needs. In some instances economic hardship has led to worsened food security, and many families are increasingly resorting to making their children work and contribute to meet basic needs.¹⁴³ In May 2020, 40% of households in a national survey declared having to reduce their number of meals in the previous week (Warren et al., 2020a, p. 16). To cope with the economic crisis, many Colombians and Venezuelans have resorted to illicit economies, which offer ample opportunities in both Cauca and Catatumbo. An interviewee from Balboa described the economic crisis and its links to illicit crops this way:

133 W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca/ W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca

134 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

135 W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca;

136 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo

137 W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo

138 W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca

139 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;

140 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

141 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

142 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo

143 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

”When a community has its licit crop like plantain, yuca, cocoa, coffee and you see that it is not working out because of lockdown, that you cannot sell your products, well, you have to look for other ways.”¹⁴⁴

Growing reliance on illicit economies

After years of increases in the number of hectares dedicated to illicit crops, Colombia had started to see a decrease at a national level (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020, p. 15). Since 2017, it appeared the country was turning a corner thanks to the demobilization of the FARC and the promise of rural reform, especially via the PNIS crop substitution scheme. The decrease was not even, however, and both Catatumbo and Cauca had seen increases in the total area cultivated with illicit crops already in 2019 (UNODC & SIMCI, 2020). The impacts of responses to the pandemic have further deepened this pre-existing trend. There is a generalized sense in all our research areas that faced with diminished state capacity, increased presence of illegal armed groups, and most importantly a major economic crisis, illicit crop cultivation has accelerated rapidly. For instance, a respondent from Buenos Aires told us: “before, there wasn’t as much coca growing as there is now, before there was no leaf washing in the region and now there is, this has brought more threats [from illegal armed groups].”¹⁴⁵

For research participants, following the advent of the pandemic, illicit crops filled an employment gap that neither the informal or formal economy could.¹⁴⁶ People turned either towards cultivation or processing of coca leaf, because its value and potential earnings remained stable despite the economic crisis.¹⁴⁷ It is an economy that has not suffered disruptions because of COVID-19 restrictions and still has a viable outlet as illegal armed groups constitute accessible buyers.¹⁴⁸ A resident in Teorama explained: “[illicit crops] were the only agricultural sector that did not stop. Crops continued, but they also offered an employment option that other businesses did not.”¹⁴⁹ Given the relative certainty and stability of illicit crops amidst a pandemic-fueled crisis, our respondents consider that it attracted numerous Colombians, but especially groups that are most vulnerable: youth and Venezuelans.¹⁵⁰ In fact, several of our participants see coca growing and processing as the reason many urban dwellers had returned to rural areas seeking a livelihood option during the crisis.¹⁵¹

144 I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

145 I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

146 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo/ I25 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

147 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I12 - Female expert, Catatumbo

148 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I4 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W17 - Female, Cauca

149 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

150 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I24 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca

151 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; I8 - Female civil society leader, Cauca;



Alan Grundy/Mercy Corps

The growth of coca and other illicit crops is diminishing further the viability of licit crops, establishing a dangerous causal loop that can continue pushing growers towards the illicit economy. The more prominent these crops are, the greater the incentives to abandon food crops — indirectly impacting food security in remote areas.¹⁵² Coca, being more profitable, is seen by respondents in our study as increasing the price of land, rendering access more difficult for licit growers with lower earnings.¹⁵³ Coca also has a substantial impact on the availability and cost of labor for other crops. Coca picking pays higher rates generally, and so daily laborers desist from working in licit fields or demand much higher wages.¹⁵⁴ A civil society leader from Popayán expressed it cogently:

› *“If you need wage laborers to pick corn in any area, or other subsistence crops, people will not go, because they do better picking coca leaf. They earn between 80,000 and 120,000 [COP (21.9 – 32.8 USD)] daily and if they pick coffee they will only earn between 25,000 and 30,000 per day [6.8 – 8.2 USD]. So this complicates the situation.”¹⁵⁵*

The growing reliance on illicit crops is also interconnected with the pathway that links state presence, illegal armed groups and insecurity. Diminished presence from security forces and fewer eradication operations have also made coca and other illicit crops a safer alternative to generate income both for growers and for illegal armed groups during the pandemic.¹⁵⁶ The resurgence of illicit crops is also worsened by the slow implementation of the PNIS substitution program, described above, which pushed some families who had voluntarily eradicated their coca fields to re-sow.¹⁵⁷ Emboldened illegal armed groups are also crucial in fuelling the shift towards illicit crops. These actors offer incentives in some cases; as a workshop participant in Tibú stated, they even provide credit to growers to start coca crops.¹⁵⁸ However, more frequently, respondents indicated that illegal armed groups seek to increase

152 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca

153 W19 - Mixed, Cauca

154 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

155 I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca

156 I13 - Male youth civil society leader, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

157 I20 - Male expert, Cauca; W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I15 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I18 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca

158 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo

cultivation through threats and coercion.¹⁵⁹ Illegal armed groups also use violence to retaliate against those who refuse to turn to illicit crops or against community leaders, who play a crucial role in supporting peers to access support for licit options and/or the PNIS substitution program.¹⁶⁰

The link between increased illicit crops and conflict was evident for research participants in the analysis of their communities. The potential for profits from illicit crops attracts illegal armed groups and fuels competition, as it is a key source of financing (both from the proceeds of the drug trade and from taxation/extortion of growers).¹⁶¹ This reliance on illicit crops also antagonizes the relationship with the state, which sees coca as a problem while many Colombians see it as their only lifeline.¹⁶² Having to remain at the margins of the state makes communities reliant on illegal armed groups for any other issues they face, as this respondent from Argelia explained:

› *“When one is used to a culture where there is always someone armed who is going to solve one’s problem and who will not interfere with one’s daily bread, which is coca, then one approaches whatever armed groups there are. Because in a way they exert control. In contrast, if public security forces come in, people know they will eradicate, they will take coca, paste, whatever has been produced. There will be arrests, so for them public forces are a threat, because people make a living out of this.”¹⁶³*



Mercy Corps

The growth in illicit activities is not constrained solely to crops. Although not as prominent in research participants’ analysis of conflict drivers in their communities, the period of the pandemic has brought about increases in common criminality (mostly robberies).¹⁶⁴ This increase in crime is largely an urban phenomenon in both Catatumbo and Cauca.¹⁶⁵ Notably, it is happening, for instance, in areas of El Carmen and Teorama, where respondents describe these forms of criminality were not common before.¹⁶⁶ In general, respondents who describe these increases ascribe the trend to the increased economic hardship that has resulted from responses to the pandemic.¹⁶⁷ Frequently, community members also understood these increases in criminality to be closely associated with Venezuelans, who in response to significant vulnerability are forced to cope by engaging in robbery.¹⁶⁸ While it may be plausible that their vulnerable status is pushing refugees disproportionately to these forms of petty criminality, it is an assessment that is hard to make from our data. However, what is perhaps more important is that, regardless of the veracity of the claim that insecurity is driven mostly by Venezuelans, the fact that this perception is held by many host community members is fueling discrimination and tensions against refugees, at times even escalating into violence.

159 W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

160 W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; I10 - Female expert, recruitment of minors; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W9 - Mixed, Cauca; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca

161 W19 - Mixed, Cauca; I19 - Male government official, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I11 - Male municipal official, Catatumbo; I22 - Male civil society leader, Cauca; I20 - Male expert, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W6 - Mixed, farmers, Cauca; I2 - Female civil society leader, Catatumbo; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; I23 - Male civil society leader, Catatumbo; W21 - Mixed, Cauca; I7 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W8 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W3 - Female Afro-Colombian youth, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca

W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

162 W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; I6 - Female expert, Cauca; I21 - Male expert, Cauca; W13 - Mixed, Catatumbo

163 I6 - Female expert, Cauca

164 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

165 W7 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo; W17 - Female, Cauca; W20 - Mixed, Cauca; W4 - Female civil society leaders, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W14 - Mixed, Catatumbo;

166 W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W16 - Mixed, youth, Catatumbo

167 W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W1 - Female, Catatumbo; W15 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W19 - Mixed, Cauca; W22 - Mixed, Cauca; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo

168 W11 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W10 - Mixed, Catatumbo; W12 - Mixed, Catatumbo; I5 - Female civil society leader, Cauca; W18 - Mixed, Cauca

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Colombia faced difficult choices because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally and in Colombia, rapid and stringent measures saved thousands of lives. The Colombian government acted quickly and imposed severe restrictions, which lasted for months. It is not within the scope or aim of this case study to assess the epidemiological appropriateness of the measures taken. However, our research indicates clearly that the COVID-19 containment strategy had significant secondary impacts on the country's conflict dynamics. Colombia showcases how, without adequate mitigation, measures enacted to contain COVID-19 (however necessary and lifesaving) can deepen conflict risks and drivers of instability. With no clear end to the pandemic on the horizon, it is important to mitigate further impacts, while also monitoring early warnings of future instability and violence. The pandemic is far from over and the consequences identified in our data are likely to have their most serious impact in the medium and long term.



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Our findings have the following policy implications:

1. COVID-19 containment had a serious impact on state capacity, and the most dire consequences were borne by vulnerable communities in conflict-affected areas:
 - › The restrictions imposed by the state have impaired its ability to fulfil core functions, like providing security, protecting human rights, ensuring the right to education for all, or implementing the long-awaited peace process.
 - › Without a solid state presence, illegal armed groups have been able to step up their operations, presence, control, and influence over civilians.
 - › With diminished security presence, emboldened illegal armed groups and lost educational protective spaces, youth have become increasingly vulnerable to recruitment.

Broadening access to state services and ensuring an integral presence across Colombia has been a historical challenge, but it has never been more urgent. Many communities in Cauca and Catatumbo have been left to cope with a deadly pandemic in a dangerous crossfire, compounding decades of mistrust in the state's ability to ensure their rights in an integral manner. Restoring youth's right to education, their prospects for a dignified future, and reintegrating those traumatized by having to participate in illegal armed groups should be an urgent priority. More broadly, restoring access to state services must not be understood as a return to the status quo, but rather a decided push to address drivers of conflict and historical inequities.

2. The pandemic-induced transformation of social interaction patterns has weakened an already vulnerable civil society, and has made women and children particularly vulnerable to diverse patterns of abuse and violence:
 - › Because of stresses linked to mandatory lockdown, increased economic hardship, and an increase in substance abuse to cope, women, girls and boys have become more vulnerable to varying types of violence at home.

- › Faced by a lack of alternatives, many young people saw abandoning their homes as the only viable coping mechanism, making them increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by illegal armed groups or becoming involved in illicit economies.
- › Social leaders and civil society groups have struggled to sustain their activities, impacting grassroots human rights monitoring and protection work.
- › Without support from the state, their peers, and their neighbours, local social leaders have become easier targets for increasingly present illegal armed groups.

The loss of protection mechanisms for women, youth and civil society requires urgent action. As women and girls continue to be especially vulnerable to violence, deconstructing toxic gender norms and protecting the growing number of victims of abuse should be at the forefront of efforts to build peace in Colombia. Civil society leaders are crucial in their communities' development, advocating for their rights, furthering social cohesion, and also building trust in existing state programs and initiatives. For too long, they have been exposed to violence for their role advancing human rights, peacebuilding and licit livelihood alternatives, and the pandemic has made them increasingly vulnerable. Despite challenges to grassroots social mobilization, conflict-affected communities were able to draw on previous networks and experience of organization to contribute to the containment of the pandemic locally. The arbitrariness and lack of legal mandate for informal COVID-19 containment caused conflict among neighbours in some instances. However, with the right support from municipal, departmental or central authorities, these grassroots forms of organization could be crucial to respond to future public health crises and even to support ongoing COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

3. The economic shock that followed lockdown and movement restrictions has severely exacerbated economic hardship, fuelling drivers of insecurity:
 - › The lack of alternatives and growing economic need has increasingly pushed Colombian families into the vicious cycle of relying on illicit crops.
 - › With the consolidation of illicit crops in Cauca and Catatumbo, by-products are the strengthening of illegal armed groups, and alienating communities further from the state, which becomes a threat to their livelihood.

The impacts of the severe economic crisis are likely to be drawn out and to continue pushing Colombians (and Venezuelans in Colombia) into stark choices if viable and licit livelihood opportunities are not available to them. For those already dependent on illicit economies, the country's recent history evidences how painstaking the shift to licit livelihoods can be. Given a growing sense of abandonment and grievance towards the state, tackling illicit economies will require a rights-based and consensus-centered approach to avoid the violence and conflict that can ensue from forced eradication (manual or aerial). Reigniting PNIS decisively would be a start, but ambitious rural reform (as highlighted in the peace process) must follow.

The findings in this report highlight that integrating a conflict-sensitive approach into the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (and any future pandemics) is critical. States must consider the differentiated impacts that measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and movement restrictions will have in conflict-affected areas and diverse conflict actors, so that mitigating measures can be taken in parallel. Public health responses cannot be disassociated from responding to existing challenges and drivers of insecurity. Colombia starkly demonstrates that conflict and drivers of instability are not immune to pandemics; bold and holistic responses are necessary to prevent one crisis from feeding the other.

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Where possible, we sourced photos depicting life during the COVID-19 pandemic period in the areas of Colombia that are the focus of this study: Cauca and Catatumbo. Many of the images in this chapter are from other parts of the country and/or from the years preceding the pandemic, but were chosen to help illustrate the broader themes, ideas, and places described by the individuals who participated in our research.

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