

“Total Peace” in Colombia: Lessons for Negotiating with Organised Crime Groups and Promoting Peacebuilding¹

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Summary

The 2016 Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)) marked a milestone in the recent history of Colombia. On the one hand, the largest armed group, which represented the greatest threat to the state’s control, demobilised; on the other, multiple areas of the country experienced peace that had been absent for decades.

However, shortly after the FARC demobilisation, some regions fell back into a spiral of violence due to attempts by other armed and criminal actors to expand their zones of control, the emergence of dissident factions of the demobilised guerrilla group, and the presence of criminal ecosystems and local armed groups attempting to regulate communities and areas beyond the reach of the state. This has led to the start of a new cycle of violence.

In response to this situation, and to definitively close this violent chapter in Colombia’s history, President Gustavo Petro launched an ambitious peace proposal aimed at ending armed violence through the Total Peace Policy (TPP). This policy promotes simultaneous negotiations with criminal organisations and “political” armed groups to achieve “Paz Total” (“Total Peace”), negotiating separately with each of the most powerful illegal armed and violent organisations in the country simultaneously.

1 For the full research papers, see: Johnson, K., Botero, F., Botero, M., Aponte, A., & Asprilla, L. (2025). *Total Peace Policy: Between light and shadow: A framework to analyse Colombia’s comprehensive peacebuilding policy*. SOC ACE Research Paper 34. University of Birmingham, and Durán, J., (2025) *Institutional Architecture of Total Peace: A normative review studied in practice*. SOC ACE Research Paper 33. University of Birmingham.

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This Briefing Note summarises lessons from the TPP for negotiating with criminal groups found in research papers coming out of the SOC ACE research project "Negotiating with Criminal Groups: Colombia's Total Peace".⁸ Drawing on fieldwork in three regions –Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco– the note explains how implementation of the TPP provides important lessons and implications for policymakers and scholars in organised crime, conflict resolution and negotiations, and peacebuilding; in particular: the need to understand the evolving nature of violence; the importance of coordinating between local and national authorities; appropriation of the concept of "hybrid political orders"; and the importance of timing and sequencing in negotiations.

The new cycle of violence in Colombia

Despite different attempts at negotiations and peace agreements signed in Colombia since 1980, none of them have succeeded in pacifying the country, as those agreements have focused on specific actors involved in conflict in Colombia. As a result, periods of transition and peacebuilding have often been followed by new cycles of violence. This also occurred with the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)).

The agreement meant the biggest armed group in Colombia with the widest national presence and strongest territorial control ceased to exist. However, the end of the FARC also left a vacuum in the regulation of the coca economy and other illegal markets. Similarly, the group's exit left vast territories and communities without a hegemonic source of authority. The state did not fill the vacuum, which created an incentive for armed actors such as the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)) and criminal groups to do so.

Therefore, the ELN, the Gaitanist Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de

Colombia (AGC))⁹ and FARC dissidents expanded their territorial influence. For the ELN, it facilitated a decade of growth after years of stagnation and military setbacks. Similarly, the FARC dissidents' structures rearmed rapidly and effectively, using their local territorial knowledge. The growth and expansion of those groups occurred through disputes or territorial distribution agreements of illegal economies.

Thus, the mapping of armed and criminal actors in Colombia was reconfigured, with the presence of regional factions from national groups such as the ELN, Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central (EMC)), Second Marquetalia (Segunda Marquetalia (SM)) and local criminal organisations operating as franchises of bigger criminal organisations such as the AGC, or violently increasing their control over urban and rural areas. These elements are at the heart of Colombia's new cycle of violence in which the Total Peace Policy (TPP) is unfolding.

Considering the context, the TPP is innovative because it encourages negotiations with "political" and organised crime groups, acknowledges that criminal actors can govern populations and recognises urban characteristics of conflict.

The implementation of the TPP began in 2022, and there are currently eight simultaneous negotiations with armed groups and rapprochements with organised crime groups.

⁸ SOC ACE Research Project, "Negotiating with Criminal Groups: Colombia's Total Peace", <https://www.socace-research.org.uk/projects/32-gitoc-total-peace>

⁹ The Gaitanist Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)), previously known as the Clan del Golfo and Los Urabeños, have rebranded as the Gaitanist Self-defence Army of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC)) as part of a bid for political recognition within the government's Total Peace politics.

Group	Type of negotiation process	Region/city
ELN	Political	Arauca, Cauca, Catatumbo, Nariño, Chocó, southern Bolívar, southern Cesar
SM	Political	Nariño, Putumayo
Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes	Political	Caquetá, Vichada, Guaviare, Catatumbo
Los Shottas and Los Espartanos	Rapprochement with organised crime groups	Buenaventura
La Oficina del Valle de Aburrá, La Mesa and Los Triana	Rapprochement with organised crime groups	Medellín (Antioquia)
Los Zetas, Los Mexicanos and Los Locos Yam	Rapprochement with organised crime groups	Quibdó (Chocó)
ACSNM10	Rapprochement with organised crime groups	Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, La Guajira
AGC	Rapprochement with organised crime groups	Urabá, Córdoba, Bajo Cauca, southern Bolívar, Chocó, Catatumbo, Sucre, Atlántico, Magdalena

So far, one of the most visible outcomes of the TPP has been the reduction of armed confrontation between state agents and criminal groups as the result of agreed ceasefires. Moreover, in some cases, such as in Buenaventura, Medellín and Tumaco, homicide rates have fallen. However, armed confrontation among criminal and armed actors has increased, generating negative humanitarian impacts. Additionally, critics of the policy have pointed out that the ceasefires have not led the negotiations to irreversible points.

With the development of each negotiation, lessons and insights can be drawn for policymakers regarding negotiations with criminal groups.

- First, there is a need to understand and adapt the TPP to the new dynamics of violence that resulted after the FARC demobilisation.

- Second, it is crucial to consider how to coordinate the relationship between the national government as architect of the TPP, and the local authorities and communities where the policy is being implemented.
- Third, understanding the context in which the TPP is being implemented – “hybrid political orders” (HPOs) – is essential for carrying out negotiations but also for designing strategies to strengthen local institutional frameworks.
- Finally, timing and sequencing are significant for understanding the trajectory of negotiations. These insights provide evidence to help anticipate potential obstacles and develop innovative strategies.

10 Sierra Nevada Self-defence Forces (Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (ACSNM)).

Lessons from “Total Peace” on negotiating with criminal groups

1. Understanding the evolution and transformation of violence

Ceasefires and truces appear to have contributed to deepening governance within the TPP framework. Currently, armed groups are not focused on confronting the state, but rather on consolidating and deepening their criminal and armed governance.

The revolutionary insurgent chapter in the country's history has almost come to an end. The only insurgent group that persists, the ELN, although it is resisting the state, has been strategically defeated. It can no longer alter the balance of power.¹¹ This means that armed groups and criminal organisations no longer focus their energies on challenging the state with revolutionary objectives, but rather dispute control over specific territories, illicit economies and communities. Their governance models do not directly oppose the order of the state; but rather, they exploit its weaknesses and create their own orders within its institutions to regulate daily life in communities, local businesses, and illegal markets, such as coca, cocaine, deforestation, extortion and the illegal cattle trade, among others.

For example, in the case of the SM, the group imposes norms (theft and drug use are prohibited), mediates issues related to the coca economy, and regulates the commercialisation of coca, including how much can be sold, at what price and to whom. The ELN taxes all economic activity in its areas of influence, including commercial establishments in the municipal capitals of Saravena and Fortul. It can even

capture state rents derived from oil extraction, thanks to its embeddedness within political networks.

Understanding who the protagonists of violent conflicts are, their organisational structure, the specificities of the areas where they have a presence (including the characteristics of the populations and economic activities they regulate), as well as the forms of violence and governance they deploy, is crucial for devising effective negotiation and peacebuilding strategies that consider organised crime groups, rather than insurgent groups only.

2. Local context and relationship with authorities

The TPP shows that the coordination between local and national levels is crucial, particularly between local authorities and institutions such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace.

The research shows that the participation of local authorities in the TPP and specifically in negotiation processes is significantly low. This can be problematic for two reasons. First, the institutional architecture of the TPP did not contemplate the creation of bridges or coordination with local authorities, either in negotiation processes with armed groups or in rapprochements with organised crime groups. As a result, this has sometimes led to a lack of understanding of contextual dynamics of criminal and armed governance. Second, it leaves aside territorial capacities that could support its gigantic task.

Bringing dialogues to local scale involves more than simply establishing negotiating tables; it also requires recognising that many of the issues, tensions and conflicts are increasingly endogenous and less connected to national problems.¹² In this context, the inclusion of local

11 Aponte, A.F., & González, F. (Eds.). (2021). *¿Por qué es tan difícil negociar con el ELN? Un federalismo insurgente, 1964-2020*. Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular-Diakonia.

12 Arjona, A. (2021). War-to-peace transitions and the behavioural legacies of civil war: a plea for looking beyond violence. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89; Justino, P. (2013); Justino, P. (2013). Research and policy implications from a micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence, and development. In P. Justino, T. Brück, & P. Verwimp (Eds.), *A micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence and development* (pp. 290-306). Oxford University Press Oxford.

authorities and community leaders in the design of policy and negotiation processes is key.

Local authorities' expectations regarding their role vary depending on the case, with some seeking active participation, whereas others foresee a more passive role limited to receiving information and contributing to the implementation of agreements.

In Buenaventura, the authorities have expressed a specific desire to participate directly in the negotiation process, rather than solely in the subsequent implementation of the peace process. In contrast, in Arauca – an area under the influence and governance of a group with clear political objectives (the ELN), which has significantly shaped local politics for many years – the authorities have shown minimal interest in directly participating in negotiations. A middle way can be found in Tumaco, where the authorities have played an important role in mediating truces between FARC dissidents, but have not expressed a desire to be fully involved in the TPP. Although incentives and desires differ, taking into consideration local perspectives could positively influence the development of the policy.

In other words, the lack of coordination between national and local levels could be detrimental to the negotiation process, as it wastes the local knowledge and resources of authorities and other actors – including the Catholic Church – and prevents them from planning and preparing for changes in local dynamics, according to their interests and capacities.

3. Hybrid political orders

Understanding that criminal and rebel governance in Colombia exists in the framework of HPOs is key for the design of negotiation strategies, and for security and peacebuilding policies.

Through the research we confirmed that the TPP is being implemented in different regions where the state is not the only institution providing security, order and welfare services, and therefore coexists, collaborates or competes with the governance of armed and criminal groups.¹³ For these reasons, it is essential to understand in depth the features, characteristics and limitations of criminal and armed governance, not only to carry out negotiations but also to design strategies for strengthening local institutional frameworks.

In the three case studies (Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco), the character of the HPO depends on the location, the actors involved, and the type and quality of state institutions. Despite these particularities, in all three cases, criminal and armed groups provide security and welfare, and enforce rules.

In the security domain, this role is shared with the state due to its lack of a legitimate monopoly on violence.¹⁴ Additionally, in all three cases, illegal armed groups advance a security narrative to legitimise and/or justify their actions within the communities they occupy. This narrative centres on protecting the community from other illegal armed groups or security forces, with protection in some cases tending to include extortion. Similarly, all groups have imposed rules to regulate behaviour, relations among community members, and other aspects such as environmental issues and mobility. Finally, in terms of the administration of justice, the illegal armed groups also play a significant role in resolving local conflicts, and communities turn to these groups to settle disputes to different extents, reflecting the state's weaknesses in the administration of justice.

Finally, the capacity of criminal and armed groups to provide welfare varied among the actors examined. In Buenaventura, the criminal groups are neither interested in nor capable of providing

13 Bagayoko, N., Hutchful, E., & Luckham, R. (2016). Hybrid security governance in Africa: rethinking the foundations of security, justice and legitimate public authority. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 16(1), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2016.1136137>

14 Boege, V., Brown, A., & Clements, K. (2009). Hybrid political orders, not fragile states. *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 13-21.

welfare services, although they use potential income-generating policies derived from the TPP as means of increasing their sources of extortion. However, in Arauca, where the ELN has had a historic presence for about 40 years, the group has developed welfare provision in areas such as infrastructure and basic services, influencing the functioning of the state to benefit the social organisations it claims to represent.¹⁵ And in Tumaco, a widely dispersed and vulnerable population benefits from roads built by the SM; this infrastructure has significantly reduced travel time and costs for locals.

Confirming the existence of HPOs in the regions where the TPP is being implemented allows us to identify the need to comprehend claims and grievances by armed actors at the local level, providing a useful compass for identifying the issues and forms of intervention to be considered in a bottom-up negotiation agenda. Similarly, the dimensions covered by criminal and armed governance (social, political economic) can also offer valuable guidance for designing citizen security strategies needed while dialogues are being held or to respond to their results.

Finally, understanding the legacies of conflict is fundamental, as the features of these armed orders and their impact on populations provide additional information for the design of sustainable and effective peace strategies. Considering how individuals exposed to different conflict dynamics may react differently to policies and interventions is vital for assessing their effectiveness in local contexts. Since peacebuilding and development policies are not

implemented in isolation, it is crucial to account for how factors beyond violence influence people's motivations and beliefs.¹⁶

4. Timing

Timing refers to the fact that conflicts are more easily resolved when the timing is right or "ripe" for resolution.¹⁷ Thus, this concept takes into account the different conditions and negotiation deadlines of the actors involved to identify when the moment might be ripe.¹⁸

Our research demonstrates that the violent cycle since the FARC agreement has not provided the mature conditions for the proper development of the TPP. By the time the TPP began to be implemented, several armed and criminal groups were expanding their control over populations and criminal ecosystems. Some of these groups, particularly the dissidents of the FARC and the ELN, have used the failures and implementation challenges of the 2016 peace agreement as justification to remain armed. Furthermore, for many of the armed and criminal groups in Colombia, controlling territory is a goal in itself – rather than winning a war against the state – which makes for a mutually hurting stalemate.

The implementation of the TPP was not adjusted to the territorial dynamics and structures of each armed group, which, despite being in a state of strategic defeat or stalemate, were facing a historic opportunity to fight, and to conquer territories and illegal markets abandoned by the FARC. The ELN has seen significant growth

15 Larratt-Smith, C. (2021). El ELN en Arauca: el bastión guerrillero a la sombra de los Andes. In A. Aponte, & F. González (Eds.), *¿Por qué es tan difícil negociar con el ELN? consecuencias de insurgente federalismo, 1964-2020* (p. 264). Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular; Peñate, A. (1998). *El sendero estratégico del ELN: del idealismo guevarista al clientelismo armado*. Bogotá: Centro de Estudios sobre Desarrollo Económico, Universidad de los Andes.

16 Arjona, A. (2021). War-to-peace transitions and the behavioural legacies of civil war: a plea for looking beyond violence. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89; Justino, P. (2013). Research and policy implications from a micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence, and development. In P. Justino, T. Brück, & P. Verwimp (Eds.), *A micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence and development* (pp. 290-306). Oxford University Press Oxford.

17 See, for example: Conciliation Resources. (2008). Powers of persuasion: Incentives, sanctions and conditionality in peacemaking. *Accord, Issue 19*. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Powers_of_persuasion_Incentives_sanctions_and_conditionality_in_peacemaking_Accord_Issue_19.pdf; Zartman, I.W. (2000). Ripeness: the hurting stalemate and beyond. In P. Stern, & D. Druckman (Eds.), *International conflict resolution after the Cold War*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Zartman, I.W. (2008). 'Ripeness': the importance of timing in negotiation and conflict resolution. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/595>

18 Zartman, I.W. (2000). Ripeness: the hurting stalemate and beyond. In P. Stern, & D. Druckman (Eds.), *International conflict resolution after the Cold War*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Zartman, I.W. (2008). 'Ripeness': the importance of timing in negotiation and conflict resolution. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/595>

in recent years, increasing from an estimated 2,972 members in 2016 to 5,187 by 2021, along with a rise in its areas of influence from 110 to 120 municipalities in 2018 to 212 municipalities across 20 departments by 2022.¹⁹ Similarly, FARC dissidents have grown in number and organisation, with the EMC faction reaching 3,545 members in 2023, spread across 173 municipalities in 22 departments, while the SM faction had 1,751 members in 2023, operating in 10 departments and parts of Venezuela and Ecuador.²⁰ In Buenaventura, where the timing to negotiate might have been more appropriate, criminal gangs and the state helped avoid a costly conflict. Initially, the goal was not to negotiate with organised crime groups, but to reduce violence between factions. A truce allowed Los Shottas and Los Espartanos to reach agreements on controlling drug-trafficking routes, extortion and protection racketeering.

There has been no mutually hurting stalemate, nor a situation close to military defeat,²¹ and no recognition that the status quo or lack of negotiation represents a negative-sum situation. This affects the likelihood of armed groups negotiating key issues and leads them to believe that time spent in negotiations works in their favour, making the process slower and with more obstacles. Alternatively, they may view these attempts at peace as opportunities to gain political leverage, accumulate resources and raise the visibility of their platform, as was the case with some guerrilla groups in the 1980s and 1990s.²²

5. Sequencing

Sequencing refers to the order in which different events and milestones occur to resolve a conflict and establish a peaceful agreement.²³ The significance of considering the characteristics of violence, the capacity of armed actors to govern territories, the type and quality of statehood, and the interaction of and coordination between local and national levels significantly influences whether a sequence of events will be virtuous or not.

As the specialised literature points out, certain pre-existing conditions either facilitate or hinder peacebuilding and negotiations.²⁴ In the cases examined, the state's capacity to provide services and security is low, and the rule of law is not a state monopoly. In preparing the TPP, the new government recognised this situation but did not consider mitigating it, especially knowing that in certain areas of the country there are phenomena of armed and criminal governance that coexist with, oppose or complement state governance, resulting in HPOs.²⁵ This is important when considering that the TPP architects defined a sequence that began with ceasefires as a show of political will to promote negotiations, a decision that has had impacts in the regions we studied.

As a result of the ceasefire, armed actors have fewer battlefronts, which has allowed them to expand their governance model in the areas under their control since the beginning of the

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- 19 El Tiempo. (2022). *El 2022 arranca con 4 grandes redes criminales con casi 13.000 integrantes*. <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/conflicto-y-narcotrafico/cuantas-personas-estan-en-los-grupos-armados-organizados-en-colombia-644062>; González, D. (2020, 20 February). *ELN: ¿Qué tan poderosa es la guerrilla que anunció un paro armado en Colombia?*, France 24.
- 20 FIP. (2023). *El proyecto 'Estado Mayor Central': un intento de unificación disidente*. <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2023-10/el-proyecto-estado-mayor-central-un-intento-de-unificacion-disidente>; El Espectador. (2024). *Se oficializa división de Segunda Marquetalia; Iván Márquez no va más en esta mesa*. <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memorial/pepetro-y-disidencia-farc-se-oficializa-division-de-segunda-marquetalia-de-ivan-marquez/>; El Tiempo. (2018). *Los ejércitos ilegales que enfrentará la nueva cúpula militar*. <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/los-ejercitos-ilegales-que-enfrentara-la-nueva-cupula-militar-305714>
- 21 Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1991). Loss aversion in riskless choice: a reference dependent model. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 41, 1039-1061.
- 22 González, F. (2014). *Poder y violencia en Colombia*. Bogotá: Observatorio para el Desarrollo, la Convivencia y el Fortalecimiento Institucional/Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular.
- 23 MacGinty, R. (2022). Time, sequencing and peace processes. In R. MacGinty, & A. Wanis-St. John (Eds.), *Contemporary peacemaking*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82962-9_10
- 24 Braithwaite, J., & Nickson, R. (2012). Timing truth, reconciliation, and justice after war. *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution* 27(3), 443-476.; Paris, R. (2004) *At war's end: building peace after civil conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 25 Boege, V., Brown, A., & Clements, K. (2009). Hybrid political orders, not fragile states. *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 13-21.

TPP.²⁶ In Arauca, a national ceasefire with the ELN allowed the Domingo Laín Front (an ELN structure) to concentrate its military power on confronting the EMC, while also expanding its influence over the local population and increasing resource extraction through extortion. In Tumaco, the SM (now known as the Bolivarian Army National Coordinator (Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano)), which recently began negotiations, appears to be pushing for recognition and legitimisation as a “political group” rather than being considered a criminal group. While this was happening, the group was able to increase its extortion of certain economic activities, deepen its regulation of social norms and even develop welfare actions, such as road construction.

Furthermore, the government established a legal framework to facilitate the implementation of “Paz Total” (“Total Peace”) through the enactment of Law 2272 of 2022, which grants powers to the government to engage in dialogues with armed groups with political status and initiate exploratory talks with organised crime structures for processes of judicial submission. However, there is no law for their actual submission to the judicial system, leaving the negotiations in Buenaventura, Quibdó and Medellín without a solid framework, and lacking the rules of the game and incentives for those organisations to negotiate.

Implications

The results of this project deepen the ongoing discussion in Colombia regarding the trajectory and outcomes of the TPP over the past two years, but can also offer useful guidance, and prompts and considerations for local and international policymakers and practitioners working on negotiations and peacebuilding with organised crime structures.

Observation 1: Legacies matter for peacebuilding

As several studies have pointed out, the legacies of conflict²⁷ are critical when initiating negotiation and peacebuilding action.²⁸ Without considering these elements, efforts to transform violent situations and contexts cannot yield the expected results and may even trigger new cycles of violence.

To devise appropriate peacebuilding strategies, particularly in contexts where the state has not collapsed, such as Colombia, but where rather an HPO exists, it is crucial to understand the possibilities and limitations of the criminal and rebel governance of the negotiating actors in specific regions. In some cases, governance models are quite extensive, to the point of fulfilling state functions, whereas in others, they are more limited, focused strictly on regulating economic activities. A proper diagnosis and examination of these different governance models can help identify how to strengthen the local state and weaken these violent orders as a component of the sequence of negotiations and peacebuilding.

26 FIP. (2024). *Paz Total: los grupos armados ganan con cara y con sello*; Insight Crime (2024). Insight Crime. (2024). *Dos años después, la Paz Total de Petro parece traer más conflicto en Colombia*. <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/entrevistas/dos-anos-despues-paz-total-parece-traer-conflicto-colombia/>; FIP. (2024). *Paz Total: los grupos armados ganan con cara y con sello*; Trejos, L.F., & Badillo Sarmiento, R. (2024, February). *La Paz Total en el Caribe: gobernanzas armadas y politización acelerada del crimen organizado*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung en Colombia. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kolumbien/21008.pdf>

27 A legacy of war is the long-term impact of war on people and the environment, even after the war ends. Legacies of war can include environmental degradation, health problems and unexploded ordnance.

28 Arjona, A. (2021). War-to-peace transitions and the behavioural legacies of civil war: a plea for looking beyond violence. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89.; Huang, R. (2012). The wartime origins of postwar democratization: civil war, rebel governance, and political regimes [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Columbia University, New York. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D84F1X26>; Justino, P. (2013). Research and policy implications from a micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence, and development. In P. Justino, T. Brück, & P. Verwimp (Eds.), *A micro-level perspective on the dynamics of conflict, violence and development* (pp. 290-306). Oxford University Press Oxford.

Observation 2: Measuring rebel and criminal governance beyond homicides

The three case studies in our research demonstrate that although homicides have reduced, other forms of violent repertoires such as disappearance, forced labour and extortion have risen with the extent and magnitude of criminal and rebel governance. Recognising this is crucial for policymakers, as efforts to negotiate must incorporate simultaneous security strategies that protect local populations while striving for a negotiated resolution to conflict.

Typically, decreases in violent repertoires such as massacres, homicides and mass displacements have been regarded as indicators of the success of peace and conflict negotiation, as metrics for these events are more easily captured than for extortion, threats, individual displacements, territorial kidnappings, forced labour and other crimes. However, these forms of "hidden violence" are commonly the methods criminal groups use to govern and control populations.²⁹

The TPP has focused on reducing homicides, and promoting truces and ceasefires. Nevertheless, it has not developed a strategy to address the factors that enable criminal and rebel governance, which are often more closely linked to citizen security strategies. This is why armed and criminal actors have found an opportunity to deepen their governance during the implementation of the TPP. The inclusion of local authorities and representative figures from local communities could have provided valuable information and helped to mitigate the emergence of this scenario.

Observation 3: Local-national interactions

TPP implementation has confirmed that coordination between local and national levels is crucial for negotiations and peacebuilding processes.

National policies should not only consider how to integrate with existing institutions and authorities, but also the potential impacts they may have in each area. Research on the micro-foundations of peacebuilding underscores the importance of existing political networks, the type of state in place, and the legitimacy issues that its agents may face.³⁰ Furthermore, recent studies on civil wars have shown that people living under criminal and armed governance are influenced in their preferences: some communities see criminal and armed justice as a more expedient and effective form of conflict resolution than state justice.³¹

Therefore, a national negotiation policy and peacebuilding strategy should not only be framed at the national level, but also take into account the particularities of each territory and pre-existing governance forms, including local authorities and others that have historically been respected, such as the Catholic Church – in the case of Colombia – and those related to illegal armed actors. In this regard, the involvement of local authorities and community representatives can be a valuable guide and source of knowledge for how to approach context-sensitive strategies deployed from the national level.

29 Aponte González, A.F., Hirschel-Burns, D., & Uribe, A.D. (2024). Contestation, governance, and the production of violence against civilians: coercive political order in rural Colombia. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68(4), 616-641.

30 Fortina, V., & Huang, R. (2012). Democratization after civil war: a brush-clearing exercise. *International Studies Quarterly* 56, 801-808; Arjona, A. (2021). War-to-peace transitions and the behavioural legacies of civil war: a plea for looking beyond violence. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89; Autesserre, S. (2014). Going micro: emerging and future peacekeeping research. *International Peacekeeping* 21:4, 492-500.

31 Ibáñez, A.M., Arjona, A., Arteaga, J., Cárdenas, J. C., & Justino, P. (2024). The long-term economic legacies of rebel rule in civil war: micro evidence from Colombia. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 68(9), 1825-1855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231170569>

Observation 4: Considering the correct timing and sequencing

Finally, as in other contexts and negotiation efforts, it is essential to highlight that for policymakers, the ripeness of conditions and the sequence in which dialogues are initiated are significant factors in the implementation of such policies.

This experience provides valuable lessons for studies on negotiation and peacebuilding, highlighting the importance of understanding the dynamics of violent conflict, as well as the conditions and timing necessary to initiate dialogues. In the case of the TPP, it is important to recognise that the timing was not ideal, considering that many armed and criminal actors were in the midst of military expansion, consolidating their economic and political power, which was deeply entrenched in criminal ecosystems.

This was compounded by the inadequate sequencing of negotiations in the absence of a regulatory framework, and the decision to begin with ceasefires as a show of governmental political will. The issues regarding timing and sequencing, plus unclear negotiation methodologies and, in particular, the lack of a clear regulatory framework that characterised the TPP, have created incentives for armed groups to focus on their territorial and economic struggles, expanding their governance, control and political influence. This experience calls for policymakers and peace architects to consider existing violence dynamics, and to consider working on promoting legal governance at territorial level rather than relying on political voluntarism.

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