

March 2025

# Total Peace Policy: Between light and shadow

A framework to analyse  
Colombia's comprehensive  
peacebuilding policy

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1. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime coordinated all activities, with the support of the research teams of Conflict Responses (CORE) Foundation and Justice and Criminal Policy Lab (LJPC).

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) research programme for its invaluable guidance and support throughout the development of this report. Additionally, they extend their thanks to Tuesday Reitano and John Collins for their technical assistance.

## Suggested citation

Johnson, K., Botero, F., Botero, M., Aponte, A., and Asprilla, L., (2025)  
*Total Peace Policy: Between light and shadow: A framework to analyse Colombia's comprehensive peacebuilding policy*. SOC ACE Research Paper 34.  
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# Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>ACCU</b>	Peasant Self-defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá)
<b>ACSNM</b>	Sierra Nevada Self-defence Forces (Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta)
<b>AUC</b>	United Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia)
<b>BOAC</b>	Alfonso Cano Western Bloc (Bloque Occidental Alfonso Cano)
<b>EGC</b>	Gaitanist Army of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia)
<b>ELN</b>	National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional)
<b>EMC</b>	Central General Staff (Estado Mayor Central)
<b>EPL</b>	Popular Liberation Army (Ejército Popular de Liberación)
<b>FARC-EP</b>	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo)
<b>FDL</b>	Domingo Laín Front (Frente Domingo Laín)
<b>FGO</b>	Eastern War Front (Frente Guerra Oriental)
<b>FOS</b>	Oliver Sinisterra Front (Frente Oliver Sinisterra)
<b>HPO</b>	hybrid political order
<b>JAC</b>	Community Action Board (Junta de Acción Comunal)
<b>M-19</b>	April 19 Movement (Movimiento 19 de Abril)
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (Alto Comisionado Para la Paz)
<b>SM</b>	Second Marquetalia (Segunda Marquetalia)
<b>TPP</b>	Total Peace Policy

# Summary

Governance by illegal armed groups and criminal actors has increasingly been identified as a serious problem for communities and states in Latin America. This is particularly true in Colombia, where President Gustavo Petro's government has implemented a policy known as "Paz Total" ("Total Peace"), which aims to negotiate with all illegal armed groups and numerous criminal organisations in the country.

Contrary to initial expectations, the development of simultaneous negotiations has not progressed as quickly or effectively as anticipated, leading to the unintended consequence of increasing the capacity of armed and criminal groups to govern the territories involved in the Total Peace Process (TPP). This has prompted some think tanks, opinion leaders and experts to argue that the policy is strengthening both rebels and criminals, including enhancing their ability to govern the territories, neighbourhoods and communities where they operate.

This paper explores the argument and demonstrates that this trajectory is not generic: it depends on the armed and criminal actors, the specific areas and the populations involved. Through case studies from three regions (Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco) where armed and criminal actors of different natures operate (including Los Shottas and Los Espartanos in Buenaventura, the Frente Domingo Laín (Domingo Laín Front) in Arauca and the Segunda Marquetalia (Second Marquetalia) in Tumaco), we provide evidence that governance models and territorial control vary significantly. These variations occur within distinct hybrid political order contexts.

By examining the differences in governance between these three cases, as well as how governance has evolved over time, the paper highlights an understudied aspect of criminal and rebel governance. This comparison explores not only which aspects of life are governed, but also how they are governed.

The research concludes with several key findings: criminals and rebels exercise control over different dimensions of life in their areas of influence, a capacity that has been amplified during the implementation of the TPP; ceasefires have facilitated this process; hybrid political orders have contributed to this trajectory; and the timing and sequencing of the peace process are crucial.

The paper stresses the importance of considering the on-the-ground effects of initiating negotiations with the rebel and criminal actors who control these territories. By incorporating violence reduction and confidence-building measures into the incipient peace process, the research highlights potential perverse effects that need to be anticipated and mitigated. Additionally, it highlights the importance of breaking the links between criminal and rebel groups and local armed forces or state institutions to undermine criminal and rebel governance. Finally, it suggests that zones of dispute and strategic competition between illegal armed organisations should be treated differently from zones of hegemonic control in terms of public policy.

# 1. Introduction

The 2016 Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)) marked a milestone in the recent history of the country. As a result, the largest armed group, which represented the greatest threat to the state's control, demobilised, resulting in multiple areas of the country experiencing a peace that had been absent for decades.

However, shortly after the demobilisation of the guerrilla group, some regions fell back into a spiral of violence, due to attempts by other armed groups and criminal actors to expand their zones of control and the emergence of dissident factions of the FARC. The ongoing presence of criminal ecosystems and local armed actors who attempted to regulate communities and areas outside the reach of the state led to the configuration of a new cycle of violence despite the Peace Agreement.

In 2022, Colombia elected its first left-wing president. Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla fighter of the April 19 Movement (Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19)), assumed the presidency with an ambitious peace proposal aimed at ending armed violence in the country through what he called the Total Peace Policy (TPP). This new policy approach promotes simultaneous negotiations with criminal organisations and “political” armed groups to establish a “complete” peace by negotiating with each of the most powerful illegal violent organisations in the country at the same time.

This research aims to explore the relationship between formal and informal institutions in the implementation of the TPP, using evidence from three municipalities (Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco) and four different actors: the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)), Los Espartanos and Los Shottas, and the Second Marquetalia (Segunda Marquetalia (SM)). It focuses on how the legal framework and local governance dynamics are influencing the implementation of “Total Peace” (“Paz Total”), showing how this differs according to the contextual conditions of each region in the context of a new cycle of violence.

The objective of the TPP as promoted by the Colombian government is to diminish violence and dismantle criminal structures, and to ensure long-lasting peace during a period of transition. Within the policy framework, lack of development is identified as an enabler of serious organised crime. Similarly, achieving less violent societies may promote future regional development, an argument that support the basics of the government's policy. Therefore, by understanding the role of formal and informal institutions in the implementation of Total Peace we aimed to document evidence from the field of how national decisions affect local dynamics, allowing us to identify potential impacts and unintended consequences of the policy. Through a conceptual framework developed by bringing together literature on rebel/criminal governance with political settlements/‘hybrid political orders’ (HPOs) in conflict and peacebuilding processes (chapter 3), the research identifies variations of criminal governance



supplied by each of the groups present in three case study territories, seeking to assess whether this governance has deepened or increased as an unintended result of the TPP. It aims to provide analysis that is immediately useful for those engaged in the TPP, as well as to provide insights that will be useful to readers for wider understanding of conflict, peacebuilding and counter-organised crime.

## 1.1. Methodology and scope of the research

To understand the nature of the armed/criminal governance of different groups in the framework of the TPP and to identify, where possible, whether this governance has deepened or increased, the research for this report employed a comparative case study approach, largely drawing on qualitative data. This approach was selected to enable an assessment of potential impacts of the TPP in each case to identify potential changes in the phenomenon under study. This was accompanied by a comparative analysis between the case studies, with the objective of understanding the differences, similarities and particularities of each form of governance.

Primary data were collected via fieldwork in the three prioritised territories through 33 semi-structured interviews with public officials, human rights defenders, community leaders, journalists and members of law enforcement, all with the support of local contacts or intermediaries. Interview data were entered into a project-specific database, organised according to theoretical categories identified through a literature review and validated during focus group discussions with partner organisations. For security reasons, the identities of our sources have been kept confidential throughout.

Regarding secondary information, we reviewed literature on peacebuilding, and rebel and criminal governance. This review of key theories and concepts helped us understand and analyse governance phenomena in the three territories, the dimensions they encompass, and the implications for the state, the civilian population and institutions. Moreover, the literature on peace negotiations helped with developing an approach to analysis that focuses on the importance of timing and sequencing when analysing the trajectories of peace processes. In addition, local and national reports from government, NGOs, think tanks, and national and local media on the development of the TPP and the trajectory of armed groups in the territories were reviewed and used to triangulate interviews, where possible.

While the primary source of data is qualitative, we also used quantitative data to illustrate trends within the phenomenon under investigation. For this, we relied on statistics from the National Police (Policía Nacional) on extortion, homicides and forced displacement. Both secondary qualitative information and the data were used to triangulate the information gathered in the field. However, it is important to note that while quantitative data were used where available, the availability of such data on types of criminal activity and violence is patchy at best, in general, and over-reliance on the data risks distorting understanding, something discussed later in the paper.

Three examples were selected as case studies where Total Peace talks are underway: (1) Los Shottas and the Esparteros in Buenaventura; (2) the ELN in Arauca, and (3) SM in Tumaco. Buenaventura was chosen because it was presented by the government as the first “success” of the TPP due to the truce between the two main gangs in the city, as well as the significant decrease in homicides in the urban area, which reflected changes in the relationship between these gangs because of the policy, according to the government. Arauca was selected as it is a territory where the ELN has been present for over 40 years; this new negotiation process is the seventh attempt to achieve a negotiated solution to the conflict with this guerrilla group, whose Frente Domingo Laín (Domingo Laín Front (FDL)), which is present in Arauca, has opposed peace. Finally, Tumaco was selected because it is the most recent negotiation process, which is being carried out between SM, a dissident FARC group that rejected the 2016 Peace Agreement, and the Government of Colombia.

**Figure 1: Map of Colombia**



Source: Authors' own.

Like all research, this study also has limitations and gaps. One of the most evident limitations is the potential for bias on the part of interviewees, because of both their profiles and the timing when interviews were conducted. Firstly, while the researchers tried to triangulate interview data with other sources of information wherever possible, findings presented should not be seen as definitive when it comes to potential impacts on criminal governance within the selected cases or the incentives of the TPP. Secondly, it is only possible to discuss some TPP actors and the development of the process, because not all TPP actors – such as the EGC, the Sierra Nevada Self-defence Forces (Autodefensas Conquistadores de la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (ACSNM))<sup>1</sup>, the Central General Staff (EMC), the combos (local street gangs) of Medellín and the gangs of Quibdó – were analysed. Thirdly, regional realities do not necessarily reflect broader or national conditions. The dynamics of current violent conflict in the country are highly endogenous and vary regionally, so the results of the case studies cannot be generalised to other territories or groups of a similar nature. Fourthly, as with any research taking place while a dynamic policy process is underway, the TPP is in the process of implementation, and none of the examples analysed have completed negotiations. Any conclusions drawn here using information to date may need to be updated in the future if contexts change substantially.

Finally, it is worth noting that the design and implementation of this study adhered to the principles of transparency, honesty, voluntariness, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of the interviewees. The information collected in the field was only used for this paper and will not be disclosed to third parties or in other processes.

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<sup>1</sup> This group emerged after the demobilisation of the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)) in 2006.

## 2. Making peace in Colombia with subversive and criminal organisations: the path to Total Peace

Total Peace is not the first attempt in Colombia to implement a broad peace policy, including negotiations with criminal organisations, to end the violent cycles the country has endured. Since the 1980s, there have been both maximalist and minimalist attempts at negotiations with criminal organisations. These efforts have varied and have not been isolated from the dynamics of the internal armed conflict that has afflicted the country for over 60 years.

### 2.1. A brief history of peacemaking attempts before 2022

Between the 1980s and 2016, reaching a negotiated solution to the conflict and signing a peace agreement with armed and organised crime groups with a national presence and high impact on multiple regions was a priority in the public agenda of six different governments. During this period, multiple attempts at negotiation were carried out with the FARC and ELN guerrillas, as well as with paramilitary groups such as the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)), the Peasant Self-defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU)), those from Puerto Boyacá, and the Medellín Cartel led by Pablo Escobar. Multiple negotiations were also promoted during the administrations of Andrés Pastrana (1998 to 2002), Álvaro Uribe (2002 to 2010), and Juan Manuel Santos (2010 to 2018).

Year	Government	Actors
1982 to 1986	Belisario Betancourt	Guerrillas (M-19, FARC, Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army (EPL)) and paramilitaries (Puerto Boyacá)
1991 to 1994	César Gaviria	M-19, EPL, Corriente de Renovación Socialista (Socialist Renovation Current), Revolutionary Workers' Party (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores), Quintín Lame
1992	César Gaviria	Medellín Cartel (Pablo Escobar)
1993	César Gaviria	ACCU
1994 to 1998	Ernesto Samper	ELN
1998 to 2002	Andrés Pastrana	FARC and ELN
2002 to 2010	Álvaro Uribe	AUC and ELN
2010 to 2018	Juan Manuel Santos	FARC, ELN and Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo)

The demobilisation of the AUC was achieved in 2006 under the government of Álvaro Uribe (2002 to 2010), through the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975 of 2005), representing the first transitional justice process in the country (Pizarro & Valencia, 2009; Uprimny & Saffón, 2009; Giha, Jaramillo & Torres, 2009).

Regarding criminal organisations, during the 1980s, the Colombian state negotiated with drug trafficker Pablo Escobar to reduce rampant violence in exchange for judicial benefits that included non-extradition to the USA and his imprisonment under “special” conditions in a prison known as La Catedral. More recently, between 2015 and 2018, the Santos administration carried out secret negotiations with representatives of the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo) – now known as Gaitanist Army of Colombia (Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC)) – to bring them to justice. However, these approaches were not successful.

In this context of the history of negotiations, the FARC initiated peace talks with the government in 2012, leading to the 2016 Peace Agreement. The disarmament of the FARC guerrilla group – the most prominent actor in the war – marked a rupture in several ways. Firstly, the armed structure that had the most control over and greatest presence in the national territory ceased to exist, as did one of the most significant regulators of coca crops (Botero, 2024; Marín-Llanes et al., 2024). Additionally, the state did not replace the roles the group had played, leaving a gap that armed actors (such as the ELN) and criminal groups (such as the EGC) filled (Aponte & González, 2021). Dissident factions of the guerrilla movement that did not accept the 2016 Peace Agreement, as well as other post-FARC structures, continued the conflict, while others began to rearm due to a combination of factors: the criminalisation of some mid-level commanders who saw no future in peace, the state’s failure ‘to implement the agreement, and security issues in the TTP territories’ (Aponte, 2023 & 2024; CORE, 2021).

This opened an opportunity for the ELN, the EGC and the FARC dissidents to grow and expand their territorial influence. In the case of the ELN, a decade of growth began, following years of stagnation and military setbacks. In 2016, the group was estimated to have 2,972 members (including combatants and support networks), according to Colombian government figures. By 2019, the force had increased to 4,879, and by 2021 to 5,187 (El Tiempo, 2022). This increase in the number of combatants also reflected a rise in the number of areas where the group held influence. Whereas in 2018, it was estimated to be present in 110 to 120 municipalities (González, 2020), by 2022 it was present in 212 municipalities across 20 departments (El Colombiano, 2022).

The FARC dissidents experienced a similar situation. By 2018, the group was estimated to have 1,749 combatants spread across 19 departments (El Tiempo, 2018). As peace talks progressed, the dissidents were largely organised into two blocs: the EMC and the SM. By 2023, the EMC was estimated to have 3,545 members, with influence in 173 municipalities across 22 departments (FIP, 2023); the SM, meanwhile, was estimated to have 1,751 members, with a presence in ten departments, and some areas of Venezuela and Ecuador (El Espectador, 2024).

In some areas, the demobilisation of the FARC and its exit from territories ruptured fragile territorial agreements; in other regions, disputes began or territorial distribution agreements were established between different armed and criminal actors, often driven by illegal economies such as coca crops, cocaine, extortion or illegal mining (Aponte et al., 2024 Larratt-Smith, Aponte & Barrera, 2022).

These changing logics related to the demobilisation of the FARC, which represented the end of the predominance of an armed actor with a national, integrated and unified character (Gutiérrez, 2018). Thus, the mapping of armed and criminal actors in Colombia was reconfigured with the presence of federated armed groups (for example, the ELN, the EMC, the SM) and criminal organisations operating as franchises (for example, EGC) that subcontracted or violently dominated other actors in both urban and rural areas of the country (Larratt-Smith, Aponte and Barrera, 2021; Barrera, 2020).

These elements are at the heart of the new cycle of violence in Colombia in which the TPP is unfolding (Gutiérrez, 2021). The counterinsurgency war has changed. We are now in a scenario with the presence of multiple armed and criminal actors that are not focused on challenging the state with revolutionary objectives, but rather are disputing the control of territories, illicit economies and communities.

A key factor in this scenario is the organisational format with which they operate, which makes them more dependent on their territorial environments. This logic helps explain the forms of violence, and the construction of criminal and governance orders. In the insurgent context, armed actors, particularly the guerrillas, created social orders to accumulate resources and challenge the state. With the demobilisation of the FARC, this logic came to an end. Now, armed and criminal actors build “new orders” based on territorial control, aiming to establish governance systems that align with and reinforce state orders (González, 2021). These systems do not oppose the orders of the state, but rather exploit its weaknesses, creating these new orders within state’s institutions, and illegal markets such as coca, cocaine, illegal mining, deforestation, extortion and illegal cattle trading, among others. These elements frame the varied trajectories of certain territories where the TPP has been implemented, and what the populations of those territories have experienced: a territorially fragmented conflict, with increased criminalisation, and growing connections between rural and urban actors.

## 2.2. What is the Total Peace Policy?

The TPP began as a broad, ambitious, and comprehensive policy aimed at containing and reducing violence, which was intended to encourage armed and criminal actors, both in urban and rural areas, to lay down their arms, reduce armed confrontation, and lessen the impact of violence on the communities and civilians where they operated (GI-TOC & FIP, 2023). This policy was an innovative peacebuilding and counter-organised crime policy, because its goal was to negotiate with all illegal armed actors, regardless of their political status (subversive or purely criminal), as a strategy to secure long-term peace (Grasa, 2022, 2024). The TPP is based on the

premise that criminal groups can be considered as political actors, which is somewhat disruptive to the Colombian context. In a highly legalistic country, clear distinctions were made between groups such as the FARC or the ELN and purely criminal groups such as the Clan del Golfo. The implications of these distinctions in terms of peace and security were significant, as military and negotiation strategies were always quite differentiated (Orozco, 1992; Trejos y Badillo, 2022, García, 2022).

To implement the TPP, the government had to create a specific legal framework that would allow it to engage in talks with illegal armed actors and establish the type of negotiation to be carried out. On the one hand, the government sanctioned Law 2272 of 2022, which grants it powers to start dialogue processes with organisations with political status and in exploratory talks with armed high-impact organised crime structures, while also establishing guidelines to carry out these dialogues. As a development of Article 2 of Law 2272, a high-level body composed of the Ministry of Defence, the National Intelligence Directorate and the High Commissioner for Peace, was created with the objective of characterising each armed actor as either a rebel or a criminal (Decree 2655 of 2022). However, it is not known if this body has already met, what decisions have been made and the criteria selected for the categorisation of the armed structures.

As a complement to Law 2272, the government should promote the creation of a law of submission to justice focused on providing a legal framework for the negotiations with organised crime structures. The bill on the Law of Submission to justice was presented to Congress by the government in March 2023; however, Congress did not debate the bill and rejected it. Nearly two years have elapsed since then and the government has not worked on a new bill, nor has it convened a working table to prioritise the issue (El Tiempo, 2024a). The lack of this law has important implications for legal support for negotiations already underway with criminal groups, because, as of the time of writing, there is no legal framework under which these groups could give up their guns or eventually demobilise.

The TPP was both an acknowledgment of the recommendations of the Truth Commission (CEV, 2022) and in accordance with some analysts who have argued that the partial peace accords have failed to put a definitive end to the period of violence (Aponte & Benavides, 2024b). The rationale for the TPP was because it is not possible to put an end to the armed conflict without removing all armed actors from the playing field and deactivating persistent factors of violence (CEV, 2024).

The development of the TPP marked a positive milestone in three respects. Firstly, it recognised the interconnection between armed organisations and crime, as well as the link between urban and rural violence. Secondly, it highlighted the role of criminal organisations as drivers of violence and as actors in peacebuilding. Thirdly, the policy placed safeguarding at its core, thus promoting humanitarian relief efforts as part of its strategy.

Almost simultaneously, the government promoted eight negotiation and submission spaces with different armed actors and criminal groups in the country: the ELN guerrillas; two dissident groups of the FARC, the SM (a rearmed faction of former

FARC commanders led by Iván Márquez, who claimed to have been tricked during the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement)<sup>2</sup> and the EMC; local and regional criminal gangs such as Los Shottas and Los Espartanos in Buenaventura, La Oficina del Valle de Aburrá, La Mesa y Los Triana in Medellín, and Los Zetas, Los Mexicanos and Los Locos Yam in Quibdó. Finally, negotiations with the ACSNM and, more recently, the EGC, the largest criminal organisation in the country, are still in their exploratory phases.

From the start, some people felt that the TPP was at best naïve, and even that it could aggravate certain local dynamics and create incentives to breach previously agreed-upon accords, particularly among the renegade signatories to the Peace Agreement with the FARC (La Silla Vacía, 2022b; El Espectador, 2022). The TPP was guided more by political idealism, leaving aside the stick and offering only the carrot, which was at odds with the concrete reality of the armed and criminal groups, which at that time were attempting to consolidate territorially and had significant incentives to exploit illegal rents (La Silla Vacía, 2022c). Moreover, Sergio Jaramillo, a former negotiator for the Colombian government with the FARC, pointed out that it was not just a flaw in execution, but in conception: with the exception of the ELN, you could never negotiate with purely criminal groups, beyond having a narrow discussion around the terms of surrender (El Tiempo, 2023; El País, 2023a).

Implementing these various negotiations and talks with organised crime structures has been characterised by a lack of clear methods, frameworks and red lines (Preciado et al., 2023a; La Silla Vacía, 2023a). Furthermore, few have shown concrete results, and they face significant issues of legitimacy, stability and continuity (Aponte & Trejos, 2024; Trejos, 2024).

In the case of the ELN talks, these have been stalled since February 2024 due to mutual accusations of non-compliance, as well as the splintering of the guerrilla group, with the formation of the Comuneros del Sur, a faction based in Nariño (El País, 2024b). Currently, attempts are being made to reopen negotiations with the ELN, but their future remains uncertain.

Furthermore, talks with the EMC faced a crisis due to internal fragmentation within the group's leadership. It is estimated that between 30% to 40% of the leadership of this faction remains engaged in dialogue (CORE, 2024), under the name Estado Mayor de los Bloques y Frentes, which brings together the former structures of the EMC mainly located in the departments of Caquetá, Meta and Norte de Santander (El Espectador, 2024a). The SM followed a similar pathway, the structures of Nariño and Putumayo (the Border Command (Comandos de la Frontera) and the Pacific Guerrilla Coordinating Committee Coordinadora (Guerrillera del Pacífico)) rejecting Iván Márquez's leadership and announcing their split from the group (El Espectador, 2024).

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<sup>2</sup> Márquez's statement about the government not fulfilling the terms of the agreement reflects the frustrations of some former FARC members, as they felt the commitments made by the Colombian government, such as reintegration programmes and guarantees for their security, were not fully met (Casey, 2019).



These cases of organisational fragmentation arise from the fact that the armed structures involved in the negotiations were formed either during the talks with the government or shortly before they began. Before, these were a collection of dissident structures scattered across the country, with minimal coordination (CORE, 2024; Preciado et al., 2023b). This led to widespread criticism of the TPP, on the basis that it served to establish organisations' internal cohesion where it had not previously existed (El Tiempo, 2024b). However, as the talks progressed, the lack of cohesion of the groups became evident through fragmentation.

Negotiations with the EMC and the SM have sparked the greatest political and legal controversy, as the groups are in part composed of signatories of the 2016 Peace Agreement who then took up arms again. The most significant case in this regard is that of Iván Márquez, a former member of the FARC secretariat (El Colombiano, 2024) and its chief negotiator between 2012 and 2016.

The organisational dynamics of these groups (decentralisation and fractionalisation), coupled with the stagnation of the ELN negotiating table, and high levels of violence in some territories due to territorial disputes between armed and criminal groups, explain two outcomes: the TPP has received little support among Colombian citizens (La Silla Vacía, 2023a); and President Petro's administration has shifted from a maximalist approach to peace to a scenario involving more localised peace processes. The most advanced negotiating tables are those of the Frente Comuneros de Sur in Nariño, followed by the pro-peace factions of the EMC and the SM. However, few of these structures are currently major players in the territorial disputes that generate the greatest humanitarian impact (Aponte & Benavides, 2024b).

The government's approach at the beginning of the peace talks and exploratory phases focused on de-escalating violence between the state and armed or criminal groups. From the outset, the government required that any demands would be in exchange for a ceasefire or truce. The sequence focused first on de-escalating confrontation, then on engaging in dialogue and forging agreements aimed at peacebuilding.

Yet, the ceasefire process faced myriad problems. On 31 December 2022, the government announced five six-month bilateral ceasefires without having signed agreements with any armed or criminal groups. In fact, by 30 June 2023 – when those “ceasefires” expired – the government had only signed vague protocols with the EMC, and the verification mechanism was never fully operational. Since then, the government has had two different ceasefires, one with the ELN and the other with the EMC. The negotiations have contributed to decreasing violence between these groups and the state, but not against the civilian population (El Espectador, 2024; Preciado et al., 2023a).

In addition, some evidence suggests that the architects of the TPP failed to recognise that violence in the country had changed since previous attempts at peacemaking (Larratt-Smith et al., 2021). Armed and criminal actors involved in the TPP may no longer see the state as their main enemy, and have redirected their coercive power and violence towards control of territories, populations and economies in need of

regulation. This has led several analysts, academics and think tanks to argue that the TPP has, so far, inadvertently created an environment conducive to armed and criminal groups expanding their control over territories (FIP, 2024; Trejos & Badillo, 2024; Insight Crime, 2024; ICPC, 2023). As a result, some groups have likely become stronger, since the TPP incentivises them to extend the areas under their control and to continue exploiting criminal markets. It is this potential dynamic that we seek to assess and explain, through a conceptual framework developed as part of this research, which is set out in the next section.

### 3. Rebel and criminal governance under hybrid political orders: a conceptual framework for analysis

In this section, we set out a conceptual framework derived from literature on rebel/criminal governance and peacebuilding/political settlements to analyse and understand how the TPP has been implemented in territories, and what effects it has had on the governance of armed and criminal actors.

As previously mentioned, there is some consensus that the TPP has unintentionally facilitated territorial expansion and the consolidation of governance by armed and criminal actors in Colombia (FIP, 2024; Insight Crime, 2024; PARES, 2024; Trejos & Badillo, 2024). To analyse this premise, among others, we need to bring together two complementary but not often connected literatures, looking at governance beyond the state. As Haider (2023, p. 8) suggests:

state actors have turned to negotiation with criminal actors in peace processes – in situations of urban violence and in civil wars. International peace operations have also begun to recognise the necessity of addressing organised crime and criminal agendas at the negotiating table and in stabilisation and peacebuilding missions. Yet, there is little guidance on when negotiation may be a preferable option; on how to negotiate or mediate with actors deeply invested in illicit economies; and on factors and conditions that can contribute to the success or failure of the process and implementation of agreements. This shortfall exists in practice, with limited discussion of SOC [serious organised crime] in the guidelines and independent mission statements of peace operations, and in analytical and empirical research. A siloed approach to research and practice has contributed in large part to this deficiency.

As this section shows, in bringing these literatures together, we suggest the importance of looking at three elements: timing and sequencing in peace negotiations; how rebel and criminal forms of governance work, including similarities between the two; and the importance of what are known as “hybrid political orders” (HPOs) in contexts such as the case study areas in this research. In HPOs, various jurisdictions – armed, community, state and ethnic – coexist, complementing and interacting with one another. A characteristic feature of HPOs is that resolving issues between different jurisdictions involves the selective use of both violent and coercive means, as well as institutional channels, depending on the problem. This phenomenon is typical of states that have not collapsed but are in a process of

consolidation in areas where their legitimacy and control are not exclusive. In such contexts, the need to negotiate, ally with, or make deals with other legal and illegal actors, which have pre-existing power networks, has emerged (Mann, 2006). In this regard, this research aims to make two useful contributions: it provides empirical evidence on this premise, and seeks to demonstrate that governance and territorial control have not followed the same trajectories or used the same mechanisms in the cases analysed. There is also the importance of timing and sequencing in peace processes, and what their implications are for the negotiating tables. In explaining the importance of sequencing, we proceed to identify the elements that characterise rebel and criminal governance to understand how and in what ways armed and criminal actors influence populations and territories in the three case study areas. An important point to highlight is that, as we will see, the literature tends to show that there are more similarities between rebel and criminal governance than is often believed.

### 3.1. The role of timing and sequencing in peace negotiations

A number of widely cited studies often suggest that to achieve success in dialogue and negotiation processes for peaceful settlement of disputes, it is almost essential to analyse the content of proposed solutions (for example Zartman, 2000; Kingsbury, 2022). However, studies on the micro-foundations of peacebuilding have highlighted that, within these factors, there are two particularly important elements: timing and sequencing.

Timing in conflict resolution is key. While much can be planned, sometimes the success of a process can be primarily attributed to luck or unintended consequences (Kingsbury, 2012). One key idea reflected across much of the conflict-resolution literature concerns the issue of timing, or “ripeness”. That is, conflicts are more easily resolved when the timing is right or when they are “ripe” for resolution (see, for example Zartman, 2000, 2008). The concept of ripeness is a pivotal moment, but it is also highly subjective; it is a perceptual event that takes shape through the processes surrounding a conflict (Zartman, 2008). For example, situations often linked to what Zartman (2000) refers to as a “mutually hurting stalemate”,<sup>3</sup> moments of significant political reforms and democratisation, strategic defeats of one side or the possibility of military annihilation may create a window of opportunity for a ripe moment (Kingsbury, 2022). The concept is based on the notion that when parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful for both sides (although not necessarily to the same degree or for the same reasons), they seek an alternative policy or “way out” (Zartman, 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> The idea behind the concept is that, when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degrees or for the same reasons), they seek a way out (Zartman, 2000).

As we will see in this case, in the violent cycle that followed the FARC agreement the conditions were not ripe for a peace process to begin. By the time the TPP began to be implemented, several armed criminal groups were already expanding their control over populations and criminal ecosystems. Some of these groups, particularly the FARC and the ELN dissidents, have used the failures and implementation issues in the peace agreements as justifications to remain armed. Also, for many of the armed and criminal groups in Colombia, controlling territory is their goal (instead of winning a war against the state), which makes a mutually hurting stalemate, for example, much less likely to occur.

Another element to consider is sequencing. Contrary to what some peacebuilding studies have argued – that state institutions such as the rule of law, justice and the institutionalisation of legitimate government need to be established prior to or alongside peace – other studies have emphasised that prior conditions do not matter greatly. The stability of state institutions, the failure of the state and the success of peace processes do not lie solely in the attempts at peacebuilding. This argument relies on the idea that certain conditions are more conducive to conflict and that these must be addressed to provide the necessary environment for peace to be sustained (see, for example, Braithwaite et al., 2012; Paris, 2004). According to this argument, the first condition for peace is that there should be a sequence of events that have led to its development.<sup>4</sup>

An important element in our research, as we will see, is that the sequencing of the ceasefire and negotiations, due to the characteristics that define our new violent cycle, has had significant consequences for the cases we studied. Armed actors, having fewer battlefronts, have been able to expand their governance model into areas where the organisation of people's lives does not always involve the state. This has important analytical implications because we can observe that the sequence for addressing negotiations matters if the dynamics and nature of the violent conflict being addressed are disregarded. Just as Falleti (2010) emphasised that sequencing in political decentralisation processes has consequences for how democratisation unfolds in some countries, the same can happen with peace processes: 'The sequential order of different types of decentralisation (economic, administrative, and political) explains the resulting change in the intergovernmental balance of power'. Initiating a ceasefire, then negotiating and reaching an agreement is not the same as starting with a carrot-and-stick strategy (negotiating during war) and then silencing the guns.

We point this out because we also identify that, in the sequence of Total Peace, in each area we examine (Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco), the type of state presence is also crucial. In all three cases, this presence has historically been precarious and illegitimate. As a result, the peace agreement with the FARC aimed to tackle the social, economic and political factors that had fuelled the war in these

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar discussion on sequencing in democratisation, see, for example, Carothers (2007); Berman (2007); Fukuyama (2007); and Mansfield & Snyder (2007).

regions. However, due to problems in implementation, citizens' perception and legitimacy of the state have deteriorated further.

In this context, the TPP has opened a window of opportunity for the emergence, reemergence or reconfiguration of forms of rebel or criminal governance, which encompass significant areas and dimensions of the daily lives of the local populations. Thus, we now proceed to the next section to detail how these concepts have been addressed in the specialised literature and how they are useful for analysing our case studies.

## 3.2. Rebel and criminal governance

There is considerable debate in the literature regarding how governance is defined, partly because it is related to government and governability, but the three concepts refer to distinct phenomena (Launay, 2005). Government refers to the ability of a set of institutions to exercise power; governability concerns the degree and type of relationship between the state, civil organisations and citizens within both public and private spheres; and governance is more about the process by which a set of institutions provide clarity and establish the rules of the game in society, and deliver services (Fukuyama, 2013).

In consolidated states, the government can lead and define the forms of governance (Peters, 2020). However, in situations where the state is in the process of consolidation, this does not occur or it tends to be more diffuse. Scholars have shown that in contexts where access to effective institutions is lacking, new informal institutions are likely to emerge. For example, rural communities that depend on limited public natural resources often develop norms that facilitate collective action (Ostrom, 2000), which ultimately contribute to the formation of parallel internal and even oppositional forms to state governance. Whittingham Munévar (2011, p. 221), for example, argues that governance is not something that concerns the government alone, but also involves other actors who shape emerging forms of governance both within and beyond the state. In this interaction, there are multiple tensions and disputes over the definition of power relations among the parties involved and who defines the form and model of governance.

Regarding the Colombian case, where the state is not yet consolidated, Launay (2005) argues that the government's limited capacity to address the problems of territories – especially those lacking real sovereignty and where state presence is inconsistent – has historically created opportunities for other actors to increase their involvement and participate in governance. This was the case with the paramilitary groups that established highly violent models of governance, alongside politicians, landowners and drug traffickers in vast regions during the 1990s (Gutiérrez, 2019); with the FARC in the south of Colombia, in the coca-growing colonisation zones (Arjona, 2016; and with the ELN in the east of the country, in alliance with local politicians and some social organisations, while deriving resources from oil exploration and production (Aponte & González, 2021).

These models of governance are based on a set of informal institutions that provide meaning and direction to the form of government over a specific territory and population. They are the codes and both informal and formal practices that structure the interaction between individuals and groups (Arjona, 2014, 2016; Huang, 2012). These may encompass dimensions ranging from providing security (in other words, protection, especially from foreign threats), administering justice (mainly dispute resolution) and imposing rules and punishments, to regulating the economy, which includes, but extends beyond, taxation, and must sustain the civilian economy. For Moore (1970, pp. 20–21), these four elements are the duty of any authority that establishes a social contract (whether implicit or explicit), and they are important because they imply that civilians are not passive agents; they can negotiate, resist or adapt to forms of governance.

For the majority of studies reviewed for this research, territorial control is considered essential for the establishment of criminal and rebel governance (Arjona, 2016; Mampilly, 2011; Weinstein, 2007; Lessing, 2020; Duran-Martínez, 2024; Magaloni et al., 2020, among others), whereas others argue that territorial control is not a precondition and may occur in situations where it is absent (Huang, 2012; Uribe, 2017). Some argue that the type of territorial control influences the differences in forms of governance (Kalyvas, 2015, p. 132).

When levels and degrees of governance are high, armed and criminal actors may intervene in the affairs of civilians well beyond taxation and security (Arjona, 2014). Mampilly (2011) suggests that this is reflected when ‘armed groups can develop a force capable of functioning as the police of a population ... where mechanisms for dispute resolution exist ... and the organisation develops the capacity to provide public goods other than security’. This is reflected in the case of Arauca, where the ELN can influence the functioning of both regional (governorship) and local (mayorship) state institutions, regulate aspects of daily life, and contribute to the development of educational infrastructure and public services (Larratt-Smith, 2021).

Governance varies not only across different types of organisations (in other words, between rebels and criminals), but also within the territories in which it develops, as we will explore in the three cases of Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco. Different key elements are essential to understanding these variations: who governs, over whom and how they do so (in other words, how groups enforce the rules they impose), both in terms of the group’s capacity and intentions to do so, as well as the agency of the governed population and the social, political, economic and cultural conditions before and during armed conflict (Mampilly, 2011; Kasfir, 2015; Van Baalen, 2021). This changing dynamic is what Arjona (2014) highlighted with the categories of “rebelocracy”<sup>5</sup> and “aliocracy”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Like actual governments, rebelocracies may collect taxes, provide mechanisms for settling disputes, enforce laws, deliver some public services, and even perform some sophisticated regulatory activities such as overseeing local fisheries.

<sup>6</sup> A form of indirect rule in which local populations govern themselves in exchange for paying tribute to the armed group or complying with a minimum set of rules.

Evidence of these variations can be seen in Arauca, where the governance of the ELN is the most intensive and extensive of the three cases. This armed structure was forged amid colonisation struggles, and the confrontation between the inhabitants and the Colombian state in the 1970s and 1980s. The ELN leveraged its social and political capital with oil industry and liberal party political networks, eventually developing a governance model that extends beyond the provision of security and taxation. In this part of the country, the group often directly influences the development of the local state, the provision of public services and even public resources (Gutiérrez, 2021; Carroll, 2011).

The other extreme could be the case of Los Shottas and Los Espartanos in Buenaventura, which, aside from some community integration issues, control the extortion market and the provision of security for cocaine-trafficking routes, but do not intervene much further in the lives of locals. Finally, in an intermediate position, there is the SM, which has regulatory capacity in areas of illicit crop cultivation (almost always establishing rules for the commercialisation of coca leaf and the sale of coca base paste), as well as in parts of the urban area of Tumaco. However, the group faces tensions and friction with ethnic-territorial organisations that defend their political and organisational autonomy.

Violence is a central factor in understanding how armed actors control and govern territories and local societies. Lichtenheld (2020) demonstrates how forced displacement represents an attempt by armed groups to identify disloyal civilians. Other studies have shown that some armed groups may use violence against individuals they deem undesirable for their social orders, such as thieves, drug users, political opponents, or those the armed group perceives as sexually deviant (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018; Steele, 2017). Moreover, violence is useful for shaping local societies in a group's ideological image (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2014; Leader Maynard, 2019, p. 637; Mampilly, 2011). The violence deployed in governing (Aponte et al., 2024) aims to enforce the group's vision of law and social order (Bateson, 2021; Jung & Cohen, 2020; Lebas, 2013; Moncada, 2017; Phillips, 2017).

At this point, a distinction is made from criminal governance, as the rules that sustain it tend to be less consensual among populations, and the orders are more coercive and lethal (Lessing, 2020; Arias, 2017). The exercise of violence by criminal organisations is often directed towards competing against rivals, coercing residents and state officials, and exploiting the public for profit (extortion and protection schemes offered to communities under criminal rule); this almost always manifests in a violent repertoire, mainly through homicides (Sampaio, 2023; Berg & Carranza, 2018). However, it does not preclude some criminal groups from providing security and other basic services – such as water, electricity or internet access – in urban areas, which may form part (or the whole) of an informal settlement or neighbourhood (Sampaio, 2021).

Some of the elements mentioned above are evident in Buenaventura. Los Shottas and Los Espartanos have consolidated links with state agents to traffic cocaine in international markets, using coercion and murder when merchants refuse to pay extortion fees for the “security” they provide to businesses, or when citizens dare to



cross invisible boundaries of territorial control between rival groups. Even recently, they have attempted to regulate aspects of daily life, such as parties in public spaces, and have established curfews.

The above does not mean that communities lack agency. Criminal governance depends on contextual factors within the communities it governs, such as changes in poverty levels, the local population's connection to "licit and illicit markets", drastic shifts in unemployment or the arrival of highly marginalised populations (Arias, 2017), as well as their density, level and organisational capacity (Berg & Carranza, 2018). Trans-local networks of cooperation (Ley, Mattiace & Trejo, 2019) can either limit (and create high costs for using violence) or facilitate the use of violence and the governing capacity of criminal organisations.

Finally, another element that may define a further distinction from rebel governance is that, although they may be in competition and conflict with the state, criminal organisations are often more often in collusion with it. Criminal groups frequently collaborate with the state, and these relationships are often highlighted in the literature as a variable that explains the differences in how criminal actors govern (Lessing, 2020; Barnes, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2020; Arias, 2017).

Indeed, this last point, particularly the relationship between criminal and armed governance, leads us to the final concept of this conceptual framework for analysis: HPOs. These orders encompass and reveal how various jurisdictions, sustained by both formal and informal institutions, shape hybrid orders that, at times, reinforce each other, while at other times, overlap and/or compete to govern the communities of a territory and their daily lives.

### 3.3. Hybrid political orders

Criminal and rebel governance exists as a layer within broader orders, particularly in conditions where states are unable to be a hegemonic regulatory entity or guarantee the full provision of public services and goods. In these situations, the state does not have a privileged position and must share authority, legitimacy and capacity with other structures, such as traditional authorities or organised crime (Boege et al., 2008, p. 10).

In these contexts, where multiple jurisdictions (both formal and informal) overlap, sustained by institutions and rules that appeal to both violence and informal channels for their processing, what are often referred to as HPOs emerge. The concept of the HPO not only serves as an alternative to the idea of fragility and fragile states, but also demonstrates the complexity and intersection between formal and informal forms of governance in situations where the state is not the dominant actor (Bagayoko, Hutchful & Luckham, 2016; Colona and Jaffe, 2016).

As Sampaio (2024) points out, HPOs are expressions of 'multi-layered governance', showing how the state, at various levels, competes with, complements, opposes or negotiates with a variety of actors regarding sets of rules, logics of order, and the

provision of goods and services, which may involve criminal, armed, traditional and religious authorities, among others (Boege et al., 2009; Luckham & Kirk, 2013; Caraballo, 2013). Thus, in HPOs, armed and criminal actors can provide security, welfare and political representation (Boege et al., 2009; Whitehouse & Strazzari, 2015), fostering cooperation, establishing new institutions and being recognised as authorities (Arjona, 2016).

These elements carry clear consequences and risks. The functioning of the state, due to the proximity of armed and criminal actors, can become distorted (Cambanis et al., 2019). State institutions can be influenced by the arrangements made between state authorities, political networks, and armed and criminal groups. An outcome of these arrangements is that violent actors, including gangs and militias, can end up being recognised as valid governance actors (Boege et al., 2009; Colona & Jaffe, 2016).

The legacies of these interactions for peacebuilding are significant. Authors such as Boege et al. (2009, p. 16) argue that in HPOs, customary institutions and community resilience should be viewed as ‘assets and [as] sources of solutions that can be drawn upon in order to forge constructive relationships between communities and governments’. Caraballo (2013) asserts that negotiations are windows of opportunity to change power relationships, that local and national orders must be articulated, and that there should be a gradual increase in the state’s presence to prevent other actors from disputing hegemony in the territory.

### 3.4. Bringing the conceptual elements together

The following section of this paper sets out three case studies, using these three elements to shape the analysis and to provide points for useful comparison between the case studies. These elements form some of the pieces of the puzzle of a successful negotiation and peace process. However, several elements are absent or have been poorly considered by the Colombian government, which is why we describe the TPP as a process of “light and shadow”, or achievements and challenges.

As we will see, progress in negotiations has followed uneven trajectories and has not succeeded in de-escalating violent confrontations – mainly between armed actors in dispute and who are involved in peace talks – nor in reducing their humanitarian impact or territorial control. This has made it clear that negotiations with armed groups are more complex and require a series of complementary steps that go beyond the political will from the top to end the war, such as understanding the nature of the conflict being addressed: that is, the organisational scheme of the armed groups, the social bases on which they are sustained and the types of territories they occupy, the forms of governance in which they operate and the shortcomings of the state. This implies that the architects of peace must design a negotiation strategy that not only politically and legally shields the negotiations, but also directly addresses the problems and demands territories face where these armed groups are present.

## 4. Case studies

This section analyses the cases of Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco. The objective is to highlight the heterogeneous trajectory of governance that has developed during the implementation of the TPP in each case. To this end, each case study is divided into three subsections. The first provides an overview of how violent dynamics as well as armed and criminal actors were incorporated into each territory. The second relates these factors to the framework of the Total Peace negotiations. The last subsection analyses the form of criminal governance in each territory in relation to the ongoing negotiations.

### 4.1. Buenaventura case study: Los Shottas and Los Espartanos

#### 4.1.1. *Armed conflict context*

Buenaventura is located in Colombia's southern Pacific subregion. The geostrategic location of Buenaventura, as the country's most important international seaport, and its natural connection to two corridors (the Naya River and the Garrapatas Canyon), through which cocaine produced in the Cauca region and other parts of the country is trafficked, has made it an attractive target for drug cartels, criminal groups and armed actors seeking to control the area (Amaya, 2021; CNMH, 2015).

Furthermore, the state's inability to regulate the daily lives of the inhabitants, and the lack of provision of social services and public goods, have facilitated the insertion of armed and criminal groups. This situation has been further aggravated by the precarious economic conditions of most of Buenaventura's residents, an important number of whom live in poverty and informal labour conditions (CNMH, 2015). This scenario has created an opportunity for armed and criminal actors to provide public goods and illegal mechanisms for social mobility, taking advantage of the financial opportunities offered by a thriving criminal economy linked to cocaine trafficking.

In the 1980s, the Cali Cartel operated in the city. In the following decade, the FARC arrived to open new drug-trafficking routes and access the arms market, as part of its expansion plan to access the Pacific coast (CNMH, 2015, p. 158). In 2000, a paramilitary incursion into the municipality began through the Frente Pacifico (Pacific Front) of the Bloque Calima (Calima Bloc) of the AUC, in response to economic pressure by the FARC on regional elites (p. 87). The 'collection of drug trafficking fees', and integration of local gangs and criminal groups, were key aspects of the AUC's advance and consolidation between 2000 and 2004 (pp. 97–98).

The demobilisation of paramilitaries between 2003 and 2006 did not entail the dismantling of the economic and social structures on which they were based. Moreover, some urban criminal gangs linked to or under the control of the AUC were excluded from the demobilisation process. This enabled these structures to

reorganise easily and continue with the criminal activities they had previously carried out (p. 120)

After the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups, numerous gangs emerged (Semana, 2012). In Buenaventura, La Local became the hegemonic organisation, controlling the existing criminal ecosystem and providing security for international drug-trafficking routes (El Espectador, 2021). Unlike other regions of the country, the wave of violence in Buenaventura was not triggered by the arrival of an external competitor, but rather by an internal fragmentation of the leadership of La Local. This led to rivalry between two factions, Los Shottas and Los Espartanos, which began competing for control of the city's communes and cocaine distribution networks (El Colombiano, 2023).

Clashes between the two gangs in 2022 resulted in the mass displacement of 6,300 people, the confinement to their homes of another 2,100 (OCHA, 2023) and approximately 20,000 internally displaced people throughout Buenaventura (Global Protection Cluster – Colombia, 2022). The turf war also led to an increase in homicides, rising from 75 in 2020 to 188 in 2021. In August 2022, just before a truce between the two groups went into effect, there were 85 murders in the city, a decrease of more than 100% compared with the same period the previous year (p. 7).

Colombia's national government estimated that the two gangs together had approximately 1,700 members, mostly young people (OHCHR, n.d.a). In 2023, according to social leaders in Buenaventura, Los Shottas had 600 members, led by Diego Fernando Bustamante ('Diego Opra') and Eloy Alberto Cándelo ('Pepo'), while Los Espartanos had 900 members under the command of Jorge Isaac Campaz ('Mapaya'), Roberto Carlos Rodallega García ('Robert') and Edilberto Riascos Riascos ('Pepe'), who were both captured in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

In this context of violent dispute and organisational fragmentation, the gangs agreed to a ceasefire with the promise of the implementation of the TPP in Buenaventura. The initial approaches, rather than aiming to establish talks with organised crime structures, had the immediate objective of de-escalating some indicators of violence between the two criminal factions (Huffington, 2022). However, as will be discussed below, this truce enabled Los Shottas and Los Espartanos to reach agreements concerning the control of drug-trafficking routes, the extortion market and protection racketeering.

#### **4.1.2. Negotiations within the framework of Total Peace**

In September 2022, the secret exploratory phase of negotiations began between Los Shottas and Los Espartanos, mediated by the Catholic Church, intending to reduce homicides in the urban area of Buenaventura. This phase resulted in the signing of a

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<sup>7</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.

truce between both gangs, called the “Pact for Life” (“Pacto por la Vida”), through a cessation of hostilities that included measures such as ‘no killing, no disappearance, no torture and avoidance of armed confrontations with the public forces ... no aggression between members of both groups and the elimination of invisible borders between neighbourhoods’ (OHCHR, 2023c). The truce resulted in a considerable reduction in homicides, with more than 80 days without violent deaths between the two groups (OHCHR, 2022).

At the outset of the negotiations, the ceasefire between the gangs provided an opportunity for them to agree on a territorial division based on the economic activities they intended to regulate. However, the timing of the negotiations was not ideal as Total Peace was not perceived as a means of disarmament, but rather as a strategy to avoid a mutually destructive stalemate. This dynamic has been further reinforced by the absence of regulations that would offer definitive legal security for criminal actors involved in high-impact organised criminal structures. The process in Buenaventura was presented as the first achievement of the TPP (El País, 2023b). In particular, the truce was presented as a willingness to start negotiations in December 2022. Although the murder rate has decreased significantly – in the six months following the truce there were only 37 homicides in the entire municipality (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n.d.a) – extortion, disappearances and threats to the population have increased in areas under the control of the gangs.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the process has been marred by violence. In April 2023, “Super”, a spokesperson for Los Shottas in the negotiations, disappeared; his body was found a few days later. Thereafter, violence increased again, with 23 clashes between the two gangs and 48 possibly gang-related killings in May 2023 alone (El Espectador, 2023). Despite this violence, the formalisation of these dialogues took place in July 2023 in Buenaventura, as part of a larger “Urban Peace” (“Paz Urbana”) approach, also known as socio-legal dialogues. With the formalisation of the talks, the delegates of the parties to the process were officially defined.

Since the formalisation of the talks, the process with Los Shottas and Los Espartanos has revolved around extending the truce: in September 2023 (for two months), in November 2023 (for four months), in February 2024 (for four months), in May 2024 (for 90 days), in August 2024 (for 90 days) and in November 2024 (for 90 days until 5 February 2025). So far, the truce has not been renewed (El Espectador, 2025). In November 2024, more than two years after the beginning of the truce, on balance, the process has positives and negatives. The gang truce did have a noticeable effect on the reduction of homicides at the beginning of the process, but not on other indicators such as extortion and disappearances, as we will see. However, beyond the truce between the gangs – which positively maintain their interest in continuing the negotiation process – the lack of a submission to justice law, the sustainability of the truce, the de-escalation of violence and the end goal of demobilisation of the negotiations, continue to be uncertain.

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<sup>8</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.

### 4.1.3. Criminal governance in Buenaventura

An article in *El Espectador* (El Espectador 2023) described the social and territorial control these gangs exercised in Buenaventura between 2020 and 2022:

before the truces between gangs and the beginning of peace talks with the National Government, those who put up resistance there, questioned the modes of operation of the reigning criminal gang or took a wrong step in the invisible borders imposed by the criminal groups, signed their death sentence. The law was laid down by Los Shottas or Los Espartanos. There was no other alternative (El Espectador, 2023).

The groups also consolidated micro-trafficking revenues, created new expansion strategies and made use of 'extortion, contract killings and torture' (El Espectador, 2023).

During the same period, data from the National Police reported the cycle of violence in the city. Regarding homicides, 2022 was the year with the lowest number of deaths (109 cases), a decrease of 43.8% compared with 194 cases recorded in 2021, and of 1.8% compared with 111 cases in 2020. Regarding extortion, and contrary to the dynamics of homicides, 2022 was the year with the highest record in the period under analysis, with 257 cases. This figure represents an increase of 154.4% compared with 2020 (101 cases) and 7% compared with 2021 (240 cases) (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n.d.b).

Since the signing of the truce in September 2022, the totals for these two crimes have shown variations. In 2023, homicides increased 24.7% from 109 to 136, nearly half of them occurring in the few months after the death of Super, when the truce, in effect, was broken. Extortion, however, decreased by 38.5%, from 257 cases to 158. The perceptions of those interviewed in the fieldwork coincided in pointing out that the truce had been a key factor in allowing the gangs to strengthen their control over the neighbourhoods in which they operate. The strengthening of their criminal governance is mainly characterised by four dimensions: repertoire of violence, protection, administration of justice, and economy.

Regarding the repertoire of violence, even though the truce signed between the groups established that the criminal groups would not commit homicides or disappearances, the interviewees pointed out that the murders committed by both groups now have a different dynamic: instead of being murdered, the accused victims are forcefully disappeared. As the killings are not recorded as such, this implies a change to the murder statistics; a fall in the numbers reinforces the narrative that the truce is working.<sup>9</sup> However, the homicide data reflect an increase in this crime in 2023, the year in which the truce was active.

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<sup>9</sup> Residents of neighbourhoods under the control of Los Espartanos and Los Shottas, interviews, October 2023; Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.

On protection issues, interviewees noted that both Los Shottas and Los Espartanos offer protection from threats from other armed groups and police operations, which often affect young people.<sup>10</sup> In all cases, this protection is perverse because victims who are accused of being part of the opposing gang are often killed. In this regard, some residents question the protection argument, as noted by a resident of a neighbourhood controlled by Los Espartanos: ‘They say that they take care of us, that people cooperate and behave well, that they are our protective environment against other groups, but in reality, it is a lie because they are the ones who attract other groups.’<sup>11</sup>

In terms of justice, the gangs continue to administer punitive and violent justice, which does not necessarily lead to peaceful dynamics within communities, nor does it truly resolve everyday conflicts, such as domestic or sexual violence, quarrels between neighbours over noise, debts or drunken fights, for example.

The administration of justice by these gangs has two characteristics. Firstly, like protection, gangs charge money for resolving conflicts, so they have no incentive to decrease the number of disputes or neighbourhood conflicts in the long run. In fact, these conflicts are an opportunity for gangs to generate income, especially in marginalised areas, where communities cannot access or are unaware of the justice services offered by government institutions. The second characteristic has to do with the legitimacy of this justice, as communities often resort to gangs to resolve everyday disputes or conflicts, such as debts or fights between neighbours, and in turn, gangs impose rules that must be followed. Non-compliance usually starts with a fine but can lead to people having to leave the neighbourhood to avoid being killed or disappeared.

As one interviewee explained: ‘If someone owes me, say, 1 million pesos, then I get tired of telling the person to pay me and we have a problem. So, okay, I go to them [the gang], they see 1 million pesos, they take [400,000] and give me back the [600,000]. Then their way is to go with guns and [say], “I’m coming for the million, you have until 12 o’clock.”’<sup>12</sup>

In cases of domestic violence, community residents may denounce the aggressors, especially if the violence generates enough noise for their neighbours to notice. In a complaint, gangs usually impose a fine of between 1 million and 2 million pesos on the offender.<sup>13</sup> However, death may be the punishment in cases where the perpetrator has previously been punished for the same act. Another interviewee, who lives under the control of Los Shottas, noted: ‘In my neighbourhood, the fine for

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<sup>10</sup> Residents of neighbourhoods under the control of Los Espartanos and Los Shottas, interview, October 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Resident under the control of Los Espartanos, October 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024. This is a large sum, given that the minimum wage in Colombia for 2025 is projected to be 1,423,500 pesos (US\$323).

fighting is 500,000 pesos or 1 million pesos. It can be a small or big conflict, but it's a million pesos for fighting.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from fines for fighting, the punishment can also be forced labour, such as 'clearing bushes' with a machete. For example, Los Shottas have imposed this punishment for fighting in neighbourhoods such as San Antonio, and even punished a young man who had sexual videos of a girl on his cell phone.<sup>15</sup>

According to interviewees, under the truce the gangs have been able to intensify enforcement in the neighbourhoods they control. One example of this is control over who can enter the neighbourhood from outside, or over residents who want to participate in cultural activities or access medical services provided by outside entities. Deciding who can participate in these spaces is a way for the gangs to pressure the community to cooperate, allowing access to certain social benefits and demanding a show of loyalty in return.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, economically, both gangs extort across the board for all economic activities, both legal and illegal: 'all businesses, whether they sell chewing gum or cigarettes, have to pay the tax'.<sup>17</sup> The amounts vary considerably, depending on the neighbourhood commander and the type of economic activity.

According to some interviewees, Los Espartanos saw the opportunity during the truce to raise more money through extortion, so they encouraged locals to explore productive, entrepreneurial and employment projects that would allow the gang to collect more protection payments.<sup>18</sup> Among the initiatives that would raise more money for Los Espartanos is 'youth in peace', which is 'a government subsidy aimed at young Colombians who live in extreme poverty, reside in regions affected by widespread violence or are at risk of forced recruitment' (El País, 2024a). However, information on such activities is very limited; further research and analysis are needed to provide a more useful understanding.

In the second half of 2023, security forces predominantly targeted Los Espartanos, capturing prominent members of the gang, which appears to have weakened its control over several neighbourhoods (Análisis Urbano, 2024; El Heraldo, 2023).<sup>19</sup> According to the information gathered, it appears that conflict resolution by the gang has declined as, following the arrests, people no longer tend to go to the gang to resolve their differences in the way they used to (El Heraldo, 2023). However, this new dynamic appears not to have had much effect on the application of rules and

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<sup>14</sup> Resident B under the control of Los Shottas, October 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Resident A under the control of Los Shottas, October 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Resident under the control of Los Espartanos, October 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Resident A under the control of Los Espartanos, October 2023; Resident B under the control of Los Shottas, October 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Expert on Buenaventura, interview, February 2024.



punishments, because Los Esparteros tended apply them an arbitrary and piecemeal fashion anyway.

In conclusion, the data and qualitative information collected in the field show that before and after the truce, both Los Shottas and Los Esparteros already exercised territorial control and criminal governance in the neighbourhoods where they operated. However, after the signing of the truce in September 2022, according to interviewees, it appears that some aspects of their governance may have deepened, particularly the collection of extortion fees for protection and the imposition of certain new norms, such as control over access to social services provided by outside entities.

## 4.2. Arauca case study: Domingo Laín Front

### 4.2.1. *Armed conflict context*

The department of Arauca is located at the foot of the Eastern Cordillera, a border region with Venezuela that has been heavily affected by all of Colombia's violent conflicts since the colonial period.

The settlement of subregions in the department is recent. It started mainly during the 1960s, as campesinos colonos (peasants) fleeing from violence in the Andean region of the country were attracted by land redistribution programmes (Celis & Gutiérrez, 2015). The state's failure to fulfil its commitments under the colonisation policy, along with the absence of public services (health and education) and infrastructure (roads), led many rural sectors to organise and mobilise against the state (Gutiérrez Lemus, 2010).

In this context, the ELN – in particular, the FDL, and later the Eastern War Front (Frente Guerra Oriental (FGO)) – emerged amid the struggles of the colonists, and confrontation between the people of Sarare region and the Colombian state in the 1970s and 1980s (Larratt-Smith, 2021; Carroll, 2011). In Sarare, which comprises the municipalities of Tame, Fortul, Saravena and Arauquita, when the government failed to implement what had been agreed on after the protests, some farmers formed a guerrilla front, recruiting from the local settler population. This gave the group significant legitimacy, as it was a guerrilla group composed of 'relatives, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours' (Larratt-Smith, 2021; Celis & Gutiérrez, 2015).

This social and political capital propelled the group, along with the oil industry and arrangements made with liberal party political networks (sometimes involving coercion), to become the dominant actor in the department. (Garay et al., 2017; Peñate, 1998). Since its inception, the FDL has had a complicated relationship with the ELN leadership. In the 1980s, they resisted full integration into the national leadership, often opposing political and economic centralisation and, amid fierce internal debates, declared that they would only abide by the norms they developed in their local environment. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the FDL was known for its

rejection of peace negotiations, its economic and military power, political radicalism, and its potential to break away from the rest of the ELN (Aponte & González, 2021).

Evidence of its military strength and social roots can be seen in the fact that it was the only insurgent group in Arauca to wage three wars – against the Conquerors Bloc of Arauca (Bloque Vencedores de Arauca) of the AUC, the Colombian state, and the FARC) in less than a decade (between 2002 and 2010), emerging unscathed from all of them (Aponte & Larratt-Smith, 2023). Since 2010, it has deepened its presence in Venezuelan territory, establishing a stronghold in Apure state (HRW, 2020; Larratt-Smith, 2020).

Today, the FDL is part of the FGO and its commander, alias “Pablito”, is part of the ELN's Central Command (Comando Central) (Verdad Abierta, 2015). Formerly an FDL commander, Pablito is now one of the most powerful figures in the organisation, with robust finances that have enabled several units to continue operating. He is also considered one of the ELN leaders that most strongly opposes peace negotiations and has led the group's extensive expansion into Venezuela, reducing his incentive to negotiate (Aponte & Larrat-Smith, 2023). The FGO has a representative at the negotiating table, but Pablito is not part of the negotiating team.

The military power of the FGO comes from its strong direct ties with the local rural population, substantial finances derived from extorting the oil industry (and the general economy), control over contraband, and human smuggling between Venezuela and Colombia, state contracts, and its connections with the local state, which are so strong that some affirm that the ELN co-governs with the state (Larratt-Smith, 2021).

This control over extensive economic activities and the lives of the local populations was reinforced through a non-aggression pact between the FGO and the FARC in 2013. Both groups divided territories, revenues and populations (ELN & FARC-EP, 2013). Although this pact persisted even after the 2016 FARC Peace Agreement – through an alliance between two FARC dissident fronts and the ELN – a violent dispute broke out between the groups in January 2022 (Trejos et al., 2022).

The humanitarian impact in the past three years has been considerable: there has been a dramatic rise in homicide rates in contested areas, cases of confinement and displacement of rural populations, threats and accusations directed at locals, open fighting over protected assets and targeted killings (Dickinson, 2022). The causes of this dispute are political (the desire to influence certain populations) and economic (extortion, control over coca routes and areas of illegal mining, and so forth). While it was initially expected that the FDL would emerge as the clear victor, the EMC structure has managed to resist the ELN's military offensive. This has demonstrated that the former FARC members' military, social and political strength was not as dependent on its previous alliance with the ELN as thought.

In conclusion, the violence in Arauca exemplifies the new cycle of violence. In this specific case, a pact between two armed groups lost its stability due to the demobilisation of one of them. The emergence of a new actor disrupted the fragile

and unstable balance, resulting in a violent struggle for local territorial control. The fighting has been intense and exceedingly violent, reflecting the organisational imprints of each group (both are expressions of federated local structures), which depend heavily on their contexts, and their ability to maintain political and economic control over their areas of influence.

In this context, the TPP was introduced. The impact of this confrontation on the peace talks with the ELN is that its members have accused the state of failing to guarantee security in the territory and, on numerous occasions, guerrilla commanders have accused members of the army of collaborating, conspiring and carrying out operations with members of the EMC (Aponte & Trejos, 2024). These statements reflect a decrease in confidence between the guerrillas and the state. Currently, since the breakdown of the ceasefire, the FGO has remained highly active militarily against the state, with the most significant action being the bombing of a military base in September 2024, which resulted in the deaths of two soldiers, and 26 others injured.

#### **4.2.2. *Negotiations within the framework of Total Peace***

Since the beginning of the Petro government in August 2022, negotiations with the ELN resumed based on the progress achieved during the last attempt at peace negotiations with the government of former president Juan Manuel Santos.

At the time the negotiations began, the ELN was going through a process of military strengthening and territorial expansion. According to various assessments, it was the group that had grown the most in recent years (FIP, 2022; Aponte & González, 2021). Furthermore, this process was accompanied by a rhetoric of non-compliance and mistrust towards the state, fuelled by the poor implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement and the insecurity former ELN combatants faced (ELN, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b). These factors created an unfavourable environment for negotiations.

The formal establishment of the negotiating table took place in Venezuela in October 2022 (OHCHR, 2022a). In two years of talks, six negotiation cycles have been held, the main achievements of which have been a bilateral ceasefire (OHCHR, 2023a) and the signing of the first point on the peace agenda, on the participation of civil society (OHCHR, 2024a). In addition, agreements on humanitarian relief, the situation of political prisoners and a temporary suspension of kidnappings for economic gain, were also signed (OHCHR, n.d.b).

The bilateral ceasefire lasted one year and was the ‘most extensive and solid’ ceasefire with the ELN in the history of the government (El Espectador, 2024b). However, its scope, verification and compliance have been the subject of debate and questioning. Firstly, experts point out that its agreement was reached at a very early stage of talks and occupied a lot of space in the negotiation agenda, causing a change in the schedule of activities, and the postponement of talks on fundamental issues – and was the only result to come out of the process (El Espectador, 2024b). Secondly, although confrontation with the security forces was reduced, the ELN continued its territorial struggle against FARC dissidents and the EGC in departments such as Arauca Chocó, Cauca and Bolivar (CORE, 2024; Crisis Group, 2024),

affecting the communities under its influence with armed attacks, and even continuing to use kidnapping as a weapon of political and territorial control (El Espectador, 2024c).

The participation of civil society is the main pillar of negotiations for the ELN. Therefore, the agenda agreed between the guerrillas and the government in March 2023 defined the topics to be discussed in the spaces for participation created by the peace process (OHCHR, 2023b); the methodology was defined with the National Participation Committee (Comité Nacional de Participación), a special, temporary body associated with the ELN negotiating table.<sup>20</sup>

These advances have been overshadowed by several factors. On the government side, officials have not developed a clear strategy to communicate the results of the peace process. On the ELN side, the group's armed actions, along with its insistence on legitimising and continuing to practise kidnapping, have negatively impacted public support for a negotiated solution. In 2024, 50.2% of citizens opposed engaging in dialogue with the ELN, while 63.3% believed that the TPP was heading in the wrong direction (Infobae, 2024).

After the Comuneros del Sur splintered from the ELN in Nariño, the ELN accused the government of intentionally trying to divide the group and froze the negotiation process for over a year (El Espectador, 2024d). In November 2024, the respective delegations held a meeting to overcome this crisis, indicating that they would meet to continue the work of the negotiating table (OHCHR, 2024d). The two years of negotiations with the ELN within the framework of the TPP show the multiple difficulties and challenges in reaching a negotiated solution to the conflict as the ELN is the organisation with which the state has had the most failed negotiation attempts (five) in its history.

#### **4.2.3. Criminal governance in Arauca**

Since the 1980s, the FDL has governed Arauca in different ways, using justice, security and the population to control the territory and legitimise itself (Larratt-Smith, 2021). During the 1990s, the ELN prohibited any link or relationship with members of the security forces, 'homosexuality, common theft and cattle rustling' (Larratt-Smith, 2021) – all crimes punishable by death. Its governance was so extensive that 'every facet of peasant society was mediated and regulated by the local structures of the ELN' (Larratt-Smith, 2021).

More recently, following a dispute between 2006 and 2010, the ELN and the FARC in Arauca negotiated a 'behaviour handbook', which came into force in 2013 (ELN & FARC-EP, 2013). This manual included a list of norms that regulated aspects of daily

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<sup>20</sup> The committee was conceived of as being responsible for designing and promoting societal participation in the peace process.

life for members of the ELN, the FARC-EP and the civilian population.<sup>21</sup> The norms related to the carrying of weapons, robberies, homicides, outsiders, brawls, bar hours, drug dealing, international cooperation schemes, sexual violence, community work, illicit crops, environmental issues and fishing, among others (ELN & FARC-EP, 2013). These norms were enforced by the ELN and the FARC-EP between 2013 and the end of 2021, and later by ELN and FARC-EP dissidents.

In January 2022, the ELN's way of governing changed drastically with the beginning of the dispute with the FARC dissidents, due to complaints from some inhabitants of Arauca about violence and extortion by the dissidents. The ELN responded by attacking the dissidents, saying that 'the house had to be cleaned'<sup>22</sup> and that it had to 'protect' the community.

After the confrontation began, the ELN added a new element to its form of governance: the protection of communities from paramilitarism represented by FARC dissidents (ELN, 2023). Thus, guerrilla governance in the territory includes the administration of justice and offer of protection, which, as in Buenaventura, can be quite perverse as the ELN kills those it accuses of having connections with FARC dissidents. It also exercises social control through the imposition of norms, and participation in the community and the political life of the municipalities, as well as extortion.

Regarding the administration of justice, the results of the fieldwork and the interviews conducted did not allow us to identify an increase in the justice provided by the ELN during the TPP. This aspect is not new and, according to the information gathered, covers the resolution of all types of problems in the areas under the group's control.<sup>23</sup> The ELN has even informed indigenous communities that if they do not form their own indigenous justice bodies, it will do it for them (ELN, 2023).

In some communities, ELN justice is considered more effective, cheaper and less corrupt than state services.<sup>24</sup> When Community Action Boards (JACs) are unable to resolve an issue, this group serves as a second court, owing to its considerable influence over them.<sup>25</sup>

The guerillas exercise social control through the imposition of rules in their areas of influence, the main rule being not to have links with the security forces or FARC

<sup>21</sup> The FARC originated in Colombia during the period of civil conflict between 1948 and 1953 known as "La Violencia" ("The Violence"). Although the group was officially constituted under this name in 1966, it has its origins in the self-defence organisations that emerged in the 1950s, which from 1964 presented themselves as revolutionary guerrillas under the name of Bloque Sur (Southern Block). The addition in 1982 of two letters to become FARC-EP (Ejército Popular (Popular Army)) confirmed its desire to come to power by military means.

<sup>22</sup> Human rights defender, interview, March 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Human rights defender and journalist, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Community members, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Community leader, interview, February 2024.

dissidents, which is punishable by death.<sup>26</sup> Other regulations include a ban on the sale and consumption of psychoactive substances, as ELN structures believe that this economic activity is linked to FARC dissidents;<sup>27</sup> prohibition of robbery and cattle rustling; control of bar hours and sex workers;<sup>28</sup> control of traffic on foot trails and who can enter communities;<sup>29</sup> and even control of the celebration of festivities, to avoid the infiltration of FARC dissidents.<sup>30</sup>

The ELN also imposes environmental norms that include the prohibition of logging, the definition of closed seasons on fishery and control over hunting of chigüiro (or capybara, a giant rodent native to South America).<sup>31</sup>

The punishments the ELN imposes for non-compliance with social norms have changed, according to interviewees, a situation that cannot be attributed to the negotiation process, given the lack of further verifiable evidence to corroborate this assertion. Regarding homicides, the perception of those interviewed is that these have increased since the beginning of the dispute with the dissidents. In some cases, the ELN warns its victims about violating the rules and may 'call their attention to it' before stiffening the punishment, which may involve death.<sup>32</sup> In other cases, the FDL may 'investigate' its victims before 'punishing' them; although this is not as common, several sources agreed that the ELN is guilty of killing people who were innocent in the eyes of the population.<sup>33</sup> According to data from the National Police, the numbers of homicides have varied over the past four years, with 2022 being the most violent year over the period, with 356 cases recorded, representing an increase of 92.4% compared with 185 cases in 2021. However, since 2023, homicides have followed a downward trend, with a total of 153 cases recorded between January and September, while for the same period in 2024, 125 cases were recorded (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n.d.a).

In addition to homicides, interviewees noted that in some cases the FDL continues to use forced labour as a punishment, although it is difficult to establish a trend.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the FDL now more frequently confines populations instead of displacing them. In fact, there are numerous cases where JAC leaders are only allowed to leave their village for perhaps one day each month and the rest of the time they must

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<sup>26</sup> Human rights defender, journalist and community members, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Journalist, interview, February 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Community members, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Local foundation, interview, February 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Human rights defender and journalist, interviews, February 2024

<sup>31</sup> Community members, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Human rights defender, interview, February 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Human rights defender, community members and local foundation, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Community members, interviews, February 2024.

remain in their home or the village.<sup>35</sup> At those times when they are allowed to leave the territory, they must give their reason for going.<sup>36</sup>

In the economic sphere, individuals and organisations consulted in Arauca agreed that extortion has increased in the department since the beginning of the TPP, especially in the context of the ceasefire with the ELN.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, in the areas under ELN control, all businesses pay extortion fees, including commercial establishments in the municipal capitals of Saravena and Fortul.<sup>38</sup> This is because most of the FDL commanders in the region are responsible for obtaining financial resources for the organisation.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to the perceptions of the inhabitants, National Police data show that since 2021 registered cases of extortion have decreased annually: there were 98 cases in 2021, 85 in 2022, 75 in 2023, and 49 between January and December 2024 (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n.d.b). However, it is important to highlight underreporting of this crime and an aspect that will be developed below: the ELN attacks those who denounce its actions, including extortion.

The last key aspect of ELN governance in this department is the control of civil society by controlling as many organisations as possible and minimising the power of those who do not align with the group.<sup>40</sup> The sources consulted affirm that since the beginning of the TPP, the FDL has had greater influence and control over key actors in local civil society.<sup>41</sup> According to interviewees, although the ELN already exercises significant control over a network of local organisations, it has gained greater influence over others. The interest in this control lies in the fact that some of these organisations are the most important civil society actors in rural areas of the department, and have a significant impact in the participation spaces created by the peace negotiations with the group.<sup>42</sup>

The interviewees also stated that the ELN has influence over the local administrations, which has generated distrust in local state institutions regarding the handling of information, complaints and denunciations made by the community.<sup>43</sup> However, these types of complaints are not new; the community had also denounced the ELN's involvement in previous local administrations. The influence of these guerrillas can include receiving contracts for local public works or, according to one

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<sup>35</sup> Human rights defender and journalist, February 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Human rights defender and journalist, February 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Human rights defender, community members and local foundation, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Community members and local foundation, interviews, February 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Human rights defenders, interviews, March 2023 and February 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Human rights defender, journalist and local foundation, February 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Human rights defender, journalist and local foundation, February 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Human rights defender, journalist and local foundation, February 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Human rights defender and community members, interviews, February and March 2024.

interviewee, creating companies to sign contracts to repair oil pipelines that the ELN itself bombs (FIP & CODHES, 2020; El Tiempo, 1997).<sup>44</sup>

Qualitative data collected in the field suggest that ELN governance in Arauca has changed since 2022, with the deepening of its control in the territory said to be mainly due to the beginning of the dispute with the dissidents, which has led to an increase in violence to supposedly “protect” the communities. However, the perceived increase in extortion and control of local participation spaces seem to be associated with the framework of the TPP. While it is not possible at this point in time to triangulate the information received with other sources of data, the research suggests there may be important trends hidden in current official data that are worth further investigation.

### 4.3. Tumaco case study: Segunda Marquetalia

#### 4.3.1. *Armed conflict context*

Tumaco is situated in the southwestern corner of Colombia, bordering Ecuador, and along the Pacific coast. Large areas of its territory are traversed by significant and numerous rivers, including some that flow into the Pacific Ocean, and tropical forests. Its geographical and natural conditions make it an area that is conducive for coca cultivation – an activity regulated by armed actors – due to the state’s limited presence and low legitimacy among the local population.

Tumaco is predominantly inhabited by Afro-descendant and the Awá indigenous communities, which maintain their forms of governance (community councils) and territorial management (indigenous reservations). Levels of underdevelopment and poverty are high in Tumaco, which has provided fertile ground for illegal economies as a means of social mobility and to satisfy basic needs.

Tumaco was once associated with being a haven of peace in Colombia. For a long time, it was not integrated into the national dynamics of the armed conflict. However, this situation changed in the late 1990s, when armed actors began to insert themselves into the region. A significant factor in this shift was the development of Plan Colombia<sup>45</sup> and the Democratic Security policy<sup>46</sup> of the president, Álvaro Uribe (2002 to 2010) (Rodríguez Cuadros, 2015; Vásquez, Vargas & Restrepo, 2011).

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<sup>44</sup> Human rights defender, interview, March 2023.

<sup>45</sup> A US-backed initiative aimed at combating drug trafficking, insurgent groups and organised crime in Colombia. It was originally launched in 1999 under the presidency of Andrés Pastrana, and was later expanded and modified by Uribe. The plan’s primary goals were to strengthen Colombia’s state institutions, reduce drug production and trafficking, combat insurgent groups, and improve overall security in the country.

<sup>46</sup> This policy was conceived of as a comprehensive strategy to fight the guerrillas through the coordinated action of various state institutions, alongside a call to the population as a central element of the counterinsurgency policy. The strategy was implemented through legal, political and public opinion actions aimed at launching a military, political and judicial offensive against the so-called ‘factors of violence’.



To evade the counterinsurgency campaign and coca crop eradication efforts, the FARC along with coca-growing peasants introduced illicit crops into the region, including in Tumaco, Barbacoas, Ricaurte and other municipalities (Aponte & Benavides, 2016).

This armed coca cultivation colonisation in Tumaco created significant tensions with the Afro-descendant and indigenous communities, which witnessed the loss of their territorial management and the disruption of their forms of property, production, and customs (Aponte & Benavides, 2016). While the FARC succeeded in establishing a military monopoly by expelling or restricting the influence of other competitors, it failed to translate its military power into political and social control (Benavides, 2019). The FARC's attempt to change the idea and model of the state and society was in direct opposition to the demands and claims of the communities, which called for a stronger and more effective state presence (Aponte & Benavides, 2016).

Two elements are important to highlight in this process. Violence was the principle means by which the FARC could influence ethnic community processes and impose coca cultivation as a local economy. Furthermore, its military and territorial consolidation drew heavily on young recruits with little political socialisation, and by incorporating local members from urban gangs and criminal organisations, which it subsequently subjugated (Aponte & Benavides, 2016).

During the demobilisation of the FARC, several structures in Tumaco were not recognised by the Central Command (La Silla Vacía, 2017), which, coupled with the criminalisation of some of its members and the challenging security conditions, led to violence between former FARC structures. The FARC's organisational structure fragmented into many small groups which, along with the emergence of rearmed factions and criminal gangs such as Los Contadores, clashed with one another to gain control over the population, territory and activities linked to the coca economy (Verdad Abierta, 2017; HRW, 2018).

Unlike the FARC, which was more inclined to influence various dimensions of local life (organisational, political and social aspects), the Oliver Sinisterra Front (Frente Oliver Sinisterra Front (FOS)), the United Guerillas of the Pacific (Guerrillas Unidas del Pacífico) and Los Contadores focused little effort on governance, either because they lacked capacity or because they showed a lack of interest (Salas et al., 2018). Their aims and the possibilities of regulation and control were limited to specific areas, which were almost exclusively related to the coca economy: they restricted movement in corridors (along rivers and roads in the municipality) and laboratory zones, set rules around the coca trade, and sought to minimise the visibility of their activities, and prevent any flow of information to their opponents or the security forces (CORE, 2021; Benavides, 2019). Finally, they used and strengthened trafficking routes with criminal gangs in Ecuador, via Esmeraldas province (Botero, 2024).

These factors have made the dissidents' control in Tumaco highly unstable and diffuse, as it is characterised by armed disputes, alliances, and territorial distribution pacts to control and regulate economic activities such as coca (Larratt-Smith et al.

2021). The result is social anchoring that is quite weak and often coerced, with unclear rules of engagement and significant levels of violence to enforce them (Benavides, 2019). This helps explain the considerable victimisation indigenous communities have suffered in recent years, particularly the Awá (Mongabay, 2023; El Tiempo, 2019). This is partly because some parts of the community oppose the presence of illicit crops in their ethnic-territorial jurisdictions. In other cases, it is more closely related to how conflicts are regulated and processed within these local societies (La Silla Vacía, 2020; Aponte & Benavides, 2024a).

The instability and violence surrounding the constantly changing alliances and disputes led many of the armed and criminal groups involved to align themselves with larger armed structures. The FOS, Los Contadores (which would later change its name to the Iván Ríos Front (Frente Iván Ríos)) and the Alfonso Cano Bloc (Bloque Occidental Alfonso Cano (BOAC)) – an FOS splinter group – would join the SM between 2021 and 2022, through the Guerrilla Coordinator of the Pacific (Coordinadora Guerrillera del Pacífico) (CORE, 2024).<sup>47</sup>

This local reorganisation of existing groups represented a win-win situation for the SM. On the one hand, the former FARC structures could maintain control over localities and coca-producing areas; on the other, the reduction of violence allowed them to focus their efforts on consolidating their influence in their zones of control. Therefore, the trajectory of this region and its key actors presents a stark contrast to that of Arauca, as the area shifted from a violent implosion, where multiple competitors fought for control over local economies and populations, to an armed pact that enabled the expansion of governance and consolidation of local dominance, with a significant impact: a reduction in levels of violence and its humanitarian consequences. It is in this context that the TPP initiative was introduced in Tumaco.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4.3.2. *Negotiations within the framework of Total Peace***

Negotiations with the SM formally began in June 2024 and included the units operating in Tumaco. The start of negotiations was facilitated by a particularly favourable local environment, driven by the alliances forged between the former dissidents, who have sought political recognition during Total Peace and are motivated principally by the rents generated by their control over coca crops and illegal gold mines. Therefore, the conditions were not yet ripe for negotiation at that time. The groups in the area had consolidated their control in Tumaco, but were still working to organise themselves to gain greater political recognition nationally (Aponte & Trejos, 2024). This process was further reinforced by a series of ceasefires – including, in effect, a unilateral ceasefire by the government during the first six months of 2023 – and negotiations, which strengthened the group's position in the

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<sup>47</sup> SM was originally made up of three factions, but fragmented; now only two factions remain in the negotiation process, calling themselves the Coordinadora Guerrillera del Pacífico.

<sup>48</sup> Violence in the region overall did not stop, but instead shifted geographically to municipalities to the north of Tumaco.

locality by seemingly taking advantage of the ceasefire to increase its control over the population and the coca economy (CORE, 2024).

Of the three case studies, this dialogue is the one that faces the greatest political and legal debate as the leaders of this guerrilla group are signatories of the 2016 Peace Agreements. This is because a negotiating table was set up at the explicit request of the government (La Silla Vacía, 2023b), rather than a socio-legal table that would go down the route of talks with organised crime structures, which created a problem that, until now, has had no solution, given that an article of the TPP law stipulates that individuals who have previously signed a peace agreement with the Colombian state must submit themselves to justice.

There have been three key moments in this process: firstly, the formal start of the negotiating table, in June 2024, where it was established as a principle that everything agreed would be fulfilled (OHCHR, 2024b); secondly, after the formal installation of the negotiating table and the development of the first cycle, the parties' agreement to de-escalate the conflict in the territories where the SM is present (OHCHR, 2024c); and thirdly, the fragmentation of SM when the Guerrilla Coordinator of the Pacific (present in Tumaco) and the Border Command did not recognise the leadership of Ivan Márquez, reorganising themselves under the name of the Bolivarian Army National Coordinator (Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivariano) (OHCHR, 2024e). Walter Mendoza, Giovanni Andrés Rojas and other dissidents who are part of this group reaffirmed their intention to continue negotiating with the government (El País, 2024c).

The current agenda consists of four points: territorial transformation, security in territories and for communities, legal security measures for members of guerrilla structures, and political participation (El Herald, 2024). Although the process is less than a year old, caution needs to be exercised in drawing conclusions just yet; there have been indications of an increase in the level of governance of the Coordinadora Guerrillera del Pacífico since the announcement of Total Peace.

### **4.3.3. Criminal governance in Tumaco**

The SM exercises criminal governance in Tumaco with variations among its different units. This governance is mainly characterised by exercising social control through the imposition of norms and the regulation of economies in different municipalities; however, SM also promotes protection and conflict resolution actions to a lesser extent.

Thus, much of the SM leadership in the area has focused on imposing and enforcing social norms in the territory, even in communities that are not under the group's full control. In this regard, different community leaders point out that this is due to SM's interest in being recognised as a political group.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

Not filing complaints with the authorities, security forces and other armed groups is one of the main rules imposed by the SM as part of its social control framework. To this end, the Iván Ríos Front has used accusations of links to the EMC as justification for violence against its victims.<sup>50</sup> In 2023, a young man from a rural area of Tumaco was threatened with death after BOAC members searched his cell phone, which contained a video of recent skirmishes between armed groups; community leaders intervened to prevent his murder.<sup>51</sup>

Mobility is another aspect of life that the SM units control. In Alto Mira and Frontera, which has a community council,<sup>52</sup> the Iván Ríos Front and FOS control numerous aspects of community life, including movement, through curfews and defining who can and cannot enter the area. On the road between Tumaco and Pasto, the Iván Ríos Front only allows traffic at certain times.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to mobility, the Iván Ríos Front imposes other types of rules on the communities living along the road between Tumaco and Pasto. Theft is prohibited and is often punishable by death. Drug use is also prohibited. Drug users are warned that if they continue using, they must leave the area; if they do not, the punishment can be death. In places such as Llorente, a town in rural Tumaco, sex workers must remain in front of their workplaces and cannot look for clients elsewhere.<sup>54</sup>

When the rules are not complied with, the SM applies three types of punishment: direct violence, fines and forced labour. Direct violence takes the form of threats, displacement, confinement and homicide, especially for those accused of having links to enemy armed groups. However, some community leaders noted that given specific rules, the Iván Ríos Front's punishments can escalate to tying people to trees for three days<sup>55</sup>. Regarding fines, the Iván Ríos Front usually charges between 5 million and 10 million pesos for different infractions, even if the community has requested support to solve minor problems.<sup>56</sup> Finally, clearing hills, roads and even cemeteries is part of the forced labour that is usually imposed by the SM for violating its rules.<sup>57</sup>

The second area of major control by the SM is over local economies through regulation. For example, the FOS, the Iván Ríos Front and the BOAC define the rules governing the sale of coca paste, including how much can be sold, at what price and

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<sup>50</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Humanitarian worker, interview, April 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Afro-descendant community councils are ethnic entities with a legal personality, composed of Black communities. Their function is to manage the territory that the state has recognised as collective property through a title, in accordance with constitutional and legal mandates, both national mandates and those of the community's own legal system.

<sup>53</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Local leaders, interviews, December 2023 and April 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Local leaders, interviews, December 2023 and April 2024.

to whom. In rural Tumaco, the Iván Ríos Front buys coca leaves on credit, paying for some or none of the leaves.<sup>58</sup>

Extortion is another aspect of SM economic governance. All businesses along the road to Pasto must pay. Several sources agreed that extortion had increased since the ceasefire with the SM began in the region.<sup>59</sup> In Llorente, the Iván Ríos Front has gone beyond regulating illegal economies or collecting extortion fees. According to sources in the area, it has forced merchants to organise themselves into “guilds” according to the type of business, which must pay taxes and even deliver Christmas gifts to local children.<sup>60</sup> The unit also established the exact distance between any commercial sign and the pavement (sidewalk), ordering the JAC to visit all businesses to verify compliance with the established safety distance.<sup>61</sup>

The information gathered in the field allows us to conclude that although negotiations within the framework of Total Peace have just begun, from the point of view of those interviewed, the negotiations generated incentives for the SM to want to be recognised as a political group; its criminal governance seems to show warning signs, with the increase in extortion and the deepening of its social control with the application of strong sanctions on those who do not comply with the norms. Thus, as the negotiations progress, it will be necessary to closely monitor the dynamics of criminal governance of the SM in Tumaco, especially these two aspects, to avoid the strengthening or expansion of governance to other areas.

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<sup>58</sup> Local leaders, interviews, April 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Local leaders, interviews, December 2024; Local leader, interview, January 2024; Local leaders, interviews, December 2023 and April 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Local leaders, interviews, December 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Local leader, interview, January 2024.

## 5. Emerging lessons from Total Peace

As we have seen, the experience of the TPP is a unique attempt to work differently with criminal groups, as well as armed groups, in the context of a formal peace process. It provides at least four important potential lessons, bridging both the conflict/peacebuilding and the counter-organised crime communities.

### 5.1. The importance of timing and sequencing for rebel and criminal governance in peace processes

The first overarching lesson that emerges from the research is that timing and sequencing are very important. First, the research shows how the violent cycle that emerged after the demobilisation of the FARC did not provide 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. The implementation of the policy was not aligned with the specific context of each group. While all were either strategically defeated or had no interest in challenging the state, they were in the process of territorial expansion, particularly in the former areas of influence of the demobilised FARC. 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 significance of considering the characteristics of violence, the capacity of armed actors to govern territories, the type and quality of statehood, and the interaction and articulation between local and national levels significantly influences whether the sequence of events is likely to be virtuous or not. In the three cases the pre-existing conditions were not ideal. Firstly, in Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco, state capacity 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 (Boege et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the necessary normative framework was not ready prior to the commencement of dialogue. The government established a legal framework to facilitate the implementation of Total Peace through the enactment of Law 2272 of 2022, which grants powers to the government to engage in dialogue 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 that provides legal support for processes that have already begun with criminal structures, as in the case of Buenaventura.

For this reason, initiating several negotiation tables with armed groups and organised crime structures through a sequence of ceasefire, dialogue and peacebuilding has had an unforeseen effect: in some cases certain aspects of the criminal governance of armed and criminal groups increased. These elements have created a vicious circle, as pointed out by critics of the TPP, where territorial control and armed and criminal governance have increased since the beginning of the policy (FIP, 2024; Insight Crime, 2024; PARES, 2024; Trejos & Badillo, 2024). The research thus suggests that in their negotiations and preliminary talks with politically motivated (at least, according to the government) armed groups and organised crime structures, the TPP's architects did not sufficiently consider the contextual factors of the new violent cycle after reaching an agreement with the FARC.

## 5.2. Negotiating in hybrid political orders

As the research has shown, 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 armed and criminal groups. To devise appropriate peacebuilding strategies, particularly in contexts such as Colombia where the state has not collapsed but is instead an HPO, it is crucial to understand the possibilities and limitations of the criminal and rebel governance of the negotiating actors in different regions. In some cases, these 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 could help to identify how to strengthen the local state and weaken these violent orders as a component of the sequence of negotiations and peacebuilding.

Acknowledging the existence of HPOs reveals the complexity in the way in which various jurisdictions interact within a state. In a sense, it is a novel perspective that allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between formal and informal institutions, beyond mere confrontation or opposition, in identifying armed, criminal and community actors within the same space. Therefore, rather than questioning the role of the state, it is recognised that these institutions and actors can complement the processes of creating and maintaining legitimate political orders (Boege et al., 2009).

Local institutions, capacities and governance structures need to be considered, regardless of their legality. In the case of Colombia, Total Peace represents an ambitious yet more complex approach than previous efforts because, for the first time in the country's history, the capacity of criminal actors to construct order and governance within HPOs is being recognised (La Silla Vacía, 2022a). What this case shows is that the dichotomy between the political and the criminal is increasingly less sustainable (Trejos & Badilla, 2022a).

In at least two dialogues currently underway, illegal armed actors have a nationwide or multiregional presence. Therefore, ensuring that local leaders' interests are represented in national dialogues is critical to ensure the inclusion of local needs and governance structures in national policy. The national dialogue with the ELN is a perfect example of this. The FDL in Arauca is one of the ELN's strongest and most traditional fronts, but the group's most powerful commander (Pablito) is not represented in the negotiations. A similar situation occurred with the ELN in Nariño, where the former ELN faction Comuneros del Sur started an independent dialogue with the government, separate from the national peace talks with the ELN.

This case is not the only example of fragmentation of a national group. The FARC dissident group EMC also split into two factions after the ceasefire was suspended in three specific departments because of the group's violence against civilians (Reuters, 2024). Likewise, the SM group initially led by Iván Marquez also fragmented shortly after the start of the negotiation process.

The success and sustainability of policies such as Total Peace require careful and strategic consideration of regional perspectives to confirm the nature of an HPO. The challenge then is to develop national processes with adequate representation of regional interests, needs and dynamics, as well as adequate use of local capacities.

### 5.3. Diminishing the power of organised crime groups

To build peace in Colombia, it is necessary to reduce the power of illegal armed groups. In the case of the TPP, critics and analysts and even public perception point out that this policy seems to be fostering the rise of the groups' criminal governance.

Total Peace's bid to establish two negotiation approaches and categorise groups as either political or criminal may create perverse incentives for them to try to be recognised as political, to enhance their reputation and potentially receive more benefits from the state. In Buenaventura and Tumaco, where the political character of groups is diffuse compared to Arauca, interviewees believed groups were promoting a more political image and raising the profile of their actions. This change in behaviour, seeking to gain legitimacy with the government and local communities, is one of the risks several authors identify in negotiating with criminal groups.

Beyond the three case studies analysed, these perverse incentives and risks had already materialised by the time the government proposed talks with the EGC, a proposal that was rejected by this criminal group. The origin of this discrepancy stems from the EGC's self-perception as a political organisation, a position that is accentuated on account of the incentives generated by the government by granting political status to the EMC and the SM. Among these incentives is the expectation of getting a "change in treatment", as happened with both dissident FARC groups. The EGC considers that submission to justice is unfair treatment that puts it on an equal footing with other smaller armed organisations (GI-TOC & FIP, 2023, p. 16).



So far, implementation of the TPP does not appear to have had the desired effect of reducing the power of illegal armed groups. On the contrary, as stated above, it has created incentives for groups to change the way they operate and contributed to deepening their criminal economies, such as extortion, and different expressions of violence. Diminishing the power of the groups in the framework of Total Peace requires avoiding or reducing perverse incentives in active negotiations, which could have an impact on future negotiations.

Firstly, the functioning of the High-Level Instance with the definition of the criteria for the classification of armed groups could provide clarity and avoid confusing government announcements related to three aspects: (1) the status of each group that is part of the policy; (2) to reduce the possibilities of demands by the groups; and (3) to avoid changes in their behaviours and demands.

Secondly, the implementation of the policy must include the voices and perspectives of the communities in each area, and of the different regional structures of the illegal armed groups, to obtain a comprehensive perspective on the situation in the territories. Thirdly, the results of the policy should focus on reducing or transforming the armed governance that persists in the territories, beyond homicidal violence. Transforming this governance, which requires a deep understanding of groups' actions and the role of the state in each territory, could become an asset for peacebuilding.

## 5.4. The impact of different approaches within a policy

The Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (OHCHR) has been the institution responsible for implementing Total Peace from the beginning, yet it has had two high commissioners for peace who have implemented different approaches to the policy. Under the first commissioner, Danilo Rueda, the TPP was implemented through a highly centralised approach, but the complexity of the task and the natural regionalisation of the conflict shifted it to a more decentralised implementation (GI-TOC & FIP, 2023). The current commissioner, Otty Patiño, has focused on this more decentralised approach, favouring the achievement of regional pacts or agreements that reflect local crime and conflict dynamics. This approach could facilitate results and be better aligned with the concept of positive accommodation.

From the cases studied, positive mutual accommodation could take shape in at least three specific areas. Firstly, it opens the possibility of exploring alternative means of administering justice that could reduce violence. This can be seen in Arauca and Tumaco, where illegal actors are encouraging JACs to take an active role in local administration of justice. Because these areas also have ethnic communities with traditional justice systems in place, this trend could be expanded by strengthening traditional justice systems, which would reduce the power of the illegal armed groups, since the less people resort to them to solve their problems, the less influence the groups will have over communities. It could also reduce violence (physical punishment, forced labour, forced displacement and homicides) linked to groups'

provision of justice. With proper articulation, this could also promote better responses from the state's formal judicial system, while reducing the power of the illegal armed groups.

Secondly, a positive mutual agreement could be reached by formalising or integrating certain components of the criminal ecosystem. While armed and criminal groups participate in illegal economies, they also participate in legal ones. Therefore, the dialogues should explore and discuss how to "legalise", or at least formalise, certain activities that will create opportunities and other economic development paradigms for both ex-combatants and communities.

Thirdly, positive mutual agreement could be reached by developing shared agendas. In all the case studies, issues such as infrastructure, connectivity, education, health, and political representation at the local and national levels are high on communities' lists of priorities. Therefore, tailoring peace dialogues to be more regionally oriented could reduce the number of issues and address specific needs, including how actors who coexist and share authority in a territory could also share responsibilities as part of this development agenda.

## 6. Conclusion

Although the TPP is not the first attempt by the Colombian state to definitively close a violent chapter in the country's history, it represents an innovative approach to peacebuilding and countering organised crime by acknowledging that criminal actors possess governance capabilities, irrespective of their political status. Furthermore, it recognises that illegal armed and criminal groups also have a presence in urban areas, making the promotion of urban peace essential.

These two aspects make the TPP the most innovative and comprehensive peacebuilding and counter-organised crime initiative developed in Colombia to date. However, its development and implementation face numerous challenges and criticisms. In this research, we analysed three case studies – Buenaventura, Arauca and Tumaco –, to understand how the TPP impacted the governance structures of armed groups and high-impact organised crime.

Two key findings are most crucial for understanding the TPP's trajectory, challenges and limitations. Firstly, the timing and sequence were not ideal. Regarding this, the research highlights how the conditions for negotiations were unfavourable, as many armed and criminal actors were in the process of military and territorial expansion, consolidating their economic and political power, and becoming deeply entrenched in criminal ecosystems. This was compounded by poor timing and an inadequate approach to sequencing the negotiations, aggravated by a lack of clear methodologies, evolving legal and political frameworks, and the decision to initiate a ceasefire before opening dialogue. These shortcomings created incentives for armed groups to focus on their territorial and economic struggles, expanding their governance and control. This allowed them to deepen their hold over local populations and gain political influence. This situation revealed flaws in recognising the nature of the new cycle of violence, and an overconfidence in the political will to transform the violent situation and reduce mistrust towards the Colombian state.

Secondly, the research verifies criticisms that as an unintended consequence of the peace policy, the governance of high-impact armed and criminal actors was deepened. However, this process was not homogeneous, varying according to territory and the actors involved. This outcome is another unintended consequence of the TPP's implementation, particularly through ceasefires, truces and armed groups' interest in achieving political status.

To understand this variation, we demonstrated the role played by the nature of armed and criminal groups, the pre-existing conditions in localities, the types of economies present, and the nature of the relationships established with local populations. The results of fieldwork and analysis show that, in the cases studied, armed and criminal actors have significant territorial control, address issues of daily life and extract material resources from local populations; and, when governance is particularly

broad and deep – as in the case of the ELN – they influence the organisational processes of local communities and may even assume state functions.

The existence of these types of armed and criminal governance means that the TPP is being implemented within HPOs. In the three cases explored, the state is not the only institution providing security, order and welfare services. Instead, it coexists, collaborates with or competes against other actors. In these cases, criminal and high-impact organised crime provide security and welfare services in various ways. Moreover, armed groups, communities, and traditional authorities or local leaders interact through both formal and informal institutions, depending on the context. Depending on the type of interaction and the degree of influence held by high-impact armed and criminal actors, they may influence one, two or all three dimensions of security: the provision of physical security, the enforcement of social norms and the administration of justice.

We believe that this research is valuable for policymakers and peacebuilders, both in Colombia and beyond, as it provides critical insights to consider when crafting peacebuilding policies that include organised crime groups.

Firstly, contextual factors matter for negotiation processes, particularly in an increasingly territorialised context. Ignoring how mature a conflict is and inadequate sequencing in design can have perverse and undesirable effects on the overall implementation of negotiations in contexts of peacebuilding and with criminal organisations.

Secondly, peacebuilding efforts could be more effective if we considered the governance capacities of armed and criminal actors; the social, political, economic and environmental dimensions of these forms of governance; and the types of control over specific economies.

Thirdly, in addition to homicides, other measurable indicators could be considered when analysing the outcomes of such policies. Patterns and types of violence, such as extortion, threats, displacement, disappearances and other forms of violence, reveal the impact of armed conflict, as well as criminal and rebel governance.

Finally, the research also provides more empirical substance to existing conceptual frameworks surrounding criminal governance, HPOs and beyond. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance of serious organised crime in conflicts and peacebuilding. Finding more opportunities to bridge these different fields provides important insights that would help policymakers and operational communities develop more effective and less harmful approaches in the future.

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