Practice Note

Community Responses to a Changing Security Landscape at the Colombia–Venezuela Border: The Case of La Guajira

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Abstract

The Colombian–Venezuelan borderlands are facing a 'double crisis': at the same time as armed groups reconfigure following the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Colombia is concurrently receiving millions of refugees, migrants, and Colombian returnees from neighbouring Venezuela. While much international coverage of the crisis has focused on Cúcuta, the major border crossing in the department of Norte de Santander, the crossing via the Guajira Peninsula is the second most frequented official land crossing into Colombia. In 2020, La Guajira was home to more than 166,000 refugees and migrants, the third highest concentration in the country. This happened at the same time as new and old armed groups were using violent measures to control strategic territory in the region. This practice note takes stock of the risks that affect security conditions as perceived and experienced by communities in La Guajira, and outlines the self-protection strategies that some communities employ to respond to the changing security conditions. It demonstrates the need for enhancing efforts for integration (for example, documentation) and response mechanisms that are shared between Colombia and other countries in the region in order to mitigate risks for Venezuelans in border regions of Colombia. The information reported here comes from a targeted civil society workshop held in Riohacha—the capital city of La Guajira—and a field visit made in April 2019 under the research programme 'From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace—CONPEACE'.

Keywords: armed conflict; Colombia; community protection; migration; Venezuela

Introduction

This practice note focuses on civilian or community self-protection strategies (Gorur and Carstensen 2016; Jose and Medie 2015); that is, strategies that communities themselves employ to protect themselves in contexts affected by violence. Concretely, we take stock of community responses to changing security conditions in the context of a 'double crisis', where armed conflict dynamics and humanitarian emergencies resulting from migration and

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refugee flows coincide. To do so, we focus on the case of the Colombian department of La Guajira, located at the northern end of the border with Venezuela. Communities in this region have been affected by the presence of multiple violent non-state groups involved in the Colombian armed conflict, as well as by the spillover effects of Venezuela's social, political, and economic crisis.[1] The information reported comes from a targeted civil society workshop held in Riohacha—the capital of La Guajira—and a field visit carried out in April 2019 under the framework of 'CONPEACE—From Conflict Actors to Architects of Peace', a research programme based at the University of Oxford.[2]

Taking stock of these strategies is not only relevant for a better understanding of how these crises unfold on the ground and are experienced by communities themselves, but also for policy and programming in the various areas, such as the protection of civilians. National and international actors engaged in the task of protection have increasingly recognized the importance of taking into account in their programming the agency of individuals and communities. To do so, they need to count on a well contextualized and comprehensive picture of how these responses look like across different conflict settings.

We derived three core findings from our work in La Guajira:

First, community responses focused chiefly on: (a) self-organizing in the absence of reliable protection from the state; (b) accessing and managing information in the absence of adequate communication channels with the rest of the country; and (c) creating guarantees for effective leadership in a context where leaders are commonly targets of armed groups.

Second, La Guajira residents perceive and experience insecurity in a manner that is distinct from border-dwellers in other parts of the country, given the department's unique cultural context shaped by the indigenous Wayúu, the historical role of contraband, and the geographical distance and isolation from the rest of the country. Perceptions, in turn, are largely shaped by a sensation of ongoing abandonment by the state. There is also variation across the different regions in La Guajira and across the various social groups that reside there: perceptions and experiences of insecurity vary importantly between Alta, Media, and Baja Guajira, and across population groups in which multiple factors of discrimination and insecurity—including ethnicity, race, age, gender and sexual orientation—converge, impairing their enjoyment and exercise of human rights.

[1] Since the time of our workshop and field visit in April 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a public health emergency to this precarious situation, turning it into what could be called a triple crisis (see Idler and Hochmüller 2020).

2 Both the workshop and the field visit draw on our decade-long research on the wider context of the Colombian–Venezuelan borderland dynamics. CONPEACE focuses on the changing security landscapes in Colombia's borderlands and works in cooperation with local civil society actors, international organizations, and representatives of the Colombian government. It aims to produce policy-relevant research, based on a close connection with communities in the field and enriched by dialogue between academics and practitioners. (For more information, see https://conpeace.ccw.ox.ac.uk.)

Third, mixed flows of migrants (that is, Venezuelans moving to Colombia and Colombian returnees) arriving from the neighbouring country face numerous challenges when crossing the border, including extortion, sexual violence, and robbery of documents. Due to historical lack of state provision, residents have limited access to education, health care, and employment opportunities. This paucity of services worsens the already critical situation of people coming from Venezuela—fleeing a political, social, economic, and humanitarian crisis—and puts further strain on already weak state system.

In what follows we document the key findings of the workshop and field visit, focusing on (i) the risks that affect security conditions and threaten human rights as perceived and experienced by communities, and (ii) the self-protection strategies that communities employ to respond to the changing security conditions.

The context

The Colombian–Venezuelan borderlands face an unprecedented 'double crisis' with important security and humanitarian repercussions (Idler 2019b). On the one hand, multiple non-state armed groups compete for and cooperate in controlling territory previously occupied by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombian (FARC)—formerly the country's largest rebel group—along and across the border. After decades of armed conflict, the Colombian government and the FARC signed a peace agreement in 2016, leading to the rebels' demobilization. While this was an important moment in the country's recent history, armed conflict and violence continue. The National Liberation Army (ELN)—now the largest rebel group—and numerous right-wing armed groups and other criminal organizations continue to operate in the country. FARC dissidents have begun to gain prominence as well. Large profits to be made in the cocaine industry and related illicit businesses continue to feed these dynamics. Concurrently, the political, social, and economic crisis that is growing in neighbouring Venezuela has led to a massive influx of migrants into the border zone. According to UNHCR (2020) data, as of September 2020, over five million refugees and migrants have fled Venezuela; 1.7 million of them have settled in Colombia.

Much international coverage of Venezuela's crisis has focused on Cúcuta, the major border crossing in the Colombian department of Norte de Santander. However, the Paraguachón crossing between La Guajira (Colombia) and Zulia (Venezuela) is the second most frequented official land crossing into Colombia (World Bank 2018). Located in South America's northernmost peninsula, La Guajira is the department where the third highest number of refugees and migrants have settled, and at the time of writing was home to more than 150,000 Venezuelans (R4V 2021).[3]

3 While, at the time of writing, the official number was 150,806, the actual number is higher. This represents more than 15 per cent of the total population of La Guajira, and municipalities like Riohacha and Maicao combined have almost 100,000 refugees and migrants, which is around 25 per cent of their population. There are more irregular refugees and migrants than those with regularized status.

Both the reconfiguration of the Colombian armed conflict and the refugee and migration crisis have specific features in La Guajira, different from those found along other parts of the border. While all the border departments face neglect by the state and precarity, La Guajira is one of the poorest departments of the country and has especially suffered from historical abandonment by the state. Illicit economic activities are rampant, with gasoline smuggling and contraband of local household goods comprising a key source of income for much of the local population. Moreover, La Guajira is home to the binational indigenous Wayúu people, making the cultural norms different from those of other borderland regions, which has translated into various forms of discrimination and exclusion of this group (Human Rights Watch 2017).

The flows of people leaving Venezuela include those who are being forced to leave the country and who are in need of international protection under the Cartagena Declaration, a non-binding instrument to protect refugees in Latin America, that was signed by Colombia and Venezuela, amongst other countries. They require measures to ensure their regular stay and protection in the destination country, so as to enable them to access social rights and integrate in the host community (UNHCR 2019). While the border between Colombia and Venezuela remains open, there are restrictive policies when it comes to accessing the territory, including immigration requirements that are impossible for Venezuelan nationals to meet, as many of them are unable to obtain identity documents or had their documents stolen during the journey. As a result, refugees and migrants opt for irregular channels and access routes where they are more vulnerable, placing their lives and security at greater risk. At the same time, they lack orientation by competent authorities and clear and timely information about their rights upon arrival in border areas. The provision of accessible information on the procedures implemented for regularizing their status, considering the differentiated information that some persons may require, is key to ensuring the effective and equal access to services. Security and border migration control measures lack screening mechanisms to identify asylum seekers.

The journeys that the refugees and migrants from Venezuela face are marked by insecurity, difficult climatic conditions, and lack of access to necessities. Additionally, according to the results of protection monitoring by UNHCR (the UN refugee agency), during the crossing and in Colombia, Venezuelans are victims of physical violence, robbery, extortion, sexual violence, recruitment into armed organizations, exploitation, human trafficking, and smuggling. Once in Colombia, there are also reported acts of violence, discrimination, and xenophobia perpetrated by different actors.

According to UNHCR protection monitoring carried out in Maicao and Riohacha (the cities in La Guajira that receive the highest number of Venezuelans) in July 2019, on average, 85 per cent of the population surveyed did not have any type of entry or stay permit, either because they entered irregularly or because their temporary permits had expired. Only nine per cent of those interviewed had applied for asylum; the majority were not aware of the existing procedures or entitlements.

[INSERT Figure 1 around here please]

The workshop

In close collaboration with the UNHCR and following a methodology designed by CONPEACE, the workshop 'Understanding Threats to Human Rights and Community Responses' brought together a variety of members of civil society, local government institutions, and representatives of international agencies based in La Guajira to discuss how the Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis and the reconfiguration of conflict dynamics since the signing of the peace accords in 2016 changed the security landscape in the different areas of the department.

In selecting participants, we aimed for diversity: participants represented communities from Alta, Media, and Baja Guajira—the three subregions of the department; 15 out of 22 were women (cis and trans); seven belong to the Wayúu ethnic group (the largest ethnic group in the department, with presence also on the Venezuelan side of the border); one Venezuelan, one Colombian returnee, and several other social and community leaders working directly with Venezuelan refugees and migrants. In addition, to have a comparative perspective and promote a broader interdepartmental dialogue, we invited community leaders from two other departments along the Colombia–Venezuela border, Norte de Santander and Arauca.

The event began with a plenary session in which CONPEACE introduced its research, UNHCR gave a comprehensive overview of their work in La Guajira, and a social leader from the department of Norte de Santander presented the local, grass-roots organization that his community created to both protect themselves from conflict dynamics and deal with mixed flows. Then, participants were divided into four mesas de diálogo (discussion tables) structured around specific questions.

In addition, during the field visit, we conducted 11 semi-structured interviews (individual and group) with representatives of these different communities, as well as with stakeholders from local government, various UN agencies, and national humanitarian organizations. We also accompanied the UNHCR to a number of the projects they run for Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Data gathered during the field visit was key to get a better sense of the context in situ, as well as to identify central topics to examine more in-depth during the workshop.

Diagnosis of threats to human rights and security

The mesas de diálogo were structured along the following questions and moderated by CONPEACE and UNHCR:

> What security problems and risks have affected/are affecting your community since the signing of the Peace Accords with the FARC?
>
> What security problems and risks have affected/are affecting your community as a result of the increase in mixed flows from Venezuela?

How has your community responded to the security problems and risks identified?

After comparing the information yielded in the mesas, we identified core security challenges that were shared among inhabitants of La Guajira, as well as some that were specific to each of the three subregions. We summarize them below.

General security challenges

The deficient presence of the state and high levels of corruption, while identified by participants as a structural and historical characteristic of the department, made security conditions worse, facilitating increased contraband, drug trafficking and other criminal activities. These include human trafficking, smuggling, and human rights violations of Venezuelans crossing the border and living in Colombia. Following the demobilization of FARC, the state had not solidly arrived in large parts of the department, allowing old and new non-state armed groups to operate in various areas and to take advantage of the Venezuelan crisis to recruit refugees and migrants to join their ranks and engage in criminal activities. This reconfiguration of armed groups accelerated an already volatile and unpredictable situation even further (Idler 2019a: 196), creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that exacerbated perceptions of insecurity of both long-term residents and arriving refugees and migrants.

Furthermore, refugees and migrants who arrived in La Guajira lacked information to understand the dynamics of conflict and violence. They did not know, for example, which armed groups exerted control in which areas, what were the norms of behaviour established (most times implicitly) by these groups, and what were the implications of not abiding by them or the costs and risks associated with getting involved with armed organizations. This put the arriving population at heightened risk of violence, recruitment, exploitation, and trafficking.

Regional differences in security challenges

The mesas also made apparent that each of the three regions—Alta, Media, and Baja Guajira—exhibits variation in terms of security challenges.

In Alta Guajira, a large number of binational members of the Wayúu ethnic group returned to Colombia given the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.[4] Upon their arrival, some claimed ancestral territories that were at the time occupied by others, leading to an increase in inter-clan conflicts. In addition, residents reported an increased robbery of cars, belongings, and livestock, limiting the mobility of communities across the territory due to fear and uncertainty. Residents linked this insecurity to a growing presence of ‘armed strangers’ in the region—presumed to be successors of former paramilitaries and/or new recruits from Venezuela. ‘Arms are a problem, but there is nothing worse than new faces with arms’, one participant noted.

4 Around half a million Wayúu are registered in Venezuela, but there is not a formal count of how many have returned or have been displaced to Colombia (field notes).

In Media Guajira, multiple armed groups (with both Colombian and Venezuelan membership) were vying for control of informal border crossings in largely rural areas. While paying tolls at (informal) border crossings had been a common practice, in recent years these crossings had been taken over by younger people who tended to be more violent (including sexual violence against women and the LGBTI community), charged larger and constantly changing amounts of money, and were not recognized as authority figures among communities (Zulver 2019; Zulver and Idler 2020).

Participants reported that, in urban settings such as the cities of Maicao and Riohacha, and in areas where paramilitarism has had a historical presence, criminal violence recently increased, especially extortion and kidnapping for profit.[5] Participants from Maicao noted that the central market was controlled by violent non-state groups who used this space to run illicit economic activities. Participants also referred to evidence of the ELN attempting to gain control of Maicao, possibly to take advantage of the corridor between La Guajira and the coca-producing Catatumbo region, used to ship cocaine and other illicit goods abroad.

Baja Guajira—largely inhabited by peasant communities—is the only subregion of the department to have had historically a strong presence of the FARC. Accordingly, armed conflict dynamics and traditional armed groups are more prominent in residents' security assessments. Since the FARC's demobilization, the various armed actors' identity, motivations, and areas of control became less clear for Baja Guajira residents. There were indications that FARC dissidents attempted to regain control of the territory, while the ELN was perceived to gain prominence in the subregion, using part of the territory as a corridor between Colombia and Venezuela. In the more urban areas and on main roads, participants reported that the presence and activity of common criminal gangs increased to levels that had not been seen in years. Furthermore, participants felt not only that they were being exposed to new security threats, but that they had not been given the assistance promised by the government as part of the transition process from war to peace (see also Defensoría del Pueblo 2018a, 2018b).

Group differences in security challenges

Across the three regions that comprise La Guajira, certain groups faced differential risks based on characteristics like ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality, and geography. Wayúu groups perceived a loss of culture, in part due to different and changing access to economic resources on the different sides of the border over the past years, and also because some families chose to make economic alliances with illegal actors. Members of the LGBTI community, who are already marginalized by homophobic and transphobic attitudes, face particular risks when offering transactional sex in urban centres like Maicao and Riohacha. In particular, transgender women engaging in transactional sex and living in the streets are at risk of physical and psychological violence at the hands of armed groups and others (Caribe Afirmativo 2019; Defensoría del Pueblo 2019). There were also reports of cases of minors

5 According to the Defensoría del Pueblo (the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office) (2018a, 2018b), this features an expansion of armed groups involved in narcotrafficking who exert territorial control and violence against the civilian population.

engaging in transactional sex and victims of trafficking. Finally, children who crossed the border into Paraguachón to go to school were exposed to violence and danger in the informal trails across the border on their walk to school. More generally, as so many people had an irregular status in Colombia, they were at constant risk of being sent back to Venezuela, where their lives are at risk due to the generalized situation of crisis and/or because of individual persecution.

Community self-protection responses

In light of the risks identified above, local communities developed context-specific responses to address the different security challenges. Below we outline six 'community self-protection strategies' related to information, leadership, and self-organizing that were discussed during the mesas. In the face of the threats to human rights and in the absence of effective state responses, these responses were largely developed autonomously, with varying degrees of support from external actors (as outlined in the sixth point, below).

Community responses related to information

First, some communities, mainly in urban neighbourhoods and semi-urban settlements, established community communication systems to improve intra-community information sharing as a means to prevent violence and react promptly to threats. Local radio stations were set up to transmit real-time information about security conditions—for example, if groups are robbing in a particular area or section of a highway or if someone unknown to the community is in the area—and as a form of identification for people visiting or staying in given territories—for example, strangers coming to a given area can identify themselves to the community by previously calling to the radio station. In Alta Guajira, efforts have been made to broadcast local information through local radio stations also in wayuunaiki (the Wayúu language), so that diverse populations could access the information and benefit from the system. WhatsApp was used as a means to improve local security by disseminating real-time information and coordinating quick responses to emerging threats. In the outskirts of Riohacha, some communities created WhatsApp groups in which neighbourhood residents report potential threats and community leaders and/or designated community members would take action as a response to this reporting. While effective as a quick communication system, community leaders stressed that these means, in particular WhatsApp groups, should not replace ongoing local meetings, as the latter have the advantage of fostering social cohesion.

Second, in some neighbourhoods, community leaders or people designated by the community take informal census information of arriving refugees and migrants, including both Colombian returnees and Venezuelans. In some cases, for an arriving person to be allowed to stay/settle in the neighbourhood, at least one community member must vouch for the person or she/he has to be a relative of a current resident.[6]

6 We have identified this type of protective strategy in other areas across the Colombia–Venezuela border, where communities are facing a similar 'double crisis' (see Masullo and Zulver 2020).

Community responses related to leadership

Third, social and community leaders in various areas organized to ensure a 'safety in numbers' procedure to avoid victimization. As social and community leaders face a disproportionately high risk of victimization in Colombia,[7] some communities have established a procedure by which leaders, when they need to move from one place to another at dusk or after dark, call other members of the community and go in groups of at least three to five people.

Community responses related to self-organizing

Fourth, members of informal neighbourhoods, including those predominantly settled by Venezuelan refugees and migrants and Colombian returnees, created neighbourhood watch groups/community security schemes (in the absence of police support) to guarantee security for all residents. These schemes were commonly composed exclusively of members of the community and, in some cases, involve a division of labour with women in charge during the day and men at night. The watch group was unarmed, and members rotated among residents on a regular basis. The common procedure was that any relevant information about security is commonly communicated to the neighbourhood watch group via WhatsApp and the group takes action. They go the location and see what is going on; if they can deal with matters themselves, they would do so, otherwise they would swiftly call authorities to take care of the situation.

Fifth, some populations came together to create cooperatives to improve their security conditions themselves, given the lack of state support. In Baja Guajira, for example, this took the form of a group of female coffee farmers who were victims of the armed conflict. They created solidarity networks with local authorities and presidents of the Juntas de Acción Comunal (JACs—communal boards) in order to create a more secure working environment—particularly given the cross-border activities and movements of non-state armed groups, developed a system of collective credit, and became collective members of the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia.

Sixth, some communities also sought to improve security conditions by closing off their territory, in the form of the 'zones of peace', 'peace communities' and/or 'territories of peace' found across the country and elsewhere in the world (see e.g. Hancock and Mitchell 2007). In Colombia, these include, for example, the Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River in the Magdalena Medio region and the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó in the Urabá region.[8] While in these communities this was a response to the general dynamics of the armed conflict, in the Guajira context the need for such self-protection was seen to arise in light of the uncertainty triggered by the arrival of new armed groups and

7 Statistics differ, but INDEPAZ (2020) registered 1,000 leaders killed between December 2016 and 21 August 2020. For an analysis of this violent dynamic, see Prem et al. (2018).

8 For more on the Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River (ATCC), see Kaplan (2013, 2017) and Masullo (2017, 2020); for the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó see Burnyeat (2013, 2018) and Masullo (2015). See also Mouly et al. (2015).

unknown individuals due to the Venezuelan crisis. For example, in the Chichituy community near Maicao, armed people and strangers are not allowed to enter the territory. To enforce this, residents built a small station/post in a strategic spot that allows them to monitor whoever is passing through their territory.

While all these initiatives were largely the outcome of local communitarian processes and grass-roots community work, from the mesas it was also clear that many protection initiatives in the department have been developed and/or advanced with the support of key external actors. These include local organizations, such as the JACs and/or Organizaciones Popular de Vivienda (OPVs—community housing organizations), as well as faith-based community organizations, such as the Diocese of the Catholic Church or Pastoral Social (a community outreach wing of the Catholic Church), international agencies, such as the UNHCR, USAID (the US Agency for International Development), and Children's Villages International, and even local state agencies.[9] In some neighbourhoods for example, organized communities have established alliances with the Childhood and Adolescence Police (Policia de Infancia y Adolescencia), a special section of the National Police that works closely with the Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being, to foster the peaceful integration of refugee and migrant children and families and to maintain a fluid channel of communication with refugee and migrant parents. In other cases, the Pastoral Social supported local communities in holding focus groups that brought Venezuelan refugees, migrants, and Colombian host communities together to exchange their experiences and develop peaceful tools for co-living. These efforts aimed to promote social and cultural integration, to reduce xenophobia and minimize push factors which could lead to involvement in crime.

Conclusions

The combined impact of the reconfiguration of armed group presence and the crisis in neighbouring Venezuela has created new security challenges and exacerbated existing ones, seriously threatening the human rights of local communities in the Colombian–Venezuelan borderlands. On the one hand, the lack of clarity on who the new armed actors are and the additional pressure that the influx of Venezuelans constitutes for local basic services affected local Colombian host communities. On the other hand, exposure to abuse and recruitment by armed groups made Venezuelans on the move particularly vulnerable.

This situation has led communities to adopt self-protection strategies, especially in the realm of information sharing, self-organizing, and guarantees for leadership.

The risks and responses outlined in this practice note have at least three implications for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars working on the defence of human rights and more broadly on protection in contexts of armed conflict and migration crisis.

9 This is a pattern that has been identified as making possible civilian collective action in the face of violence in various parts of the country (see Kaplan 2017; Masullo 2017, 2020).

First, Colombia and other countries in South America continue to experience a significant influx of Venezuelans. While individual circumstances and reasons for these movements vary, fair and efficient access to asylum are necessary to ensure that individuals with international protection needs safely enter the territory, are identified, registered, recognized, and protected from refoulement (forcible return to Venezuela). Likewise, alternative protection-oriented measures to enable legal stay for Venezuelans are key to ensure safety, security, and access to rights and services for this population.

Second, more generally, before developing new protection mechanisms, practitioners should make efforts to identify existing mechanisms and study their effectiveness. In the case of the responses outlined above, ongoing grounded research would be required in order to rigorously assess their efficacy. In doing so, humanitarian and public policy can be better designed to support and expand, rather than co-opt or impose, existing mechanisms and responses.

Third, many communities have gathered useful lessons on both successful and failed responses and learned from them, yet these lessons are rarely shared with other communities. Practitioners can help promote the dissemination and exchange of such lessons. Scholars can contribute by conducting grounded and controlled research to understand the conditions and mechanisms that made some self-protection strategies successful in providing protection, as well as those that are likely to lead to failure. Indeed, as scholars of conflict ourselves, we hope that this practice note contributes to this endeavour.

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