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How to be conflict sensitive in the midst of a pandemic? A case study on Colombia

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Efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 have led to a series of knock-on effects. Some measures have contributed to increased social conflict and violence. Understanding how to sustain peace, while implementing measures that had drastic psycho-socioeconomic impacts has been challenging for countries around the world. This policy brief looks at Colombia, a country with some success in the management of the pandemic,¹ and highlights lessons learned on how the United Nations can support governments to be conflict sensitive when a country is hit by an external shock such as the COVID-19 crisis.²

The levels of violence have fluctuated in Colombia during the pandemic. During the lockdowns, national rates of homicide and violent crime decreased. After two years, however, homicides have gone up by almost 10 percent in comparison to pre-pandemic levels (2019).³ This policy brief analyzes how some measures to contain the spread of the pandemic, such as lockdowns may have contributed to the fluctuations in levels of violence.

While security indicators—such as homicides—improved during the lockdowns, in some areas of the country **risk factors for violence went up**. Income inequality rose.⁴ In one reality, Colombians were working and attending school from home; in another, the poorest hung red rags from their windows to signal “we are hungry.” Among children, 38.7 percent did not have access to the internet and were unable to attend school.⁵ Despite the Colombian government's efforts to prevent negative socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, some pre-existing grievances increased, paving the way for social

¹ Bloomberg, “The Covid Resilience Ranking of the Best and Worst Places to Be as World Enters Next Covid Phase,” June 29, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/>.

² This policy brief is mostly based on 47 interviews with national and local government representatives, UN staff, and civil society organizations.

³ Policía nacional, “Estadística delictiva,” Policía Nacional de Colombia, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.policia.gov.co/grupo-informacion-criminalidad/estadistica-delictiva>.

⁴ World Bank, “Colombia CO: Gini Coefficient (GINI Index): World Bank Estimate | Economic Indicators | CEIC,” CEIC, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/colombia/poverty/co-gini-coefficient-gini-index-world-bank-estimate>.

⁵ Naciones Unidas Colombia, “Plan de Respuesta Socio-Económica Frente a La Pandemia de La COVID-19 En Colombia” (Colombia: Naciones Unidas, May 21, 2020), https://colombia.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/SERP_Colombia.pdf.

“We do not even know where to start the dialogue, they are angry about everything”

unrest.⁶ This was particularly true for major cities, where the lockdowns were often enforced more strictly. In the middle of a COVID-19 wave, the economic despair and psychosocial frustrations pushed hundreds of thousands of Colombians to take the streets in a national strike. The frustrations were so broad and so deep that a local government representative reported: “We do not even know where to start the dialogue, they are angry about everything.” In some areas, interviewees reported that, at the time, they were afraid that the confrontations could lead to a wide-scale escalation of violence. While the protests ended at the end of 2021, some interviewees reported that both the psychological and socioeconomic consequences of the lockdowns and of the protests had been worse than COVID-19 itself.

In certain rural areas, measures to contain the spread of the virus also had a **tremendous impact on security dynamics**, because illegal armed groups—taking advantage of the vacuum of physical presence left by the government, communities, and international cooperation, as these complied with lockdown measures—tried to increase their criminal activities and strengthen their presence in areas that are key to their illicit business.⁷

In other areas of the country, the COVID-19 crisis **brought opportunities for peace**, strengthening social and community ties through actions,⁴¹ such as the distribution of food. They also addressed underlying drivers of conflict, such as inequalities, through efforts to improve digital connectivity and access to healthcare. Given the gravity of the situation, in some areas the crisis also encouraged the private sector to address the root causes of violence, sometimes in partnership with the government.

The sections below look at how the Colombian government and the United Nations (UN) made efforts to sustain peace during the COVID-19 crisis—and highlights challenges they faced.

Government efforts to prevent violence

Challenges to sustain peace

During the pandemic, as in many countries, **government priorities were not focused on preventing violence**. Officials were first concerned about finding a balance between the economy and health, both of them life-

⁶ Violent protests started in 2019, followed by a social dialogue, which was put on hold because the government had to focus on COVID-19. See International Crisis Group, “The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia’s Mass Protests | Crisis Group,” Latin American and Caribbean (Bogotá/New York/Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 2, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/090-pandemic-strikes-responding-colombias-mass-protests>.

⁷ ONU, “En Colombia la paz es otra víctima de la pandemia de COVID-19,” Noticias ONU, July 14, 2020, <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/07/1477431>.

threatening in the short term.⁸ Focusing on violence prevention did not seem urgent, especially given that violence indicators were mostly going down during the lockdowns. The police and the military were mobilized to enforce pandemic restrictions and to distribute assistance, and they had to take measures to prevent their staff from getting sick.⁹ Movement restrictions led some violence prevention activities to become virtual, which hindered communities' participation and opened new institutional gaps.

Early on, when the government was thinking about violence prevention, it was mostly in a reactive fashion, trying to address some of the imminent threats to public order. For example, the mayor's office in Bogotá developed a series of plans: to prevent prison riots after informing prisoners that family visits were suspended due to COVID-19; to protect healthcare workers and Venezuelans from neighbors afraid they were bringing the virus to their communities; to protect women from domestic violence, etc. Help lines were also set up for people dealing with mental distress.

Most analyses overlooked the rise in risk factors for violence

Most analyses, however, overlooked the rise in risk factors for violence.¹⁰ Interviewees report that there was no new strategy on the prevention of violent conflicts—and observed that the fact that the strategies already in place are adopted every four years made it difficult to adapt them to the knock-on effects of COVID-19.¹¹ Interviewees commented that government capacity was often stretched too thin to deal with violence prevention. “We need to stop and think about what is working and what is not, but we do not have time. Since the pandemic started, work has been non-stop,” a high-ranking government official reported.

Colombia's centralized approach was highlighted as a factor that made it **difficult for local governments and communities to adopt context and conflict-sensitive approaches.** As one interviewee said, “It does not make sense to apply the same rule throughout the country.” Indeed, the impacts of the measures on conflict varied greatly depending on factors such as the extent to which they were enforced, people's ability to work from home, culture, territorial control, etc. Some interviewees said that, in their region, the measures to contain COVID-19 ended up being worse than the disease itself.

⁸ Organización Panamericana de la Salud, “Con un llamado a la solidaridad y a la unidad para enfrentar la pandemia comenzó reunión de ministros de salud de las Américas - OPS/OMS | Organización Panamericana de la Salud,” Organización Panamericana de la Salud, September 28, 2020, <https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/28-9-2020-con-llamado-solidaridad-unidad-para-enfrentar-pandemia-comenzo-reunion-ministros>.⁶

⁹ Ministerio de Defensa, “Operación San Roque: Plan San Andres,” 2020, <https://www.cgfm.mil.co/es/san-roque>.; Nathalie Alvarado et al., “Evolución de La Seguridad Ciudadana En Colombia En Tiempos Del COVID-19” (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, October 2020), <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/Evolucion-de-la-seguridad-ciudadana-en-Colombia-en-tiempos-del-COVID-19.pdf>.

¹⁰ One exception is that the National Council for Economic and Social Policy warned new social demands that would rise during the reactivation of the economy and that it would require preventive actions to ensure citizens' safety. See Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social, “Política Para La Reactivación, La Repotenciación y El Crecimiento Sostenible e Incluyente: Nuevo Compromiso Por El Futuro de Colombia,” Documento Compes (Bogotá: Departamento Nacional de Planeación, February 11, 2021).

¹¹ E.g., the peace agreements, Integral Plans for Coexistence and Citizen Security.

The increase in violence took time to become apparent. “We were shy in acknowledging that there would be criminal movements during the pandemic,” a government representative commented. We did not use our whole capacity to address this issue and we focused on the pandemic, for obvious reasons. It cost us around 1,500 homicides¹² more than in the past years. In a future pandemic we need to look more at what is going on in local contexts.”

Nexus: humanitarian assistance, development, and peace

The Colombian government did, however, grasp that a humanitarian and an economic crisis could have a dramatic impact on peace. Early on, the president raised attention about the relationship between food shortages and the risks of conflict. The military, police, and local governments were mobilized to distribute groceries to vulnerable populations. The government also provided **economic support** to small- and medium-sized companies, tax holidays, and unemployment subsidies. Efforts were also undertaken to get low-income people—including those in the informal sector—to open bank accounts to receive cash transfers. The Ministry of Interior set up a program called “Colombia is with you” to support the elderly, migrants, and vulnerable population groups such as indigenous communities. The measures were not necessarily put in place with the objective to foster peace—nor sufficient to do so—but they contributed to it by alleviating some of the hardships brought by the lockdowns.

The Ministry of Health undertook efforts to improve access and quality of healthcare¹³ and to provide culturally sensitive services to leave no one behind.¹⁴ The National Vaccination Plan against COVID¹⁵ in Colombia has enabled over 80 percent¹⁶ of the population to receive at least one dose of a vaccine. In addition, Colombia has worked on a legal framework to ensure access to health and particularly to COVID-19 vaccines to migrants,¹⁷ regardless of their migration status.¹⁸ The vaccination campaign was perceived as fair and as a tool

¹² The number is a rough average of increase of homicides comparing 2021 homicide number with homicide numbers from the past few years. For instance, the increase between 2020-2021 is + 1,855; between 2019-2021 is 1,217. You can see the official numbers at Policía nacional, “Estadística delictiva.”

¹³ See, for instance, Ministerio de Salud, “\$109 Mil Millones Serán Destinados a Proyectos de Infraestructura y Dotación Hospitalaria,” Ministerio de Salud, October 23, 2020, <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/109-mil-millones-seran-destinados-a-proyectos-de-infraestructura-y-dotacion-hospitalaria.aspx>.

¹⁴ Organización Panamericana de la Salud, “Colombia Responde a La COVID-19 Con Un Modelo de Salud Intercultural,” Organización Panamericana de la Salud, November 13, 2020, <https://www.paho.org/es/historias/colombia-responde-covid-19-con-modelo-salud-intercultural>.

¹⁵ Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, “Vacunación Contra COVID-19,” Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, accessed June 30, 2022, https://www.minsalud.gov.co/salud/publica/Vacunacion/Paginas/Vacunacion-covid-19.aspx?utm_source=Google.com&utm_medium=Search&utm_campaign=Presidencia&utm_content=presidencia&utm_term=Vacunacion_covid.

¹⁶ Our World in Data, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations,” Our World in Data, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>.

¹⁷ Carlos Felipe Jaramillo, “A Future of Opportunities for Colombia and Its Migrants,” November 24, 2021, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/future-opportunities-colombia-and-its-migrants>.

¹⁸ Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, “El País Debe Avanzar En La Vacunación de Población Migrante,” Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, October 8, 2021, <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/El-pais-debe-avanzar-en-la-vacunacion-de-poblacion-migrante.aspx>.

to relaunch the economy¹⁹—it did not lead to massive polarization of politicians or the population as has been seen in Europe or the United States. These efforts may have contributed to reducing inequality and increasing trust in and the presence of the state, which are all important peace factors (**health for peace**).

In some areas, the depth of the crisis encouraged the **private sector** to step in. In the region of Valle del Cauca, companies and foundation created an initiative called “Commitment Valle” (*Compromiso Valle*) where they started a spontaneous dialogue with individuals and communities to understand their needs.²⁰ They then offered services, including food delivery and trainings. Some of their efforts were directly targeted at reducing violence—such as the program “building opportunities” (*forjar oportunidades*), which provided a psychosocial pathway for gang members to prepare them for the job market. Some of these initiatives were started by the private sector and then joined by the government.

Communicating to coordinate and establish trust

Early on during the pandemic, the president participated in a daily program, “Prevention and Action,” to communicate about the response to the crisis. Some local governments also invested efforts in raising awareness to their citizens.²¹ This may have contributed to the increase in trust in the government in 2020, which can be a powerful tool to prevent violent conflict.²²

The government is also using a series of mechanisms to listen and address some of the grievances that have deepened during the pandemic, such as its use of the police human rights unit to strengthen a dialogue with communities,²³ an “employment mission” to address the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the labor market,²⁴ and local youth councils to listen to young people grievances and proposals.²⁵

The UN’s role in preventing violence during COVID-19

The UN country team adapted their existing strategies in country²⁶ to take into account COVID-19 humanitarian and socioeconomic impacts, as mandated by

¹⁹ people were prioritized based on age groups through a clear communication campaign

²⁰ Compromiso Valle, “Compromiso Valle,” Compromisovalle, 2021, <https://www.compromisovalle.org>.

²¹ Organización Mundial de la Salud, “Colombia busca no dejar a nadie atrás en la lucha contra covid-19,” Organización Panamericana de la Salud, July 21, 2020, <https://www.paho.org/es/noticias/21-7-2020-colombia-busca-no-dejar-nadie-atras-lucha-contra-covid-19>.

²² Semana, “La Confianza de Los Colombianos En El Gobierno Subió de 27% a 37 % Entre 2018 y 2020: Ocede,” Semana, July 12, 2022, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-confianza-de-los-colombianos-en-el-gobierno-subio-de-27-a-37-entre-2018-y-2020-ocde/202138/>.

²³ “Estos Son Los Planes de La Policía Para Mejorar Su Imagen,” La Opinión, September 11, 2021, <https://www.laopinion.com.co/colombia/estos-son-los-planes-de-la-policia-para-mejorar-su-imagen>.

²⁴ Departamento Nacional de Planeación del Gobierno Nacional de Colombia, “Acerca de La Misión,” Misión de Empleo, July 2020, <https://www.misionempleo.gov.co/acerca-de/Paginas/Antecedentes-y-justificacion.aspx>.

²⁵ Ministerio de Interior de Colombia and International Republican Institute, “ABC Consejos de Juventud” (Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2019), https://participacion.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/documentos/doc_abc_de_consejos_de_juventud_con_calendario_2.pdf.

²⁶ See, e.g., the UNSDCF, the Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants, and the Intersectoral Humanitarian Response Plan.

headquarters (HQ).²⁷ **HQ did not, however, request an assessment of how COVID-19 affected risks for violent conflicts.** The socioeconomic assessment did identify some of these risks (e.g., increase in inequality and forced recruitment, slowdown of peacebuilding projects) but did not label them as such, and no specific violence prevention strategy was developed.

The UNCT also did not have the flexibility to adopt a new framework on conflict prevention to address the risk factors deepened by COVID-19. Indeed, the cooperation framework was negotiated with the government in 2019—with the peace component focusing solely on the peace agreement—and the UN was not at liberty to act outside of the framework, or to reorient its resources. In other words, no plans enabled the UN to work with the government on a strategy to address rising risk factors for violence.

In terms of violence prevention, the country team, the Security Council, and the UN secretary-general²⁸ played a crucial role in helping the government—which had to deal with many priorities—**to keep the peace agreements on its agenda.** Thanks to its strong presence in remote territories, the UN also produced useful information on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Some government officials mentioned, however, that they would have benefited from more joint analyses across the country team, explaining the links between different phenomena (e.g., forced displacement and drug trafficking).

While no UN strategy was adopted to mitigate the rising risk factors for violence brought by COVID-19, a **few UN projects addressed some of them.** The project *Health for Peace*, supported by the multi-partner trust fund, helped provide better access to healthcare in areas of the country most affected by the conflict, with the aim of contributing to reducing inequality.²⁹ The UN also supported institutions in their efforts to promote peaceful coexistence with Venezuelan migrants through conflict resolution and communications campaigns to prevent xenophobia.³⁰ UNDP used a conflict-sensitive approach by providing health kits to family commissioners so they could attend to victims of domestic violence and by supporting governmental subsidies for the most vulnerable populations. OHCHR played an important role in facilitating dialogue between governmental entities and protesters during the national strike.

The UN's primary objective is to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Peace cannot be an afterthought when a situation like COVID-19 creates massive socioeconomic shocks that can destabilize nations

²⁷ See UN frameworks: A UN framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 and Global humanitarian response plan for COVID-19.

²⁸ ReliefWeb, "Secretary-General Arrives in Colombia to Commemorate the Fifth Anniversary of the Final Peace Agreement - Colombia," Reliefweb, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/secretary-general-arrives-colombia-commemorate-fifth-anniversary-final-peace>.

²⁹ Organización Panamericana de la Salud, "Fondo multidonante de Naciones Unidas: Fortaleciendo comunidades para el acceso a la salud tras el Acuerdo de Paz en Colombia," accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.paho.org/es/alianzas/fondo-multidonante-naciones-unidas-salud-para-paz-colombia>.

³⁰ Naciones Unidas Colombia, "Informe annual de resultados de 2021: Marco de Cooperación para el Desarrollo Sostenible en Colombia 2020-2023," 2021, 33.

Four recommendations to prevent violence during major crises

The UN's primary objective is to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Peace cannot be an afterthought when a situation like COVID-19 creates massive socioeconomic shocks that can destabilize nations.

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1. The UN should call on member states to adopt conflict-sensitive policies to respond to major crises such as COVID-19. Member states should balance peace and health interests; mitigate the negative impacts of the response by adopting corrective measures; and identify opportunities to strengthen peace during the response (e.g., the health for peace approach). This message could come from the secretary-general, the Security Council, and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and could also be reflected in the soon to be negotiated Pandemic Treaty. The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned governments that the socioeconomic costs of closing their borders outweigh the health benefits. It could make similar calculations about health and rising risk factors for violence.³¹

2. The UN should support member states to develop conflict sensitive measures during a major crisis.³² **UN HQ could adopt a response plan specifically for violent conflict prevention**, the way it has developed the socioeconomic and the humanitarian response plans.³³ It could also adapt the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to support the government in preventing violence that may stem from the crisis. The Resident Coordinator (RC) Office—with the support of relevant partners such as the PDA, UNDP, UNODC, UN-Habitat—should be able to advise the government in the development of conflict sensitive strategies. Agencies, Funds, and Programs (AFPs) could also update their strategies on conflict sensitivity to include a methodology on how to support national actors in being conflict sensitive.

3. The UN could undertake a “lessons learned” exercise, including, e.g., PBSO, the UNDP-DPPA Joint Program, UNODC, WHO. The UN could commission a study on good practices of sustaining peace during the COVID-19. Based on this, the UN could develop a toolkit for local and national actors on how to respond to an emergency while sustaining peace.

³¹ On the public health approach to violence, see World Health Organization, “Violence Prevention Alliance Approach,” World Health Organization, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.who.int/groups/violence-prevention-alliance/approach>.

³² This is in line with the secretary-general's report, *Our Common Agenda*, which highlights that the UN has a major role to play as “a centre for context specific prevention expertise.” Secretary General, “Our Common Agenda” (New York: United Nations, 2021), 73, www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.

³³ The plan should focus on risk factors for violence to enable preventive actions, not on violent incidents.

4. The UN could call on member states to develop a strategy to address residual risk factors for conflict deepened by the COVID-19 crisis. The UN—and particularly the secretary-general, the Security Council, the PBC, and the RCs—could encourage governments to diagnose risks factors for violence deepened by the COVID-19 crisis and to address them through their national development plans, and violence prevention/peacebuilding plans. The UN should also encourage member states and the donor community to invest in prevention and peacebuilding plans—in the case of Colombia, including the Peace Agreement—with the understanding that these plans are more important than ever to address the root causes of conflict, which have often been exacerbated by COVID-19.

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