Rewriting the Future of Peace in Colombia

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Rewriting the Future of Peace in Colombia: Confronting Structural Violence, Illicit Economies, and Marginalization

Introduction: A Conflict Older Than the Republic

To understand Colombia's present, one must recognize that violence in the country is not a recent phenomenon—it is embedded in its very foundations. The resurgence of armed conflict in Colombia is best understood as the continuation of an unresolved historical struggle rooted in political exclusion, rural poverty, and systemic inequality. Since the times of conquest, Colombia has never truly experienced a year of lasting peace. While modern academia often begins its timeline with La Violencia in the 1940s (Justice for Colombia, 2025), the cycles of state repression, political exclusion, and armed rebellion go back much further. The failure to create a truly inclusive political system led to the rise of armed groups representing marginalized populations, especially rural peasants, who had been left out of Colombia's political and economic development. These root causes remain largely intact, especially in rural zones where poverty affects over 65% of the population, compared to 30% in urban areas (Justice for Colombia, 2025). This stark inequality fuels cycles of conflict, with many rural communities still seeing no viable future outside of illicit economies or violence. What we witness today is the continuation of a historical pattern where conflict is constantly reshaped, not resolved.

Root Causes: Land, Exclusion, and Abandonment

One of the primary drivers behind Colombia's armed conflict—and its ongoing resurgence—is the unresolved issue of land inequality, which has fueled rural exclusion, displacement, and violence for over a century. Despite progressive legal reforms like the 1991 Constitution, land ownership remains highly concentrated, with 82% of productive land held by just 10% of owners (Rettberg, 2018, p. 6). This deep agrarian inequality laid the foundation for FARC's original insurgency and continues to shape post-conflict dynamics. Similarly, the lucrative drug trade has enabled both guerrilla and paramilitary groups to finance violence, deepen state fragility, and perpetuate inequality and displacement. The peace agreement recognized these root causes and aimed to address them through rural reform and voluntary crop substitution, but the implementation of these measures has been slow and contested (Rettberg, 2018, pp. 10–12).

The success of the 2016 peace agreement is mixed. On one hand, it demobilized thousands of FARC fighters, created transitional justice mechanisms, and laid the groundwork for rural development and coca substitution through programs like PNIS. However, the agreement also revealed Colombia's deep political polarization. Its rejection in the 2016 referendum—driven by opposition to amnesty and land reform—exposed strong conservative resistance to transformative change (Rettberg, 2018, pp. 9–11). Moreover, institutional weaknesses at the regional level have hindered implementation, especially in conflict-affected areas with limited state presence. As a result, criminal groups and drug cartels have moved into vacuums left by FARC, reviving violence in rural areas. These conditions demonstrate that while the peace agreement made important legal advances, it failed to establish a fully inclusive and resilient social contract.

A more effective course of action would require strengthening institutions at both national and local levels to address land reform, provide public services, and implement development projects in rural regions. International actors, while essential to past peacebuilding and military efforts, should now support long-term investment in rural infrastructure, land formalization, and sustainable alternatives to coca cultivation. Rettberg (2018) emphasizes that unilateral drug enforcement strategies have done little to reduce global demand and have undermined the legitimacy of the Colombian state in rural areas. The future of peace depends less on punitive justice and more on ensuring equity, trust, and opportunity. The agreement's broader legacy may ultimately depend not on the legal text itself, but on whether it catalyzes lasting institutional and social transformation in a deeply divided society (Rettberg, 2018, pp. 22–24).

The Peace Process and Its Limits

Colombia's pursuit of peace has been long and fragmented, marked by multiple attempts to end armed conflict through negotiation and demobilization. From the Uribe Agreement of 1984 to the El Caguán process between 1998 and 2002, peace talks with guerrilla groups like the FARC-EP have repeatedly faltered under political resistance, deep mistrust, and persistent violence. The assassination of over 1,500 members of the Unión Patriótica—an outcome of earlier negotiations—stands as a stark reminder that formal agreements do not always translate into safety or political inclusion (Segura & Mechoulan, 2017).

While these peace efforts have succeeded in reducing open combat at times, they have largely failed to address the deeper systems that drive armed conflict. The 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC was unprecedented in scale, resulting in the demobilization of nearly 13,000 fighters and the transformation of the FARC into a legal political party. However, this legal success masked persistent structural shortcomings. Rettberg (2018) argues that although the accord introduced reforms on rural development and crop substitution, implementation has been slow and uneven, particularly in the territories most affected by the conflict.

Moreover, critics like Marre (2014) contend that by the time of negotiation, the FARC's revolutionary ideology had largely become a facade for criminal activities such as drug trafficking, extortion, and territorial control. The peace process, then, may have been more about negotiating an exit from illicit economies than resolving ideological conflict. Despite its ambitions, the agreement was also rejected in a 2016 referendum, revealing deep political polarization and elite resistance to reform. In practice, the peace strategy remained focused on demobilization and reintegration, without transforming the economic, institutional, and political structures that sustain violence. As a result, new armed actors quickly filled the void, and many rural communities saw little change in their lived realities.

The Return of Conflict: New Faces, Old Failures

Despite the historic 2016 peace agreement with the FARC, violence in Colombia has not ended—it has transformed. As the FARC demobilized, other armed actors swiftly filled the territorial and economic vacuums they left behind. Chief among these were the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the so-called Bandas Criminales (BACRIM)—criminalized successors to paramilitary groups. The ELN expanded operations into areas once controlled

by FARC fronts, while BACRIM, deeply embedded in illicit economies, reasserted their influence through extortion, trafficking, and territorial control (Marre, 2014; ICTJ, 2009).

This post-agreement fragmentation reflects a deeper issue: the Colombian state failed to consolidate its presence in former conflict zones. The 2005 demobilization of paramilitary groups under the Justice and Peace Law had already shown that without meaningful reintegration and accountability, criminal structures adapt and persist. As the ICTJ (2009) notes, many of these groups rebranded, rearmed, and resumed operations with little state

resistance, often maintaining ties to local elites or economic interests. Today, dozens of such groups operate across Colombia, many involved in illegal mining, contraband, and above all, narcotics trafficking.

The international cocaine market remains a central driver of violence. Both guerrilla and paramilitary successors continue to fund their operations through drug production and trafficking, with little disruption to global demand. Rettberg (2018) highlights that unilateral, militarized drug enforcement strategies have not only failed to curb these economies but have also undermined state legitimacy in rural areas by associating government presence with repression rather than development. Meanwhile, crop eradication campaigns—often conducted without viable alternatives—have alienated local communities and fueled resentment, creating ideal conditions for new armed recruitment. As long as drug trafficking remains more profitable and more reliable than the state, Colombia's conflict will continue to mutate rather than resolve.

Everyday Insecurity and Absent Peace

While peace agreements are negotiated in national capitals and celebrated in international forums, many communities in Colombia remain trapped in conditions of war. Nowhere is this disconnect more visible than in regions like Chocó, where formal demobilization has done little to improve everyday security. In an interview, social leader Fabio Serna describes a reality in which the only presence of the state is military: "Cuando hay presencia del Estado, sólo se ve un componente: el militar" (Serna, 2025). For residents of Quibdó and surrounding areas, peace is not defined by accords but by the daily ability to live, work, and move freely—rights still routinely denied in so-called post-conflict zones.

Serna recounts how young people in Chocó continue to be recruited by armed groups—not out of ideological commitment but because these groups are often the only institutions offering opportunity, protection, or income. "Lo que hay es una oferta institucional de la criminalidad," he explains, highlighting how the state's absence in providing education, infrastructure, or employment leaves youth vulnerable to exploitation (Serna, 2025). Despite peace on paper, these communities experience structural violence through neglect, underinvestment, and the normalization of fear.

Yet amid this absence of state support, local leaders like Serna build what Mac Ginty and Richmond describe as “everyday peace”—community-led efforts to resist violence and create stability through social ties, cultural resilience, and grassroots innovation. Through Fundación FASEMA, Serna uses tennis, music, and vocational training to offer young people an alternative future—what he calls “healthy environments” where children can imagine life beyond conflict. These bottom-up strategies, though often overlooked in official policy, are

essential to sustaining peace where institutions fail. They reveal that sustainable peace is not just the cessation of hostilities, but the creation of conditions where dignity and hope can flourish.

A Reimagined Strategy for Sustainable Peace

If Colombia’s long history of violence reveals anything, it is that peace cannot be achieved through demobilization alone. The country’s post-accord reality has made it clear that symbolic gestures—ceasefires, disarmament, political reintegration—are not enough to produce lasting stability. As previous sections have shown, the 2016 agreement was a historic achievement in legal and diplomatic terms, but it left intact the social, economic, and institutional conditions that first gave rise to armed conflict. A more effective strategy must therefore reframe peace as a process of structural transformation rather than a temporary settlement.

This transformation begins with acknowledging that state institutions remain weak or absent in many of the regions most affected by violence. Rural communities continue to lack roads, schools, healthcare, and access to legal employment. In these places, the state is often not perceived as a guarantor of rights, but as an enforcer of punitive policies like forced eradication or militarization. Strengthening institutional presence through development, not coercion, is crucial. As Rettberg (2018) and the ICTJ (2009) both argue, justice must move beyond courts and military tribunals; it must be experienced as a tangible improvement in quality of life, access to rights, and community resilience.

Colombia’s future depends on a pivot from security-first strategies to social justice-centered governance. This means investing in land restitution, rural infrastructure, and public education while dismantling the economic logics of war, particularly illicit economies that remain more viable than legal ones. Equally important is ensuring the safety of social leaders, environmental defenders, and community organizers who continue to face assassination and

intimidation despite the formal end of conflict. If Colombia is to prevent the next generation of armed actors from emerging, peace must offer not just disarmament, but dignity, opportunity, and equity. This vision of peace is not utopian—it is pragmatic, rooted in decades of lessons learned and in the lived realities of communities still fighting for their right to exist in peace.

From Peace as a Pact to Peace as a Process

Colombia has long treated peace as a finite goal: a signed agreement, a demobilization ceremony, a symbolic handshake. But as recent years have shown, this approach has failed to prevent the resurgence of violence, the reorganization of armed actors, or the deepening of social fractures. True peace requires more than momentary disarmament—it demands the construction of a new social contract. One that is not negotiated only between elites, but rooted in inclusion, justice, and opportunity for all Colombians, especially those who have been historically silenced, displaced, or disregarded.

To move from peace as a pact to peace as a living process, Colombia must address not only the symptoms of conflict but the systems that reproduce it: land inequality, rural abandonment, impunity, and structural exclusion. Building sustainable peace means investing in people and places long written out of the national narrative, and ensuring that

justice is felt not only in courtrooms, but in homes, farms, and classrooms. The following recommendations are grounded in this principle: that preventing future violence is inseparable from repairing the past and transforming the present as much as it needs visible justice.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Territorial Development and Governance

Redistribute unused land, especially that taken by armed groups, and normalize rural property rights to tackle long-standing inequality and conflict over territory, particularly in regions with a history of displacement and land concentration (Rettberg, 2018). Invest in rural infrastructure such as roads, schools, health services, and clean water access to close the urban-rural divide and deliver tangible peace dividends to historically excluded communities (Justice for Colombia, 2018). Establishing a sustained, civilian state presence—not just

military—through local governance, education, and social services in neglected areas like Chocó and Catatumbo to build legitimacy and prevent armed group resurgence is the final, and most relevant step (Serna, 2025). Departments like Chocó and Arauca need permanent structures that not only momentarily solve, but also prevent the conflict from rising up again and create permanent protection for children in the area.

2. Justice and Structural Accountability

Reforming the transitional justice system to include full accountability not only for guerrilla actors, but also for paramilitary forces, state collaborators, and private sector sponsors of violence (ICTJ, 2009), as initially proposed in the 2016 peace agreements woth the FARC. Launching a comprehensive national reparations and land restitution program, ensuring that victims of displacement and dispossession are prioritized and that restitution mechanisms are transparent, community-led, and well-resourced would restore one of the most negative effects and aspects of the armed conflict. Finally, combating organized criminal networks through financial intelligence, asset seizure, and anti-corruption strategies, reducing the profitability of violence and weakening the power structures that allow it to flourish would weaken the system that supports the armed parties of the conflict.

3. Youth and Community Resilience

Create national youth protection and empowerment programs that center education, sport, culture, and mental health support as tools to prevent recruitment and foster hope in conflict-affected communities (Serna, 2025). Scale up grassroots peacebuilding efforts, including initiatives led by Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and rural communities, by offering sustained funding, legal support, and institutional partnerships, such as Project 2025, but developed in a more effective manner.

4. International and Institutional Reform

Reframe peacebuilding as a developmental and democratic agenda, mobilizing international cooperation not around military benchmarks, but around long-term equity, inclusion, and institutional reform (Bell et al., 2015), and taking words and turning them into actions.

Supporting inclusive national dialogue processes that break elite monopolies over reform and bring rural, youth, women's, and minority voices to the center of decision-making about the

country's future would be the final step in ensuring inclusion is appropriately handled and that decision-making is representative.

Colombia's war was never only about weapons—it was about who got to belong in the nation's future. Peace will remain elusive until the structures of exclusion that created the conflict are transformed. Sustainable peace depends on turning inequality into inclusion, marginalization into participation, and violence into shared prosperity. The time for symbolic peace is over. The time for structural peace is now.

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Interview with Fabio Serna Machado, social leader in El Choco, Colombia