

WEATHERING RISK

POLICY REPORT

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# Environmental Peacebuilding in Colombia

Leveraging Synergies  
between Environment,  
Climate, Peace and Security  
Policies

September 2025



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## List of Acronyms

AGC	Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia; Spanish: Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia
AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia; Spanish: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
CONPES	National Council for Economic and Social Policy; Spanish: Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social
ELN	National Liberation Army; Spanish: Ejército de Liberación Nacional
EMBF	Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frente
EMC	FARC's Central General Staff; Spanish: Estado Mayor Central
EPP	Environmental Peacebuilding Policy
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
FCDS	Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development; Spanish: Fundación para la Conservación y Desarrollo Sostenible
GEF IEO	Independent Evaluation Office of the Global Environment Facility
GEF	Global Environment Facility
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDEAM	Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology, and Environmental Studies
INVIAS	National Roads Institute; Spanish: Instituto Nacional de Vías
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace; Spanish: Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz
MADR	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; Spanish: Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural
MADS	Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development; Spanish: Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible
NBS	Nature-based solutions
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NDP	National drug policy

NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NICFI	Norwegian International Climate and Tree Initiative; Spanish: Iniciativa Internacional de Clima y Bosque de Noruega
NPSI	National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution of Illicit Crops; Spanish: Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos
OCHA	United Nations Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs
PA	Protected area
PDET	Development Plans with a Territorial Approach; Spanish: Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial
PES	Payments for Ecosystem Services
PNN	Natural national park; Spanish: Parque Nacional Natural
RMIB-LAC	Indigenous women network on biodiversity from Latin America and the Caribbean; Spanish: Red de Mujeres Indígenas sobre la Biodiversidad de América Latina y el Caribe
UAIIN	Intercultural Indigenous Autonomous University; Spanish: Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural
UAPPS	Environmental Units for Peace and Social Services; Spanish: Unidades ambientales para la paz y los servicios sociales
UN	United Nations
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime

## Executive Summary

Colombia's pursuit of peace and sustainability is a complex journey with decades of armed conflict deeply entwined with environmental challenges. This report explores the intricate relationship between environmental degradation, climate change, and peace policy efforts. It examines how these elements can be addressed by an environmental peacebuilding approach to shape the nation's path toward a more peaceful and sustainable future.

Analysing the peacebuilding policies of the Santos, Duque, and Petro administrations, the report reveals an evolution – from grappling with the challenges of implementing a newly signed peace agreement to a predominantly militarised approach and, more recently, to a growing recognition of the environment's pivotal role in peacebuilding. Each government has confronted interrelated issues: deforestation, illicit economies like coca cultivation and illegal mining, climate vulnerabilities, and the urgent need to foster state services and sustainable livelihoods for communities affected by conflict.

Despite progress, persistent challenges remain. Uncoordinated policy implementation, weak state presence in conflict-affected regions, and the pervasive influence of illicit economies continue to threaten lives and destabilise rural communities. However, amidst these difficulties, there is cause for optimism. The report highlights policies laying the groundwork for an integrated approach to environmental peacebuilding and showcases community-led initiatives offering valuable lessons for advancing peace and sustainability in Colombia.

Our analysis underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive national Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP) – one that learns from past experiences, scales up successful local initiatives, and empowers communities as agents of change. The Colombian government should develop a national EPP that integrates environmental protection and climate action into peacebuilding efforts. Such a policy should focus on:

- **Civilian-military coordination for environmental protection and climate resilience:** This policy should promote a robust and coordinated state presence beyond military involvement, addressing root causes and political-economic dynamics in conflict zones. By restoring ecosystems and repairing relations across communities and reducing maladaptation pressures that push marginalised communities into illicit economies, the State can improve its legitimacy, fostering social cohesion essential for economic development and prosperity while protecting the environment.
- **Integrating climate action, peacebuilding, and development finance:** Vulnerable populations bear the brunt of climate change impacts and violence, creating a vicious cycle that hampers resilience. An environmental peacebuilding approach offers an opportunity to implement a triple nexus combining humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding. The government should prioritise investments toward victim compensation, land restitution, and resettlement programs. Investing in longer-term grants and strategic initiatives can address immediate economic needs, offer reparations, integrate former combatants, and conserve critical ecosystems. Evidence has shown that projects such as agroforestry, public works tax reduction in rural areas, off grid renewable energy, eco-tourism, and microfinance tailored to local entrepreneurs have good potential.
- **Enhancing coordination and inclusive governance:** A lack of alignment between peacebuilding, agrarian, climate, and conservation agendas has delayed progress and exacerbated social conflicts. Coordinating policies among governmental bodies and fostering dialogue that brings together diverse perspectives on Colombia's localised conflict economies is imperative. Furthermore, implementing gender-inclusive policies recognises the role of women and diverse

populations in environmental protection and as peacebuilders and ensures their equitable participation.

- **Promoting decentralised peacebuilding processes:** Strengthening local governance structures and ensuring inclusive decision-making is vital. An EPP can set the ground for conducting peace negotiations with armed groups by using the management of critical natural resources as an entry point and offering opportunities for reintegration into green local economies. Yet, a national policy should not imply a centralised approach. Empowering local authorities and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into biodiversity conservation and community forestry initiatives can foster acceptance and trust. Decentralising the implementation with specific budget and means allocation of the EPP empowers local governments to coordinate efforts from the bottom up, leveraging local knowledge while being supported by national institutions.
- **Collaborating with the international community:** The international community, including the EU, can support Colombia's EPP by integrating climate and peacebuilding funds and transitioning climate finance toward grant-based frameworks that function effectively in challenging conditions. Supporting sustainable economic alternatives rooted in agri-food enterprises, pushing for higher global trading standards, and promoting fair procurement policies can incentivise sustainable practices, benefiting smallholder farmers and local communities.

An effective Environmental Peacebuilding Policy will help Colombia implement coherent practices across sectors, laying the ground for peace negotiations that consider climate and environment to foster rural development. Colombia stands at a crucial juncture where significant challenges meet unprecedented opportunities. This juncture allows Colombia to redefine its future and serve as a model for other nations, demonstrating that peace and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand. Supporting environmental peacebuilding offers hope for healing past divisions and building a sustainable, equitable future for all Colombians.



Guaporé, Colombia © Luis Deltreehd, Pixabay



## Introduction

*Environmental peacebuilding* is a multidisciplinary approach that addresses the intricate connections between environmental sustainability, human security, and conflict resolution. It acknowledges that ecological destruction, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, compounded by the climate crisis, can significantly escalate tensions and spark new conflicts over scarce resources such as water, arable land, and energy. This field is particularly interesting because it offers innovative solutions to some of the most pressing global issues. By focusing on the nexus of environmental governance, social equity, and peace efforts, environmental peacebuilding aims to foster cooperation among communities and nations, mitigate the risks of conflict, and promote long-term sustainability and stability.

Defined as “the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery” (Ide et al. 2021), historically, the environmental peacebuilding approach has collected lessons learned from different environmental, climate and agricultural initiatives contributing to peacebuilding, focusing primarily on their success in resolving community-based conflicts. Some cases, such as transboundary peace parks and water diplomacy, touch upon interstate conflicts. The application of the environmental peacebuilding framework to countrywide policies to systematically promote stability has so far been limited.

This policy report draws on the Colombian case as a critical example of how ecosystem conservation and climate action challenges are intertwined in their causes and solutions with peacebuilding. In Colombia, as in many conflict-affected nations, there are widespread issues of distributive inequality and production structures that compromise ecological integrity, leading to ongoing environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, forced displacement, and violence against marginalised groups. To effectively address these challenges, this report seeks to respond to the research question: How can Colombia best address the double challenge of building and sustaining peace while enhancing resilience to climate impacts and preserving its natural ecosystems?

## Objectives and scope of this policy report

This report is structured into two parts. The first part analyses how the last three Colombian governments have integrated environmental and climate considerations into peacebuilding policies. It reviews the environmental aspects of the peace accord, highlighting successes and gaps in its implementation. Additionally, it examines how conflict evolution over the past eight years has impacted environmental goals and policies to prevent deforestation and environmental degradation amid rising insecurities. Then, it revisits the evidence of community-level environmental peacebuilding practices, illustrating their potential benefits.

The second part focuses on how these efforts could be scaled nationally to address socio-environmental conflicts and enhance coordination between security, peacebuilding, environment, and low-carbon development policies. It concludes with recommendations for implementing an Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP) to strengthen Colombia's resilience and achieve sustainable peace.

## Methodological approach

This report builds on a doctoral research project implemented over the last five years. It employs a qualitative research methodology using four methods to ensure comprehensive results. Firstly, a systematic literature review was conducted (n=73). The literature review explored the socio-environmental dynamics of the Colombian conflict, focusing on peacebuilding, environmental, climate, and security policies. We reviewed relevant literature and conducted interviews to evaluate the impact of policies,

identify gaps, and assess their alignment with the environmental and agricultural sectors. Field observations and discussions centred on understanding the drivers of deforestation and promoting community cooperation in affected regions. Finally, virtual workshops aimed to understand conflict drivers and develop environmental peacebuilding activities.<sup>1</sup> The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

### Background: The Colombian case

Colombia is a country that exemplifies the overlapping challenges of protecting a rich natural environment of global importance and a prolonged armed conflict. The country is home to a vast area of forest, covering 52 per cent of its surface area, 14 per cent of which is designated as primary forest, the most biodiverse and carbon-rich type of forest. It also has 50 per cent of the world's *páramo* ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> The country is recognised as the second most biodiverse nation on the planet, with over 51,330 registered species (Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible 2019). The diverse ecosystems found in Colombia provide a range of ecosystem services that are essential for the growth of the country's economy and the well-being of its communities. However, the effects of climate change and anthropogenic activities such as deforestation, contamination of water sources, overexploitation of resources and cultivation of illegal crops are putting immense pressure on these ecosystems (IPCC 2023). As a result, the benefits generated by the ecosystem are diminished, and the population's quality of life is impaired.

At the same time, Colombia has been affected by over 60 years of armed conflict, resulting in more than 9 million victims. The country's dense forest has been a strategic asset for illegal armed groups involved in the conflict (FIP et al. 2021). Additionally, Colombia has a high internal displacement, with 6.9 million internally displaced people, and it also hosts almost 3 million displaced asylum-seekers from Venezuela (UNHCR 2025).

Many experts agree that the historic peace agreement signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, the Spanish acronym) presented a crucial opportunity to address a range of important issues. For example, it aimed to halt agricultural land expansion into the Amazon rainforest, contribute to rural development, and eliminate coca cultivation in natural parks (Valenzuela and Caicedo 2018; Baptiste et al. 2017). Additionally, it aimed at addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, such as social and political marginalisation, unequal access to land, and underdevelopment in peripheral areas (Morales Muñoz et al. 2021).

However, nine years after the accord, the country faces a complex interplay of challenges involving persisting and recurrent violence, environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, and a lack of broader sustainable development. The current situation shows that armed groups are capitalising on the absence of the guerrilla to control illegal mining and drug trafficking. Some factions of the FARC that disagreed with the peace agreement are absorbing smaller groups in southern regions. Similarly, the National Liberation Army<sup>3</sup> (ELN, the Spanish acronym) is continuing to carry out attacks on civilians and the armed forces

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<sup>1</sup> Forty-eight semi-structured interviews were held with key stakeholders, including practitioners from international and national NGOs, government officials, members of farmers' associations and local enterprises, former combatants, and experts from civil society and NGOs. Participatory observation during two research field trips to the reincorporation camp Miravalle in the Zona de Reserva Campesina Pato Balsillas in April 2021, near the Natural Park Cordillera de los Picachos, San Vicente del Caguán. Two virtual workshops with 27 practitioners and academia complemented these interviews.

<sup>2</sup> "*Páramo*" refers to a specific type of high-altitude ecosystem found primarily in the Andes mountains of South America. However, it is often described in English as a "tropical alpine tundra" or "high-altitude Andean ecosystem". Colombia has a significant amount of the world's *páramo*, holding approximately 50-60% of this ecosystem globally. The Colombian *páramo* covers about 2.9 million hectares (approximately 29,000 square kilometres or 11,197 square miles). This makes Colombia the country with the largest extent of *páramo* in the world, which plays a crucial role in water regulation, biodiversity conservation, and carbon storage. (Sevillano et al. 2020; Galvis and Ungar 2021)

<sup>3</sup> The National Liberation Army (ELN) is a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group in Colombia, established in 1964, that criticises unequal income among the social classes and has a radical influence of liberation theology through armed struggle. Known for its involvement

throughout the country. Furthermore, former paramilitary groups known as the Self-Defence Gaitanist Forces of Colombia (AGC, the Spanish acronym) have advanced in military and social control over different territories in rural Colombia (International Crisis Group 2024).

After years of state and military attacks in response to guerrillas and paramilitaries, the conflict in Colombia has moved towards the peripheral areas of the country. This has put some of the country's most vulnerable people, such as the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, at a higher risk. These communities are mainly located along the Pacific coast and the Amazon region, the country's most ecologically valuable areas.

Since 2016, the violence has become more localised, armed groups have multiplied, and the logic of conflict has fragmented, as evidenced by ongoing violence against environmental and social leaders and reported by different organisations. According to Global Witness (2020), Colombia has experienced the highest number of killings of environmental activists globally for two consecutive years (65 in 2020), underscoring the ongoing risks associated with environmental activism. Recently, between January and November of 2023, 163 assassinations have been registered by the Ombudsman Office (Defensoría del Pueblo), showing an alarming state of insecurity, especially in rural areas of the country. For example, in Putumayo, part of the Colombian Amazon sub-region, there have been at least 21 massacres since 2020, and the homicide rate is 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. There, violence is linked to competition for territorial control, drug trafficking corridors and the presence of extractive industries. Similarly, in early 2025, the Catatumbo region suffered a peak in violence leaving thousands of people displaced and acute humanitarian needs.

## Colombia's high vulnerability to climate change

National vulnerability, defined as the relationship between the sensitivity of the territory and the management of adaptive capacity, shows that 15.5 per cent of the national territory—covering 92 municipalities—falls within the categories of high and very high vulnerability. Notably, regions such as the Amazon and much of the municipalities in the Pacific region require special attention (IDEAM, PNUD, MADS, DNP, CANCELLERÍA 2017).

With approximately 85 per cent of its population and GDP exposed to natural disasters, Colombia will experience frequent extreme weather events under every emissions scenario, for Colombia as a whole, but with high regional variability (World Bank 2021b). Colombia's high exposure to climate change impacts, high levels of inequality, and prolonged armed conflict hinder the population's capacity to adapt to climate change impacts.

### Key climate risks

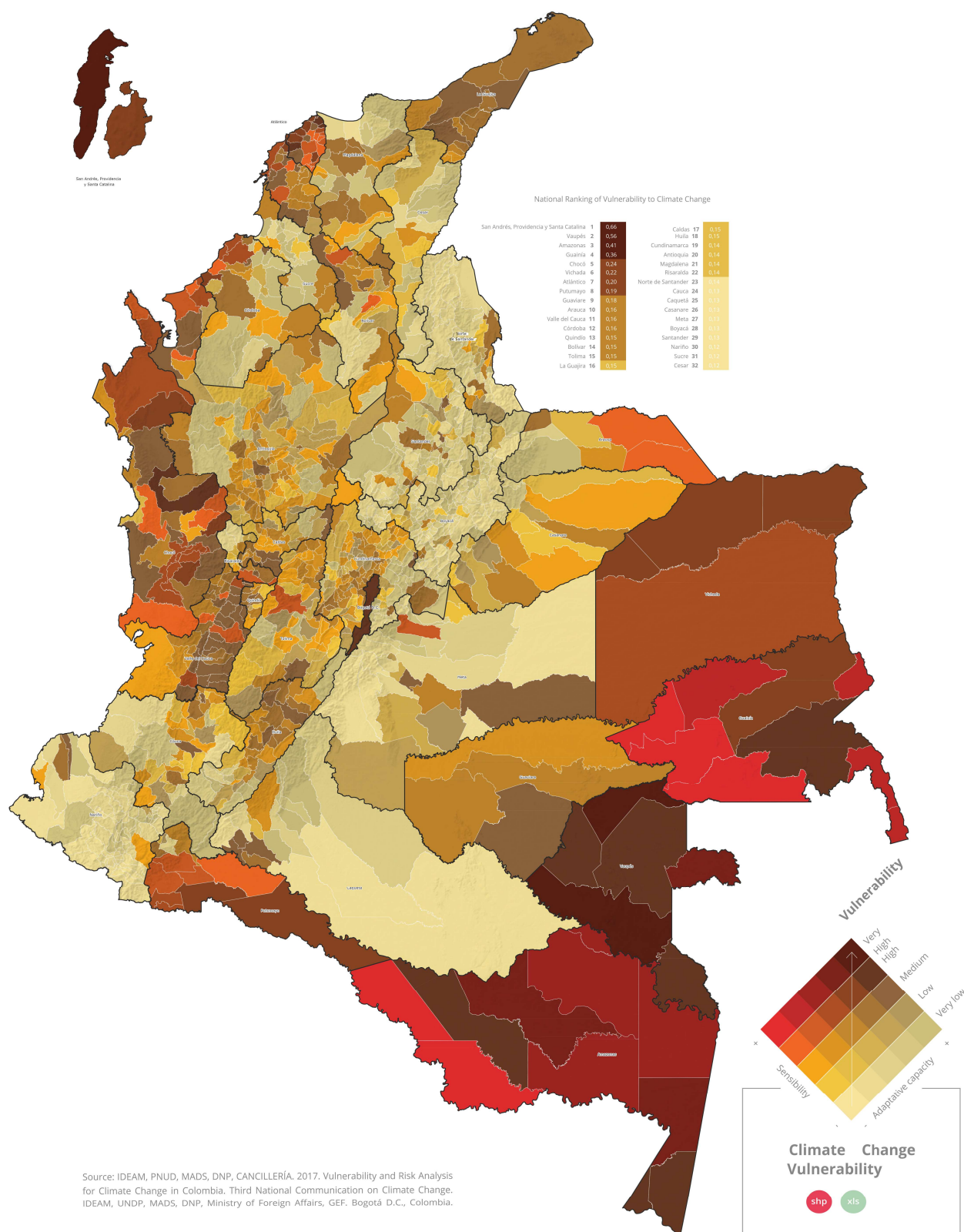
#### Rising temperatures and flooding

The Climate Change scenarios for 2040 indicate that the primary areas experiencing temperature increases will be the Caribbean and Pacific regions. Similarly, the inter-Andean valleys may be affected by rises in the annual average temperature. The Colombian Orinoquía region is also expected to experience significant temperature increases compared to current levels (IDEAM, PNUD, MADS, DNP, CANCELLERÍA 2017).

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in kidnappings, extortion, and attacks on oil infrastructure, the ELN has been particularly notorious for its difficulty in negotiations, significantly impacting Colombia's efforts for peace and stability.

## Map 1: Colombia's Climate Change Vulnerability by Municipality



Source: IDEAM, PNUD, MADS, DNP, CANCELLERÍA. 2017. Vulnerability and Risk Analysis for Climate Change in Colombia. Third National Communication on Climate Change. IDEAM, UNDP, MADS, DNP, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, GEF. Bogotá D.C., Colombia.

Figure 1. Map of Colombia's climate vulnerability by municipality



Under a high-emissions scenario, the average temperature in Colombia is expected to rise by as much as 3.88°C until the end of the century (World Bank 2021b) and glaciers are predicted to lose 3-5 per cent of coverage per year. On the one hand, this poses immense risks of flooding in the Colombian Andes, where 75 per cent of the population lives, due to increased surface run-off from snow melt and extreme rainfall (World Bank 2021b). On the other hand, the Andean region is also likely to experience water shortages as critical glaciers disappear. In coastal areas of Colombia, rising sea levels, erosion, earthquakes, and cyclones can lead to localised flooding. For reference, even an increase of 1.5°C would increase the number of people affected by floods in the country by 100-200 per cent (IPCC 2022).

### Climate-driven extreme El Niño and La Niña phenomena

Colombia experiences both El Niño and La Niña weather patterns. The former brings droughts and warmer weather; the latter increases floods and leads to cooler weather patterns (World Bank 2021b). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted that climate change will lead to stronger El Niño- and La Niña-like conditions, affecting temperature and precipitation patterns. For instance, the combination of El Niño and climate change is linked to dry spells in the Amazon, the Andes and the Caribbean coast regions. Additionally, the combination may lead to an increase in the number of forest fires. Similarly, a stronger La Niña phenomenon is predicted to increase rainfall and floods.

### Rainfall variability and water shortages

Precipitation projections vary regionally and interannually, with great uncertainty. The precipitation scenario for the country by 2040 reveals two distinct trends. A gradual increase in precipitation is projected for territories in the Andean region. Conversely, regions such as the Caribbean and Amazon are expected to experience a gradual decrease in precipitation during this period (IDEAM, PNUD, MADS, DNP, CANCELLERÍA 2017). After 2040, rainfall is projected to increase in Colombia's Amazon basin and the Pacific coastal areas, and it is projected to decrease in the highlands (World Bank 2021b). By 2050, climatic changes are expected to impact 14 per cent of the GDP corresponding to agriculture (World Bank 2021b). Extreme weather events have caused significant damage in the past. For example, in 2010-2011, La Niña produced major floods, causing economic losses estimated at approximately US\$6 billion (World Bank 2021b). Finally, decreased river flows will have energy security implications, as approximately 65 per cent of Colombia's electricity supply stems from hydropower (World Bank 2021b).

### Livelihoods and maladaptation

The high variability of precipitation projections increases the uncertainty in adapting to the agricultural and energy sectors. For example, climatic changes will heavily affect the productivity of Colombia's agricultural sector (De Zyosa 2022) as many economically important export goods, such as coffee, flowers, sugar cane, rice, and plantains, are highly vulnerable to rising temperatures and hydrological events (Cortes-Catano et al. 2024; IPCC 2022).

Colombia's vulnerability to extreme weather events and natural disasters is driven by densely populated informal human settlements in already vulnerable areas. The country faces several climate-driven socioeconomic stressors, including crop, livestock, ecosystem and infrastructure damage, with consequences especially for the agriculture, fisheries, and tourism sectors, causing (or increasing) poverty for those highly dependent on them.

In this context, the impact of climate change on livelihoods creates maladaptation practices such as illegal land acquisition, increased informal settlements in areas with high landslide risk, and the conversion of forests into farms for extensive livestock, disturbing further ecosystem services and increasing the risks and incidence of vector-borne diseases. Figure 2 below summarises climate projections for Colombia under a high-emissions scenario (RCP 8.5).

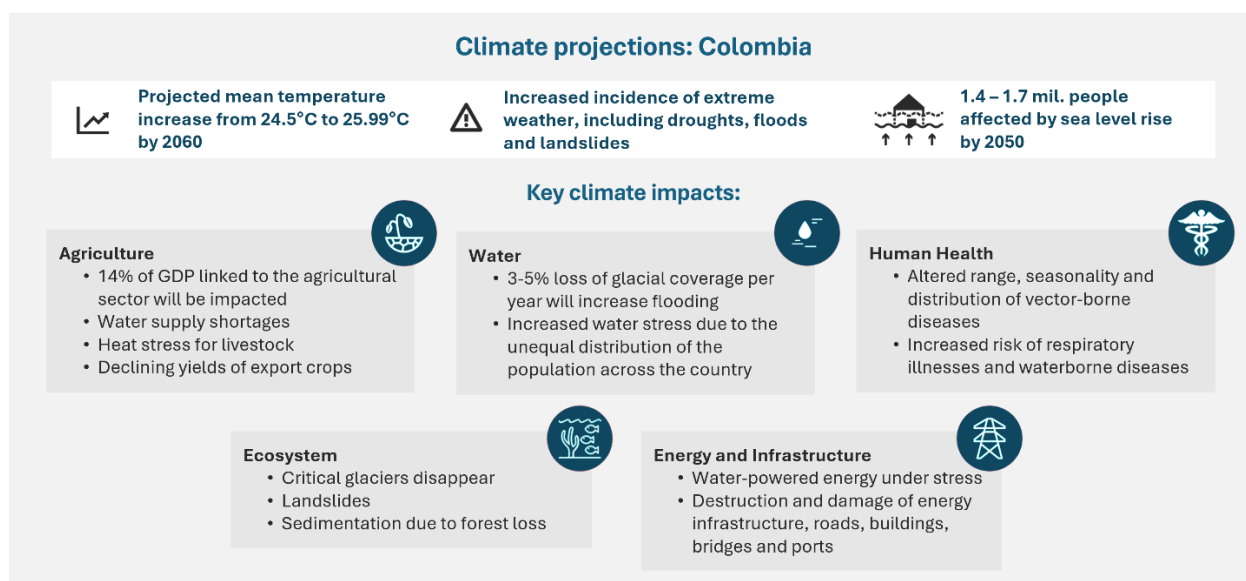


Figure 2. Climate projections in Colombia (adelphi, based on World Bank 2023 and CMIP6 SSP3-7.0 scenario)

## Environmental and climate-related security risks

Climate and environmental security risks encompass the tangible, financial or sectoral consequences of climate variations and ecological damages, significantly disrupting political stability, social cohesion, human well-being, or a nation's security framework. This also includes the repercussions of security issues and armed conflict in the natural environment and people's resilience capacity.<sup>4</sup>

Colombia is highly affected by climate and environmental security risks, as the roots of its prolonged armed conflict lie in a history of political conflict and a struggle to govern the exploitation of natural resources. The connection between armed conflict, the environment, and climate change in the country is most evident in the governance and management of land, with land access and distribution being major conflict drivers (FIP and adelphi 2021).

Unsustainable land uses are the main source of greenhouse gas emissions and ecological disturbances. In fact, 59 per cent of Colombia's GHG emissions result from agriculture, forestry and other land use sectors, including deforestation or change in forest cover (USAID 2023). Historically, the State's development model has encouraged forest clearing for agriculture. In the 1970s, policies even promoted land clearing in the Amazon region, which was considered wasteland at the time, to facilitate land titling. Recently, by establishing protected areas (PAs), the State has developed conservation policies, which have clashed with the history of peasant colonisation and communities that had settled in what are now legally PAs.

The areas that suffered the most significant environmental impact during more than five decades of armed conflict in Colombia are in regions with the highest concentration of PAs and are therefore of particular interest for conserving the country's flora and fauna.<sup>5</sup> Some 610 park rangers are looking after the more than 17,465,359 hectares that comprise the national parks. According to the National Natural Parks authorities (PNN, Spanish acronym), the international average for the number of hectares to be conserved is 6,250 per official. In Colombia, there are 34,000 hectares per ranger. In some cases, park rangers are the only institutional presence in the country. As a result, officials have at times been declared military targets by armed actors from exercising environmental authority. In the last decade, 11 park rangers were killed.

<sup>4</sup> Security risks in this paper are framed within the concept of human security, i.e. the "survival, livelihood and dignity" of people. United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security: What is Human Security? New York, NY. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/>, 16.1.2023.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: [https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/97/1/179/6041471\\_](https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/97/1/179/6041471_)

For example, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the AUC and FARC financed their operation with the timber they extracted from the park and illicit crop cultivation.<sup>6</sup> To guarantee the success of their undertakings, they regularly burned and looted control checkpoints and kidnapped and killed park rangers.<sup>7</sup>

The environment has suffered increased instability in the post-peace agreement period (2017–2018), bringing a concerning 50 per cent increase in forest disturbance across the Andes-Amazon Transition Belt (IDEAM n.d.). Many experts assume that, with the withdrawal of FARC's informal governance structures, actors like criminal groups, large landowners and dissident factions now control illegal mining and drug trafficking.

These actors engage in large-scale deforestation activities such as extensive cattle ranching, speculative illegal land markets, the expansion of coca cultivation and mono-cultivation, which is mainly influenced by money laundering schemes (Krause et al. 2022). In fact, the land used for coca cultivation in Colombia is relatively small compared to the land cleared for livestock pasture. Pasture is the primary cause of deforestation in the country, responsible for over a third of Colombia's total land area and about half of its deforestation. However, coca production is responsible for indirect deforestation through a phenomenon known as the 'pioneering effect,' whereby coca cultivation attracts other harmful activities (Davalos et al. 2021). The cultivation of coca crops responds to a persistent and growing illegal consumption of cocaine worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

The so-called war against drugs adds to the complex challenges that extend beyond the realm of illicit substance trafficking alone. Coca-related activities contribute to ecosystem pollution, deforestation and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It intersects with and amplifies other criminal activities, including illegal land occupation, logging, and mining. This intertwining of illicit enterprises has given rise to a phenomenon known as "narco-deforestation," which poses a significant threat to the Amazon region. In Colombia, drug profits are increasingly fuelling land speculation and environmental degradation, exacerbating the already critical issue of deforestation in the region. As such, addressing narco-deforestation is crucial for combating the drug trade and preserving the environmental integrity of vital ecosystems like the Amazon (UNODC 2022). The repercussions of clashes among armed groups in protected areas and rural territories affect Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities the most. In 2021, these communities accounted for 57 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, of the victims of combat violence among illegal groups nationwide, according to the Colombia Monitor Humanitario by the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (OCHA n.d.). Additionally, Afro-Colombians, constituting between 10 and 20 per cent of the population, comprised 53 per cent of all forcibly displaced people in 2022. Indigenous communities, comprising just under 5 per cent of the population, make up more than half of those living in forced confinement (OCHA n.d.). Similarly, Afro-Colombians and Indigenous people, especially women, were disproportionately affected by climate-related displacement and resource conflicts (Cardenás et al. 2021).

Most recently, these armed groups have started controlling the territory by controlling the civilian population, who become the targets of violence. These groups have used different population control

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<sup>6</sup>This is narrated by a park ranger who has worked in more than 12 national parks in the country. The seizures of extracted wood he had to make in his work led to threats to kill him. "It is only armed with our courage and the shirt of conservation that we confront the people who are committing infractions". For more information, see: <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/guardaparques-en-colombia-amenazas-asesinatos-y-otros-riesgos-laborales-645403>.

<sup>7</sup> According to the environmental defenders, "They took us out of the parks, they threatened us, they threw us out of many places that ended up being left alone". The group seeks to vindicate the rights of environmental defenders and those of nature and territory, which were violated by different clashes between armed groups. More recently, in 2020, rangers had to leave ten protected areas because of threats. There are landmines in 17 protected areas. This persecution led a group of park rangers to submit a report to the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition in 2019, asking to be recognised as victims of the armed conflict. For more information, see: <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/guardaparques-en-colombia-amenazas-asesinatos-y-otros-riesgos-laborales-645403>.

<sup>8</sup> Recently, a European multicity study looking at the presence of illicit drugs in wastewater showed that cocaine use increased between 2016 and 2022 in more than half of the studied cities. See: (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2023).

tactics. They did not start with violence, but with supplying state functions such as building small roads and providing electricity (Razón Pública 2023). Armed groups such as the ELN, FARC dissident fronts, and the Gulf Clan (self-styled as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC)) exploit vulnerable populations by offering them various "services" such as ensuring justice, preventing crime and providing economic opportunities along their trade chains (International Crisis Group 2020). Rural areas have higher recruitment linked to environmental degradation. Evidence suggests deforestation funds dissident factions. In conflict-affected areas vulnerable to climate change, deforestation, and mining, community members, especially those already vulnerable, may be more open to joining armed groups due to the negative impacts of these changes on their livelihoods (Cardenás et al. 2021).

In addition, many economic activities in Colombia's rural areas, such as agriculture and extractive industries, incentivise forest clearing, which affects soil erosion and desertification, loss of biodiversity, and ecosystems' capacities to regulate hydrological cycles, leaving ecosystems and communities' livelihoods more susceptible to natural hazards such as droughts and floods. The convergence of these factors is compounded by the impacts of armed conflict, leaving Colombian communities less equipped to withstand the effects of climate change and more vulnerable to being recruited. This creates a vicious cycle that reduces community resilience to security threats and increases illegal economic activities and the adverse effects of environmental degradation and climate change (see Figure 3 below).



Figure 3. The vicious circle of deforestation, insecurity and climate change in the Colombian Amazon (WWF Germany 2021<sup>9</sup>)

<sup>9</sup>Find more information on the source here: Figure 6 "The vicious circle of deforestation, insecurity, and Climate change in the Colombian Amazon" in FIP and adelphi 2021: A DANGEROUS CLIMATE: Deforestation, climate change and violence against environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon. WWF Germany: Berlin.



## Policy analysis: The interplay of peacebuilding, environment, and climate policies at a national scale

Colombia faces a vast array of challenges to implement peacebuilding, rural development, environmental, and climate-related policies, particularly in the areas most affected by armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> The Colombian State has developed national policies in the realms of climate, environment, peace, and security, with varying levels of implementation. There are also good practices for integrated environmental peacebuilding programming at the local level. Nevertheless, the last three presidential administrations have approached peace, climate, and environmental challenges differently. There remains a noticeable gap in intersectoral coordination and a disconnect with local policies and dynamics. This disconnect, compounded by the centralised nature of Colombia's policy conception, has hindered the upscaling of successful local practices.

### Why is a national-level environmental peacebuilding approach appropriate for Colombia?

Environmental peacebuilding entails promoting diverse and inclusive livelihoods based on sustainable natural resource management to solve local conflicts. It aligns with the Colombian State's commitment to peacebuilding, adopting a low-carbon economy, and stopping deforestation in the Amazon (Baptiste et al. 2017). Moreover, it addresses pressing global concerns such as deforestation, illicit drug production, and biodiversity protection, thereby impacting climate change mitigation by safeguarding massive carbon sinks in ecologically rich regions like the Amazon biome (IPCC 2023).

Environmental peacebuilding, if implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner, contributes to community-based social cohesion. Learnings from local practices have shown that smart impact investments with an environmental peacebuilding approach are pivotal in creating intercommunal trust. For example, connecting vulnerable farmers to sustainable value chains fairly enhances their resilience against climate change and illegal economies by providing better livelihood opportunities. Evidence from the cocoa value chain shows that interventions that combine livelihood strategies with peace efforts positively impact social cohesion, particularly trust. Additionally, technical solutions that promote sensible contact between groups significantly increase their willingness to participate (Löhr 2021; Morales Muñoz 2021).

Similarly, they allow vulnerable populations to participate in new governance spaces, facilitating discussions on climate adaptation and resilience, price stability, and access to better markets (Morales Muñoz et al. 2023). This is particularly significant as historically marginalised populations, most affected by armed conflicts and natural disasters, are now positioned to play a crucial role in environmental protection within their territories.

### Environmental peacebuilding and climate resilience

Climate and peacebuilding policies remain stove-piped at Colombia's national policy level. Besides the provisions in the peace agreement and their development on deforestation and environmental crimes, climate and environmental projections are not sufficiently integrated into peacebuilding and security policies. Nevertheless, several interconnected factors contribute to environmental peacebuilding and

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<sup>10</sup> Most of these areas are located in agricultural frontier zones and necessitate meticulous coordination in terms of procedures and timing. Among the main challenges are: the protection of vulnerable communities from violence, the implementation of the peace agreement, the compensation to victims of the armed conflict, a national land cadastre, the "green" titling of forest reserve areas, the implementation of community forestry concessions, the regulation of Indigenous territories (resguardos), the recovery of wastelands unduly occupied by large land grabbers, the substitution of coca-growing economies and territories, and the systematic provision of productive infrastructure, among others.

climate resilience. These factors include how governance processes affect dealing with the effects of climate change on water availability and accessibility, terrestrial carbon, and nutrient cycle shifts and land productivity. It is challenging to achieve effective climate adaptation and resilience without socio-political components such as improving access to land suitable for cultivation, increasing climate literacy, promoting rational rural land-use planning, intergenerational equity considerations, enhancing the potential for economic diversification, and fostering social cohesion (IPCC 2023).

Recent literature suggests that investing in socially inclusive low-carbon development pathways, such as renewable energy, nature-based solutions, carbon sinks, and green industries, offers opportunities to enhance environmental sustainability and socioeconomic development with co-benefits for peace (Wong 2022). Further research underscores the significant role of land-use systems, particularly agroforestry, in addressing climate change vulnerabilities, reducing emissions from unsustainable practices, and fostering peace through sustainable natural resource management (Krampe et al. 2021; Morales Muñoz et al. 2023; Morales Muñoz et al. 2022).

For Colombia, a conflict-affected country highly vulnerable to climate change, a nationwide policy approach to environmental peacebuilding has many benefits for transformative climate resilience. An EPP should strengthen its government presence by promoting lawful economies, rural extension, health, education, and justice services for communities that have been excluded from the country's sources of growth. Given the communities' presence in regions with valuable ecological resources and their reliance on agriculture, integrating climate education into local agricultural training equips farmers with insights into climate variability's impact on their crops and livelihoods. This knowledge motivates them to protect these resources, encouraging their participation in payments for ecosystem services schemes and sustainable practices for enhanced resilience (Hernandez et al. 2025).

### Environmental peacebuilding and national governance

While natural resource management initiatives can contribute directly to forms of peace at the local level, they tend not to scale up (Johnson et al. 2021). For example, there is an ongoing tension between land rights and the State's ability to control the territory in Colombia. Local and national governance is a key competition arena between State and rival actors. Environmental peacebuilding facilitates *intra-group* social cohesion and has the potential to impact *inter-group* social cohesion (Hachmann et al. 2023). However, there remains a gap in programming covering tensions between local communities and the national State, as well as between local communities and large corporations (Hachmann et al. 2023).

According to McKenzie et al. (2021), bottom-up initiatives tend to have more positive outcomes on livelihoods, inclusion, and subnational institutions related to community governance. Top-down and overly technical approaches can detract from capabilities and substantial positive peacebuilding. Balancing the scale of action is critical in ensuring positive outcomes for different dimensions of peacebuilding. Adding capabilities and resources to end, mitigate, or adapt to threats to human, environmental, and social rights is crucial (Matthew et al. 2010).

However, environmental peacebuilding has a systemic impact that goes beyond environmental considerations. It influences socioeconomic dynamics and significantly contributes to territorial peacebuilding efforts by promoting inclusive governance arrangements, thereby becoming a powerful tool for encouraging community participation, socioeconomic inclusion, and climate resilience (Ide et al. 2021). For example, an experimental study involving 1,504 respondents examined the factors influencing public support for environmental peacebuilding projects in Colombia. The findings revealed that job creation and public investments that benefit the entire population, especially those that promote dialogue between former combatants and victims, were the most influential factors (Schmid and Vlaskamp 2024).

The table below provides an overview of Colombia's key policies that could facilitate the coordination of climate, environment, peace, and security efforts, forming a foundation for advancing an integrated

approach under the framework of environmental peacebuilding. These policies include international treaties like the *Escazú Agreement*, ensuring rights to environmental information, and the *Leticia Pact* to stop deforestation in the Amazon basin, as well as national frameworks such as the *Law on the National Environmental and Territorial Coordination* and the *Security, Defence and Citizen Coexistence Policy*. Those exemplify diverse strategies and efforts to promote sustainable development, protect natural resources, and ensure peace and security (see Table 1).

Legal Framework	Objective	Year
<b>International</b>		
Escazú Agreement	It aims to guarantee people's rights to obtain environmental information and participate in decision-making that affects their lives and the environment. It is the world's first legally binding instrument containing specific provisions on environmental defenders. It requires governments to provide safe and enabling conditions for the defenders and ensure that those responsible for violence and intimidation against them are investigated and prosecuted. To this date, it has been ratified by 18 countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Dominica, Ecuador, Grenada, Guyana, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, The Bahamas and Uruguay	2021
Leticia Pact	Signed by the governments of Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Guyana, Suriname, Ecuador and Bolivia, to stop illegal deforestation and promote sustainable development in the Amazon basin.	2019
<b>National</b>		
Law on the National Environmental and Territorial Coordination of the National Environment (Government of Colombia 1993)	It reorganises the public sector in charge of managing and conserving the environment and renewable natural resources, organises the National Environmental System, SINA, and enacts other provisions.	1993
Land Use Law (388) Government of Colombia 1997	Establishes mechanisms that allow the municipality, in the exercise of its autonomy, to promote the organisation of its territory, the equitable and rational use of land, the preservation and defence of the ecological and cultural heritage located in its territorial area, and the prevention of disasters in high-risk settlements, as well as the execution of efficient urban planning actions.	1997
Decree on Regulations for Land Management Plans (Government of Colombia 1997)	Regulates the provisions relating to municipal and district land-use planning. Land-use planning aims to give economic and social planning its territorial dimension, rationalise intervention on the territory and promote its development and sustainable use.	1997-1998
Regulations on the National System of PNAs (Government of Colombia 2010)	Regulate the National System of Protected Areas, the management categories that comprise it, and the general procedures related to it.	2010

Legal Framework	Objective	Year
CONPES 3886/2017 (CONPES 2017) Payment for Ecosystem Services for Peacebuilding	Organises payment for environmental services for peacebuilding.	2017
Visión Amazonía / NDC Colombia (2030)	Reduces deforestation in the Colombian Amazon through a sustainable development model that includes strategies for forest protection and the sustainable use of natural resources. The initiative also aims to empower local communities and Indigenous peoples while generating development and low-deforestation, productive alternatives. This is an initiative by the Colombian government with financial support from Norway, the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany through the KfW Bank.	2018
Decreto 660 2018 (Government of Colombia 2018) Integrated Security and Protection Programme for Communities and Organisations in Territories	Facilitates the safety and protection of leaders, representatives and activists of various rights organisations in territories aimed at preventing violations, respecting human rights, and guaranteeing safety.	2018
CONPES 4021/2020 Deforestation Reduction	Aims at capping annual deforestation at 100,000 hectares by 2025 and zero deforestation at the national level by 2030.	2020
Security, Defence and Citizen Coexistence Policy for the Protection of Life (Presidencia de la República 2023)	It aims to generate security conditions in urban and particularly rural environments and recover territorial control to free society from violence. It has four pillars: 1. Total Peace. 2. Deforestation, protection and preservation of biodiversity. 3. Safeguard territorial integrity, sovereignty, national independence and constitutional order. 4. Strengthen the security forces.	2023

Table 1. Relevant policies in Colombia related to the coordination of climate, environment, peace and security

The success of policies at the local level hinges not on their design alone but on the political will and strategies of the executive branch. In the following section, this document delves into how the varying visions of peace at the national level have shaped environmental and climate policies on the ground. It unpacks how these dynamics have evolved and why they shape sustainable peace and resilience in Colombia. Then, by exploring the intersection of environmental issues with the root causes of Colombia's conflict, we make the case for why a national-level environmental peacebuilding approach offers a transformative path forward.



## National responses to peace, conflict, and environmental dynamics

### Three different conceptions of peacebuilding: *Territorial Peace*, *Peace with Legality*, and *Total Peace*, and their environmental implications

The last three governments of Colombia have developed different conceptions of peace policy, which have impacted the dynamics of local conflicts and the country's environmental policies.

First, the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) approached the FARC guerrilla and developed peace dialogues, leading to the so-called *Territorial Peace*, which laid the foundations for developing a comprehensive peace programme, with the primary goal of bringing the State to the most fragile and violence-affected territories. Subsequently, the government of Ivan Duque (2018-2022) was elected in response to dissatisfaction with the FARC negotiations, under the promise of an iron fist government that would bring perpetrators of crimes to justice. His policy was called *Peace with Legality*. Finally, after widespread grievances from social forces over the growing inequality and the lack of implementation of the peace agreement, the current government led by Gustavo Petro (2022-2026) was elected on the promise of implementing the peace accords, especially regarding a comprehensive rural reform and developing negotiations with the illegal armed groups that did not sign the 2016 agreement in order to consolidate a *Total Peace*. The Petro Administration recently launched the World Coalition of Peace with Nature during the UN Biodiversity Conference 2024 (CBD COP16).<sup>11</sup>

Below, we present the main milestones of these three political approaches and their implications for environmental challenges and solutions.

#### 1) The *Territorial Peace* approach and environmental considerations within the 2016 peace agreement

The concept of *Territorial Peace* gained prominence during the peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC. Sergio Jaramillo, the former Special Envoy for Peace of Colombia, introduced the concept in 2014 during President Santos's tenure (2010-2018). It suggests that the Colombian conflict is closely tied to the absence of effective state institutions, particularly in rural areas (Baum 2019). The legal system is highly inefficient in solving local disputes between neighbours. Often, a victim must drive up to 4 hours to the municipality to file a complaint, just to face a slow bureaucratic system. Thus, robust institutions, practices and norms must emerge from a new collaboration between the State and locally constituted communities to address this. Achieving this requires the active participation of the local population through inclusive processes that consider specific local conditions and needs (Cairo et al. 2018).

This approach also involves different aspects related to the environment, such as natural resource management and, most importantly, land ownership, including rights and distribution, administration, governance, and the territory's cultural and spiritual significance (Vanelli and Peralta 2022). In 2016, the Santos administration launched the programme "Visión Amazonia", which aimed to reduce deforestation in the Colombian Amazon through a sustainable development model that includes strategies for forest protection and the sustainable use of natural resources. Its purpose was to contribute to climate mitigation, poverty reduction, and peacebuilding. The programme reframed the Colombian Amazon from a "narco-frontier" to a net CO<sub>2</sub> sink with opportunities for green growth and poverty reduction. However, this

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<sup>11</sup> Republic of Colombia. Declaration of the world coalition of peace with nature: A Call for life: <https://www.cop16colombia.com/es/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DECLARATION-OF-THE-WORLD-COALITION-FOR-PEACE-WITH-NATURE.pdf>

shift has created land conflicts and affected the legitimacy of property rights, as smallholders are now seen as occupiers and Indigenous communities as naive environmental guardians (Hein et al. 2020), undermining a comprehensive environmental governance policy that recognises different governance structures and ways of life.

#### Environmental strategies in the 2016 peace accord

The peace agreement had important implications for Colombia's environmental governance. A narrative has developed claiming that the peace agreement was responsible for increased deforestation (Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2020). However, this is an oversimplification. The relationship between the peace process and deforestation is more complex, involving factors such as weak state presence, economic incentives for land conversion, and the role of different actors in post-conflict land use (FIP, adelphi 2021). Although deforestation rates increased, the reason was not the peace agreement itself, but a lack of and a lag in its implementation. In fact, the deforestation effects were attenuated in municipalities with higher state presence and judicial capacity (Prem, Saavedra, and Vargas 2020). The 2016 peace accord mentioned sustainability and environmental inclusion across various document sections. Within its core, several mechanisms related to land governance and the management of environmental aspects were included as a prerequisite for achieving *Territorial Peace*. Indeed, the peace agreement provided several tools to promote sustainable rural development, including economic recovery, rural reform, and environmental protection (Valenzuela and Caicedo 2018). Most importantly, it created the foundation for transformative land-based policies, a critical issue in Colombia's peace and climate-related discussion, which can help move towards environmental sustainability and political stability (Vanelli and Peralta 2022).

Specifically, environmental protection was mentioned in three of the six chapters of the agreement: Chapter One, on comprehensive rural reform; Chapter Three, on finalisation of the armed conflict (disarmament of the guerrillas); and Chapter Four, on the problem of illicit drugs (see Table 2).

Chapter of the peace agreement	Strategy	Description
Chapter One. Comprehensive Rural Reform	• Multipurpose cadastre	Cadastre information clarifies the status of land tenure and wasteland, among other mechanisms.
	• Participatory environmental zoning plans	Creates an inventory of areas with special environmental management to stop deforestation.
	• Territorially Focused Development Programmes or PDETs	The PDETs are plans created with local leaders to tackle long-overlooked governance and development issues in the municipalities of Colombia most affected by conflict.
Chapter Three. Finalisation of the Armed Conflict	• Demining and environmental protection projects	Offers job opportunities for the reintegration of former combatants.
Chapter Four. Solution to the Problem of Illicit Drugs	• National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution of Illicit	Fosters community agreements to start alternative livelihood strategies and end illicit crops.

Chapter of the peace agreement	Strategy	Description
	Crops (NPSI, the Spanish acronym)	

Table 2. Environment-related strategies in the peace agreement

The first chapter of the agreement is a comprehensive rural reform which covers activities related to sustainable planning of the territory and the delimitation of agricultural frontiers. A critical component of this section of the peace agreement is the establishment of a multipurpose cadastre. This land administration system can provide nationwide land administration services to enhance tenure security. Different international cooperation projects have supported national authorities in their implementation with a participatory approach, through capacity development to communities, strengthening dialogue processes and integrating solutions from the public administration regarding land management policies (GIZ 2023). A complete implementation will clarify the status of the land, including informal land tenure or wasteland, which the State owns. Additionally, the cadastre information will be accessible to increase tax and fee revenue and serve as an information resource for municipal and land use planning purposes (World Bank 2021a).

Similarly, the peace agreement created the Territorially Focused Development Programmes (PDETS). They focus on 16 conflict-affected zones with limited government presence, covering 170 of Colombia's 1,122 municipalities. This includes 11,000 communities, 452 Indigenous and 305 Afro-descendant groups, spanning 36 per cent of the national territory, housing 6.6 million people (13 per cent of the population) and 31 per cent of registered victims, all experiencing poverty rates above the national average. A key environmental factor regarding the PDETs is their formulation's integration of environmental justice. These plans not only consider the need for economic and social development but also ensure that development actions respect and protect the local environment and are highly participatory, thus promoting a sustainable development model.

Finally, the peace agreement established the space for the development of environmental zoning plans as a tool to ensure sustainable development in PDET municipalities and others. It creates an inventory of areas with special management, such as conservation zones, forest reserves, hydrological protection, and restoration. Participatory environmental zoning has been planned for 172 prioritised municipalities that were the most impacted by the armed conflict and have been historically marginalised. Its objective is to generate alternatives to unsustainable land uses and illegal economies towards environmentally diversified livelihoods. These spaces coincide with the expansion of the agricultural border, making it an important process for sustainability. 87 per cent of the prioritised municipalities have a form of nature protection, forest reserve, or protected area. The Ministry of the Environment developed these plans through a participatory and iterative process involving diverse groups such as farmer communities, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples, community-based organisations, associations, and local institutions. Its participative nature is critical because it makes these populations recognise the government as an entity they can trust (Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible 2021).

The third chapter, "Finalisation of the Armed Conflict", included humanitarian demining and environmental protection projects including former combatants in their implementation. These projects have facilitated environmental peacebuilding and acted as a proving ground for good practices and lessons for the future. Finally, the fourth chapter, "Solution to the Problem of Illicit Drugs," included a section on sustainability, restoration of nature (World Bank 2024) and substitution of illicit cultivation, particularly within protected areas (Republic of Colombia 2016). It created the National Comprehensive Programme for the Substitution

of Illicit Crops (NPSI, as the Spanish acronym) in 2017.<sup>12</sup> A notable aspect of NPSI was the introduction of community agreements, requiring consensus among government representatives, FARC members and local communities before implementation in each municipality. These agreements signify the community's voluntary commitment to replacing illicit crops.

The peace agreement and the NPSI have been implemented to bring peacebuilding and drug-related policies together. The dialogue established to implement these policies showed a good sign of bringing the State to the territories. However, its implementation was not conflict-sensitive enough, and efforts must be made to improve coordination between these policies. These appear disconnected, particularly regarding forced eradication and the interventions of security forces (FIP 2020). For example, at the beginning of the NPSI programme, land-use conflicts emerged, and some government implementers struggled to finance some of the productive projects located in protected areas. The delays in payments to farmers created delegitimization of the State in these territories. Furthermore, evaluations have shown that violence against leaders was more pronounced in municipalities where organised crime was present but had not fully consolidated power, and where social leaders participated in eradication programmes opposing the expansion of illicit crops (Llanes 2022).

### Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) for peacebuilding policy

Another critical measure within the *Territorial Peace* approach was consolidating PES. It aimed to solve land use and economic inclusion problems by reconciling productive and conservation activities. The PES policy incentivises landowners to conduct actions that conserve and generate environmental services in strategic areas and ecosystems in exchange for a monetary or in-kind reward. This policy aims to incorporate one million hectares of the national territory under PES schemes by 2030, requiring close to one trillion Colombian pesos in investments (almost 59 billion US dollars).<sup>13</sup> Implementing PES is essential as it supports ecosystem conservation, promotes sustainable agriculture, provides economic benefits to vulnerable populations, and aids in climate change adaptation and mitigation.

### Transitional justice, reparations and the environment

As another part of the *Territorial Peace* approach under Santos, the Colombian peace agreement of 2016 gave rise to a robust transitional justice mechanism, namely the Special Peace Jurisdiction (JEP as the Spanish acronym). The JEP is responsible for the legal prosecution of the crimes committed during the conflict and of those directly or indirectly involved: members of the FARC guerrillas, the military and civilians. It reflects a diverse judicial composition that includes representation from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people. This diversity underscores a particular perspective on the environment, territory and communities, with traditional authorities emphasising the significance of preserving ecosystems crucial to sustaining life (JEP 2023a).

JEP's restorative justice approach offers nuanced solutions that consider contextual characteristics such as race, gender, and intersectionality to understand the impacts of conflict on the environment and its significance to the community's lives. It recognises the disproportionate impact on women and ethnic communities who see violations against their territories as equivalent to violations against the people themselves. In this case, the territory is not only seen as a natural asset, but it also extends to the social identity of the communities and beyond land ownership to sustainable resource use.

This jurisdiction extends rights to nature, a departure from the traditional approach limiting nature's participation in court proceedings, ensuring nature a distinct voice in criminal proceedings. The JEP establishes a dialogue mechanism to enhance the conservation of critical ecosystems. It engages in a pedagogical exercise to foster responsibility and recognition and to initiate restorative processes within

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<sup>12</sup> Currently, NPSI stands as the world's most extensive substitution programme, involving over 99,000 households. <https://portalparalapaz.gov.co/programa-de-sustitucion-voluntaria-de-cultivos-ilicitos/>.

<sup>13</sup> CONPES is the highest national planning and government advisory committee on economic and social development issues.



affected territories. The JEP acknowledges the cumulative impact of slow-onset environmental violence, for example, through the recent recognition of the Cauca River as a victim (JEP 2023a). This approach empowers Colombian ethnic leaders to advocate for sacred ecosystems, valuing their symbolic and spiritual significance.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, JEP's judicial rulings mandate ecosystem restoration to compensate victims and facilitate reconciliation, prioritising victims' rights in these processes.

In summary, the peace agreement had positive impacts in terms of laying the groundwork for better environmental governance. It opened previously inaccessible biodiversity hotspots for ecological research (Irwin 2023) and advanced into planning economic solutions for the communities, including 8,600 hectares and 639 families in the PES (CONPES 2017). Sixteen maps of environmental zoning in prioritised municipalities were created. On its part, the NPSI successfully substituted illicit use crops through 99,097 families, located in 56 municipalities of 14 departments of the country (UNODC 2022). However, as the following sections will demonstrate, the most-affected regions still lack effective implementation of the agreement and durable solutions.

### 2) *Peace with Legality*: The difficulties of building peace with an iron fist

The election of Iván Duque Márquez as president of Colombia was, in part, a backlash against the perceived impunity associated with the peace agreement with the FARC. Many Colombians felt that the terms of the agreement were too lenient on former guerrilla fighters, allowing them to avoid adequate punishment for past crimes. Duque's campaign capitalised on this sentiment. In fact, the political motto of Duque's party, the Democratic Centre, was "Tear the accord to shreds". Advocating for a return to a focus on legality and justice became a central theme of his administration. This approach, labelled *Peace with Legality*, aimed to ensure peacebuilding efforts did not compromise the rule of law or grant excessive concessions to former combatants.

The *Peace with Legality* approach of Duque's government aimed to restore state authority by ensuring control through military and police forces, focusing on the stabilisation and consolidation of territorial control to strengthen national security, boost the economy, and ensure compliance with the peace agreement (Ministry of Defence 2021).

Between 2018 and 2022, Ivan Duque's government implemented regulations to expand agricultural land and launched the National Development Plan. Targeted interventions prioritised 170 municipalities under the PDETS, as stated in the peace agreement, where the State sought to enhance its presence through public services and security forces.

During this period, Duque's administration faced considerable pressure from the international community, particularly from the United States under the Trump administration, which advocated for aggressive measures to curb illegal coca cultivation (White House 2020). At the same time, Colombia was bound by international commitments to preserve the Amazon biome, supported by funding from countries such as Norway, the United Kingdom, and Germany. These nations have made substantial financial contributions to conservation efforts and expect Colombia to uphold its rainforest protection responsibilities (The Office of the Prime Minister of Norway 2015). Under his administration, the fight against deforestation appeared in the policy agenda, partly driven by international pressure to avoid further deforestation encroaching into

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<sup>14</sup> The JEP's innovative approach is an example for international courts, challenging outdated norms in international law and the human-centred nature of international criminal law. In international criminal law, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is the relevant body to prosecute individuals for the most serious crimes of international concern, such as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression. The ICC has jurisdiction over individuals, not states or non-state entities. It operates based on the Rome Statute, which defines the crimes falling within its jurisdiction. For instance, while the ICC may consider harm to natural heritage as part of the context of the four crimes listed above, it only recognises natural legal persons as potential victims. While the ICC statute has limitations regarding nature's rights, the JEP extends protection to natural sites and places of worship, not just human-made ones, by giving "voice" to natural places of cult. This approach considers protecting and preserving the environment for all and reflects a holistic understanding of transitional justice and environmental concerns.

the Amazon. Thus, it was a priority and used as political leverage to show efficacy in stopping deforestation and showing its "iron fist" policy.



Canangucha, Colombia © Leonel Barreto, Pixabay

The main approach of Duque's administration to stop deforestation was a military operation called Artemisa. The main goal of the Artemisa Military and Police Campaign was to assist the environmental and administrative authorities in preserving and safeguarding water, sanitation, water resources, biodiversity, and the environment in forest reserve areas, protected areas, and National Natural Parks (Ministry of Defence 2019, 2021). These are considered the primary and most vital strategic assets of the nation. The Colombian armed forces assumed a role in environmental protection, with 22,000 personnel dedicated to this task. It involved the integration of different Colombian environmental, judicial and administrative authorities, such as the security forces, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, the Attorney General's Office, the administration of National Natural Parks, and the Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM) (Colombian Ministry for Defence 2019). According to figures from the Colombian Ministry of Environment, the Artemisa campaign by 2022 had managed to secure more than 22,000 hectares of forest that it had identified as being at risk of deforestation (Colombian Ministry of Environment 2022).

Despite all efforts, deforestation has not stopped, and different challenges remain. Experts argue that the Artemisa operation relied too much on a heavy-handed approach, aiming to showcase "victories" even if these consisted of arresting small-scale farmers in areas where deforestation was not allowed, diminishing the advances in other areas and jeopardising the State's relationships with local communities (Corredor-Garcia et al. 2024). The increased militarisation raised concerns about the safety of park rangers, who, in the context of ongoing conflicts, risked being perceived as informants or allies of the military, thereby escalating the dangers they faced (FIP 2021). Furthermore, these military operations were rejected by the communities. They sometimes disrupted the dialogue processes that had started between civilian

authorities and farmers occupying PAs since Santos' administration (2010-2018), resulting in human rights violations related to property rights and land tenure (Bautista 2022). Critics, environmental defenders, and the civilian population claimed that the military campaign lacked coordination with civilian authorities and was reproducing harmful violence patterns against civilian populations in vulnerable rural areas (Bautista 2022).

While Duque's administration achieved some progress in its environmental agenda and positioned itself as a proponent of environmental protection internationally, as evidenced by its leadership in the 2019 Leticia Pact, environmental policies showed mixed results by the end of this mandate.

From the beginning, the environmental goals set within the National Development Plan were assessed as insufficient to address emerging challenges (Eufemia et al. 2019). Duque's government achieved an overall reduction in deforestation. It inherited a deforestation annual rate of 197,159 hectares, which by 2022 had decreased to 123,517 hectares (IDEAM MADS 2024). Duque's government did not invest in achieving long-term forest governance and broader sustainability despite reducing deforestation. The environment and sustainable development sector had one of the smallest shares in Colombia's national budget from 2018 to 2020. In 2019, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuels hit a record 102 Mt, a 17 per cent increase from the 2010-2018 average. Similarly, in June 2021, a bill prohibiting fracking and unconventional deposits was rejected in the pro-government Congress, raising concerns among analysts due to the significant methane leaks and greenhouse gases associated with these practices (Salazar et al. 2022).

By the end of Duque's government, security governance problems remained. Violence targeting grassroots human rights and environmental leaders climbed during Duque's government and has remained high in the current Petro administration. Social leaders and land defenders are among the most fervent advocates for the peace deal and the staunchest defenders of conflict victims and land reform. Although there is technically freedom of assembly and protest in Colombia, different cases have evidenced violent restrictions during Duque's term. In the spring of 2021, there were nationwide, predominantly peaceful protests on regressive tax reforms, demanding a quick implementation of the peace agreement and an end to economic inequality. Manifestations, road blockades, and protests occurred in 331 municipalities, according to Defensoría del Pueblo (2021). However, these protests were met with police violence instead of dialogue, which escalated violence and increased the demands towards justice against abuse (Freedom House 2022). According to the local office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 44 protesters were killed, at least 28 of them by the police (Freedom House 2022). This has created an environment of political instability and shows that the State is struggling to protect vulnerable communities in rural areas (International Crisis Group 2020).

### The problem of illegal crops and narcotraffic

Illegal armed groups have violated Indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories to plant coca and establish safe havens for their operations. In 2021, approximately one-third of Colombia's coca production was situated within these territories, as reported by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (UNODC 2022). Delays in implementing the NPSI programme, such as the absence of payments for communities and the lack of presence of the national government to provide social services, which was part of the core of the peace agreement, aggravated this situation.

Iván Duque introduced the *Ruta Futuro* as a comprehensive policy involving various ministries, public forces, and regulatory bodies to combat drug trafficking. Its primary goal was to decrease the availability of drugs by reducing illegal crops and territorial vulnerabilities and enhancing social services (Republic of Colombia 2018). Although in theory the approach had a socioeconomic component, the Duque administration prioritised reinstating aerial spraying with glyphosate and showcasing the capture of armed

group figures.<sup>15</sup> Local communities have repeatedly reported various environmental, health, and economic damages from aerial glyphosate spray (Jimenez 2021). Moreover, coca eradication on Indigenous or Afro-Colombian territories is strictly prohibited without community consent according to Colombia's constitution, a measure aimed at respecting their autonomy and traditional governance structures (Corte Constitucional de Colombia 2021).

Similarly, manual eradication did not achieve a significant reduction of coca crops. They went from 169,000 hectares in 2018 to 154,000 in 2019 and 143,000 in 2020. By 2021, they rose again to around 160,000, indicating a reduction of less than 5 per cent over the four years (León 2022). According to the UNODC's World Drug Report, it has been shown to have no long-term benefits. After ten years, there is no difference in areas where eradication occurred compared to those where it did not; in fact, cultivation increased faster in areas subject to forced eradication. The International Narcotics Control Board report released by the United Nations indicated that only fourteen per cent of the areas where forced eradication occurred are still free of illegal crops (UNODC 2022).

Duque's iron fist approach contrasted with the strategies implemented by illegal armed actors, who offered salaries and the provision of public goods. Additionally, illegal groups enforced their authority through curfews, recruitment, forced cooperation, and violent suppression of dissent. For instance, in areas controlled by the ELN and FARC dissidents in Arauca, community members turn to these groups for conflict resolution due to the absence of the State, thereby legitimising their authority within the community (International Crisis Group 2020). The cost-benefit assessment of Duque's lack of civilian and military coordination has resulted in high levels of social conflict. In regions such as Cauca, Nariño, Catatumbo, Putumayo, and Guaviare, security forces have clashed with communities where coca cultivation has been eradicated (Observatorio de tierras 2020).

This shows that the lack of or ineffective implementation of the peace agreement's environmental governance and rural reform dispositions has created perverse incentives for armed actors to enter the territories that the FARC previously controlled. Duque's government was not fast enough to implement de facto territorial control with civilian authorities and state services rather than a sporadic military presence. The distrust in the government has caused great incoherence in the security approach of the State. The armed forces found themselves in the difficult position of being the first responders, even though they knew that Duque's government was not concerned with civilian protection but with capturing high-level individuals and forcing the destruction of illicit crops (International Crisis Group 2022).

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<sup>15</sup> The Constitutional Court's tutela ruling, based on communities' right to prior consultation, made the process nearly impossible to implement efficiently. Corte Constitucional de Colombia. (2021, November 29). Sentencia T-413/21. Retrieved from <https://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2021/T-413-21.htm>



## Map 2: Most Prominent Presence of Armed Groups in Colombia

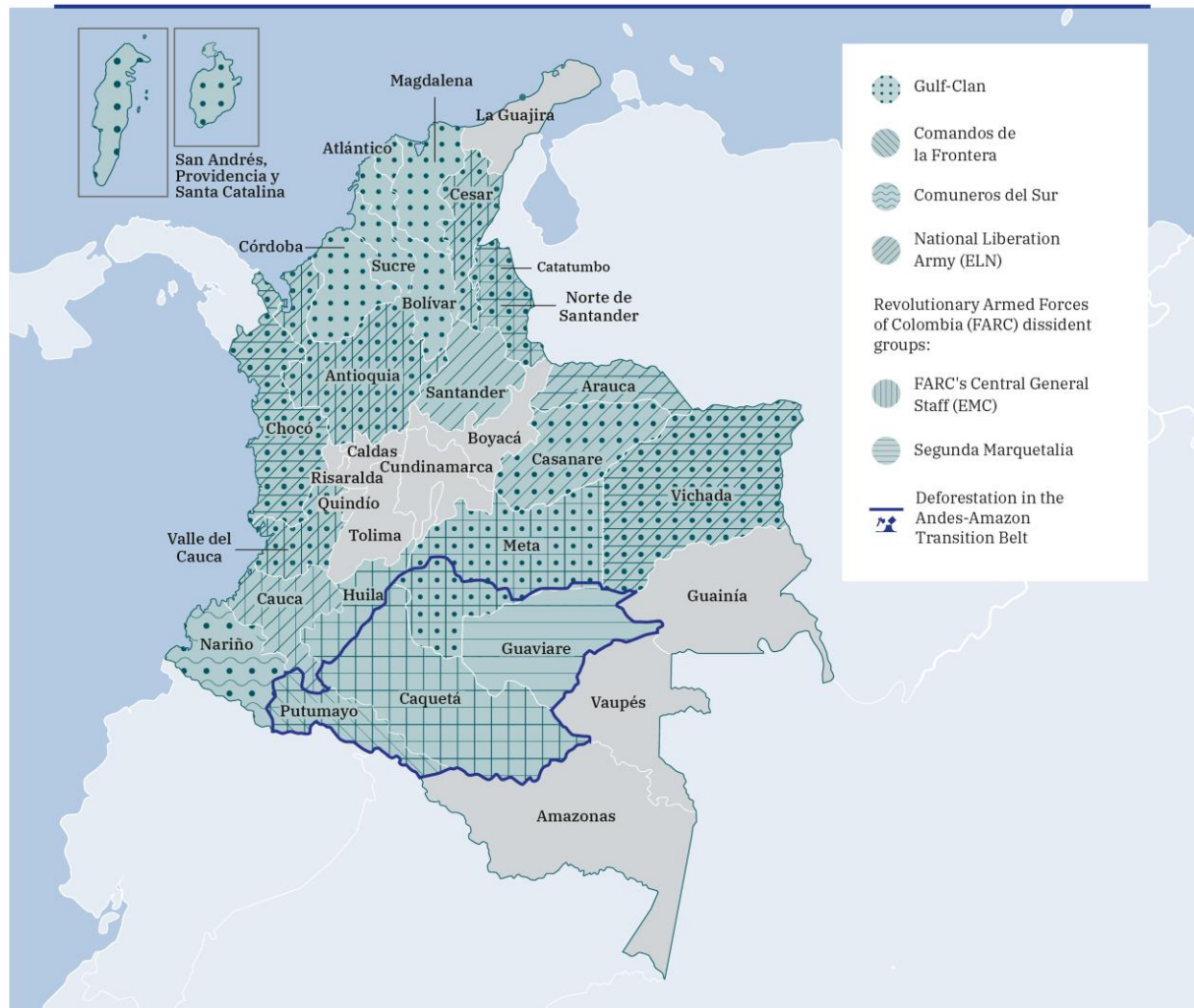


Figure 4. Map of most prominent presence of armed groups in Colombia

### 3) The *Total Peace* approach under Gustavo Petro

Petro's *Total Peace* approach is based on simultaneous broad dialogue and peace negotiations with several armed groups. The president sanctioned an extension of "The Victims and Land Restitution Law (1448 of 2011)", outlining a policy of *Total Peace* and establishing the social service for peace, among other provisions. The text gives the national government the authority to engage in dialogues and negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissidents, such as the Central General Staff (EMC – Estado Mayor Central – in Spanish), the Second Marquetalia, and criminal groups like the Gulf Clan. Within this framework, individuals who surrender weapons, provide information on drug trafficking routes, and hand over assets and money from illicit activities may receive reduced sentences and immunity from extradition (Republic of Colombia 2022b).

Engaging in talks with the ELN and FARC's Central General Staff (EMC) and corresponding ceasefire agreements has played a vital role in reducing conflict, harassment, displacement, and confinement. There was a slight decline in homicide rates; however, different armed groups still have dominance in different regions (JEP 2023b; JEP 2023c) (see Figure 1).



### A new policy of security and defence reflected a change in fighting environmental crimes

Petro's government introduced a new security and defence policy in response to persisting insecurities and acknowledged criticism of the Artemisa operation. The focus changed from prosecuting the most visible figures of illegal armed groups to protecting local civil society and communities (Republic of Colombia 2022a). The new approach has been built on a broader participatory process and regional consultations. A key challenge is rebuilding the lost trust between civil society and the state's armed forces.

The implication of this strategy for the environment is that it prioritises the prevention of deforestation through joint initiatives with communities. Some measures to implement the peace agreement's provisions under Petro's administration included regulations such as a procedure for accessing and formalising land, a land (access) fund, and development plans with a territorial focus. Since then, deforestation has been reduced, although it has not stopped completely and is being more selective than before. The cumulative data reflects a 40 per cent reduction relative to the 2021 baseline (174.103 hectares). In 2023, deforestation was recorded at 79,256 hectares, the lowest in the last 23 years. In 2024, this value increased to approximately 107,000 hectares<sup>16</sup> (IDEAM MADS 2024). National targets established in the National Development Plan are being exceeded, underpinned by a consistent annual reduction of 20 per cent from the 2021 baseline. (Ministerio de Ambiente 2025). While military action continues, it will no longer target small-scale farmers who engage in deforestation due to economic pressures from criminal organisations. Instead, military operations will focus on extinguishing fires and collaborating with investigative authorities to apprehend major deforesters (Republic of Colombia 2022a).

The transition from militarisation to conservation, grounded in social agreements and community education, looks promising on paper but requires expedited implementation. The strategy includes containment and prevention at strategic points, institutional strengthening, improved judicial processes, and enhancing IDEAM's capabilities (International Crisis Group 2023).

### State of unconstitutional affairs: A jeopardised *Total Peace*

President Petro's *Total Peace* initiative, which ambitiously aimed to negotiate simultaneously with multiple armed groups, began on a hopeful note. Initial ceasefires led to a significant reduction in homicides and attacks on government forces, signalling a potential end to decades of conflict. However, the process soon encountered substantial obstacles across various fronts.

Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that Colombia was in a "state of unconstitutional affairs",<sup>17</sup> based on a lawsuit filed by victims during Duque's administration. The ruling recognises the serious and widespread effects on human rights defenders and social leaders. Echoing past decisions on forced displacement, it argues that the state has utterly failed to create security conditions for the free exercise of rights, protect leaders quickly and effectively, and de-stigmatise social leaders (Constitutional Court of Colombia 2023). Victims' representatives and environmental, community, ethnic, and gender leaders are among the most targeted by armed actors and thus, the court called attention to the urgency of taking measures to stop it (Constitutional Court of Colombia 2023).

Illegal armed structures have used intimidation to threaten civil society leaders, extending their power to control different spheres of society. They have co-opted representatives, threatened them, or pushed them out. Social leaders report that by silencing one person, armed groups can successfully silence the entire population they claim to represent. Right after the FARC demobilised, the Local Action Boards (Junta de Acción Local in Spanish), self-organised grassroots organisations, developed coexistence manuals for addressing community needs through collective decision-making. Examples of these rules were the

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<sup>16</sup> Figures from the Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales (IDEAM), Colombia's environmental authority. <http://www.ideam.gov.co/>

<sup>17</sup> This mechanism allows judges to compel state institutions to better respond to ongoing threats against social and human rights leaders.

prohibition of armed actors within the territory and imposing logging bans. Nevertheless, different dissident factions, the ELN and other armed groups, entered the territory and imposed new rules in the regions, disturbing the self-made coexistence manuals. In this way, they have broken the social fabric to build their order in daily life. Further, these illegal structures have also offered justice services, solving disputes about land limits between neighbourhoods, for example. Armed groups have also offered protection against other violent actors, sustaining mostly illegal economies and creating a dependence on the presence of such groups. In conflict zones, communities may depend on armed groups to survive and facilitate access to resources that would otherwise be inaccessible or unreliable (ACAPS 2023).

Regarding the multiple negotiations embedded in the *Total Peace* approach, one major challenge lies in the legal complexities of extending transitional justice benefits to dissident factions of the FARC who did not comply with the 2016 peace agreement yet seek the advantages of such mechanisms. This issue is compounded by the necessity of establishing a distinct transitional justice framework for the National Liberation Army (ELN), a process stalled in a congress where opposition parties hold the majority. Furthermore, the Gulf Clan, or Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), a powerful armed group controlling territories along Antioquia and the Pacific and Caribbean coast, has been largely excluded from the *Total Peace* initiative. President Petro authorised dialogue with the AGC in July 2024 and talks started in early February 2025, signalling a potential policy shift; however, the absence of a legal framework for gang demobilisation or "transition to legality" has hindered meaningful progress.

Simultaneously managing multiple negotiations with fragmented major armed groups underscores the difficulty of negotiating with organisations that are loose coalitions of diverse factions. For example, the split of the Comuneros del Sur in Nariño and Putumayo from the ELN exposed the limited control the ELN's central command has over its regional fronts. Similarly, divisions within the EMC's leadership mirror internal tensions in the Second Marquetalia, where former FARC commander Iván Márquez struggles to maintain cohesion among factions such as the Border Command. These fractures heighten the risk of escalating violence as splinter groups vie for territorial control and excluded factions intensify attacks on government targets (Shuldiner 2025).

Most recently, in January 2025, the ELN conducted coordinated attacks against FARC dissidents in seven municipalities of the Catatumbo region, Norte de Santander, near the Venezuelan border. These actions included selective assassinations, massacres of over 80 people, and armed confrontations, violating international humanitarian law. The violence displaced around 40,000 people, prompting the Petro government to suspend talks with the ELN (Trejos Rosero et al. 2025). Complicating matters further is the ELN's alliance with Venezuela's Maduro regime, which allows them to operate along the border with impunity, controlling illegal mining, coca cultivation, and other illicit economies. With prospects of prolonged protection under Maduro for six more years, these groups have little incentive to engage in peace negotiations. Meanwhile, the AGC has expanded its influence despite sustained military pressure and is poised to solidify control amid surging cocaine production and soaring gold prices (Shuldiner 2025).

The last events show how violence has become localised, armed groups have multiplied, and the logic of conflict has fragmented, as evidenced by threats against mostly Afro-Colombians and Indigenous territories. The balance of *Total Peace* is regrettable because, so far, no territorial or partial agreement can alleviate the country's complex humanitarian scenario; only the negotiations with the Comuneros del Sur in Nariño are expected to be an exception (Johnson K 2024).

### Deforestation and peace talks: Challenges and progress

Across the Santos, Duque, and Petro administrations, efforts to achieve peace in Colombia have often been marked by uncoordinated peacebuilding and environmental protection policies. However, Petro's government's emphasis on integrating environmental considerations into peace agreements, particularly in regions like Guaviare, marks a shift in strategy and offers a glimmer of hope (Taylor 2023). Despite this,

the delicate balance between negotiating peace, sustainable development and environmental protection remains a complex challenge for Colombia.

After the 2016 peace agreement, dissident rebel factions of the former guerrilla group FARC, such as the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), adapted to a new context in which large landowners and land grabbers took advantage of the legal uncertainty over lands that were previously controlled by the FARC and came to these areas to buy land at very low cost (Vélez 2019). The EMC allowed anyone who paid a tax per head of cattle and hectares of land bought or sold to log, turning deforestation into a profitable business.<sup>18</sup>

In May 2022, just when Petro went to the second round of the presidential election, the EMC banned deforestation in areas under their control in Guaviare, southern Meta, and parts of San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá. As this statement from May 2022 by the EMC shows, deforestation became a real political bargaining tool for the EMC: *"This year no one will be clearing mountains, they will fix all the stubble fields and pastures and when they have all their land organised they will be able to start clearing again with the authorisation of the FARC [the EMC see themselves as "the real FARC"], whoever is foolish enough to clear mountains will be punished. Of 1.000.000 pesos per hectare of mountain felled."* (Fundación Conflict Responses - CORE and Akorde 2024).

In September 2022, just a month after Petro came to power, the EMC went even further and sent WhatsApp voice notes among the communities reaffirming this order to prohibit logging *"until an institutional solution for the peasants who lack land to work materialises in these four years of the government of Dr. Gustavo Petro"* (Fundación Conflict Responses - CORE and Akorde 2024). These actions, according to the EMC, were "peace gestures" in response to Petro's *Total Peace* policy, which aims to negotiate with all armed groups that the government considers "political". The government suspended the Artemisa Strategy against deforestation, meaning there would be no more military operations against deforesters. What happened, informally, was an environmental cessation of hostilities, meaning that the peace process not only stopped the fighting but also led to a pause in harmful environmental activities, at least temporarily.

In 2022, in the "Amazon deforestation arc"—Meta, Guaviare, and Caquetá, areas influenced by the EMC—deforestation fell by 34 per cent in Guaviare, 31 per cent in Caquetá, and 26 per cent in Meta (IDEAM n.d.). In 2023, Colombia's deforested area was estimated at 79,256 hectares, reflecting continued success in reducing deforestation. Compared to 2022, deforestation decreased by 36 per cent overall and by 38 per cent in the Colombian Amazon (IDEAM MADS 2024). This reduction was attributed to logging bans by armed groups, conservation agreements between the government and community boards, and the La Niña phenomenon. However, deforestation increased in late 2024 due to the El Niño phenomenon and the "suspension of talks with dissidents".<sup>19</sup>

On 30 November and 1 December 2024, peace talks with another dissident group, the EMBF (Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frente) in San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá, focused on preventing logging near natural parks. Over 34 peasant organisations and government delegates discussed consolidating the *Social Participation Agreement* to address community needs, oppose deforestation, and develop land tenure plans, particularly in the Yarí savannahs, amid concerns of illegal activities by armed groups (Ríos Monroy 2024). The imposed moratoriums on logging as a "gesture of peace" highlighted the complex interplay between economic interests and ecological stewardship, as the EMC sought to balance financial gains with preserving natural resources. By positioning themselves as environmental protection agents, the EMC aimed to legitimise their role in the post-conflict landscape and foster a narrative of responsible governance that could appeal politically. These developments show how a peace agenda has offered

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<sup>18</sup> The first units that today make up the EMC were born in Guaviare in June 2016, with the 1st Front, commanded by Ivan Mordisco, and in 2017 with the 7th Front, commanded by Gentil Duarte. Initially, Duarte allowed unrestricted logging in the areas under his control, and Mordisco did the same.

<sup>19</sup> This was stated by the Minister of Environment, Susana Muhamad. <https://www.minambiente.gov.co/ministra-de-ambiente-revela-informe-de-alertas-tempranas-que-muestran-reduccion-del-70-de-la-deforestacion/>

opportunities for conservation. However, the sustainability of the fight against deforestation gains is uncertain. The key factor is the government's ability to guarantee presence in the areas and take control over illegal economies, while ensuring that communities have livelihood alternatives.



*Village, Colombia © Justus, Pixabay*



### Illegal economies: A revised war on drugs

Different policy approaches have not tackled the production of coca crops in Colombia. After the peace agreement, President Juan Manuel Santos created the NPSI programme to incentivise growers to voluntarily replace their coca crops. Most armed groups relied heavily on coca production to fund their operations. The programme aimed to prevent this by offering state benefits to growers who eradicated their coca crops.

Although nearly 100,000 farming families were enrolled in the NPSI by the Santos administration, they were not given the promised technical assistance to transition to substitute crops (Republic of Colombia 2022c). The situation worsened under Santos's successor, Iván Duque, who completely froze enrolment. As a result, almost half of the families who volunteered for the coca substitution programme have yet to be enrolled. The coca eradication programme has slowed down under the current president, Gustavo Petro, who took office in mid-2022. The Petro administration aims to destroy about 20,000 hectares (nearly 50,000 acres) of coca crops each year, 60 per cent less than the Duque administration did (Via Campesina 2020). By 2023, the U.S. ended its 35-year-long involvement in coca cultivation monitoring in Colombia, aligning with the new Colombian National Drug Policy (NDP) (Republic of Colombia 2023), focusing on targeting traffickers rather than growers (Goodman 2023). The new policy aims to support farmers in shifting away from coca cultivation through land access and extension services. Furthermore, it prioritises strategic investigation, and prosecution of financial flows linked to drug trafficking, strengthening international cooperation to dismantle transnational criminal networks, and imposing sanctions on individuals and entities – including those located in the Global North – that facilitate money laundering (Republic of Colombia 2023).

Local farmers in Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Cauca, and Nariño, where many coca enclaves exist, filed complaints with the Constitutional Court. They reported not being included in the programme or receiving support to transition to a legal economy. In response, the court has ordered the Directorate for the Substitution of Illicit Crops to honour agreements and expedite implementation. The Ministry of Defence and the army have been ordered to prioritise voluntary substitution over forced eradication, which will only be considered if voluntary substitution fails and must consider the precautionary principle. The court has also ordered the entities in charge of implementing the peace accord, including the Agency for the Renewal of the Territory, to review the substitution commitments, coordinate this work with comprehensive rural reform and speed up the implementation of the Development Plans with a Territorial Approach (PDET) (La Silla Vacía 2023).

Since the end of 2023, there has been a decrease in the price of cocaine globally. This has created different dynamics in the coca-crop-affected regions. For example, in Tibú in the northeast of Colombia, between 2001 and 2022, 105,000 hectares worth of tree cover were lost to deforestation, with coca cultivation being a significant factor. Coca cultivation has led to soil and water contamination, violence, and crime. After a 40 per cent drop in coca paste value due to coca overproduction, the rural economy in Tibú collapsed between 2021 and 2022, as it was a source of livelihood for over 230,000 families (Monsalve 2022).

While there are calls to transition farmers to sustainable economies, some are turning to more ecosystem-polluting activities like illegal gold mining (Dahl 2021). Local farmers say they have little faith the government will jump in to help. Nevertheless, they have not given up on finding alternative ways forward. According to a farmers' leader: *"Some farmers have started growing yuca, sugarcane or cacao (...). The community cannot build up a new economy based on these crops, but at least they can grow them for their consumption"* (Monsalve S. 2022). Experts say that the drug policy should involve not only the Ministry of Justice, which is leading the new national policy against illegal drugs, but also coordinate with the Ministries of Environment, Agriculture, and Defence and the governance of national parks to manage disputes around coca-related economies properly (Marín et al. 2023).



Recent changes in coca prices have created two paths in Colombia's conflict landscape. In December 2024, the government advanced peace talks with one EMC faction, EMBF, by engaging with regional leaders in Norte de Santander. They conducted over 125 social dialogue meetings with various stakeholders to build trust with armed groups. The efforts focus on 27 initiatives for territorial transformation in Catatumbo, supporting coffee, cacao, rice, and cassava farmers, young environmental entrepreneurs, and peace signatories' projects in housing, organic fertilisers, aquaculture, and sustainable livestock (El Espectador 2024). Conversely, the ELN has attacked the EMC and other dissidents in early 2025, blaming the government of having a pact with them and escalating violence due to changes in the coca economy. Each group, facing losses from reduced coca production, has turned to activities like charcoal extraction, smuggling, trade, and agriculture, all accompanied by extortion. Coca remains a means to exert political power and control territories beyond state reach (Trejos Rosero et al. 2025).

Considering these challenges, President Petro's approach to peacebuilding, coupled with the narrative of making peace with nature from the UNCBD COP16, faces many challenges in implementation and some potential for integrated environmental peacebuilding. As the implementation of the peace agreement advances, the delegations in the dialogues and peace negotiations will discuss agricultural, mining, and energy planning. Institutions must establish a presence with judges, inspectors, and police to regulate life in coca-producing areas and draw lessons from successful local environmental peacebuilding initiatives. The following section will delve into these initiatives, illustrating how they not only foster environmental conservation but also build social cohesion and resilience (economic and climatic). Colombia can reinforce its peacebuilding efforts by learning from and scaling up these successful models.

## Local level good practices around the environment, climate, and peacebuilding

Against the backdrop of these shifting national policies, this section will explore the grassroots where environmental peacebuilding truly takes shape in Colombia. The initiatives we examine, from former combatants restoring native forests in the Amazon to communal forestry and cocoa agroforestry, demonstrate how aligning peacebuilding funds with climate and biodiversity investments can amplify benefits for communities and ecosystems. Across many Colombian regions, there are local initiatives that have successfully integrated projects combining environmental protection and peacebuilding. However, the potential of these local endeavours is often hindered by a lack of coordination between national and local authorities and among sectors at the national level. Below, we present examples and lessons learned from such local solutions (see Table 3 for a summary).

Project/Initiative	Description	Good Practices/Outcomes
GEF Projects Post-2016	Environmental conservation in key biodiversity hotspots.	This includes conflict sensitivity, community engagement, ex-combatants' reintegration, and social fabric strengthening.
Marine Protected Areas	Creation of protected marine zones in the Caribbean.	Reduces stakeholder conflicts, achieves environmental and social benefits.
Forest Restoration	Native tree planting by ex-combatants in the Amazon.	Restores deforested areas, promotes female leadership, and addresses soil and water regeneration.

<b>Communal Forestry</b>	Sustainable timber use in Guaviare and Caquetá (Northwest Amazon)	Reduces deforestation, provides livelihoods, and promotes sustainable forest use.
<b>Local Dialogue and Livelihoods support in buffer zones of protected areas</b>	Conservation balanced with community support.	Resolves land conflicts, supports local economic initiatives, and improves well-being.
<b>Collective Protection Measures</b>	Self-protection for human rights defenders and communities.	Creates safe zones, prevents armed actor entry, and protects communities.
<b>Agroforestry (cocoa)</b>	Combines conservation with agricultural production.	Mitigates climate change, provides employment, and reduces resource disputes.
<b>Nature-Based Solutions</b>	Enhances the resilience of infrastructure and communities.	Addresses climate risks, promotes community resilience, and integrates local experiences.
<b>Biodiversity Conservation</b>	Expeditions and educational initiatives.	Promotes knowledge exchange, fosters reconciliation, and supports Indigenous knowledge.
<b>Eco-tourism for Peace</b>	Sustainable tourism in conflict-affected areas.	Fosters reconciliation, ecological restoration, cultural preservation, and economic reinvestment; engages former combatants and local communities in tourism development.

Table 3. Solutions and good practices of environmental peacebuilding in Colombia

## Forest restoration of native trees in the Colombian Amazon by former combatants<sup>20</sup>

A cooperative called Comuccom is working to restore the Colombian Amazon. It aims to plant and care for 1 million native trees to counteract deforestation from illegal gold mining, cattle ranching, coca-growing, and illegal logging. The project is set up to run for around 8 years, with 125,000 trees planted yearly. The cooperative was born after the 2016 peace agreement to include locals and former fighters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). During their reintegration phase, they work as active peacebuilders in Comuccom's restoration efforts for future generations.

Comuccom has created another association that now works to regenerate the soils impoverished by cattle pasture and coca cultivation, and to restore water sources polluted by gold mining and mercury use. The Association of Women's Freedom Builders takes care of bees that are a crucial part of the Amazon restoration process while promoting female leadership to support women to work outside the home. Although the peace agreement was signed in 2016, the conflict remains present daily. The ecological restoration of the Amazon has profound significance for healing the relationship between people and their territories. It can be understood as a form of reparation for war crimes and other kinds of violence in the

<sup>20</sup> Insights were taken from: Palliaccia, Monica, 2023: Ex-FARC members aim to restore 1 million native trees in the Colombian Amazon. Mongabay. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/11/ex-farc-members-aim-to-restore-1-million-native-trees-in-the-colombian-amazon/#:~:text=Language-,Ex%2DFARC%20members%20aim%20to%20restore%201%20million,trees%20in%20the%20Colombian%20Amazon&text=Former%20fighters%20in%20the%20Revolutionary,through%20a%20cooperative%20called%20Comuccom.>

wake of the peace agreements. Despite threats to the members of Comuccom and the recent killing of its president in 2022, it continues its environmental work in the Colombian Amazon. It hopes to be considered in Gustavo Petro's *Total Peace* approach as part of the national initiative to pay salaries for Amazon restoration.

### Map 3: Examples of Environmental Peacebuilding Projects in Colombia

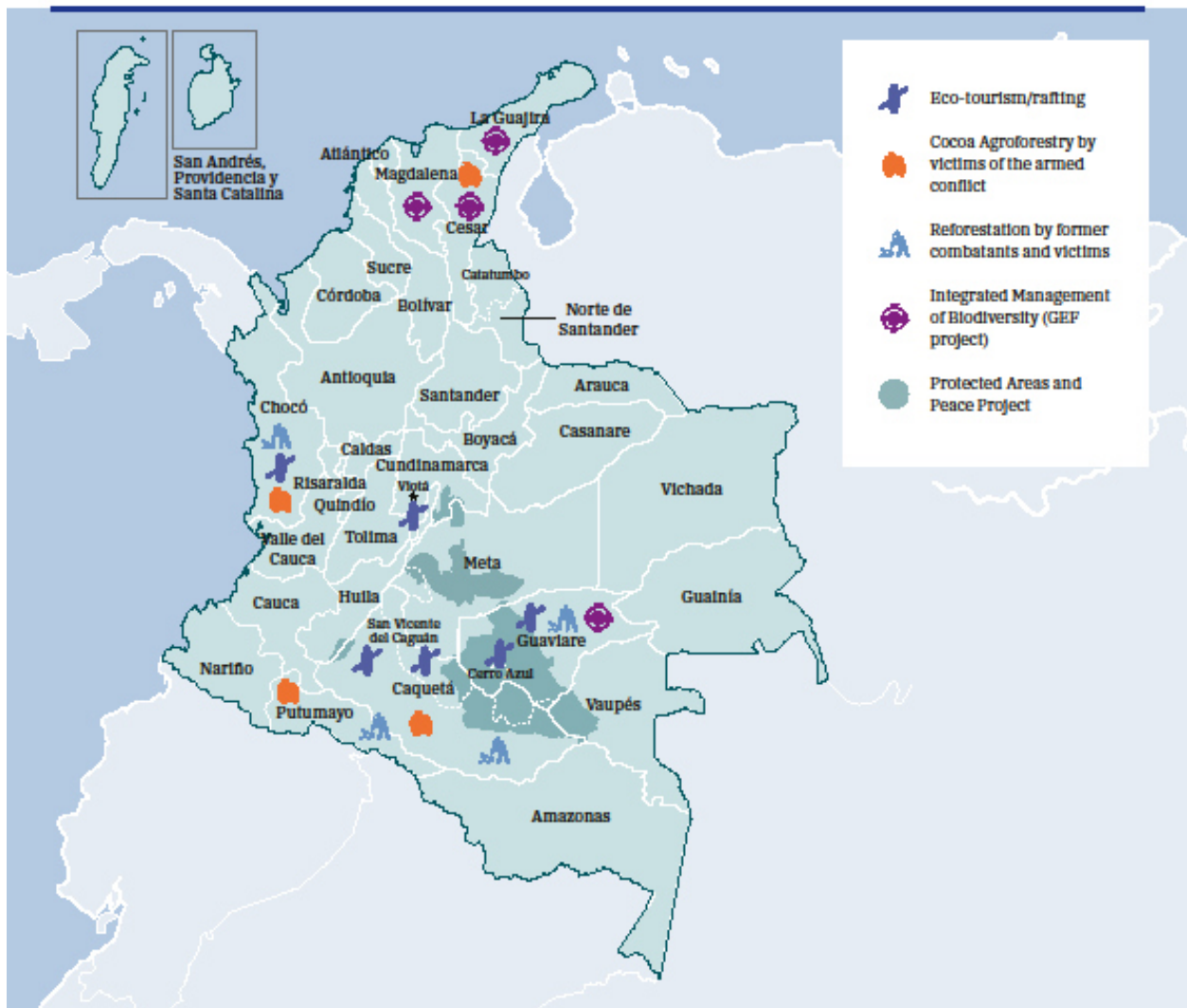


Figure 5. Map of examples of environmental peacebuilding projects in Colombia

### GEF Programming in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: Colombia

To examine the impact of conflict and fragility on environmental projects supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the GEF Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) undertook a deep dive analysis of some of its 110 environmental projects. IEO analysed the projects regarding relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and likelihood of sustainability. Most evaluated projects received favourable overall ratings, meaning they, directly and indirectly, benefited local and global environments and human populations.

#### The context of GEF operations in the country

Generally, GEF projects designed or implemented after the 2016 peace agreement are more conflict sensitive. For instance, one project seeks to mainstream peacebuilding through environmental conservation in the Amazon region. It fosters the implementation of low-carbon development to improve livelihoods, employ local communities, and reintegrate ex-combatants. The project aligns with the government's peacebuilding policies. It is strengthening the social fabric of a region at the heart of the conflict, where work would have been unthinkable before the peace agreement. Environmental authorities are slowly moving into areas previously avoided for security reasons, and they can now build confidence, promote community work, and establish dialogue (GEF 2017).

#### Lessons learned

One of the most important factors contributing to project success is the comprehensive assessment of the national context, including identifying potential conflict risks. Successful projects also involve the active engagement of various stakeholders, using approaches such as participatory design, community monitoring, and a holistic approach by integrating environmental considerations with other social, humanitarian, health, and conflict-related goals. Similarly, the value of linking small producers to markets, integrating peacebuilding with socio-economic interventions, and engaging communities in biodiversity monitoring as strategic partners. For example, a conservation and peacebuilding project in the Caribbean region and the Magdalena River Valley focused on the tropical dry forest ecosystem. It aimed to promote sustainable biodiversity use, mitigate deforestation, and ensure ecosystem services. By implementing REDD+ pilot projects, and promoting sustainable land management, the initiative-built trust with local communities, fostering participatory conservation and ensuring local benefits. (GEF, UNDP 2021). This highly participatory project is an example of successfully achieving project objectives and bringing about environmental, economic and social benefits for the populations involved.

*Box 1. The GEF programming in fragile and conflict-affected situations: Colombia<sup>21</sup>*

### Communal forestry<sup>22</sup>

Since the peace agreement in 2016, the community reforestation programme "Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development" (FCDS, the Spanish acronym for Fundación para la Conservación y Desarrollo Sostenible) has been providing a living for farmers and Indigenous populations in three areas of the municipalities of Guaviare and Caquetá. These projects have so far enabled over 500 families to make a living from the sustainable use of timber- and non-timber-based products. Practices like agroforestry drastically decreased the deforestation rate in the project areas, by as much as 86 per cent in Cartagena del Chairá and Solano in Caquetá. With the financial support of the Norwegian International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), the project aims to spread awareness among local populations that the forest can deliver economic benefits only when it is protected and used sustainably at the same time.

<sup>21</sup> Insights were taken from: Bruch, Carl, Geeta Batra and Anupam Anand 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Insights were taken from: FCDS 2023: ¡Bajó la deforestación en las zonas de forestería comunitaria de Guaviare y Caquetá! FCDS: <https://fcds.org.co/bajo-deforestacion-en-zonas-de-foresteria-comunitaria/>.

The projects show great success: Between April 2022 and March 2023, Southern Caquetá witnessed an 86 per cent decrease in deforested area, compared to the previous year. In addition, the FCDS also seeks to strengthen local organisational capacities in the long term and farmers' rights to access land. Areas that had been used for coca production and had been part of the armed conflict are now an active part of this peace process that improves the relations between the state and local communities.

Rural reform, land access, and regularisation are interconnected with conservation and environmental efforts. A pilot initiative at the public policy level involves collaboration among community organisations and various national, regional, and local entities, cooperation agencies, and civil society groups. For instance, in Guaviare, the Environmental Units for Peace and Social Services (Spanish: UAPSS) serve as pilot initiatives facilitating social investment, land regularisation, conservation agreements with payments for environmental services, and more. These initiatives operate in seven to ten *veredas* (rural districts).

### Local dialogue and livelihoods alternatives to improve protected areas governance

Colombia's protected areas and buffer zones are key sites for environmental conflicts. International organisations are working to involve local communities in biodiversity protection efforts. WWF's Protected Areas and Peace project<sup>23</sup> encourages civil society and government collaboration to restore ecological balance and improve community well-being.

The project approach was to balance conservation efforts with the need to support the livelihoods of vulnerable peasant communities. By resolving land use conflicts through dialogue and agreements, the project seeks to improve living conditions for these communities. Additionally, the project promotes local initiatives for the sustainable use of biodiversity, benefiting the local economy. Seven local enterprises, including cocoa, honey, coffee, oil, and nature tourism, have been supported and strengthened (Collins et al. 2022).

### Collective protection measures

Human rights defenders and rural communities have developed a series of self-protection measures to protect themselves from the violence generated by all armed actors in the conflict. Afro-Colombians, Indigenous groups and peasant communities have used three similar models: creating humanitarian and biodiversity zones and humanitarian shelters, indicating that the area is only for the civilian population, preventing the entry of armed actors – legal or illegal. In different forms, these models have effectively contributed to protecting and securing human rights defenders, the community, and their territory. In the northern region of Cauca, locally-led community initiatives have been established to rebuild social fabrics at the grassroots level, creating safe spaces to impede the recruitment of children left home alone into the armed forces. Women of the Nasa Indigenous group use some self-protection practices that are common to women defenders, such as sharing public denunciations with their Indigenous networks, the international community, and international organisations, and filing complaints with judicial and state officials (ABC Colombia 2023) (see Table 4 for a collection of self-protection mechanisms). Under the lens of environmental peacebuilding, the sustainable use of resources improves livelihoods and social cohesion, strengthening this collective protection mechanism and thus, communities' resilience against armed conflict.

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<sup>23</sup> See <https://www.international-climate-initiative.com/en/project/protected-areas-and-peace-in-colombia-19-iv-081-col-a-protected-areas-and-peace/>



Community	Mechanism and description
Especially rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of humanitarian and biodiversity zones.</li> </ul> <p>Humanitarian and biodiversity zones are established by temporarily fencing off an area, often a small portion of a community's territory. This way, the zones help to better distinguish between civilians and combatants. It involves signalling throughout the security fence that the area is for civilians only, preventing armed actors – legal or illegal – from entering. Rural communities also document and report human rights violations so that they can file complaints and demand prosecution of the perpetrators. International accompaniment ensures that other governments, diplomatic missions, and the public in other countries are informed of human rights violations. Providing funds for subsistence crops, technical support, and tools ensures communities are not alone and understand their rights.</p>
Peasant Reserve Zone Group (Spanish: Zona de Reserva Campesina)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of humanitarian shelters.</li> </ul> <p>Due to threats to their lives and livelihoods, the Campesino Reserve Zone created a humanitarian shelter mechanism. Humanitarian shelters are non-permanent spaces where communities move to when they urgently need to protect their lives and integrity from human rights violations. They do not have a defined timeline and are preventive shelters until violence decreases in their villages. They are formed to draw attention to potential human rights violations like displacement and to promote dialogue between the community and the Colombian government. They exist until security and protection agreements are approved with the government. The humanitarian shelters are essential for communities to maintain control over their territories. National and international organisations act as observers to ensure that the rights of the civilian population are respected.</p>
Women of the Nasa Indigenous Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assuming the role of human rights defenders.</li> </ul> <p>Indigenous women assume the role of human rights defenders by making public denunciations against armed actors and filing complaints to judicial and state officials. This is an extension of their traditional task of caring for and defending the lives of their sons and daughters and their community. They use measures to ensure their safe movement, such as making changes in their routines, activating communication networks, and collaborating with international and national solidarity organisations that aim to protect women. They also use traditional protection practices accompanied by traditional medicine and doctors.</p>
Indigenous Guards (Spanish: Guardia Indígena)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Peaceful resistance and self-protection.</li> </ul> <p>Patrolling their territories and demanding the departure of armed actors, the women, men, and youth of the Guardia strive to prevent community members from becoming involved in the conflict, particularly youth who are at risk of forced recruitment. They promote food security and human rights and develop protection mechanisms like early warning systems. The Guardia can mobilise their members quickly and rely on their numerical strength to confront armed actors using only their ceremonial staffs. Additionally, Indigenous peoples may exercise jurisdictional power within their territory</p>

	and according to their own rules and procedures, provided they are not contrary to the Colombian Constitution and national laws.
Social Pastoral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Context-based self-protection.</li> </ul> <p>The first step of self-protection measures for the communities is to analyse the context and study which actors are present in their territory and their interests. The Afro Pastoral Group in Quibdó organises workshops with the communities to examine the realities they face in their territory. Collecting this information is the basis for constructing personal and community self-protection strategies. It strengthens their organisational capacities to enable communities to claim their rights and denounce corruption and all other forms of violence.</p>

Table 4. Mechanisms of self-protection of rural and Indigenous communities.<sup>24</sup>

## Cocoa agroforestry for peace

Cocoa agroforestry has been promoted in Colombia to reconcile conservation with agricultural production while supporting the peace agreement's implementation (Cocoa Forest and Peace Initiative 2022). Scientific research has found that cocoa agroforestry systems help mitigate climate change driven by deforestation by opening dialogue spaces on farm design, conservation agreements, natural resource governance, and knowledge exchange. Ultimately, more productive farms create employment opportunities and diversify livelihoods, thus making communities more resilient to illegal economies (Morales Muñoz et al. 2023). Furthermore, cocoa agroforestry is a relatively new value chain that allows farmers to negotiate a fairer price for their produce and has decreased disputes over natural resources<sup>25</sup>.

## Nature-based solutions (NBS) in a green economy

NBS<sup>26</sup> can enhance the resilience of critical infrastructure to climate impacts and conflict-related risks. Pilot projects in Colombian municipalities such as La Ceja and Soacha demonstrate the potential of NBS to address climate-induced risks and promote community resilience, serving as models for replication in other regions. For many Colombian cities, NBS are understood as a multifunctional strategy with great opportunities to meet the challenges of climate change and losses of urban habitat and biodiversity by benefiting humans and ecosystems simultaneously (Figueroa-Arango 2020). Participatory planning of NBSs can integrate local people's experiences into the design of an NBS to achieve a contextualised and locally embedded solution.

## Biodiversity conservation and Indigenous knowledge

Colombia BIO is a timely initiative that took root in 2015. It was a direct response to the FARC's disarmament. The project aimed to leverage this significant event to explore regions where the FARC were

<sup>24</sup> Insights taken from ABC Colombia 2023: [https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ABColombia-Mecanismos\\_de\\_autoproteccion\\_ESP.pdf](https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ABColombia-Mecanismos_de_autoproteccion_ESP.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> A mixed-method study incorporated perception indicators to assess the impact of cocoa agroforestry on peacebuilding. A survey involving 429 farmer households in Caquetá and 500 in Cesar revealed that participants believed agroforestry systems had expanded spaces for community dialogue. Most farmers also noted that agroforestry decreased disputes over access to natural resources in their environment. (Morales Muñoz et al. 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Best practices of nature-based solutions worldwide demonstrate the benefits to urban climate resilience, the quality of life of its citizens, and the health of ecosystems (NBS Initiative 2024). For instance, nature-based solutions such as green infrastructure (e.g., natural drainage systems, coastal vegetation buffers, or even rooftop gardens in urban areas) can help mitigate the impacts of floods, erosion and sea-level rise, protecting vulnerable communities and infrastructure assets. These green areas help remove carbon from the atmosphere and assist in reducing the runoff from storms or snow, and permeable surfaces can store, infiltrate, or evaporate stormwater and reduce flows to sewer systems or to surface water (IPCC 2023).

present, and which are now more accessible. Since 2016, the project has sponsored forty-nine expeditions, uniting a diverse team of botanists, mycologists, entomologists, ornithologists, herpetologists, and other scientists, mainly from the country but also from abroad, in a robust and inclusive effort for biodiversity conservation and scientific exploration.

Scientific expeditions to biodiversity hotspots, previously inaccessible areas that were highly affected by armed conflict but have now become accessible due to the peacebuilding process, provide a platform for multiple stakeholders with different knowledge systems, like former combatants, farmers, scientists, and park rangers, to exchange knowledge and promote peaceful reintegration into society (Nature 2023; Angel Botero 2023). Colombia's rich biodiversity means that research on genetics and natural compounds could be used to develop new medicines and foods, creating valuable business and job opportunities for the country (De las Quinchas 2018).

However, ongoing unrest in Colombia poses challenges that undermine the potential impact of conservation efforts on peacebuilding. Therefore, to move forward, it is crucial to apply conflict sensitivity, as demonstrated by the Do No Harm methodology, to adapt strategies and address conflict sources while enhancing social cohesion. The participation of former combatants, park rangers, and community members in biological expeditions demonstrates how biodiversity conservation can foster reconciliation and economic opportunities and protect vital ecosystems, such as those in the Amazon region (Ecosystem for Peace 2021).

A good practice for promoting Indigenous knowledge is enhancing the autonomy and interculturality of Indigenous universities, such as the Intercultural Indigenous Autonomous University (UAIIN) in Popayán, Cauca, which is part of the Indigenous Education System (SEIP). The UAIIN strengthens and highlights Indigenous knowledge and wisdom based on principles of integrity, reciprocity, and complementarity, aligning with community life and spirituality (Werner 2024). Similarly, the RMIB-LAC, an Indigenous women's network on biodiversity in Latin America and the Caribbean, has gained recognition in the Western world and established their knowledge as a science in the international biodiversity arena, effectively navigating various knowledge systems (RMIB-LAC n.d.). Additionally, the Awa community in Nariño has initiated regulations to respect their autonomous education system, incorporating nature discovery, learning from ecosystems, and plant-based medicine, contrasting with the conventional Western education model that confines learning to urban schools (Werner 2024).

## Eco-tourism for peace

Eco-tourism is being harnessed as a powerful tool for reconciliation and peace. The "Opportunity Territories" initiative by the Colombian Association of Responsible Tourism (ACOTUR) promotes six "emerging destinations" in rural areas such as Guapi, El Tambo, Villagarzón, Vista Hermosa, La Macarena, and San José del Guaviare. Once scarred by violence, these areas now exemplify sustainable and regenerative tourism, fostering ecological restoration, cultural preservation, and economic reinvestment (GSTC 2023). In San Vicente del Caguán, the rafting agency "Caguán Expeditions" exemplifies this transformation. The agency, led by former guerrilla fighters and locals, has created a competitive rafting team and launched an annual international rafting festival. These projects highlight the region's journey from conflict to peace, with former combatants now champions of environmental stewardship and communal development. Most inspiring are the children and teenagers who now aspire to be part of this flourishing tourism sector, embodying a hopeful future for Colombia (Morales Muñoz and Gorricho 2021).



*Amazon, Colombia © Gabriel Guillén, Pixabay*



### The peace co-benefits of implementing a low-carbon development strategy in Colombia

As Colombia navigates the complexities of its green energy transition, a low-carbon development strategy – if inclusive and fair – will simultaneously address social inequalities and provide marginalised communities access to clean energy, food security, and improved livelihoods. Colombian policymakers must prioritise equity, economic viability, and security considerations:

- External finance is becoming increasingly "green": the first movers are the biggest winners, either between countries or in terms of companies/sectors within them. The National Department of Planning should use a spatial approach by helping to unravel regional policy, interests, and incentives around key sectors such as bioeconomy, agro-industrial manufacturing, transport, and the dynamics of green industries with a general sustainability lens.
- Allow participation in the projects to influence decision-making, especially in those regions still dependent on the coal sector. Strengthening community engagement in decision-making processes in decision-making processes through open, transparent, and informed spaces for dialogue is critical for fostering social acceptance and maximising the co-benefits of renewable energy projects. By ensuring that interventions address interconnected environmental, security and peacebuilding challenges, these platforms can significantly contribute to policy effectiveness (Schmelzer & Morales Muñoz 2024). It entails improving communities' capacities to balance power dynamics and adequately represent diverse interests.
- Strengthening Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) will yield sustainable growth by integrating nature into territorial planning. NBS not only recover ecological services but also create new livelihood opportunities and promote a sense of ownership and solidarity, enabling better resilience of vulnerable and marginalised populations to conflict and climate risks.
- Fostering inclusive growth and resilience by integrating climate adaptation into social protection programmes to establish safety nets for vulnerable populations that depend on a stable climate during the transition to a low-carbon economy. The national and regional governments should act as impartial mediators, building trust through binding dialogues.

*Box 2. The peace co-benefits of implementing a low-carbon development strategy in Colombia*

## Recommendations for Colombia's Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP)

In the face of mounting challenges posed not only by illegal economies and environmental degradation but also by the enduring legacy of conflict and the escalating impacts of climate change in Colombia's border regions, a comprehensive national strategy and policy framework are imperative. This framework should coordinate climate and environmental action with peacebuilding efforts, specifically focusing on vulnerable areas disproportionately affected by violence and degradation. It is important to reconcile various operational mandates and sets of technical expertise, beginning with policy diagnostics that holistically recognise the interactions, pathways, and cascading risks across climate, peace, and security. The intricate interplay between environmentally friendly rural development, the imperative for state legitimacy, and the pressing need for income generation requires a nuanced approach. The national government, the international community, NGOs, and the private sector must collaborate closely to implement the following set of policy recommendations.



## Recommendations for the National Government

### 1) Establish a more ambitious Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP)

**Creating a comprehensive EPP:** Colombia's policy landscape has instruments to promote climate action, conservation, and agricultural initiatives with peace benefits, such as involving ex-combatants and victims. However, these have not been scaled up, and Colombia has no explicit environmental peacebuilding policy. The Colombian government needs to develop a national Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP) that integrates environmental protection and climate action into peacebuilding efforts.

An EPP opens the space for a more robust state presence beyond the military but includes enforcement strategies in the policy approach when necessary. A state-led EPP should coordinate civil and security authorities and have a broader contextual understanding of the conflict-affected areas' political economy and ecological dynamics. This policy should set the groundwork for investing in effective protection mechanisms for environmental leaders working with the local communities. Institutions must establish a presence with judges, inspectors, and police to regulate life in coca-producing areas and draw lessons from successful local environmental peacebuilding initiatives.

A state engaged in local dynamics and responding to historical grievances of affected populations, mostly around access to natural resources, improves its legitimacy. Repairing relations across communities will limit the opportunities of violent actors in these territories, which translates into broader social cohesion, a condition for further economic development and prosperity.

**Protecting vulnerable populations effectively:** To effectively address violence targeting vulnerable communities, such as child recruitment, sexual violence, and movement restrictions, existing ceasefire agreements with relevant armed groups should include these specific concerns. The national government's priority should be to protect vulnerable populations and uphold human rights standards in conflict-affected areas. Protocols in negotiations with the EMC, Second Marquetalia, the AGC, and the ELN must explicitly prohibit practices such as forced confinement, kidnapping, recruitment of minors, gender violence, and environmental crimes.

**Establishing dialogue with powerful armed groups:** Decisions regarding high-impact criminal groups like the AGC are essential, as they possess significant resources and territorial influence. Effective negotiation and dissuasion with the AGC and other criminal groups looking forward is imperative to prevent interference with other peace processes. Initiating dialogue with these groups using environmental subjects, such as management of natural resources, as an entry point backed by gestures of goodwill, can lay the groundwork for medium- and long-term discussions, especially since affected communities support establishing dialogue with the Gaitanistas to access land-related resources. An EPP can facilitate a transparent negotiation with the local populations to offer clear benefits for collective action and dispute resolution on structural grievances such as agrarian rights and sustainable land uses, which armed actors largely utilise to gain legitimacy.

**Integrating climate action, peacebuilding, and development finance:** In Colombia, the most vulnerable populations are suffering the burden of climate change impacts and violence. Structural fragility creates a reinforcing vicious loop, making it challenging to create resilience. Environmental peacebuilding approaches offer an opportunity to implement the triple nexus, which combines humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding. The government should prioritise investments directed towards compensation for victims, land restitution, and return and resettlement programmes. By investing in longer-term grants that support access and transparent management of natural resources, those in acute need will have a path to self-reliance. It is also important to overcome structural barriers and unlock the potential of communities living in rich, biodiverse environments that serve as carbon sinks. Strategic investments can include financial support for agroforestry projects, infrastructure to connect rural markets, renewable energy projects benefiting directly local communities by providing electricity for

productive uses (Irena and ILO 2022), eco-tourism ventures enhancing capacity building, and microfinance programs tailored to local entrepreneurs. These investments address immediate economic needs, provide reparations for victims, integrate former combatants, and ensure the long-term conservation of critical ecosystems (see Box 2).

## 2) Enhance the integration and coordination of Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP)

**Coordinating government policies:** A lack of coordination and alignment between the agrarian and conservation agendas has delayed advancements in ensuring Indigenous and farmers' rights, exacerbating the social conflict in the peripheral areas. It is imperative to coordinate policies and programs among various governmental bodies with a peace lens, including the National Planning Department, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development (MADS), National Parks Authorities, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the Land Restitution Unit, the National Land Agency, the Territory Renewal Agency, and the Rural Development Agency. By adopting a broader environmental peacebuilding policy, the government can integrate the national budget and promote dialogues that bring together different perspectives on the localised and context-dependent conflict economies.

**Aligning the *Integral Rural Reform* and a green development strategy:** The EPP should align with the dispositions of the integral rural reform and address environmental and climate challenges through a green economy strategy. For example, promoting agroforestry on lands whose ownership has been clarified is a critical strategy for mitigating climate change in buffer zones and promoting peace. Establishing policy-level incentives to encourage farmers to transition to sustainable land-use practices emphasises their benefits for climate resilience and peacebuilding. The Colombian State should develop support for long-term financing of conservation of high-carbon ecosystems (e.g., peatlands, wetlands, rangelands, mangroves, and forests). Some of these have immediate impacts while others, such as restoration of high-carbon ecosystems, reclamation of degraded soils, or afforestation, will need decades to deliver measurable results. However, many sustainable land management technologies and practices are financially profitable in three to ten years (IPCC 2023), and those have the added benefit of a symbolic social fabric restoration process.

**Integrated approaches for sustainable land use systems, ecosystem restoration, and victims' compensation:** Policymakers should adopt integrated strategies encompassing law enforcement, economic initiatives (such as promoting green economies and sustainable land-use systems), and social dimensions (like rural extension and association programs). The national government should coordinate policies that encourage sustainable land-use systems restoration and integration at the landscape level, in sync with implementing the “environmental zoning plans” that emerged from the peace accord. Encouraging the development of effective markets that recognise and reward the sustainability efforts of farmers and utilising broader international cooperation to promote resilient systems for smallholder farmers are essential steps.

Ecosystem restoration, entailing a long-term process, also has the symbolic power of restoring the social fabric of the communities involved and owning the initiatives. Restoration can be a form of compensation through labour from perpetrators to victims. This requires management, manual labour, and social, natural, and agricultural science research. Restoring natural habitats should focus on using the country's many native plants and species. Beyond a one-off reforestation tree action, it entails nurturing and sustaining the seedlings until they are self-sustained. For that, it is fundamental that stable income is ensured for the communities at the beginning of the initiative. They can share their knowledge with other contexts and be compensated for this (UNCCD 2024).

**Mainstreaming inclusive and conflict-sensitive conservation:** A multidimensional approach involving capacity building, moderated dialogue, and creating sustainable livelihood alternatives through knowledge

production on biological resources and their usability in buffer zones of protected areas is necessary to ensure sustainable maintenance of natural richness. If effectively managed, this approach can significantly contribute to peacebuilding efforts.

### 3) Foster Environmental Peacebuilding Policy (EPP) with decentralised implementation

**Promoting decentralised yet coherent peacebuilding processes:** To build sustainable peace, the Colombian state needs to address social conflicts systematically and proactively to avoid the accumulation of grievances that risk renewed violence. As local authorities are best placed to understand and respond to local social conflicts, the EPP should be national in reach but decentralised, with corresponding budgets to be implemented locally. A decentralised EPP empowers local governments to coordinate efforts from the bottom up, leveraging their local knowledge and capacities while being supported by national institutions. Establishing dialogue platforms that bring together national and local stakeholders, including Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, farmers, and other marginalised groups, fosters accountability and aligns interests.

**Coordinating national and local level constituencies:** The vastness of the forests makes centralised control unrealistic, highlighting the need for local engagement. The government needs to properly identify existing governance structures and engage with the right contacts in each community. Empowering local communities to resolve governance gaps in critical ecosystems is essential, as they are best positioned to protect the rainforest. Indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians and rural communities should be supported. By using drones, satellite monitoring, and traditional observations, they can effectively manage their lands and detect invaders involved in environmental crimes. Additionally, communication channels, coordination mechanisms, and enhanced trust with the legitimate governmental armed forces need to be established to respond against violent actors. Implementing an environmental peacebuilding approach can close the governance gap at the local level by reducing the appeal to be a rival to state institutions and ensuring a degree of independence and respect for existing local governance structures (e.g. Peasants Reserve Zone, in Spanish Zonas de Reserva Campesina, and Indigenous reserves).

**Advancing a more effective justice system at the local level:** The Colombian justice system should acknowledge, integrate, and financially support traditional local authorities and community systems to resolve conflicts, especially around natural resource management. The system must respond effectively against corruption from environmental crime authorities, as this erodes trust with the communities. Finally, it is key to encourage partnerships to integrate victims, such as landless farmers, into conservation activities and participate in ecosystem restoration processes.

**Integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into biodiversity conservation and community forestry:** Drafting legislation to foster community forestry initiatives in close coordination with ethnic and local authorities and peacebuilding activities must be a priority. This should ensure adequate funding, time allocation, and technical support to advance ecological economies and services in the most marginalised areas in Colombia. National legislation should facilitate a smooth transition to community forestry by gradually empowering organised communities to assume management roles, supported by ongoing government monitoring and verification.

**Implementing gender-inclusive policies:** Integrating gender-sensitive policies within environmental peacebuilding initiatives recognises the role of women in environmental protection and green jobs and ensures their equitable participation in decision-making processes. The Colombian government should support programs that address gender imbalances and promote the active involvement of women in green technology through training to access green jobs and livelihoods.

## Recommendations for the international community

The peacebuilding process in Colombia is crucial not only for the country but also for the entire Latin American region. Its spillover effects will benefit neighbouring countries, including reduced drug-related violence and trade, as Colombia is a critical location for international commerce due to its strategic geographical position. The Colombian peace agreement has been supported for many years by diplomatic activities. Many states and international organisations developed comprehensive rules in complex negotiations. The following set of recommendations is directed to the international community at large and to institutions as specified.

First, supporting a Colombian EPP can be done by integrating climate/environmental funding mechanisms with peacebuilding funds that support pro-active peacebuilding approaches within climate, agricultural, and environmental projects; likewise, to integrate a climate lens and take the opportunity that natural resource management and climate action bring to peacebuilding efforts regarding livelihoods and reintegration.

Second, it is crucial to transition climate finance in these regions towards a grants-based, debt relief, decentralised framework capable of functioning effectively in challenging and crisis-ridden conditions, including times of governance instability and in remote areas. Such a system should persist independently of leadership changes and empower local organisations to take the lead in responding to environmental challenges. This approach ensures resilience and sustained impact, even in the face of political uncertainties or difficulties in access, benefiting the most vulnerable.

## Recommendations for the EU

### 1) Support compliance in peace dialogues

In the context of ongoing peace dialogues with armed groups, the international community and EU countries can serve as guarantors to ensure compliance and effective monitoring of ceasefires, thereby protecting communities. By promoting the implementation of a *Total Peace* policy that aligns with security and defence strategies, the EU can significantly contribute to lasting stability and resilience in conflict-affected regions. Additionally, the EU should advocate for integrating environmental and climate security factors into peace negotiations, as this approach is crucial for addressing the root causes of conflict and could serve as a model for future dialogues.

### 2) Strengthen economic agreements

The EU has shown interest in supporting economic diversification towards a low-carbon economy by strengthening economic agreements in key sectors such as the bioeconomy, forestry, renewable energy, and services. Establishing appropriate transition periods to integrate private sector investments into local-level environmental peacebuilding initiatives is vital. In particular, we recommend that the EU provide dedicated funding to bolster the emerging green sector in Colombia. Such investment should prioritise comprehensive assessments integrating conflict sensitivity in rural areas, ensuring that local socio-economic and security contexts are carefully considered. By ensuring that the EU and multinational corporations solidly back the support, these measures will foster a more resilient and equitable transition towards sustainable development worldwide.

### 3) Push for higher global trading standards

Exporters in many sectors must adapt their production techniques and traceability to maintain access to the EU market and, increasingly, other markets. A transparent and open dialogue that levels the field and ensures that environmentally friendly legislation does not disrupt the international value chains in which millions of people work should be a priority to enable responsible and equitable trade that has a cascading

impact on Colombia's development. In this way, the government and actors from the private sector (European and Colombian) investing in and adopting sustainable and low-carbon pathways will be able to take advantage of niche markets that align with EU regulations. Eventually, this will converge to a higher global standard (Deforestation Free Finance n.d.).

The EU can adopt more flexible criteria regarding eco-label certifications to prevent the investment burden from falling disproportionately on the value chain's smallest and most vulnerable links. Furthermore, the EU should advocate for fair procurement policies prioritising sustainably produced goods and ensuring equitable contracting conditions for Colombian farmers. This includes offering better pricing, longer-term contracts, and support in meeting certification standards required by European markets.

Additionally, the EU should encourage multinational corporations operating in Colombia to invest in sustainable practices by integrating environmental compliance into their corporate social responsibility agendas to achieve fairer value chains and provide incentives to ensure that the private sector shares in the costs of transitioning to zero deforestation and low-carbon production. This can include co-financing reforestation projects, adopting sustainable sourcing policies, and supporting local conservation efforts.

### 4) Support climate-resilient agriculture

Implementing the EU and UK's new anti-deforestation laws, which impact Colombian sectors including oil and mining, requires providing viable economic alternatives rooted in sustainable agri-food enterprises. The EU should continue expanding its support for climate-resilient agriculture in Colombia while investing in high-level academic research that fosters low-carbon businesses. Academic research plays a crucial role in developing innovative technologies and sustainable practices, which can be transferred to local enterprises to enhance their competitiveness and sustainability. By establishing partnerships to co-produce knowledge and advance research in sustainable farming techniques, renewable energy use in agriculture, and carbon-efficient supply chains, the EU can help Colombian businesses adopt low-carbon models, opening new economic opportunities. Finally, the EU should invest in initiatives that build more inclusive and reliable value chains, ensuring smallholder farmers and local communities benefit from climate resilience and trade. By providing technical assistance and access to climate finance, the EU can help farmers improve their production practices and connect with European buyers seeking reliable supply chains providing sustainable and healthy products.

## Recommendations for international cooperation, NGOs, and civil society organisations

In Colombia, strategies to enhance local and environmental governance focus on promoting ongoing inter-sectoral dialogues and collaborations among various stakeholders, including government entities at all levels, the private sector, Indigenous communities, and civil society organisations. These initiatives leverage existing, reliable community-based platforms. International organisations and NGOs should prioritise capacity building and support for local communities, enabling them to advocate in political forums effectively. This support should emphasise the following components of an environmental peacebuilding policy approach in practice:

### 1) Promote peace-positive conservation and environmental governance

A forest management policy in a conflict-affected area does not automatically become an environmental peacebuilding policy; it needs specific safeguards. In Colombia, the focus should be on conflict-sensitive governance of protected areas (PAs) and their role in addressing socio-environmental conflicts. International and local NGOs can facilitate dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders in protected areas governance, such as farmers, the private sector, ethnic communities, and the official authorities. This approach is crucial for inclusive decision-making and will strengthen local and environmental



governance. INGOs and donors can help develop ecosystem monitoring and information systems, including early warning systems for disasters. These tools can improve decision-making and address issues of weak state presence and political marginalisation. Additionally, they can promote citizen science initiatives to encourage cooperation among different groups, reduce prejudices, and build trust within communities.

### 2) Support local engagement in land tenure and use

Environmental organisations must emphasise the centrality of land-related activities, including building capacity for greater local communities' involvement in land access and formalisation. Strengthening actions related to land access contribute to creating trust between communities and the government, fostering positive peace.

### 3) Coordinate among agencies

INGOs and the UN system can lead in the support for articulating processes among governmental agencies and intersectoral dialogue, emphasising the importance of collaboration with national agencies like the Agency for Rural Development, the National Agency for the Renovation of the Territory, and the Ministries of Agriculture and the Environment.

## Conclusion

Colombia stands at a pivotal crossroads where vast challenges intersect with unprecedented opportunities. The nation grapples with the complexities of multiple armed groups profiting from environmental crimes and illicit economies, pervasive corruption that undermines governance, and the mounting adverse effects of climate change on its economy. The imperative to transition to a low-carbon economy without jeopardising state finances adds another layer of complexity. Yet, within these challenges integrative approaches such as Environmental Peacebuilding Policy offer hope. By integrating environmental and climate actions with peacebuilding and security efforts, Colombia can harness co-benefits that address multiple issues simultaneously. To realise this vision, it is essential to scale up existing local good practices and lessons learned of environmental peacebuilding that have shown promise.

An EPP will enable the Colombian government to implement a coherent set of practices mainstreamed across multiple policy sectors and mandates. First, at the community level, environmental peacebuilding projects have been proven to promote collective action and cooperation locally and foster a sense of belonging in a new community of practice. This, in turn, builds trust among peers and enhances social cohesion and climate resilience.

Second, at the national level and in conflict-affected areas, Colombia can offer armed groups viable alternatives by conducting climate-sensitive negotiations with them that address the interconnection between illegal economies and rich natural resources. This integrated strategy not only mitigates environmental degradation and builds climate resilience but also provides viable economic alternatives to illegal activities, thereby reducing the allure of armed conflict. Encouraging them to lay down their arms and embrace new roles as guardians of nature could lead to dignified livelihoods for victims, former combatants, youth, and women.

Third, once a peace agreement has been reached, EPP can positively impact post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Promoting sustainable land uses after land restitution processes have been conducted can simultaneously serve as a framework to compensate victims and reintegrate displaced persons and former combatants. In this manner, environmental peacebuilding can improve the quality of citizen-state relations and rejuvenate the social contract as a prerequisite for a sustainable transition.

Central to this approach is including the most affected communities in decision-making and governance structures, strengthening their capacities to produce knowledge and overcome corruption. These communities can establish dignified livelihoods by consolidating ways of life that conserve nature while sustainably profiting from its resources. Connecting markets fairly and equitably, coupled with enhanced national and local coordination, will bridge the gap between remote regions and economic opportunities. By seizing this moment, Colombia can redefine its destiny and serve as a model for nations confronting similar challenges, proving that peace and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand.

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