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MEAC Findings Report 17

Perceptions of FARC Dissident Groups in Colombia: Implications for Future Peace

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**MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT**

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KEY FINDINGS

- Public perceptions of FARC dissident groups as a community's main security threat varied across 11 particularly conflict-affected municipalities (PDETs), which is possibly explained by the varied presence of FARC dissident groups in each location.
- Two thirds of community member respondents reported that there is no difference in the operations of the dissident groups compared to the former FARC-EP. Levels of positive response confirming this perception varied across municipalities.
- Almost one quarter of respondents reported that they *did* perceive a difference between the FARC-EP and the FARC dissident groups and gave contrasting explanations of this difference. For example, some respondents reported that violence had decreased under the dissidents: "Before, everything was difficult. I lived afraid to go outside. Now, I'm not." Others said that the dissident groups are more violent: "Now, they'll kill you just for smiling."

This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected as part of a phone survey of community members in 19 municipalities across Colombia, conducted in two waves: from April to May 2021 and November to December 2021, as outlined in detail below.¹ The report also includes a small amount of data collected from 50 former members of active armed groups, including FARC dissident groups, in survey interviews held between April and September 2022. The report presents findings on public perceptions of FARC dissident groups, as well as the experiences of, and perceptions held by, individuals who left these groups. By comparing municipal-level summary statistics, this report allows for an examination of regional differences, often stemming from their different conflict histories. Analysis of this data aims to be useful for the international community, governments, local

¹ This research was conducted in partnership with [Fundación Conflict Responses](#).

authorities, and Colombian civil society organizations in their peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts – including potential talks between the Government and some of these groups. The report ends with an examination of the key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

FARC Dissident Groups and the Security Situation in Colombia

Overview

It is common for armed groups to fragment during or after the conclusion of a peace process, often contributing to the rekindling of armed conflicts.² For example, in the early 1990s after peace processes with several left-wing guerrilla groups, “dissident” groups stemming from the Popular Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym, EPL) continued to operate, and still do so today in northeastern Colombia using the same name.³ In a later case, soon after the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, AUC) between 2003 and 2006, more than 30 groups made up of both former members of the AUC and new recruits were created.⁴ At least three of these still exist today. The largest is the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym, AGC), which has at least 1,500 members, according to Government sources.⁵ These historical splinter groups have been joined by a new wave of break away groups that came into existence prior to, and after the, 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP. Currently, approximately 30 different FARC splinter factions operate throughout the country, under two macro dissident “projects”: one coordinated by Iván Mordisco (alias), a former FARC-EP high-level commander; and another, the “Segunda Marquetalia”, led by Iván Márquez (alias), a former senior FARC-EP negotiator in the 2016 peace process.⁶ Some of these dissident groups were a part of fronts or blocs opposing the peace accord, refusing to lay down weapons with the rest of the guerrilla organization. Others, like the Segunda Marquetalia, rose up after the FARC-EP laid down their weapons.⁷

² Indeed, “The typical country reaching the end of a civil war faces around a 44 per cent risk of returning to conflict within five years ...”. See Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking The Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, Policy Research Working Paper, No. 56793 (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2003), p. 83.

³ Comisión de Superación de la Violencia, *Pacificar la paz: lo que no se ha negociado en los acuerdos de paz* (Bogotá, Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad Nacional, 1992).

⁴ Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, *Disidentes, rearmados y emergentes: ¿Bandas criminales o una tercera generación paramilitar?* (Bogotá, Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2007).

⁵ Jhordan C. Rodríguez, “Clan del Golfo: la organización que dirigía alias ‘Otoniel,’” *El Espectador*, 24 October 2021.

⁶ All names of dissident group leaders mentioned throughout this document are aliases.

⁷ Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), *Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución* (Bogotá, CORE, 2020).

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This more recent wave of splinter or dissident groups has disrupted the peace agreement's implementation, not least because their violent operations have a range of negative impacts on security and peacebuilding in communities across the country. For example, the expansion of these dissident groups has led to greater direct confrontation between the groups and other armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym, ELN), among the dissident groups themselves, and between the dissident groups and the Colombian armed forces.⁸ This has generated increased insecurity in some communities, including forced confinements (in which community members cannot leave their towns or villages) and forced displacement.⁹ Furthermore, the groups target social and human rights leaders who advocate against violence. In addition, these groups have been responsible for attacks against FARC-EP ex-combatants – leading to extensive calls for increased protection measures to ensure the security of this population and therefore their successful transition to civilian life.¹⁰ The groups have also tried to infiltrate reincorporation sites (known by the Spanish acronym, AETCRs)¹¹ and other sites in which FARC-EP ex-combatants reside in large numbers, potentially because they believe that ex-combatants may be interested in joining them¹², or because they aim to spoil the peacebuilding processes occurring in the AETCRs by provoking violence and undermining leadership processes.¹³

Although FARC dissident groups are not widely understood, they challenge peacebuilding processes in Colombia, especially implementation of the peace agreement. While there is some clarity on how many groups exist, there is very limited research, for instance, on their involvement in illegal economies or the relationships between them.¹⁴ This is mainly due to the fact that the dissident groups have not existed for very long (and for part of their existence, access to the areas where they are active was impeded by insecurity and the Covid-19 pandemic, making it difficult to conduct fieldwork). Furthermore, for a few years after the agreement, there was little political interest in addressing these groups as a security threat and little attention was paid to them, both in policy discussions and in peacebuilding practice. Until now, based on limited information, the Colombian Government has pursued a mixed strategy against FARC dissident groups, including both “carrot and stick” approaches to try and undermine their capacity to operate. The administration of Iván Duque (which preceded the current Government of Gustavo Petro) classified FARC dissidents as “organized armed groups,” providing legal permission to use military force against them, and to kill or capture their members.¹⁵ In parallel, the Duque Government created a policy that allowed FARC dissident fighters (as well as members from other “organized armed groups”) to demobilize and

⁸ Juan Pappier and Kyle Johnson “[El remanso y un desafío para el gobierno de Petro](#),” *Conflict Responses*, 26 July 2022.

⁹ United Nations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “[Confinamientos en Colombia – Enero a Abril 2022](#),” Fact Sheet, 25 July 2022.

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, “United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, Report of the Secretary-General,” 27 June 2022, S/2022/513.

¹¹ Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (known by their acronym in Spanish, AETCRs) are managed by the ARN with the objective of facilitating the initial phases of transition of former FARC-EP members to civilian life.

¹² El Espectador, “[Capturan a presunto responsable de crimen del excombatiente Alexander Parra](#),” 10 March 2021,

¹³ Juanita Vélez, Laura Soto, Ana León, Jerson Ortiz, and Ever Mejía, “[La cara desconocida de los muertos de las FARC](#),” *La Silla Vacía*, 2 February 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Juan Pappier and Kyle Johnson, “[Does the FARC still exist? Challenges in Assessing Colombia's 'Post Conflict' under International Humanitarian Law](#),” *EJIL: Talk!*, 22 October 2020.

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reintegrate through a special “differential assistance” route created in 2020.¹⁶ This defector programme offers benefits to those individuals exiting active armed groups – either by escaping or following capture by the military – but not currently to individuals whose groups dissolve as the result of peace talks. However, in order to prepare for possible talks with FARC dissident groups, and any reintegration support processes for those laying aside weapons following successful engagement, more information is needed to understand these dissident groups, including information on their leadership, the range of violent activities they commit, and their relationships with local communities.

This need for information has become especially acute since President Gustavo Petro, who entered office in August 2022, announced his goal of achieving peace with all armed groups, either through political negotiations with the ELN guerrillas or legal “surrenders” for “criminal” groups such as the FARC dissident groups.¹⁷ This announcement was cautiously applauded by the international community and civil society in Colombia.¹⁸ Talks with the ELN will formally re-start in November 2022, and exploratory dialogues were held with the dissident organization led by Iván Mordisco in September 2022. However, it remains unclear what the parties aim to discuss in future engagements, and what their negotiating strategy will be. Given the demonstrated threat to peacebuilding posed by the dissidents, however, it seems clear that successful efforts to dismantle them – including by negotiating their disintegration – could positively impact security outcomes in Colombia, including the implementation of the peace agreement. Without a better understanding of how these groups operate, what they hope to achieve, and how they are perceived by both communities and their own former members, it will be difficult to enact successful engagement strategies. MEAC, therefore, aimed to contribute to filling this gap, analysing data from surveys with community members and former members of criminal groups, including the dissident groups. The aim of the analysis is to enhance understanding of the FARC dissident groups that could support both those who design and implement peacebuilding policies in Colombia, and those who are currently thinking through engagement strategies for these groups.

Findings

This report is based on data collected in a 30-minute phone survey led by MEAC and its Colombian research partner, Fundación Conflict Responses. The survey was conducted in two waves: from April to May 2021, with a representative sample of 2,460 community members from 11 municipalities;¹⁹ and from November to December of 2021, with a sample of 1,859 community members in eight municipalities.²⁰ In addition to a range of other topics, the 30-minute phone survey

¹⁶ Juanita Vélez, “[Gobierno vuelve a idea uribista de desarticular grupos sin verdad a víctimas](#),” *La Silla Vacía*, 28 May 2020.

¹⁷ El Tiempo, “[Los caminos y las preguntas para la ‘Paz total’ del nuevo gobierno de Petro](#),” 29 July 2022.

¹⁸ RadioCaribe, “[Hay motivos para ser optimistas’: La ONU aplaude el compormiso de Petro por avanzar hacia una ‘paz total’ en Colombia](#),” 15 July 2022; and Forbes, “[ONU aplaude intenciones de Petro de continuar con diálogos de paz](#),” 14 July 2022.

¹⁹ Mutatá, Antioquia; Caldon, Cauca; San José del Guaviare, Guaviare; Guapi, Cauca; La Uribe, Meta; Puerto Asís, Putumayo; Villavicencio, Meta; Bogotá, Cundinamarca; Cali, Valle del Cauca; San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá; and Apartadó, Antioquia.

²⁰ Medellín, Antioquia; El Carmen de Bolívar, Bolívar; Santander de Quilichao, Cauca; Valledupar, César; Quibdó, Chocó; Cúcuta, Norte de Santander; Icononzo, Tolima; Arauquita, Arauca.

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included questions on current perceptions of security and recent changes in security dynamics. Additional data was collected in a 60-minute survey with a sample of 50 ex-combatants from criminal groups, including the FARC dissident groups, currently going through the differential assistance process in Bogotá D.C., Medellín, and Cali. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences before they entered their respective armed group, their lives within the group, experiences during the conflict, psychosocial well-being, and perceptions of the differential assistance programme, among other subjects. This series of questions was designed to understand how and why ex-members of criminal groups enter and respond to the differential assistance process, in order to allow relevant stakeholders to make evidence-based adjustments to further tailor and strengthen the process.

Community attitudes towards future talks with some or all of the FARC dissident groups may depend in part on their perceptions of these groups as threats. With this in mind, MEAC asked respondents about their perceptions of the biggest threats to their communities. Interestingly, community member respondents in the overall sample did not identify the FARC dissident groups as their main security concern. Despite the violence orchestrated by these armed groups, respondents most frequently cited thieves and criminals (37 per cent), followed by the “guerrillas” (6 per cent), and other armed groups (6 per cent). FARC dissident groups were cited by only 4 per cent of respondents as the biggest threat to their communities. It is important to highlight that a high percentage of community members refused to answer this question (24 per cent), raising questions about whether people were afraid to answer a question about active armed groups in their communities. It is also possible that respondents were thinking of the FARC dissident groups in at least some cases when they responded that guerrillas were the greatest threat.

Threat perceptions of armed groups and openness to government engagement with them have historically varied between communities in Colombia, depending on their experience with these groups. Given this, it is likely that different communities may react to dialogue with armed groups in different ways. Over time, Colombia’s urban, conservative communities – many of whom identify as victims of guerrilla groups – have favoured military outcomes to conflicts, rather than dialogues.²¹ In more rural communities, some armed groups have been known to increase violence in the lead-up to talks, in order to increase their negotiating advantage.²² This may cause communities to be wary of engagement with the groups, as they may fear an increase in violence. Others may favour the idea of talks as a way to incentivize the groups to dismantle, reducing the threat of violence. In order to assess perceptions of the FARC dissident groups as principal threats in Colombia’s most conflict-affected communities, MEAC disaggregated data to analyse perceptions in “PDET” municipalities (municipalities in which “Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial” or “Regionally Focused Development Programmes” are taking place). PDETs are places that were identified as being significantly impacted by the conflict and most acutely in need of peace agreement implementation.

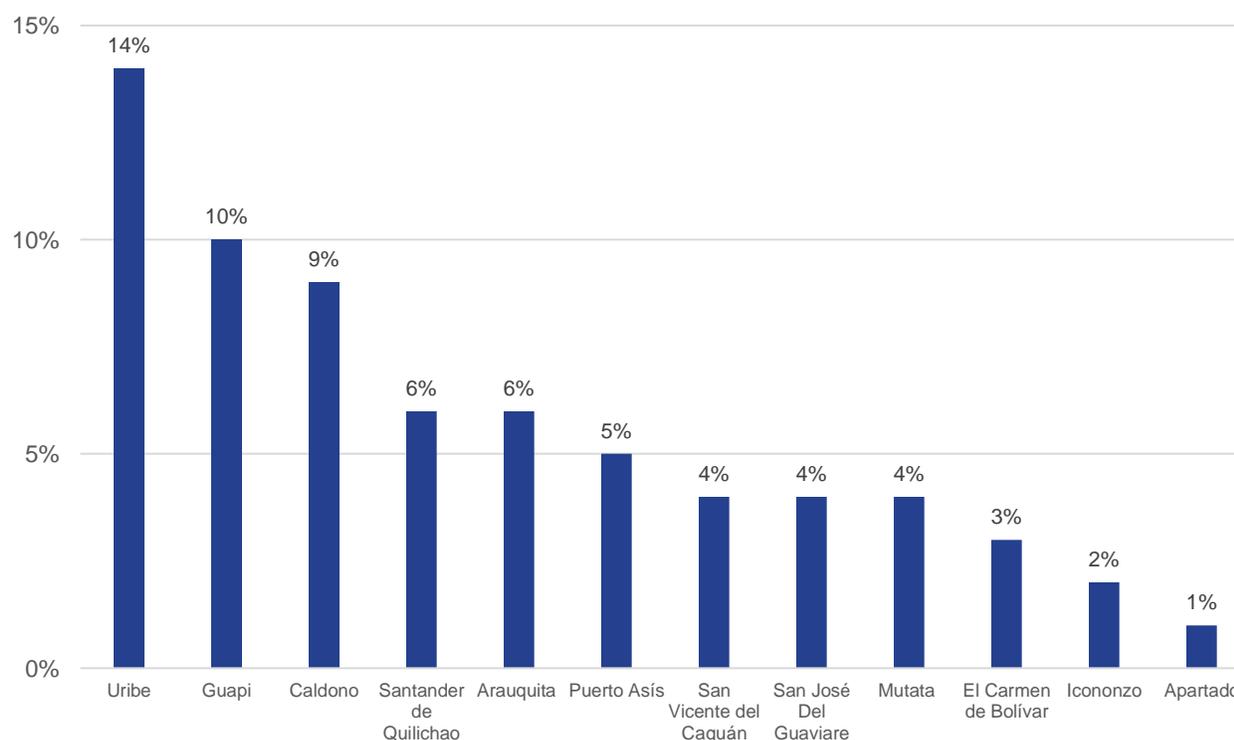
²¹ At the beginning of peace talks with the FARC-EP in 2012, the Democracy Observatory, which belongs to the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) found that people living in urban centres, those who identify as “right-wing”, and victims of the guerrillas, were less likely to support peace talks with the guerrillas. See LAPOP: Observatorio de la democracia, [Cultura política de la democracia en Colombia y en las Américas, 2012: Hacia la igualdad de oportunidades](#) (Bogotá, Vanderbilt University and Universidad de los Andes, December 2012).

²² El Espectador, [“Plan Pistola. El Clan del Golfo asesinó a más de 20 policías en 2022,”](#) 27 July 2022.

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The PDETs are also locations where dissident groups are more likely to be active (given that they feed off the same illegal economies and other socioeconomic dynamics as their predecessors) and where they have the greatest potential to sabotage peacebuilding. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in PDET municipalities who stated that FARC dissident groups were the biggest threat to their community.

Figure 1 – “Who presents the biggest threat to the safety of your community? Please select all that apply” (Answers for “FARC dissidents” in PDET municipalities)²³



One possible explanation for the variation seen between municipalities in positive responses relates to the presence, or lack thereof, of FARC dissident groups in each location. According to research by Fundación Conflict Responses, FARC dissident groups are not present in the four municipalities on the right of the graph (Mutatá, El Carmen de Bolívar, Icononzo, and Apartadó). The eight municipalities on the left, from Uribe to San José del Guaviare, have active dissident groups.²⁴ Community member respondents in municipalities with no dissident group presence may see the dissidents as less of a threat because the groups do not operate there. In municipalities where some of the 30 dissident groups operate, community member respondents more frequently see FARC dissidents as a threat, albeit to differing degrees. For example, in Uribe, where the perception of threat is highest, the commander of the dissident group that operates there, Calarcá (alias), is known

²³ This figure represents the answers of those respondents who answered the question. It does not include data from those who refused to answer.

²⁴ Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), *Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución* (Bogotá, CORE, 2020). This information is also supported by fieldwork conducted in 2022.

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for being especially predatory.²⁵ In Caldone, another dissident group is in conflict with – and has attacked – local indigenous communities, which likely explains the high level of threat perception there.²⁶ In San José del Guaviare and Puerto Asís, the percentage of community member respondents who identified dissident groups as the primary threat to their community was noticeably lower despite the presence of armed groups in these municipalities. This is likely because, in contrast to Uribe, the majority of the population in these three municipalities live in town centres, not rural outskirts, where dissident groups operate. They, therefore, do not have as high a perception of threat regarding these groups since the presence of these armed groups is less tangible in their daily lives.²⁷ Community members may also have been afraid to report these groups or other actors as a threat, given the impact they have had on security in recent months and years. In San Vicente del Caguán, for example, 34 per cent of the sample refused to answer the question.

To understand public perceptions, it is not only important to gauge differences in the presence of armed groups, and their characteristics and behaviours, but also the historical presence of armed groups. For those communities in which the FARC-EP had a longstanding presence, it is helpful to understand how today's armed groups represent either continuity or a marked departure in their relationship with the local community, and what impact this may have on perceptions. The experience of Uribe is illustrative in this regard. After decades of stable control,²⁸ the FARC-EP left Uribe as a result of the peace agreement, but this left an opening and dissident groups and others subsequently fought to take control of the area. As a result, the community may have felt more threatened by the upheaval and ensuing violence that followed the departure of FARC-EP, resulting in a high response rate to this question.

The apparent relationship between the presence of dissident groups and the perception that they pose a threat to local residents suggests that different communities will likely respond in different ways to talks with these groups. Successful engagement with armed groups will therefore require the Government to navigate public opinion and initiate contextualized public information campaigns designed to secure public support for talks, taking into account the diverse perceptions that communities across the country hold.

Continuity or Change? Differences or Similarities between the Former FARC-EP and the FARC Dissident Groups

²⁵ Interview with Community Leader, CORE, San Vicente del Caguán, April 2021.

²⁶ CRIC, "[Atentan contra consejero mayor del pueblo Nasa territorio Sath Thama Kiwe](#)," 6 September 2021.

²⁷ Colombia's political division of territory divides municipalities into urban centres – known as the municipal centre or "head" – and the rural parts of the municipality. In many areas, including those mentioned here, armed groups operate in rural areas without having a strong presence in urban centres. See Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), [Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución](#) (Bogotá, CORE, 2020), and fieldwork conducted in 2022. This information is also supported by fieldwork by Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE) in San José del Guaviare in September 2021 and in San Vicente del Caguán in April and October 2021.

²⁸ The effects of this relationship were seen in the 2018 congressional elections, in which Uribe was the only municipality in the country in which the FARC political party obtained more than 20 per cent of the vote (they obtained 23 per cent in this municipality). The party was the second most popular party in Uribe in this election, after the Liberal party. See Juanita Vélez, Jerson Ortiz, and Daniel Morelo, "[La FARC, casi en ceros para 2019](#)," *La Silla Vacía*, 15 March 2018.

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There is currently a significant national debate in Colombia about how public policy should address FARC dissident groups, and whether and how talks with each group should take place. Part of this discussion revolves around how similar or different these groups are from their guerrilla predecessors, with whom the Santos Government (2010-2018) ultimately signed a peace agreement.²⁹ Although some of these groups claim to have left the peace process due to the government's non-compliance with the agreement, and stress that they are upholding the original FARC-EP's ideology, there is an argument that FARC dissident groups are very different from the FARC-EP, due to the new groups' perceived criminal (rather than political) nature. Furthermore, the newly inaugurated Petro Government has stated that its policy to address these groups, not yet finalized at the time of writing, will focus on offering them the legal means to cease operations and transition to civilian life, for example suspending criminal arrest warrants and extradition orders.³⁰

Here also, community perceptions of the differences between the FARC dissident groups and the FARC-EP may be key in anticipating community attitudes towards talks with these groups. In order to contribute evidence to this discussion, the MEAC survey explored respondents' perceptions of how different the FARC dissidents are from the former FARC-EP. When asked about the difference between the ways in which the old FARC-EP and the current FARC dissident groups operate, 66 per cent of community member respondents reported that there is no difference in the operations of the dissident groups compared to the former FARC-EP.³¹ This may be because, according to a report by Fundación Conflict Responses, all FARC dissident group leaders are former leaders from the FARC-EP, and thus, the groups that they now lead operate similarly to the FARC-EP in terms of their sources of financing and targets for violence. This could also contribute to a certain degree of continuity in the way these groups relate to local populations and might explain why the majority of the MEAC sample does not report differences between these two groups.³²

The view that there is no difference between the FARC-EP and the FARC dissident groups varied in strength across municipalities. Some analysts have argued that there is a fundamental difference – and one that is appreciated by the public – between dissident groups who never laid down weapons during the peace process, and those groups that arose as new or “recidivist” groups after the peace agreement.³³ Interestingly, the data does not suggest that community perceptions vary along these analytical lines. In San Vicente del Caguán, San José del Guaviare, and Uribe – where dissidents did not cease operations – responses were very similar to those from Puerto Asís, Santander de

²⁹ Colombian Defense Minister, Diego Molano, has said that the FARC has split into three: a party in Congress, dissidents in Colombia, and those inside Venezuela. See La FM, “[MinDefensa aseguró que el proceso de paz dejó tres Farc](#),” 21 September 2021.

³⁰ El Espectador, “[¿Qué dicen las regiones frente a la “Paz Total” del gobierno Petro?](#)” 31 August 2022.

³¹ 24 per cent of the MEAC sample reported differences between the former FARC-EP and the current FARC dissident groups. It is also worth noting that 10 per cent of the overall sample refused to answer this question.

³² Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), [Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución](#) (Bogotá, CORE, 2020).

³³ This differentiation was proposed by Aguilera, who defined dissidents as those who never laid down their weapons as part of the peace process, and “recidivist” or “rearmed” groups as those formed by people who did lay down their weapons only to later return to the conflict. See Mario Aguilera Peña, “Disidentes: ¿rebeldes obstinados, exguerrilleros narcotraficantes o guerrillas ambiguas,” in *Violencias que persisten: El escenario tras los acuerdos de paz*, Mario Aguilera Peña and Carlos Mario Perea Restrepo, eds. (Bogotá, Universidad Nacional, and Universidad del Rosario, 2020), pp. 225-338.

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Quilichao, Caldon, and Guapi, where recidivist groups sprang up after the peace agreement.³⁴ The similarity in responses across municipalities with different types of dissident groups suggests that the visible continuation of leadership may influence how these groups are seen by the community. These community perceptions of armed group leadership may in turn influence community attitudes towards talks. For example, those who perceive no difference between the FARC-EP and the dissident groups may feel that the groups – especially their visible leaders – already had their chance to dismantle through talks in 2016, and that military victory – not talks – is the best option to end the violence. Others may feel that talks are necessary in order to address the dissident groups' different priorities, which were not addressed in the 2016 peace agreement. Further efforts should be made to understand whether these competing views are, in fact, manifest in conflict-affected communities, and if so, the Government should tailor public information campaigns appropriately in the lead-up to (or in some cases, during) engagement with dissident groups.

In contrast, almost one quarter (24 per cent) of community member respondents reported that they *did* perceive a difference between the FARC-EP and the FARC dissident groups, suggesting that the perception of continuity is not universal in Colombia. In order to understand the kind of differences that community members perceived, MEAC asked an open-ended follow-up question for those who reportedly saw a difference between the groups. Responses varied greatly. Some community member respondents reported that violence had decreased under the dissidents. One respondent claimed: "Before, everything was difficult. I lived afraid to go outside. Now, I'm not." Others said that the dissident groups are more violent than the FARC-EP: "Now, they'll kill you just for smiling". Another noteworthy observation about dissident group violence was the perception that "there is no one leading, and the groups fight among themselves", raising a question about whether in-fighting is impacting public opinion about these groups.

Conflicting views on the use of violence are also evident among former members of the dissident groups themselves, and by former members of other armed groups that fought against them. For example, a former member of the Clan del Golfo (a rival group with its roots in the AUC demobilizations of 2003-2006) said: "The FARC-EP kidnapped people, maintained order, and were more organized. The dissident groups are more disorganized and more violent. They violate the rules." However, another member of the same group implied that the dissidents are less violent, arguing: "The old ones [chopped people up] and killed people for anything. Now they find things out, seek intelligence, and follow steps." Similarly, a respondent who left a FARC dissident group reported that "the old FARC-EP were stricter, they killed more, and today's groups are not depleting [the population] as much".

For those respondents who agreed that there were differences between the FARC-EP and the dissident groups operating today, another area of distinction is motivation and sources of income. Some community member respondents perceived that the FARC-EP was more idealistic, arguing that "the guerrilla had leftist political ideals, now they are drug traffickers and terrorists". Another agreed: "The old ones fought for a better country – now they just want power and riches."

³⁴ Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), [Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución](#) (Bogotá, CORE, 2020).

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Interestingly, another community member respondent compared the groups' treatment of the environment, highlighting that "before we did not see contaminated rivers because they prohibited mining. Now, we do see that." Some individuals who had left the dissident groups themselves agreed with this change in ideology. One said: "The 30th Front now say they're the old FARC-EP, but they only want money – the old FARC-EP helped people." Another ex-member of a dissident group agreed: "Now they operate for money and there's no ideology or statute. Before they respected people and there was more order." Another ex-dissident member also concurred, claiming that "now they're more mafia". However, some community members found the dissident groups to be more approachable and "accessible for dialogue" than the FARC-EP – an observation that could be particularly significant in the current context of efforts to initiate engagement with some of these groups. An additional factor to consider in this analysis is that the FARC-EP was not monolithic, and its presence also differed between communities in terms of ideology, financial motivations, and relationships with the community, among other aspects. For example, the FARC-EP units in Uribe had very close ties with the high command of the organization so their activity in the municipality was seen as mainly driven by the group's ideology. Meanwhile, the unit in Puerto Asis was more economically driven, to the point that they worked with a local criminal group to manage the drug business in the region.³⁵ Even though the Uribe unit was also involved in trafficking, the two were seen in very different ways by the local populations. These differences between FARC units mean that local communities not only base their perceptions of the dissident groups on their experiences with them, but also upon their very localized interaction with the FARC-EP units that were previously present in their municipality.

The variations across perceptions and possible explanations for them suggest a need for similarly varied, flexible, and localized outreach and communications efforts about policies that aim to address and dismantle the dissidents, taking into account each specific context, dissident group, and conflict dynamics – including the historical presence of the FARC-EP. This finding may also suggest that approaches to talks with the more than 30 FARC dissident groups in Colombia would benefit from a localized approach that recognizes variations across them – and differences in community experiences with them – and does not approach these groups in a standardized way. Evaluating strategies for dealing with individual armed groups – and communicating these strategies to the populations impacted by them – should take into account group embeddedness within local communities and other factors that have changed or remained the same since the departure of the FARC-EP. Furthermore, the variation between municipalities may also suggest that attitudes towards talks with some of the groups will also vary, as discussed above, as respondents who perceive the FARC dissidents as being more economically than ideologically driven may, for example, not believe that peaceful engagement is a more effective solution than military strategy. Further research is necessary to bring these differences to light and truly understand the many distinguishing characteristics of each of the 30 groups so that engagement with them – and accompanying public information campaigns – are appropriately tailored and therefore as effective as possible.

³⁵ Juanita Vélez, "[La guerra fría que se calienta en Putumayo](#)," *La Silla Vacía*, 13 January 2019,

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This MEAC report has contributed some of the first quantitative data to help understand communities' perceptions of FARC dissident groups in Colombia, especially in terms of how differently – or similarly – these groups operate in relation to their former FARC-EP counterparts. In addition, MEAC has collected and shared some of the first data from respondents who were formerly associated with FARC dissident groups. The findings suggest that community members experience the operations of the approximately 30 FARC dissident groups in generally similar ways to their experiences with the former FARC-EP. However, this does not mean that policy should treat the dissidents the same as the former FARC-EP. The current context of nearly 30 armed groups is drastically different from that of one major, national armed group and this means that State responses – including talks and other engagement efforts, as well as strategies to communicate this engagement to local populations – should be flexible enough to respond to local differences and changes in how armed groups operate across the country.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

The FARC dissident groups in Colombia represent a serious challenge to peacebuilding by undermining the ability of the State to implement the peace agreement, and by weakening civil society through their violent acts.³⁶ These groups are responsible for at least half of the killings of FARC ex-combatants and several different humanitarian crises throughout the country, making them a significant threat to sustainable peace.³⁷ This, though, does not mean peacebuilding is impossible in the current context; far from it.

Engagement with these groups has already begun, but uncertainty remains about how talks will proceed and what the government will offer dissident groups in terms of legal and political incentives to stand down.³⁸ The MEAC findings suggest that an effective engagement strategy would recognize that each of the two macro dissident projects (the Segunda Marquetalia, led by Iván Márquez, and the other led by Iván Mordisco) comprise multiple groups with distinct characteristics, including variations in ideology and differing relationships with local communities. Varying perceptions among community members and former dissident group members regarding the extent to which these groups still uphold FARC-EP ideology, their use of violence, and their economic (or alternative) motivations may require different engagement strategies. For example, further data collection is necessary to understand whether group members more motivated by financial benefits and involvement in the drugs trade can be incentivized to defect without assurances that they will not be prosecuted under criminal justice processes or extradited to the United States, given the US

³⁶ UN News, "[Colombia: La violencia se intensifica en Chocó, Putumayo y Arauca, afectando a los civiles](#)," 5 April 2022; Juanita Vélez, "[A la sustitución de la coca le salió otro enemigo en Putumayo](#)," *La Silla Vacía*, October 26 2017; Juanita Vélez, "[La trocha que sirve de corredor para la disidencia de Gentil Duarte](#)," *La Silla Vacía*, 25 March 2019.

³⁷ Fundación Conflict Responses (CORE), *Las caras de las disidencias. Cinco años de incertidumbre y evolución* (Bogotá, CORE, 2020); Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, *Los obstáculos para la continuidad de los procesos de paz en Colombia* (Bogotá, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, 2022).

³⁸ El Tiempo, "[Gobierno se reunió con disidencias de FARC en Caquetá para explorar la paz total](#)," 18 September 2022; Infobae, "[La Segunda Marquetalia anunció disposición a dialogar con Gustavo Petro: 'Respaldamos el gobierno de la vida y la esperanza'](#)," 23 June 2022.

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extradition of other drugs trafficking organization leaders in the past. Likewise, it would be helpful to understand if those who are more ideologically motivated will seek guarantees that they can enter politics after they exit their armed group. A better understanding of individual group characteristics, from ideology to financing sources, is therefore needed to design effective engagement overtures and strategies.

Engagement strategies should also be informed by community members' attitudes towards dismantling the groups. Support for talks rather than military operations may vary depending on how much of a threat community members feel the groups are, and to what extent they feel the groups are disrupting their daily life, for example damage to the natural environment on which their livelihoods depend.

Furthermore, strategies to bolster community support for engagement should take into consideration community members' experience and perception of the FARC-EP, if and when the group was present in their municipality, recognizing that prior experiences and perceptions can shape current views towards dissident groups. For example, some units of the FARC-EP were more ideologically driven while others were more motivated by financial gain (and indeed, these were not black and white categories of motivation as many units were both highly aligned with the organization's ideology and driven by economic gain). Therefore, if a respondent lived in an area in which the FARC-EP had been particularly motivated by the economic benefits of war, for example through drug trafficking, they may not have perceived a difference if the dissident groups currently present in their territory were similarly motivated.

The "differential assistance" process that currently allows individual FARC dissident members to demobilize seeks to subvert the strength and operational capacity of dissident groups, and support is not available for those whose group stands down. If support was extended to those making the transition to civilian life in the wake of talks, this could signal the Government's commitment to sustainable peacebuilding. The differential assistance process provides an exit that many fighters from criminal groups such as the FARC dissident groups did not have until its creation in December 2020. This process should be strengthened and expanded as the number of former dissident group members who defect increases, especially in preparation for a potential scenario in which members demobilize as a result of talks. A trustworthy, robust process to support their transition to civilian life is required.

In terms of other efforts to build peace in the context of ongoing violence by dissident groups, the peace agreement seeks to address many of the conditions that allow these groups to continue to operate. It looks to strengthen civilian state institutions, tackle inequality in land distribution and ownership – the main historic, structural factor driving conflict and coca cultivation – create and carry out locally-designed development programmes, substitute illegal crops, and provide judicial and economic clarity for ex-combatants. All of these aims seek to undermine the ability of dissident groups to operate by reducing their financial resources, weakening their political discourse, and decreasing their capacity to recruit. It is now important to increase momentum and implement the peace agreement in its entirety, complementing President Gustavo Petro's call for a "total peace"

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that engages dissident groups while also targeting their capacities to operate and addressing the conditions and grievances that have contributed to their emergence and growth in recent years.³⁹

³⁹ El Tiempo, "[Avances en la implementación del acuerdo, otro frente del gobierno Petro](#)," 24 July 2022.



MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT