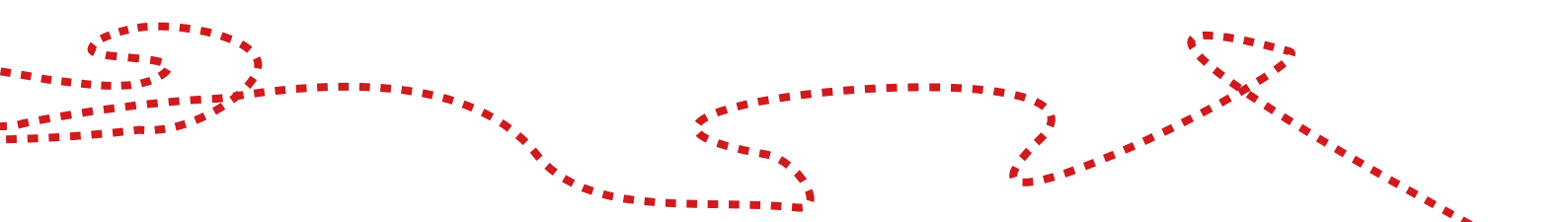*„Weaving peace": picture of the AETCR La Guajira in Mesetas, which had to be relocated in the face of threats of violence. Photo: Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal.*

Reintegration through Local Interactions: The Colombian Peace Process from the Perspective of Rural Communities

Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal | Santiago López Álvarez | Jonas Wolff

Reintegration through Local Interactions

The Colombian Peace Process from the Perspective of Rural Communities

A central element of the Colombian peace process with the FARC-EP guerrillas is the collective reintegration of former combatants in specially designated "Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation." A survey conducted in seven rural municipalities suggests that this reintegration process has led to a significant reduction in the perceived social distance and mistrust among the local population, contributing to the reconstruction of the social fabric. However, these successes are limited and, given the ongoing violence in marginalized regions of Colombia, are at grave risk in several cases.

by Laura Camila Barrios Sabogal, Santiago López Álvarez, and Jonas Wolff

Reconstructing the social fabric is one of the greatest challenges of building peace after civil war. A central element in this process is the normalization of relationships and the reduction of mistrust between former combatants and the population they are reintegrating into. Given deep-seated experiences of violence and societal cleavages exacerbated by the armed conflict, this is far from easy. However, general research suggests that contact between group members can make an important contribution to overcoming existing prejudices and reducing social distance and mistrust.[1]

In late 2016, the peace agreement between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) sealed the dissolution of the guerrilla group founded in 1964, officially ending Latin America's longest civil war. To facilitate the reintegration of former FARC-EP combatants, the agreement took an unusual approach. At the core of the peace deal was a collective process called *reincorporation*, in which groups of demobilized FARC-EP members were to gather in so-called "Transition Zones" (*Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización* – ZVTN) to jointly transition to civilian life. After the signing of the peace agreement, over 20 such ZVTNs were established for nearly 10,000 former FARC combatants. In 2017, these ZVTNs were transformed into 24 "Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation" (*Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación* – ETCR), which have continued to exist since August 2019 under the name of "Former ETCRs" (*Antiguos ETCR* – AETCR).

The ZVTNs, and thus the current AETCRs, are located in rural regions of the country that were chosen during the peace talks by the negotiating parties, without prior consultation with the local population. That said, the arrival of former FARC-EP members and their families had an immediate effect on the surrounding communities, sparking both expectations and concerns.[2] In this context, the question arises as to the extent to which the territorial reintegration process has succeeded in reducing mistrust between local communities and former combatants, thereby contributing to reconstructing the social fabric in those areas that were particularly affected by the armed conflict with the FARC-EP.
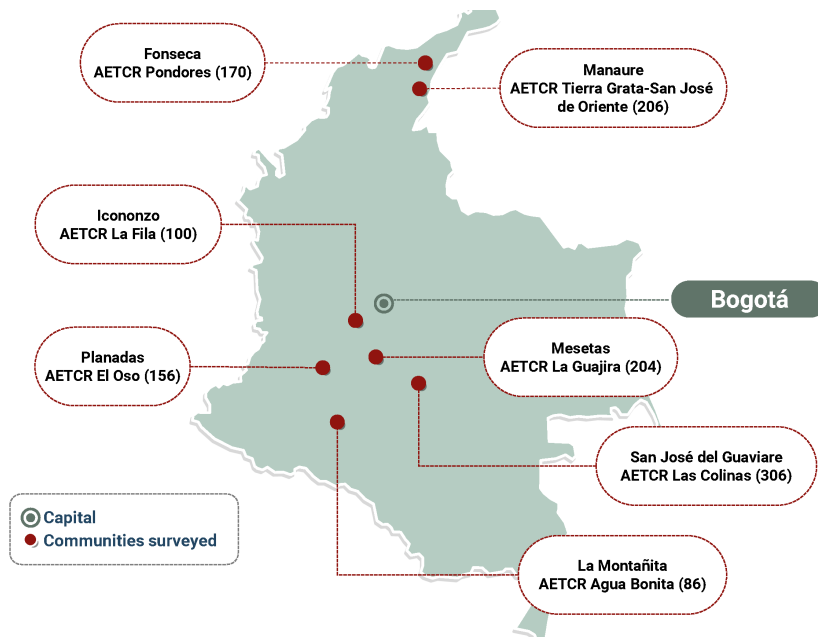
In this TraCe Policy Brief, we summarize the key findings of a research project conducted with support from the German-Colombian Peace Institute (*Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz* – CAPAZ). Our survey, fielded in seven rural municipalities with AETCRs, suggests that contacts—in-person interactions—between members of the surrounding local communities and former combatants have helped reduce social distance and mistrust, and furthermore, have increased the population's support for the peace process. In the following section, we introduce our study and present some of the main quantitative results of the project. We then illustrate some of the forms of interaction and cooperation observed in the communities we surveyed, which according to our analysis, contributed to reducing mistrust and social distance. We conclude with a series of recommendations.[3]

The study

This TraCe Policy Brief is based on a collaborative research project conducted by the authors with the support of the *Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz* (CAPAZ, Bogotá) and Rice University (Houston, TX). A German version has been published as PRIF Spotlight 10/2023, and a more comprehensive version is available in Spanish under the title *La reconstrucción del tejido social mediante la interacción entre comunidades y excombatientes de las FARC-EP* as a CAPAZ Policy Brief.

More contacts, more trust: The general pattern

To determine whether contact between members of neighboring communities and former FARC-EP combatants has contributed to reducing social distance and mistrust in the local population, we conducted field visits between January and December 2022 in seven municipalities with AETCRs, collecting in-person surveys from 1,228 individuals (see map).[4] We statistically analyzed these 1,288 questionnaires using regression analyses to explore whether there was a systematic empirical association between the

Fonseca
AETCR Pondores (170)

Manaure
AETCR Tierra Grata-San José
de Oriente (206)

Icononzo
AETCR La Fila (100)

Bogotá

Planadas
AETCR El Oso (156)

Mesetas
AETCR La Guajira (204)

San José del Guaviare
AETCR Las Colinas (306)

⊙ Capital
● Communities surveyed

La Montañita
AETCR Agua Bonita (86)

Legend: In addition to the names of the municipality and the respective AETCR, the information includes the number of surveys conducted (in parentheses).

variables "contact" and "social distance, " while considering additional control variables in our models. Since we were interested in whether contact leads to a reduction in social distance, the two variables were defined in a way that minimized the likelihood of reverse causality—low social distance leading to less contact—in line with previous studies.[5] Specifically, we measured social distance by asking respondents whether they would mind having a former FARC-EP combatant as their boss or as the spouse of a close relative.[6]

In brief, our analysis reveals a consistent, statistically significant, and negative relationship between contact and social distance. This means that members of local communities who have had contact with former combatants are, on average, less socially distant from them, compared to respondents who have had no contact. The more frequent the contact, the more pronounced the reduction in social distance. Furthermore, there are no systematic differences among the seven municipalities we studied. Taken together, these findings provide clear evidence of a general and positive impact of interaction between the local population and former combatants within the framework of the Colombian peace process.

Trust-building effects of contact between the local population and former combatants are also evident in responses to additional questions. As the figure illustrates, support for the peace and reintegration processes is, on average, 14 percent and 13 percent higher among individuals who have had contact with former combatants than among those who have not, respectively. In the group who have had contact, support for the political

participation of former combatants is, on average, 18 percent higher, and the likelihood of voting for a former FARC-EP member in future elections is 21 percent higher.
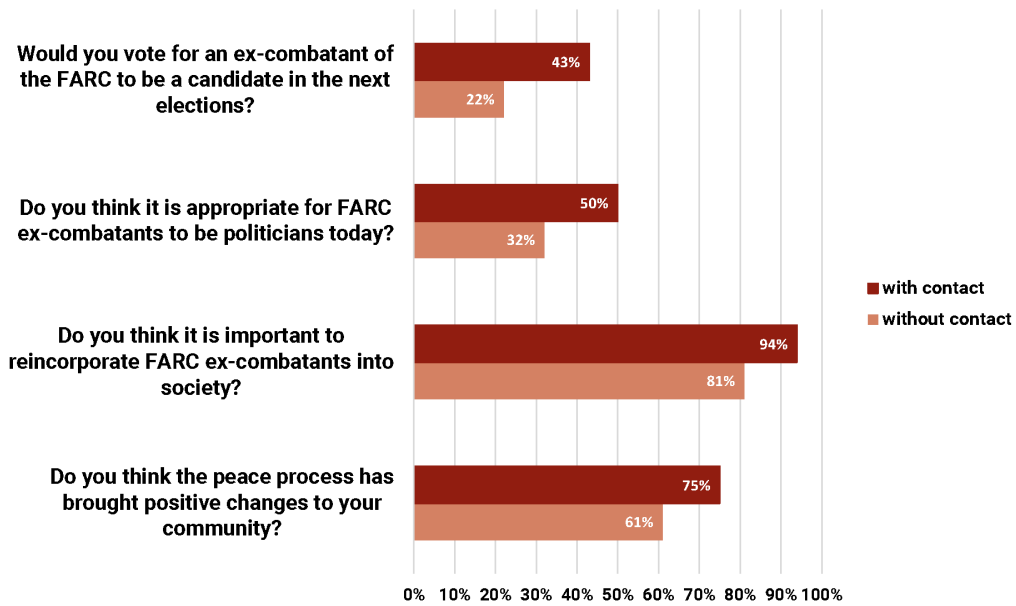
Forms of interaction and cooperation

What lies behind the abstract category of social contacts? Our research in the seven municipalities points to three forms of cooperation that bring the local population and former FARC-EP combatants into contact with each other: local infrastructure and service provision initiatives; productive projects; and education, culture, and sports initiatives.

First, the establishment of the current AETCRs was accompanied by initiatives to improve local infrastructure and the provision of basic public services. For example, in the case of Tierra Grata (Manaure), these services are jointly managed by the local population and a group of former combatants. Additionally, facilities such as supermarkets and restaurants have been built within the AETCRs and these are accessible to the surrounding communities. In the case of Colinas (San José del Guaviare), an ambulance and local health facilities were established, which also serve the residents of the nearby villages.

Second, as part of the reintegration process, projects aimed at the production and processing of goods were launched and financially supported, often benefiting the surrounding rural communities as well. In Agua Bonita's AETCR (La Montañita), thanks to international development cooperation, a facility was built to convert raw materials into pulp. In Colinas, one of the projects

Figure: Perceptions of former combatants and the peace process

Would you vote for an ex-combatant of the FARC to be a candidate in the next elections? — with contact: 43%, without contact: 22%

Do you think it is appropriate for FARC ex-combatants to be politicians today? — with contact: 50%, without contact: 32%

Do you think it is important to reincorporate FARC ex-combatants into society? — with contact: 94%, without contact: 81%

Do you think the peace process has brought positive changes to your community? — with contact: 75%, without contact: 61%

Legend: ■ with contact ■ without contact

implemented was to process raw materials from the harvest of the surrounding villages.

Third, former combatants and community members regularly collaborate on joint educational projects. Across the AETCRs that were examined for this study, a project conducted by the National Open and Distance University (*Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia*) and funded by the Norwegian Refugee Council, for example, enabled hundreds of former combatants and members of neighboring communities to pursue their first academic degree together. In terms of cultural initiatives, the arts and cultural festival *Sembrando paz* ("Sowing Peace") is worth mentioning. This two-day event takes place annually with one of the days being held within the AETCR in La Fila (Icononzo) and the other in the urban center of the municipality, promoting artistic exchange and reconciliation between the groups. Additionally, members of the surrounding villages visit the AETCR area to use the sports facilities.

However, it is also the case that across the municipalities that were part of this project, contacts between the local population and former combatants decrease with increasing geographical distance from the AETCRs. In particular, residents of the small town centers of the municipalities often have little to no contact with former FARC-EP members, primarily due to the remoteness of the AETCRs and the poor conditions of the roads. As a consequence, mistrust toward former combatants especially persists in these urban areas.

Conclusions

The implementation of the 2016 peace agreement and the overall peace process in Colombia face numerous challenges that cannot be discussed here.[7] However, our study suggests that a core objective of the reintegration of former combatants appears to been successfully achieved: their collective territorial reintegration is contributing to the reduction of the perceived social distance and mistrust among the local population. Direct contact is key to this success. The conditions that facilitate or limit the interaction between the local population and former FARC-EP combatants are therefore crucial. This underscores the importance of programs that bring together people living within and outside the AETCRs and that promote cooperation between these two groups. Based on this, we would like to make three recommendations.

First, the initiatives, experiences, and social relationships that have been developed since 2017 as part of the reintegration process should be protected. In this regard, the Colombian state has the primary responsibility to prevent the gradual and fragile progress achieved in marginalized regions of the country from being threatened by the ongoing dynamics of violence and the presence of armed groups. Recent experiences in Mesetas (Meta) reinforce this. In March 2023, former FARC-EP members and their families had to leave their AETCR due to various threats from one of the remaining FARC-EP dissident groups. In May, the national government purchased 1,460 hectares of land in another municipality (Acacías) to allow

the former combatants to continue their reintegration process there.[8] This change implies that here, the process of reconstructing the social fabric and building trust with the new host communities has to be started from scratch.

Second, the findings of our study emphasize the importance of the diverse initiatives and projects that facilitate contact and cooperation between local communities and former combatants. The commitment of the local actors themselves is crucial for these projects. However, they often also require external support, whether from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, or international development cooperation. For numerous productive projects, educational initiatives, and cultural activities, it is essential to maintain or build upon such support.

Third, our study shows that the reduction of social distance and the progress achieved in the trust-building process have primarily been observed in rural communities in close proximity to the AETCRs. Projects and initiatives, whether driven by state institutions or non-state actors and international development cooperation, should therefore actively involve the urban centers of the municipalities as well, including by means of public campaigns aimed at countering the stigmatization of former guerrilla fighters.

Finally, maintaining the commitment to the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement and strengthening it through the involvement of violent actors who are still active remains of central importance. Without tangible progress toward a peace that encompasses the marginalized rural regions of Colombia, the advances in reconstructing the social fabric that we have observed in our study will remain limited and persistently at risk.

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[1] See, e.g., Gordon W. Allport, The Nature of Prejudice (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954); Zvi Bekerman and Gabriel Horenczyk "Arab-Jewish Bilingual Coeducation in Israel: A Long-Term Approach to Intergroup Conflict Resolution," Journal of Social Issues 60, no. 2 (2004): 389–404; Miles Hewstone and Katharina Schmid, "Neighbourhood Ethnic Diversity and Orientations Toward Muslims in Britain: The Role of Intergroup Contact," The Political Quarterly 85, no. 3 (2014): 320–325.

[2] See, e.g., Alberto Rodríguez et al., De las Zonas Veredales Transitorias De Normalización a la Paz Territorial. Tensiones, conflictos y retos en el suroccidente de Colombia, Bogotá (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Colombia/Instituto CAPAZ, ideas verdes 10: 2018); https://co.boell.org/sites/default/files/20180913_ideas_verdes_10_web_ok.pdf.

[3] This TraCe Policy Brief summarizes a Spanish-language Policy Brief published by the Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz (CAPAZ) in Bogotá: Laura Barrios Sabogal, Santiago López Álvarez, and Jonas Wolff, La reconstrucción del tejido social mediante la interacción entre comunidades y excombatientes de las FARC-EP, Bogotá: Instituto CAPAZ (CAPAZ Policy Brief 10-2023); https://www.instituto-capaz.org/nuevo-policy-brief-capaz-la-reconstruccion-del-tejido-social-mediante-la-interaccion-entre-comunidades-y-excombatientes-de-las-farc-ep/. A German version has been published as PRIF Spotlight 10/2023 ("Reintegration durch lokale Interaktion: Der kolumbianische Friedensprozess aus Sicht ländlicher Gemeinschaften"; https://www.prif.org/publikationen/publikationssuche/publikation/reintegration-durch-lokale-interaktion. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support provided in conducting the study, particularly during the fieldwork phase, by the student members of the research team: Camila Forero García, Martín Gómez Perry, and Odan Acero Arnedo.

[4] In selecting the seven municipalities, we attempted to take regional and cultural differences into account, as well as variations in local conditions in order to include a reasonably broad spectrum of municipalities with AETCRs for the study. Nevertheless, case selection was also influenced by practical research considerations, such as safety conditions and accessibility. The questionnaire included questions on various topics related to the peace process, as well as personal and/or family experiences of victimization, political identity and ideology, perceptions and experiences of contact with former FARC combatants, indicators for assessing social distance, and demographic questions (see also the footnote 5).

[5] See Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–783; Nicole Tausch, Miles Hewstone, Jared Kenworthy, Ed Cairns, and Oliver Christ,: "Cross-Community Contact, Perceived Status Differences, and Intergroup Attitudes in Northern Ireland: The Mediating Roles of Individual-Level versus Group-level Threats and the Moderating Role of Social Identification," Political Psychology 28, no. 1 (2007): 53–68.

[6] Our dependent (outcome) variable, "social distance," combines the responses to two questions, each of which asks on a five-point scale whether the respondents would mind having a former FARC combatant (a) as their boss or (b) as the spouse of a close relative. According to relevant survey research, these scenarios are not expected to inherently influence the likelihood of social contact. The key independent (explanatory) variable, "contact," was measured both dichotomously (Have you had any contact with former combatants: yes/no?) and on a five-point scale (from "never" to "daily"). Control variables included in the regression analysis encompass factors such as the respondents' status as victims of the armed conflict and their general assessment of the peace process—variables that are likely to influence both the probability of contact and the level of perceived social distance toward former combatants.

[7] For the implementation of the peace agreement, see, among others, Kroc Institute, Seis años de implementación del Acuerdo Final: retos y oportunidades en el nuevo ciclo político, diciembre 2021 a noviembre 2022 (Notre Dame: Kroc Institute, 2023); https://doi.org/10.7274/41687h17d1g, or Kroc Institute, Implementation of the Colombian Peace Accord Reaches its Sixth Year (Notre Dame: Kroc Institute, 2023); Policy Brief, June 2023; https://doi.org/10.7274/6395w666821. For a more general overview of the peace process and its current challenges, see, among others, Crisis Group, "Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to 'Total Peace'," International Crisis Group Latin America Report no. 98 (24 February 2023); https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/98-protecting-colombias-most-vulnerable-road-total-peace; Indepaz, Balance de seguridad: Primer año del Gobierno Petro (Bogotá: Indepaz, 2023); https://indepaz.org.co/balance-de-seguridad-primer-ano-del-gobierno-petro; Pares, Mitos y Realidades de la Paz Total (Bogotá: Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (Pares), 2023); https://www.pares.com.co/post/mitos-y-realidades-de-la-paz-total.

[8] See Laura Barrios Sabogal, Santiago López Álvarez, and Jonas Wolff, "¿Qué está en riesgo en Mesetas, Meta?," El Espectador (23 March 2023); https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/analistas/que-esta-en-riesgo-en-mesetas-meta; Lizeth Suesca, "Gobierno adquirió 1460 hectáreas para firmantes de paz del AETCR de Mesetas, Meta," Caracol (20 May 2023); https://caracol.com.co/2023/05/20/gobierno-adquirio-1460-hectareas-para-firmantes-de-paz-del-aetcr-de-mesetas-meta.