



UNITED NATIONS
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MEAC Colombia Case Study Report

The Evolution of Inclusion:

Three Decades of Policies and
Programmes to Manage Exits from Armed
Groups in Colombia

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank. While this report benefited from feedback from MEAC donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily reflect their official policies or positions.

ISBN: 978-92-808-6543-1 © United Nations University, 2021.

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Citation: Cristal Downing et al., *The Evolution of Inclusion: Three Decades of Policies and Programmes to Manage Exits from Armed Groups in Colombia* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) supports a range of efforts that aim to resolve conflicts and build peace. Part of the UN's conflict resolution and peacebuilding infrastructure is dedicated to supporting and implementing interventions that provide the conditions and means for individuals formerly associated with armed groups to successfully transition to civilian life. Much of the UN's attention over the last 30 years has been oriented to efforts, commonly termed disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)ⁱ, to help individual ex-combatants reintegrate into civilian society - often to bolster peace processes or manage potential spoilers following a peace agreement. In recent years, the UN has supported DDR in contexts where there is no semblance of a peace process, during active conflict, and in places rife with listed terrorist group activity. Alongside these and other challenges, DDR interventions have developed over time and become broader in scope and ambition. Despite important lessons learned as a result, there remains a gap in knowledge on which models work effectively, for whom, and under which conditions. This scarcity of knowledge undermines effective UN and Member State programming, mandating, policymaking, and resource allocation, and ultimately decreases prospects for sustainable peace.

The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project seeks to redress this knowledge gap. One of the MEAC project case studies is Colombia – a context made unique by the national Government's longstanding ownership of DDR processes and the support provided by the UN Country Team – not by a UN peace operation as has occurred in many other contexts. In Colombia, MEAC will test its data collection methodology to draw out lessons learned over the long trajectory of DDR there, and its design and implementation with a range of different armed groups whose members have begun the transition to civilian life both within and outside the context of peace agreements. The MEAC project will provide evidence to support several relevant interventions by the national Government and the UN in Colombia.

The objective of this paper is to provide a history of DDR policy and programming in Colombia and derive lessons learned that can be applied to other contexts. The paper pays special attention to how international and national factors (including the work of the UN) have influenced the design and implementation of relevant interventions in Colombia; how policy and programmatic decision-making have served the overarching goal of conflict resolution in the country; and what the impact of these factors and decisions has been on children, women, and ethnic minorities within the population of individuals formerly associated with armed groups.ⁱⁱ This paper traces the shifts and policy and programmatic outcomes that have shaped Colombia's approach to DDR today. It draws on an extensive literature review and more than 15 interviews conducted between November 2020 and August 2021 with stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of relevant interventions at different points of Colombia's history, to better understand the evolution of Colombia's approach to disengagement policy and programming.

This report will first provide an overview of the background to the Colombian conflict until the late 1980s. The subsequent section is divided into key time periods, from 1989 to the present, which

ⁱ Although there are many types of interventions that support the transition to civilian life by individuals leaving armed groups, this report will use the terms DDR, reintegration, and reincorporation in accordance with the terminology used in the Colombian context, as will be described later in the report.

ⁱⁱ This paper uses the UN definition of "child" as anyone under the age of 18 years old, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations, 20 November 1989, A/RES/44/25, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

represent key inflection points in Colombia's policy and programmatic approach to DDR interventions. This analysis will also note how changes in eligibility requirements over time impacted different groups of people, by employing "differential approaches" used by stakeholders in Colombia.ⁱⁱⁱ This section will also analyse the role of the UN in DDR efforts in Colombia, reflecting the needs of the Government and other stakeholders as they evolved over the decades of national and international shifts. The report then analyses the implications of these shifts for ex-combatants themselves, the conflict, and the 2016 peace agreement between the Government and the FARC-EP, and highlights some lessons learned.

Background to the Colombian Conflict

In 1948, a period known as 'La Violencia' began, characterized by fighting between the Liberal and Conservative political parties, and driven by socioeconomic disparities in access to land and basic services, to the disadvantage of the rural majority.¹ Continued violence, increasing frustration over inequality, military heavy-handedness, and the parties' differences² led to the founding of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 1964, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in 1964, and other guerrilla groups.³ For the next two decades, the violence between these guerrilla groups and the State was characterized as a low-intensity armed conflict, mainly in rural areas.⁴

In the 1980s, paramilitary groups proliferated, adding a third side to the armed conflict.⁵ At the same time, cocaine production and trafficking – previously quite small in scale – increased in Colombia, adding a new economic dimension to the conflict as groups tapped into the drug trade as a source of financing.⁶ The expansion of the drug trade was accompanied by bouts of more intense conflict as all sides struggled to gain and maintain a military advantage over each other.⁷ The groups grew rapidly: for example, the FARC expanded from around 1,500 combatants in 1982 to more than 5,000 in 1989.⁸ As the conflict intensified in the early 1990s international calls to quell the drug trade grew, armed groups expanded and multiplied, and successive governments became more motivated to explore ways to reduce violence and national illegal drug production by providing these groups with viable exits from conflict.

Over the following decades, these outlets came in both political and programmatic form – first through peace processes, then through the implementation of measures to integrate formerly associated individuals into political and socioeconomic life as civilians. The latter – interventions to support adult ex-combatants exiting the conflict in Colombia – have evolved over time alongside shifts in conflict and political dynamics, and with peacebuilding policy. Colombian reintegration and reincorporation efforts have – as a result – become inherently linked to the opening of the democratic space to facilitate the entry of new political actors, including those previously represented by armed groups.⁹

30 years of Reintegration Policy in Colombia

The following section provides an overview of the political and programmatic shifts that have constituted milestones in the evolution and implementation of DDR as a tool for conflict resolution in Colombia. The section is divided into key time periods that recognize policy and programmatic shifts, with particular attention paid to how different iterations of programming addressed – to varying degrees – the needs of subgroups of ex-combatants over the last three decades, and what the UN's role has been at different points along this trajectory. This historical overview is divided into six time periods:

ⁱⁱⁱ A differential focus is used in DDR in Colombia to understand and address the impact of gender, age, ethnicity, and other characteristics on individuals' experiences, needs, and priorities as they exit an armed group and transition to civilian life. For example, the differential focus on gender aims to ensure equal status across genders and to increase women's participation in all stages of DDR (ARN, 2020; Artega, 2012; Farr, 2002).

- 1989-1994, when peace agreements with several guerrilla groups motivated the creation of a new institutional architecture to support reintegration;
- 1996-2002, when progress made on child protection at the international level was reflected in new national measures to prevent child recruitment and facilitate child reintegration;
- 2002-2007, when the Auto-Defensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) paramilitary structures demobilized and individuals started the transition to civilian life in a new reintegration process;
- 2007-2009, when efforts were made to strengthen the “differential focus” of reintegration, which aimed to address the needs and experiences of children, women, and ethnic groups;
- 2010-2011, when the institutional architecture of reintegration became more inclusive;
- 2012-2021, during which time a peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP shaped the arc of interventions that support the transition to civilian life in Colombia.

1989-1994: Peace Agreements Usher in a New Institutional Architecture for Reintegration

After several failed government attempts to negotiate peace with diverse parties to the conflict, successful negotiations – motivated by increased pressure on the Government to de-escalate the conflict – in the early 1990s led to agreements. This included opening of democratic space for guerrilla groups making the transition to political party, and the development of institutional architecture that provided for interventions to support the transition to civilian life by individuals leaving these groups.

Political and Programmatic Shifts

A few peace processes under the presidency of Belisario Betacur, including the La Uribe agreement with the FARC in 1984, had resulted in the demobilization of a limited number of guerrilla groups and led to the creation of the Union Patriótica (UP) political party by the FARC. The UP enjoyed some success in local elections, but the visible nature of their candidates’ campaigns made them easy targets for the increasingly active paramilitary groups,¹⁰ and thousands of UP members were killed in just a few years – with estimates that range from 1,500 to over 4,000.¹¹ The FARC’s goal of maintaining one foot in politics and another in the conflict backfired, and the group decided to concentrate much more on military strategy.¹²

The FARC’s violent response to the assassination of UP members, combined with failed peace processes with other guerrilla groups and increased paramilitary activity, meant that by the early nineties there was both public pressure on the Government to bring about peace, and more combat-related pressure on the guerrilla groups to exit the conflict. In March 1990, President Virgilio Barco signed a peace agreement with the 19th of April Movement (M-19) guerrilla group, and less than one year later his successor, César Gaviria, signed agreements with the Workers Revolutionary Party (PRT), Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), and Quintin Lame Armed Movement (MAQL). These agreements opened the political landscape, with all of the guerrilla groups demanding mechanisms for increased political participation by both themselves and the general population, and pushing the Government to hold a Constituent Assembly to write a new Constitution.¹³ In 1991, the Constituent Assembly was brought together to draft a new Constitution, creating mechanisms that provided the Colombian population with additional justice and democratic guarantees.¹⁴ Some former guerrilla members met success as candidates in local elections in the coming years, but were also the targets of attacks that eventually dissuaded their political participation.¹⁵

The DDR processes created for ex-combatants from these groups paved the way for the support later provided to the AUC. For these guerrilla groups, the Government of President César Gaviria created a

National Normalization Council with the main objective of supervising disarmament and monitoring reinsertion programmes, and NGOs were also established to manage group-specific projects.¹⁶ These NGOs were intimately tied to the former guerrilla groups' political objectives, as they ensured a means through which the ex-combatants could channel funds into community projects and other local activities that connected them with their base. They also provided a form of cohesion through which the group-turned-party leadership could maintain group identity and continue the political project.¹⁷

These institutional developments were further formalized under President Ernesto Samper, who elevated the Council to the status of National Office for Reinsertion, responsible for the new Reinsertion Policy.¹⁸ Significantly, Decree 1385 of 1994 recognized the distinction between collective and individual demobilization, allowing for the possibility that individuals could voluntarily leave their armed groups of their own accord and in the absence of a broader group demobilization, turn themselves in, and apply for benefits under the existing law.¹⁹ The DDR processes in the early nineties were closely linked to the political objectives of the guerrilla groups' leadership, whose entire approach to the negotiation seems to have been founded on an interpretation of DDR as a political tool that could help transform the group into a political force, rather than an intervention focused on day-to-day support for its rank and file who were being asked to stand down. The close relationship between DDR design and armed group political objectives is an intermittent theme throughout the next 30 years of DDR in Colombia, as will be seen below.

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

The need to develop public policies with a “differential” approach to address the needs of specific subpopulations was addressed in Colombia for the first time in the 1991 Constitution. The inclusion of the “differential focus” was motivated by a desire for practitioners to understand and address the impact of an armed conflict as heterogeneous across the population. However, the demobilizations of the early 1990s show no evidence of differential considerations towards women ex-combatants,²⁰ children, or ethnic groups. One exception to this was the demobilization of the MAQL. In this case, the group's identity was closely tied to its roots as an armed movement that claimed to represent indigenous groups across Colombia. Upon demobilization, the group successfully argued for several elements of a differential approach in its political and socioeconomic reintegration, including “the participation of a delegate observer in the National Constituent Assembly [in 1991], support for local development plans in indigenous territories, human rights commitments, and legal and political guarantees” through the Indigenous Social Alliance (ASI) political party. Along the same lines, the reintegration process for this group was designed and implemented with the indigenous authorities.²¹

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

There is little evidence of UN involvement in the guerrilla demobilizations of the 1990s in Colombia. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that DDR itself was arguably a relatively new, and certainly small, area of work for the UN at the time, with most of its experience gained in the armed group demobilizations of Central America and southern Africa. In addition, the presence of the UN in Colombia was limited in the early 1990s, focusing on protecting the rights of children and adolescents, preventing the production, trafficking, and consumption of drugs, and promoting human development and human rights. Work in these areas was carried out through a UNICEF office – present in Colombia since 1950 – and the implementation of monitoring processes through the United Nations Information Centre.²²

1996-2002: International Measures Influence the Approach to Children in Armed Groups

In the late nineties, armed groups were expanding their ranks rapidly, including through the recruitment of children. International norm-setting on this topic created external pressure that, combined with internal pressure to address patterns of child recruitment, encouraged policymakers in Colombia to move the domestic framework forward. Such progress was not seen, however, in laws and policies that aimed to address the needs of women and ethnic groups.

Political and Programmatic Shifts

Any optimism brought about by the demobilizations of the early 1990s was soon quashed as the drug trade boomed further and paramilitary groups united under the umbrella of the AUC in 1997, driving conflict violence to new levels.²³ Law 418 of 1997 reinforced the normative framework surrounding reintegration, and in 1999 the Government of President Pastrana began talks with the FARC that gave cause for optimism that new DDR support would soon be needed.²⁴ However, these talks broke down in 2002 – having never touched on DDR - and with no large-scale demobilizations on the horizon, there was little motivation to continue to develop and institutionalize processes that would support the transition to civilian life for new groups.²⁵ While this period was not marked by new agreements to disband or by the expansion of DDR programming, it was characterized by a significant shift in the Government's approach to children associated with armed groups in Colombia – a change that was in part influenced by UN measures and international pressure.

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

The late 1990s saw several significant developments at the national and international levels that impacted Colombia's approach to child protection in conflict. According to Human Rights Watch and other analysts, this shift coincided with an increased effort by the FARC, ELN, and AUC to expand their ranks by systematically recruiting children.²⁶ At the international level, the seminal Machel Report of 1996 refocused the international spotlight on war's impact on children, including children's association with armed groups and armed forces.²⁷ Advocacy groups and the UN pointed to the report as evidence that Member States should do more to prevent child recruitment and support children who had been involved in conflict. Just two years later, the International Labour Organization (ILO) named the involvement of children in armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour, further solidifying the international framework of relevant child protection standards. This rounded out the new institutional architecture on child soldiering, which included the newly mandated Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict as well as the aforementioned norms and nascent evidence base.

As international attention increased, Colombia took steps to advance its national framework to address child recruitment. In 1997, Law 418 was passed with the goal of clarifying the conditions for amnesty and peace processes,²⁸ recognizing formerly associated children as victims of kidnapping who should receive reparations. Just as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child was under development, Colombia ratified the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour in 1999 and enacted Law 548, prohibiting military service or recruitment of minors under the age of 18.²⁹ Subsequently, Decree 1137 (1999) launched a pilot child reintegration programme that later developed into the current programme led by the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF).³⁰ One year later, also reflecting international developments, Law 599 (2000) defined the recruitment of minors for their direct or indirect use in hostilities as a crime.³¹ Law 782 (2002) built on earlier laws and defined child recruits who took part in hostilities as victims and officially designated the ICBF as responsible for providing them with protection programmes.³² These reactions to international norm-setting processes demonstrate that Colombia was paying attention to multilateral child protection standards and responsive to the emerging international norm against child soldiering.

There is less evidence that the needs of women and ethnic groups were being as closely considered in the development of relevant policies and programmes during this period.

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

The UN presence in Colombia during this period continued to focus on protecting the rights of children and adolescents; preventing the production, trafficking, and consumption of drugs; and promoting human development and human rights. Reflecting the nascent child protection measures addressing children's association with armed groups and the lack of a collective peace or demobilization process to which to provide support, the UN agencies present in Colombia at this time were not involved in the implementation of DDR programmes. The UN also maintained an Envoy to support the Government-FARC peace talks until they terminated in 2002.³³

2002-2009: Demobilization of the AUC Motivates Changes in Eligibility Requirements for Reintegration Processes

After 20 years of increasingly violent and geographically expansive activity by the paramilitary groups, their different blocs entered negotiations with the administration of President Uribe. Agreements with these groups led to modifications to eligibility requirements that would otherwise have prevented former AUC members from entering reintegration programming, to allow adults leaving these groups access to these interventions.

Political and Programmatic Shifts

President Uribe came to office in 2002 on an electoral platform founded on his "Democratic Security Plan", which emphasized the militarized aspects of security and counter-insurgency to defeat the guerrillas. Soon after, Law 782 of 2002 was passed, which had a significant impact on reintegration by opening eligibility to armed groups that were deemed non-political actors.³⁴ In concrete terms, this meant that the paramilitaries, until then considered a criminal group under Colombian law, could qualify for reintegration benefits upon demobilization.³⁵ Uribe was allowing for paramilitary demobilizations as he worked to draw the groups' members out of the conflict and their leaders towards negotiations.

One year later the "Santa Fe Ralito Agreement" was reached and the first bloc of the AUC demobilized. By the end of 2006, 35 blocs – all but the Casanare bloc (Autodefensas Campesinas del Casanare) – entered the DDR process. However, the internal details – including the content – of the Government-AUC negotiations remain somewhat unknown, even to experts on the Colombian conflict.³⁶ During their three years (2003-2006), the negotiations with the AUC went through several controversies, with national and international human rights groups expressing concern over the attempts to provide AUC leaders with amnesty for crimes against humanity without regard for victims' rights, as well as calls from the US and others to ensure that justice – including extradition to the US – was guaranteed for international drug trafficking crimes. These controversies also defined the rhythm of talks and demobilizations: when it seemed that the Government was willing to address these public outcries, talks would move forward and paramilitary blocs would demobilize; in moments of doubt or mistrust, demobilizations would stop.³⁷

The talks with the AUC almost fell apart over lack of agreement on what the AUC leaders' judicial process should comprise, but in July 2005, Law 975 – the Justice and Peace Law – was passed in an attempt to provide some clarity on the legal situation of the group's leadership after demobilization³⁸ and in response to national and international pressures to recognize victims' rights. This law focused on justice in the form of truth, reparations, and non-repetition relating to crimes for which AUC

leadership was considered responsible.³⁹ In a sudden change of heart from the Government – after the Constitutional Court declared parts of the law unconstitutional - the law was modified in 2006 to remove amnesties for crimes against humanity and crimes not related to the conflict, including drug trafficking,⁴⁰ resulting in jail time for those AUC leaders considered responsible for such acts.

As a result, the AUC leaders felt that they had been bamboozled – they had entered the negotiations thinking that they would not be punished for their crimes, and had demobilized their units under the same impression before later finding out that they did, in fact, have to confess their crimes and serve time in prison.⁴¹ The Justice and Peace Law – focused entirely on judicial benefits and obligations of the AUC leaders – remained the legal guidance behind the high commanders’ reintegration.⁴²

Given that nearly 32,000 ex-combatants demobilized collectively during the AUC process, in 2006 a new institution was created to manage all aspects of reintegration – the High Council for Reintegration (Alta Consejería para la Reintegración, or ACR). This transformed reintegration from a short-term to a long-term programme, moving from a focus on the services needed to support ex-combatants immediately after demobilization to an approach that contemplated their needs, experiences, and priorities in the medium term.⁴³ In 2008, the foundation provided by Laws 782 and 975 was further solidified with the elevation of reintegration to State policy through National Social and Economic Reincorporation Policy (CONPES) 3554.⁴⁴

One key aspect of the AUC demobilization was the question of what motivated the AUC leaders to enter the negotiations in the first place.⁴⁵ Although most experts agree that the connections between the AUC leadership and politicians were still strong in the late nineties and early 2000s, the difference of opinion focuses on whether or not the AUC wanted to build on these connections by formalizing their role in politics. For example, a senior official at an international organization that worked closely with the Government to plan and implement the reintegration process did not think that the AUC had political motivations when they entered negotiations: “They were already in politics...they were already in Congress...and political participation wasn’t within the possibilities [discussed in the negotiation].⁴⁶ Catalina Acevedo, a senior International Organization for Migration (IOM) official who at the time worked on the Government’s High Commissioner for Peace team in charge of planning the demobilization at the time, presented a different view:^{iv} “The idea was for them to leave illegality so that they could enter political positions.”⁴⁷ In fact, she proposed that the leadership was so focused on their own political gains - and the amnesties and pardons that were necessary for them to attain their goals - that they overlooked the reintegration of their rank-and-file members and mid-ranking commanders, resulting in a lack of dedicated resources for the ACR to implement reintegration programming. Other explanations of why the AUC demobilized at this time focus on the leadership’s frustration with loss of control over the group’s involvement in the drug trade, while others argue that international pressure forced the leadership to agree to negotiate.⁴⁸

The reintegration of rank-and-file AUC was stymied by a lack of focus on this population, a rushed timeline, sparse resources designated to the process, and a lack of clarity on the legal framework that supported it. One result of the lack of focus on rank-and-file and mid-rank reintegration, according to Acevedo, was the creation of new post-demobilization groups, as these subpopulations of ex-combatants had not received adequate reintegration support.⁴⁹ This lack of support also stemmed from the fact that former members of the AUC were rushed into a process based on the individual reintegration model that had been implemented since the nineties, managed by the ex-AUC’s NGOs. The Ministry of the Interior, in charge of the reintegration process at the time, did not have the resources or capacity to manage the sudden surge in numbers of participants that resulted from the AUC demobilization: there were reports of only one social worker per 1,500 or 2,000 ex-combatants.⁵⁰

^{iv} Acevedo’s comments – cited throughout this text - represent her personal views based on her past experience, and do not the institutional positions of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The lack of clarity around the legal status of rank-and-file ex-combatants is another potential indicator of the lack of attention paid to the terms and conditions of their reintegration during the Government-AUC discussions. According to the legal framework that applied to the reintegration of the rank-and-file members of the AUC, they had to contribute to truth and other aspects of victims' reparations in order to qualify for reintegration benefits. However, they could not participate in the truth-telling processes of the Justice and Peace Law because they were not responsible for crimes against humanity, and there was no other outlet through which they could fulfil this requirement. They were therefore launched into a legal limbo, unable to complete their reintegration process until this loophole was closed by Law 1424 of 2010, as outlined below. Furthermore, the reintegration of the mid-ranking AUC commanders went totally unaddressed by the rank-and-file reintegration process, and so many returned to armed group life, leading to the birth of new criminal groups.⁵¹ What remains unclear, therefore, is the degree to which political goals motivated the AUC leadership: did they want to formally enter politics, or was their influence through others enough? Further research on this question is still needed.

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

During and after peace talks with the AUC, the Colombian Government began to adopt laws, policies, and programme guidance on how to support specific ex-combatant populations such as women and children on almost a yearly basis, as part of efforts to develop a comprehensive transitional justice framework. Law 975 of 2005 reiterated that child recruitment was a crime and specified that its victims were legally eligible for reparations, justice, and truth.⁵² Also in 2005, the Constitutional Court decided through Sentence C-203/05 that the judicial and institutional response to child reintegration should be focused on re-socializing, rehabilitating, educating, and protecting children.⁵³ Law 1098 of 2006 – the Childhood and Adolescence Code – introduced mechanisms for child protection and for recruitment prevention.⁵⁴ However, as will be seen below, child reintegration was not directly addressed in the talks with the AUC⁵⁵ and it was later revealed that despite these small domestic steps forward in addressing the needs of children formerly associated with armed groups, children who were part of the AUC were not actually included in reintegration efforts at this time as AUC units did not report their inclusion in their ranks.

In terms of women formerly associated with armed groups, at the international level the Security Council had recognized the need to include gender-responsive measures in DDR processes in Resolution 1325, which established the Women, Peace and Security agenda, adopted in 2000.⁵⁶ Despite the international recognition of the need to include such a focus and the evidence that women had played a crucial role in the conflict until this point, little explicit attention was paid to gender in the peace processes with the AUC between 2003 and 2006.⁵⁷ Considerations that would allow women formerly associated with the AUC to fully participate in the transition to civilian life were absent in the demobilization and reintegration processes.⁵⁸ Neither at the international level nor within Colombian policymaking circles were the needs of ethnic groups highlighted – a seeming indication of ongoing neglect of this population's needs by stakeholders in relevant interventions.

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

The UN's presence in Colombia was slightly more expansive by the early 2000s, but was mostly focused on assistance to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and other victims of the conflict, rather than on assisting those – especially the AUC – who were making the transition away from armed groups and into civilian life. The UN did not at the time support the AUC DDR process out of concern about the lack of a coherent legal framework and fears that doing so might spark FARC retaliation against its staff and other unrelated programmes, as well as other concerns around the political sensitivity of the

AUC process.⁵⁹ Furthermore, UN agencies in Colombia are not permitted by the Government to contact armed groups directly, so whereas in other countries they have the ability to negotiate the handover of children to enter reintegration programming, this is not possible in Colombia.⁶⁰ The Government requested the Organization of American States (OAS) to monitor and verify the agreements with the AUC through the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP),⁶¹ and engagement with other international actors and foreign governments deepened. The Government and IOM began to meet to discuss AUC reintegration, and Member State donors present in Bogotá exhibited interest in supporting this process. Acevedo reported that the US soon gave a waiver so that the law prohibiting material support for listed terrorist groups would not be applied to entities involved in reintegration for the AUC, thereby facilitating assistance and injecting momentum and resources into the design and implementation of the AUC process.⁶²

The first significant step in international support for Colombian reintegration efforts came from IOM, at the request and with the support of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), to assist with data management to support the design and implementation of DDR activities.⁶³ The Tracking, Monitoring, and Evaluation System (SAME, by its Spanish acronym) was born, and not only represented the UN's first effort to support DDR in Colombia but also shaped data collection around DDR in Colombia for years to come.⁶⁴ However, the design and implementation of this data collection system brought with it many early challenges. During demobilizations, IOM was not permitted to ask certain questions about the ex-combatants' time in the armed group, for example their rank.⁶⁵ This had negative consequences further down the line, because the lack of understanding of mid-rank commanders' needs and experiences resulted in weak reintegration programming for them, a weakness to which many analysts at least partially attribute their return to armed violence later on, as mentioned above.⁶⁶ A further weakness was that although IOM designed the survey, the National Statistics Department – as national lead on data collection – rolled it out, and neither registered ex-combatant names nor assigned individuals codes that would allow follow-up. Hence, the data allowed a universal view of the ex-combatant population, but due to sensitivities around data collection, IOM was unable to set up a system that could track ex-combatant trajectories from day one of their demobilization.⁶⁷

IOM continued to design and implement different aspects of support to the AUC DDR process as the process developed. For example, the Organization set up an assistance model through regional assistance points – a model that still survives in Colombia's DDR interventions⁶⁸ - and carried out socialization activities with local entrepreneurs and national companies to engage them in the reintegration process, reduce the likelihood of rejection and bias, and eventually provide employment.⁶⁹ UNICEF also supported the reintegration of the few children who did exit the AUC – though not officially carried out under the umbrella of the peace agreements - and since then has implemented diverse interventions to support child reintegration in Colombia.⁷⁰

2007-2009: Challenges in Addressing the Needs of Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

The policy and programmatic shifts during this period were really focused on addressing the needs of specific subgroups of ex-combatants, especially children. Shortly after the justice processes of former AUC commanders began, it became known – both from public messages from advocacy groups and through the testimonies of some commanders themselves – that children had been excluded from the reintegration process, and sent back to their communities without being registered for any kind of reintegration support. Policy and programmatic efforts therefore focused on righting this mistake. Meanwhile, ethnic groups made progress on establishing their own reintegration programmes, supported by gradual advances in national policy.

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

Children

Building on the progress made on child reintegration and, more broadly, on child protection in conflict in the nineties, the Colombian Government continued to adopt laws and promote programmes that addressed the needs of former child recruits. The Government and the AUC, however, did not prioritize the needs of associated children in their negotiations, and children were not included in the reintegration plans agreed by the parties.⁷¹ The Inspector General's Office warned that the plight of 11,000 to 14,000 children believed to be within the ranks of the AUC was not being discussed, to the detriment of the process and their rights.⁷² Negotiations continued without addressing children. The AUC did not release children from their ranks as part of the demobilization, due to fears over the potential consequences that would be faced under international justice mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court.⁷³ Despite this, the Justice and Peace Law required that child recruitment and use had to be addressed in the transitional justice hearings of former AUC leaders. The testimonies of some AUC leaders confirmed what human rights groups had feared: children had been part of the AUC but were sent away with no reintegration benefits. The testimony of Freddy Rendón Herrera, alias "el Alemán", who led a paramilitary bloc in Urabá, was particularly revealing: he affirmed that the High Commissioner for Peace, Luis Carlos Restrepo, had requested that the paramilitary leaders send any minors in their ranks home before the demobilization so that they would not be registered as part of the process, as making the crime of child recruitment evident to the international community would put the negotiations at risk.⁷⁴

Given that the lack of reintegration benefits for child recruits from the AUC had now been made public, coinciding with the arrival of the mandated UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia in December 2008,⁷⁵ the Government scrambled to make amends. CONPES 3554 of 2008 identifies five age groups, including "disengaged" minors.⁷⁶ Importantly, this CONPES was the first policy implementation guidance to formalize the process of "re-establishment of rights" for former child recruits – an approach that has persisted to this day. This process was to be completed through the reintegration programme, led by ICBF until the child turned 18 years old; at that point they would pass to the adult agency, then-named the High Commission for Social and Economic Reintegration.⁷⁷

Furthermore, under a new High Commissioner for Peace, Frank Pearl, in 2009 the Government initiated a search process called "Finding Nemo" that aimed to trace the children who had left the AUC and ensure their access to ICBF reintegration benefits under newly adopted CONPES 3554.⁷⁸ The search was carried out in 20 of the 32 departments of the country, without a mass communications campaign due to security risks.⁷⁹ Several focus groups were held with the participation of 4,718 people, finally finding 273 adolescents and young people. Seventeen people were still under 18 years old at the time they were found, and about 47 per cent were in Antioquia.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the programme only found 275 former child recruits of the estimated 11,000 to 14,000, and most of them by that time were over the age of 18.⁸¹ This remains a sensitive topic among policymakers to this day. It also indicates a need for further research into how international norms meant to protect vulnerable populations can have unintended negative effects on policy and programme decision-making.

Women

In terms of women's needs, in 2006 the Security Council adopted Resolution 1820, followed by Resolution 1889 of 2009,⁸² both of which stress the urgency of protecting women and fulfilling their needs within all stages of DDR.⁸³ In Colombia in 2008, CONPES 3554 led to the creation of strategies meant to address the needs of women ex-combatants, especially in relation to their sexual and

reproductive health and to the prevention of different kinds of violence against them.⁸⁴ This was a significant step forward: for the first time, national public policy recognized the importance of addressing women's needs at all stages of the reintegration processes.⁸⁵ However, the policy was strongly criticized for expecting women ex-combatants to fulfill traditional gender roles, such as mothers or wives, while silencing the experiences of those who did not fit within these categories, especially single mothers, lesbians, or transgender women.⁸⁶ Furthermore, practitioners at the time criticized the child reintegration programme for not taking adequate measures to address the needs of girls and ethnic groups among others who should have been offered programming with a "differential focus" – a criticism that persists to the current day.⁸⁷

Ethnic Groups

The same CONPES 3554⁸⁸ recognized the autonomy of ethnic communities in Colombia and the need for a differential approach to their reintegration. However, in Afro-Colombian communities, a lack of consultation ultimately led to low levels of acceptance of community reintegration processes led by the national Government, making the processes' legitimacy and sustainability more difficult.⁸⁹ For example, the individual nature of subsidy provision to ex-combatants did not align with the principle of collective economic activity upheld by many Afro-Colombian communities, and created tension between individual reintegration process participants and their communities, which the National Centre for Historical Memory linked to an increased risk of recidivism.⁹⁰

In the case of indigenous populations, many indigenous organizations chose to develop their own reintegration initiatives, recognizing their autonomous nature.⁹¹ Indigenous authorities realized the damage caused by – and increased re-recruitment and recidivism risk stemming from – traditional practices that expelled individuals including children from their communities due to their involvement in conflict.⁹² A first reintegration initiative was therefore proposed by the Nasa indigenous communities through the Association of Indigenous Authorities (Cabildos) Norte del Cauca (ACIN) in 2008.⁹³ This initiative sought not to turn children away from the community but to reintegrate them as victims of forced recruitment,⁹⁴ recognizing "the community had to protect them – try to make them return to being collective subjects, indigenous subjects."⁹⁵ The collective aspect of this reintegration initiative is described by the Nasa as sustaining the dynamics and permanence of the indigenous movement of Cauca, because the indigenous movement leverages ex-combatants' desire to bring about social and political change, but allows them to do so without the use of weapons.⁹⁶

Other indigenous communities established norms for autonomous reintegration or a combination of their own processes and national reintegration support. Interestingly, in cases in which the indigenous child and adult reintegration processes took place through national institutional channels, imbalances and tensions between ex-combatants and their communities were observed as these processes were not coherent with community values and practices.⁹⁷ For example, the national reintegration process was preceded by interaction with the military in which ex-combatants were required to report information about their former group's operations. This was often perceived as collaboration with the State through the provision of military intelligence, leading to threats and in some cases murders of indigenous ex-combatants after their return to their communities. Alternative, indigenous-owned or jointly implemented processes did not have this requirement and therefore avoided this potential security threat to ex-combatants.⁹⁸

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

UNICEF played a key role in searching for and carrying out initial reinsertion support for approximately 350 children who exited the AUC over the course of the talks – not as the result of an AUC policy, but due to individual commanders who decided to allow the children to leave. The children were

registered and provided with medical services and other early support before being asked if they wanted to enter the ICBF process – which most did not – or would prefer to go home.⁹⁹ In 2009, the UN signed Framework Agreement 144 with the ICBF, the ACR, UNICEF, the Investment Fund for Peace, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, with the objective of supporting the aforementioned Finding Nemo programme to support children and adolescents who were not given the chance to participate in the AUC reintegration programming. The ACR was the entity in charge of leading the Finding Nemo project.¹⁰⁰ IOM and UNICEF played a crucial supporting role in this initiative, and the programming it implemented within Finding Nemo eventually merged with or evolved into both entities' own child recruitment prevention programmes. Also at this time, UNDP and other agencies were working to initiate peacebuilding initiatives, especially those that involved civil society – paving the way for civil society involvement in future peace talks.¹⁰¹

2010-2011: Eligibility for Reintegration Broadens, Programming Becomes More Holistic

After President Santos came to power, efforts were made to adjust the legal framework in such a way that eligibility-related contradictions affecting adults were corrected, therefore allowing greater legal clarity on their ability to access services. The policy framework on child reintegration was also brought in line with practice, though in this case legal contradictions remained. Furthermore, a new strategy was adopted to address women's needs in the reintegration process. However, ethnic groups' reintegration processes remained under-supported and not well defined.

Political and Programmatic Shifts

Not all members of the AUC demobilized in 2006, as some individuals and blocs broke off to form their own criminal groups. The Rastrojos, Urabeños, Aguilas Negras, and others denominated “post-demobilization” or criminal groups became more active throughout the country during this period. These groups focused on co-opting the territory and economic space that the AUC and guerrilla groups had left behind, and continued to recruit both adults and children to increase their ranks.¹⁰²

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos was elected President with promises of building on the security gains made by his predecessor. His Government continued to strengthen the legal framework for reintegration, enacting Law 1424 of 2010 to resolve the legal limbo caused by the Justice and Peace Law^v that affected more than 24,000 former members of the AUC.¹⁰³ The High Council for Reintegration became the Colombian Reintegration Agency (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración – ACR) in 2011, further solidifying the institutionalization of reintegration. Reintegration programme benefits were outlined in further detail later on, in Resolution 754 of 2013.¹⁰⁴

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

This period represented gains in the policy framework addressing children and women's needs, but fell short of creating measures that addressed the priorities and experiences of ethnic groups. The Santos Administration introduced CONPES 3673 of 2010, focused on the prevention of recruitment of children by all illegal armed groups.¹⁰⁵ This CONPES was adopted in part to ensure that policy guidance reflected practice, as the ICBF was formally authorized to implement programmes to prevent child

^v As stated above: According to the legal framework that applied to the reintegration of the 30,000 rank-and-file members of the AUC, they had to contribute to truth and other aspects of victims' reparations in order to qualify for reintegration benefits. However, they could not follow the truth processes of the Justice and Peace Law because they were not responsible for crimes against humanity, and there was no other outlet through which they could fulfil this requirement. They were therefore launched into a legal limbo, unable to complete their reintegration process, until this loophole was closed by Law 1424 of 2010.

recruitment by *all* armed groups, not just those who were party to the conflict as it had previously been allowed to do. However, contradictions within the legal framework remained, as the CONPES contrasted to the Victims' Law 1448 of 2011,¹⁰⁶ which ensures integral reparations for children recruited by illegal armed groups party to the conflict but *not* by post-demobilization groups, which were considered external to the conflict. This law also allowed victims, including formerly associated children, to participate in victims' roundtables, thereby feeding into policymaking.¹⁰⁷ Both of these policies shaped the way that child recruitment and prevention were designed and implemented from that moment forth in Colombia.

Progress was also seen in addressing the priorities and experiences of women in the reintegration programme during this time. In March 2010, the ACR implemented a strategy with a differential focus that recognized the risks and obstacles faced by women in the reintegration programme, who at that time represented 15 per cent of the entire population.¹⁰⁸ For the first time, the ACR designed, implemented, and evaluated its programmes based on the needs of both men and women ex-combatants, which in turn allowed for the creation of concrete activities to understand and fulfil the needs of women in DDR.¹⁰⁹ The gender strategy operates under eight dimensions, including income generation skills and the promotion of self-care habits for both men and women ex-combatants.

Little progress was made during this time to address the needs of ethnic groups in the reintegration programme; some Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities continued to operate autonomous parallel processes, but overall there was little support for the development of such initiatives.

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

During this period, IOM continued to expand its DDR programme to include prevention activities, restitution of rights, child and youth protection, livelihood promotion, income and productive activities, and transitional justice. Some programmes that stand out as part of efforts to strengthen Colombian institutional capacities were the Child Soldiers Program I and II, as well as Community Reintegration of Ex-combatants (CORE).¹¹⁰ The first of these was developed in close collaboration with the ICBF to support its specialized care programme which formalized and standardized judicial, technical, and institutional mechanisms aimed at protecting formerly associated children.¹¹¹ The second part of this programme between 2009 and 2015 bolstered protective environments against violence, working to support families and improve their living conditions.¹¹² Additional projects related to the "re-establishment of rights", as well as others focused on economic reincorporation and prevention of youth recruitment, have been implemented by UN entities in Colombia in the last decade.¹¹³

Meanwhile, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) held workshops and forums with the participation of regional authorities to stimulate the implementation of reintegration policies and programmes with support from the private sector. UNDP also carried out activities to include reintegration policy measures in departmental and municipal development plans and strengthen the capacities of communities and local authorities, as well as supporting other reintegration initiatives.¹¹⁴

2012-2021: The Government-FARC Peace Agreement Reshapes DDR

From 2012 to 2016, the Government and the FARC-EP negotiated and, in November 2016, signed an agreement to bring an end to their conflict. The agreement contemplated not only the dismantling of the armed group and the transition to civilian life of its former members, but also the transformation of the group into a political party and far-reaching efforts to transform the countryside and address the root causes of the conflict, from economic inequality to the absence of non-military State institutions. This defining moment in Colombia's recent history implied the construction of a new

“reincorporation” process to support individuals laying down their weapons. Negotiations around the relevant chapter of the peace agreement were affected by political pressures as well as each side’s previous experience and priorities, causing challenges further down the line of implementation. Efforts were also made to address the needs of children and women leaving the FARC-EP.

Political and Programmatic Shifts

In August 2012, President Santos announced that he had begun peace negotiations with the FARC in Cuba.¹¹⁵ After an initial boost of optimism toward the talks, a portion of Colombian society gradually lost enthusiasm for the process. When the final agreement was put to a referendum in October 2016, a slight majority rejected the accord, spurred on by a ‘No’ campaign led by former President Uribe. Some modifications were made to the agreement and it was adopted in November 2016. Two years later, opposition presidential candidate and Uribe’s political mentee, Iván Duque, came to power in August 2018. Balancing both his domestic mandate to modify the peace agreement and the international community’s clear message to implement it as it was agreed – as well as additional pressures from COVID-19 more recently – President Duque continues to walk the line between amending the agreement and implementing it.

The peace agreement included a chapter titled “The End of the Conflict”, which outlined the broad parameters under which the guerrillas would lay down their weapons and transition to civilian life.¹¹⁶ These parameters were brought to policy and programming life by Decree 899 of 2017 and CONPES 3931 of 2018, formalizing the reincorporation processes for adults and children as part of the peace agreement.¹¹⁷ From the start, the FARC leadership was clear that they did not see this transition as a “DDR” process, and talks on this point were tense given the sides’ strong preferences on terminology.¹¹⁸ Specifically, the group wanted to avoid the use of terms such as “disarmament” – preferring instead “laying down weapons” – and “demobilization” – saying that they were still mobilized as a political party. For the support they were negotiating to receive as part of the transition, they preferred the term “reincorporation” to “reintegration”, as the latter term had been used for processes designed for other groups in Colombia and was seen as a counter-insurgency policy that had encouraged defection from the FARC-EP. Along these lines, the FARC also insisted that their reincorporation process could not be managed by the ACR, which had run the earlier reintegration programmes. The agency was therefore renamed the Agencia de Reincorporación y Normalización (Reincorporation and Normalization Agency, or ARN).¹¹⁹ For the FARC, this institutional adjustment was essential to ensure that their process was managed adequately, and to ensure that the institutional branding aligned with their narrative of the transition to civilian life.¹²⁰

Despite their clear position on terminology, the chapter on the “End of the Conflict” is the least prescriptive among the chapters of the peace agreement, in terms of the policies and processes it outlines. According to Andrés García, a member of the technical team that supported the Government negotiators, this point was negotiated under great pressure; the negotiations had been ongoing for four years and the two parties were eager to reach an agreement and report results to the public.¹²¹ The main focus of the FARC negotiators during the discussions of this point was their entry to politics, so the design of the reincorporation process into which the rank-and-file would transition took a back seat,¹²² though seemingly not to the extent it had in the negotiations with the AUC. Pastor Alape, a former FARC commander and now FARC reincorporation lead, when asked about the FARC’s strong position on the language used to describe reincorporation, focused his answer on the creation of the political party: “...[This is about] generating recognition of political sectors. That is why it couldn’t be disarmament...it’s about dismantling the use of weapons from politics, and the State has to guarantee its monopoly on the use of weapons.”¹²³

Many details of reincorporation, for example the source of financial support within Government, the objectives of Ecomún – the cooperative meant to channel funds to productive projects and oversee the reincorporation process – and the acquisition of land for income generation activities, were therefore left to be agreed by the joint Government-FARC National Reincorporation Council (CNR) decision-making body.¹²⁴ The creation of this body, says García in his interview, was also a repetition of previous errors. The Government had proposed that the FARC political party leadership not attempt to coordinate the reincorporation process, because guerrilla groups who had demobilized in the 1990s had later said that this centralized model had not worked well. García stated that the FARC negotiators, however, were very clear that they wanted to extend the group’s leadership structure to implementation of the reincorporation process, ironically becoming “more centralist than the Colombian State itself” in their insistence on a top-down approach to implementing the reincorporation model.¹²⁵ The CNR body was therefore created, with the additional benefit that it could be mandated to define the details of reincorporation that had not been agreed at the negotiating table. Beneath this body sit Regional Councils for Reincorporation, which manage local processes under the oversight of the CNR.

Another unique aspect of the design of the FARC transition process was the emphasis on a collective model in which former combatants would reincorporate together rather than dispersing across the country and reintegrating through the existing individual reintegration route. The FARC leadership continually requested that this collective model be developed, for several reasons. Knowing that their members were mostly from rural backgrounds, and as their ideology is focused on the rights of rural populations, they assumed that the ex-combatants would want to reintegrate in rural areas. Second, they believed that their group cohesion was so strong that the ex-combatants would want to stay and work together in the village camps in which they demobilized. They were also especially interested in maintaining this group cohesion because it would help them to organize the FARC political party and achieve their electoral goals as a Leninist structure with “centralist-democratic principles.”¹²⁶ Third, they could not accept that an individual reintegration model that had initially been developed for their battlefield enemies, the AUC, and had facilitated ex-combatant dependence on the State, would be relevant to them.¹²⁷ However, this collective model was the subject of much debate, as the Government – particularly the ARN – was convinced that the individual reintegration model that it had been implementing for over a decade was successful, and was reluctant to adjust the reintegration infrastructure to fit the FARC’s political objectives. The ARN believed that past collective models of reintegration had failed and saw the collective model as a potential security threat as it would allow group members to maintain some level of organization and communication.¹²⁸

The collective process began with the congregation of the FARC in 24 Transitional Village Normalization Zones (TVNZ), located in areas in which the FARC had a historic presence. In August 2017, at the start of the reincorporation process under Decree 899,¹²⁹ the decision was made by the CNR that the TVNZ would change status and become Territorial Areas for Training and Reincorporation (TATRs). The TATRs were seen as the sites in which FARC group unity could be maintained through collective productive projects and other reincorporation activities.

According to García, the centralized model that connected the political party to the reincorporation process through Ecomún and the CNR has resulted in delays in the approval of productive projects given the amount of information the CNR has to review in order to approve each project.¹³⁰ These and other delays caused by institutional obstacles have frustrated some former FARC members, including some relatively high-ranking members, to the point that they have separated from the political party and the Ecomún cooperative and created their own NGOs to manage their reincorporation.¹³¹ This quote from a former rank-and-file member of the FARC who has joined a separate effort, cited by news source *La Silla Vacía*, demonstrates this sentiment:

“We want to decentralize reincorporation and the productive projects because decisions are being made by the leadership of a party that does not represent us and that abandoned its guerrilla base a long time ago.”¹³²

In other words, said García in his interview, the design backfired – the components of the reincorporation process that were rooted in the collective nature of the process caused issues in the implementation phase that provoked former FARC members to leave the centralized process altogether:

“A lot of people could have felt connected to the party, without their reincorporation process depending on the party.”¹³³

Alape saw it differently:

“New experiences, some want to organize in one way, others in another...the party can’t be one of only ex-guerrillas... that would be like an NGO, a foundation of ex-guerrillas...So [the separation of some members] is part of that, I’m not worried about it. It’s logical that it has to be like that in order to adjust the [political] bases and the leaderships.”¹³⁴

There has been uneven success in the achievement of the FARC’s political objectives in other areas as well. The FARC identify the lack of government political will to support implementation of the peace agreement overall as a significant challenge to reincorporation and a purposeful obstacle placed on their political participation.¹³⁵ They were guaranteed ten seats in Congress as part of the peace agreement, but lost one after its occupant, Jesús Santrich, returned to illegal activity and his seat was left unfilled for too long. The FARC also saw mixed results in the 2019 local elections, where they had hoped to be able to take a high number of local political positions but achieved only three FARC political party wins. One additional former FARC member ran as a local candidate outside the party, and won a mayoral position.¹³⁶ The combination of gradual dispersion of former members away from the TATRs due to security issues and other reasons¹³⁷ and separation of individuals from all levels of the party, means the FARC has a weaker structure than they expected to fulfil their political objectives.

The Current DDR Programming Landscape in Colombia

There are two programmes at the time of writing that support transitions to civilian life among adult former members of armed groups in Colombia. The current adult reintegration programme, which has been running in different forms since 2003, is open to all adult ex-combatants who leave any armed group that is party to the conflict, and who are not responsible for crimes against humanity – including former members of the FARC who demobilized before the peace agreement in 2016.^{vi} The programme lasts at most six and a half years and has eight dimensions: security, personal, productive, family, living conditions, health, education, and citizenship. It begins with stabilization services to address the individual’s immediate needs and work; this is enacted by the reintegration professional along with the ex-combatant who jointly devise a work plan for his or her reintegration. The programme then moves on through a combination of health services¹³⁸ for individuals and their families; psychosocial support; education for individuals and their families; vocational training; economic support in the form of seed capital or other stipends for productive projects; reconciliation activities through social work; and legal support for the ex-combatant.

^{vi} There is an additional process for former members of the AUC – mostly high commanders – who were considered responsible for crimes against humanity and whose judicial processing took place under the Justice and Peace law. This process is called Special Reintegration for Justice and Peace.

In addition to this long-standing individual programme, the collective reincorporation model applies to FARC ex-combatants who laid down their weapons as part of the 2016 peace agreement.¹³⁹ The ARN leads the reincorporation process in the former TATRs – now in the process of being converted to legal villages – with a similarly broad spectrum of components as the previously existing individual reintegration programme, but more focused on a collective model. Education, reconciliation, vocational training, and economic support for productive projects have therefore taken on a group approach.¹⁴⁰ However, over time the majority of ex-combatants have left the TATRs – more than 9,600 of the 13,116 currently in the reincorporation process reside now outside these spaces, including approximately 2,200 women.¹⁴¹ Most of them live in villages or cities with their families, or in more than 70 new informal reintegration areas, called New Areas of Reincorporation (NAR), which are not recognized by the ARN but whose occupants still have the right to access benefits provided by the Agency.¹⁴² This means that as the geography of reincorporation changes, so too the model of service provision – especially services provided in physical spaces – needs to be adjusted to accommodate the increased number of participants who have left the collective process.¹⁴³ For example, in the case of collective productive projects, of the 88 approved – benefitting 3,383 ex-combatants – at least 40 are outside the former TATRs, meaning that support for these projects needs to have a wider geographic scope than previously planned.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, approximately 2,960 additional FARC ex-combatants have chosen to implement individual - rather than collective - productive projects, adding additional challenges to the design and implementation of support to these initiatives. This change took place at the level of the individual ex-combatants who expressed their preference for individual projects directly to ARN, in contradiction to the collective model originally negotiated by their former leadership. The ARN continues to accommodate these requests.¹⁴⁵

Finally, in addition to these programmes, in December 2020 the Government of Colombia adopted Decree 965, which opens a new reintegration process for individuals leaving criminal groups including the FARC dissident groups, los Pelusos, los Caparros, and the Clan del Golfo or Urabeños.¹⁴⁶ At the time of writing in June 2021, little is known about this process and about the individuals entering it, pointing to an acute institutional need for data that the MEAC project aims to contribute to filling.

Reintegration Support for Children, Women, and Ethnic Groups

Children

Over time, the contradictions within the national normative framework on child recruitment and reintegration were revealed, and efforts were made to rectify the inconsistencies in the law. For example, despite the Victims' Law guidance that children recruited by post-demobilization groups were not victims of the conflict, the ICBF had been assisting them since 2007. In 2016, Constitutional Court Sentence C-069/16¹⁴⁷ aimed to provide legal support to this practice, by clarifying that children who had been recruited by any armed group could access reparations. Furthermore, although the Victims' Law made clear that eligibility for reparations was open to children under 18 years old, the penal code states that children over 14 years old who had been involved in crimes against humanity could be prosecuted under penal law. The Public Ombudsman's Office attempted to clarify this point by issuing Resolution 068 of 2016, which recognizes all disengaged children as victims, regardless of the crimes in which they were involved. Also a result of the peace process with the FARC, Decree 899 of 2017¹⁴⁸ outlines measures and instruments for the group's reincorporation, including "minors who have left the FARC-EP camps since the beginning of the peace talks or who leave before the end of the disarmament process."¹⁴⁹

The ICBF programme – implemented throughout the country – is framed by the "Technical guidance of the psychosocial support strategy for the re-establishment of rights and contribution to integral reparation of children and adolescents who are victims of the armed conflict", which applies to all

child victims of the armed conflict.¹⁵⁰ Phase I of the reintegration programme initially aims to identify and meet the child's immediate needs, ensure access to health and education, generate trust and "emotional stabilization", seek family reunification, and conduct a more in-depth diagnostic of the child's needs, taking into account gender, ethnicity, and other factors. Phase II works with the individual and the family to address the needs identified in the diagnostic exercise. The focus here is on reconstructing family and community ties, "re-signifying traumatic events", and establishing short, medium, and long-term life goals. Phase III takes a broader approach to ensuring that the child and the family are aware of State services and institutions necessary to act upon these life goals, including the Victims' Unit and the ARN.¹⁵¹ Regardless of the stage of the programme they are in, once the child turns 18 years old, he or she also receives reparations from Victims' Unit.

In addition to the ICBF reintegration programme, the "Differential Life Pathway" (DLP) programme has been developed as a result of the peace agreement with the FARC. The DLP is open to children who left the FARC as part of the negotiations and were on the list the FARC handed over to the Government in 2017, and is aimed at those who were under 18 years old at that time. The guidance document for the DLP process, which was agreed between the Government and the FARC political party, covers the entire programming life cycle starting from their release from FARC camps, facilitated by ICRC and third parties. The DLP document acknowledges the push factors behind child participation in conflict, but completely lacks reference to any element of coercion.¹⁵² The DLP follows 18 principles, which include a focus on rights; the child as a victim; comprehensive protection; the rights to participation, free expression, and the exercise of citizenship; and voluntary participation in the programme.¹⁵³ The document goes on to define eleven programme characteristics, including the child's participation in community and his or her re-connection with family which will aid reintegration into civilian life.¹⁵⁴ The DLP draws from the phased model of the previously existing ICBF programme, as well as reparations under Law 1448. When the child turns 18 years old, he or she passes to the adult reincorporation programme run by the ARN and designed for and with the FARC-EP – a transition that practitioners say is still rocky and needs strengthening in order to ensure that young adults continue to receive the support they need after they transition to the collective adult reincorporation process.¹⁵⁵ In addition to this challenge, focuses on gender and ethnicity within the DLP process are lacking, especially when contrasted with the strong gender focus of the adult reincorporation process.¹⁵⁶

Women

During the negotiations between the Government and the FARC-EP, the need for a stronger and more exhaustive gendered differential focus became evident and was championed. Recognizing that approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the FARC-EP were women,¹⁵⁷ and with the vocal support of the women's social movements that played a key role in the peace process, the design and implementation of DDR took on a more comprehensive gendered differential perspective.¹⁵⁸

This included progress made after a gender subcommittee was put in place in 2014 to shed light on the importance of women's participation in all aspects of the peace process.¹⁵⁹ These points included equal access to rural property for both men and women, the creation of measures to promote the participation of women in conflict resolution spaces, and strategies to reduce stigmatization towards women and LGBTI individuals who partook in the conflict.¹⁶⁰ This subcommittee was constituted by five women representatives including Victoria Sandino, then a FARC-EP commander, and María Paula Riveros, the Director of the Human Rights Ministry.¹⁶¹ In addition, in 2017 a special commission was put in place to ensure the effective implementation of the gendered differential focus after the peace agreement was signed.¹⁶² At this time, the National Reincorporation Council (CNR) created a technical team on gender composed of ex-members of the FARC-EP and government representatives, to ensure the implementation of a differential focus in the reincorporation process.¹⁶³ One of the biggest

achievements was the integration of a gendered perspective to the CONPES 3931 of 2018,¹⁶⁴ which led to the creation of 18 specific actions to recognize the differential impact of armed conflict on individuals, to ensure the equal participation of men and women ex-combatants in the process, and ultimately to transform cultural and structural dynamics that disempower women in society as a whole.¹⁶⁵ Ultimately, as a result of these efforts, the final peace agreement showed evidence of a strong willingness to include a gendered differential focus in all components of the FARC-EP laying down of weapons and the reincorporation process.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, in 2020, through Resolution 50, the ARN put in place a team that will support and facilitate the gender perspective within the agency.¹⁶⁷

Outside the peace process, further steps have recently been taken to address women ex-combatants' needs in the reintegration process, mainly, according to Acevedo, due to the fact that "now the international community [of donors] won't accept any projects that don't have a differential focus [on gender]."¹⁶⁸ These steps included the 2016 strategy implemented with support from IOM that incorporated a gendered differential focus in all stages of the reintegration process.¹⁶⁹ Currently, according to the ARN website, 3,907 individuals are participating in the reintegration programme, of whom 1,056 are women (27 per cent of the total). However, there remains a gap in knowledge on the impact of the gendered differential focus in the reintegration process; therefore, further work is needed in this area to truly understand the effectiveness of this approach as it evolves, and make public policy recommendations to this effect.

Ethnic Groups

With regard to ethnic groups, the agreement defined several guarantees that must be fulfilled in the reincorporation process, among them "the construction of a Harmonization Plan with an ethnic focus for the reincorporation of ex-combatants, previously consulted with the relevant entities."¹⁷⁰ Early planning for this strategy is underway with the National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), who are leading the drafting of a programmatic proposal that will then be reviewed in a consultation process with the rest of the indigenous territories before implementation within the next year or two.

In relation to Afro-Colombian communities and reincorporation under the peace agreement, the Alto Río Naya Community Council is leading the proposal for these groups, which will also have to go through a similar consultation process with the rest of the Afro-Colombian ex-combatant population.¹⁷¹ As the ARN points out, this proposal for Afro-Colombian ex-combatants should address: 1) "Invisibility of their ethnic identity, reflected in the disuse of their own cultural practices, loss of contact or ignorance of the traditional ethnic organization and family dispersion; 2) Overlap of identities between ethnic groups; 3) Losing touch with their territories due to stigma".¹⁷² The ARN also recognized that previous reintegration programmes that had attempted to address Afro-Colombian communities' needs had had an urban focus that did not correspond with the rural locations where Afro-Colombian ex-combatants were located.¹⁷³

These developments have taken place at a time when the armed conflict has mutated in such a way that the risks for indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations reincorporating on ethnic lands have increased once again, and "some say that it was a mistake to have handed over their weapons, because we knew this was going to happen. This has allowed collective murder."¹⁷⁴ There is concern that the conflict is once again concentrating in ethnic territories, which is why Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities express their frustration over what they refer to as "non-compliance with the signed agreement", as the risk to the lives of individuals who have decided to hand over their weapons, as well as the lives of their families, has increased.¹⁷⁵

The UN Role in Supporting DDR

The UN provided several forms of support to the peace talks between the Government and the FARC, especially in the last two years of the process after the UN had built sufficient trust with the parties, especially the FARC who were initially suspicious of UN involvement.¹⁷⁶ Examples of this included UN efforts to bring victims to Havana to sit down with the parties and discuss the agreement, and – most relevant to this report – some UN former and current officials were invited to feed international experience into the talks on reincorporation as it reportedly became clear that the Government and the FARC had unequal knowledge of cases outside Colombia and that FARC, especially, would benefit from such input as talks on this point began.¹⁷⁷ Jean Arnault, who at that time had been sent to Havana as the UN Secretary-General's Delegate to the talks, also filled a mediation role at this point, as the FARC were initially unwilling to sit down with representatives of the ACR given its history of implementing reintegration programming for the AUC and other groups, which they considered to be a counter-insurgency effort rather than a form of support to individuals leaving armed groups.¹⁷⁸ Arnault was able to build trust and communication between the ACR and the FARC so that the talks could proceed. He and UN colleagues also later played a mediation role in the FARC and government discussion on the number of sites that would be established to carry out the laying down of weapons and house the ex-combatants in the coming months and years (the future TATRs).¹⁷⁹ In these early stages of planning, UN officials were concerned that the parties were rushing through the talks on the “End of the Conflict” and – reinforcing the point made above – that many details were being left for definition after the agreement was signed. The UN, therefore, did not have a central role in discussions on this chapter of the accord, but did have a key role in trust-building behind the scenes and in planning for implementation - the final ceasefire and laying down of weapons.¹⁸⁰

As it became obvious that the Government and the FARC were going to reach a peace agreement in 2016, the Security Council, based on information provided by the UN Country Team, took the risk of mandating – before the agreement was signed – the formation of a civilian mission to prepare observation functions and processes that would allow a future mission to verify implementation of the upcoming peace agreement. This decision was taken also considering that the UN, at the request of the parties, had previously contributed input to discussions on the monitoring and verification mechanisms by the sub-commission on the End of the Conflict during the peace negotiations.¹⁸¹ This early mission was mandated as a civilian entity due to sensitivities around the potential presence of international military observers on Colombian soil, which was considered a non-starter for discussion with the Colombian Government. Creating the mission at this early stage had the additional benefit of starting the process of building trust, not only between the parties as they moved towards the implementation stage of what they were about to formally agree, but also between the parties and the UN, who were working together in a tri-partite mechanism.¹⁸² In August and September 2016, this mechanism became more integrated and the UN component grew in order to prepare for support to the process of laying down weapons. As described previously, semantics here were extremely important – the UN's role was initially described as a leading one, but this language was softened to “coordination” in order to maintain the primacy of the Government and FARC roles in implementation.¹⁸³

The UN's role became increasingly important to implementation preparation as it became clear that aspects such as travel and logistics presented challenges that required rapid response. In contrast to some other country contexts, the UN deployment in Colombia was quick, and considered flexible by those involved.¹⁸⁴ One of the first logistical tasks was the movement of approximately 6,900 FARC combatants to the previously agreed sites where they would lay down their weapons and begin the early reincorporation process in the ZTVN, as described above.¹⁸⁵ The UN Verification Mission (UNVM) concluded activities related to the laying down of weapons in September 2017, including the destruction of 8,994 weapons registered in the ZTVN and the extraction of 750 arms caches (with

collection of information regarding a further 277 caches).¹⁸⁶ The FARC-EP ex-combatants who did not enter these camps were urban militia members who did not carry weapons or uniforms (approximately 2,800), as well as former members who at the time were in prison (around 4,000).¹⁸⁷ To date, a total of 13,116 ex-combatants^{vii} are accredited by the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace and are advancing in their reincorporation process.¹⁸⁸

The UN played a key role in ensuring that this process, including supporting the laying down of weapons and the beginning of reincorporation, contributing to building and maintaining trust between the parties, and ensuring that the top-level decision-making about reincorporation, filtered through to the local level with participation by local authorities and other key stakeholders.¹⁸⁹ The UN was in a challenging position at this point, both in terms of the size of the tasks at hand and with regard to the need to navigate a highly political process – indeed, every aspect of the UN’s role was scrutinized, often touching on sensitive points that had previously arisen at the negotiating table.¹⁹⁰ Despite this, the UN was seen as a key actor in maintaining communication between the sides and driving the process forward to successfully complete the laying down of weapons by the FARC-EP without great disturbance or issue, and in turn the tri-partite nature of the mechanism was seen as key in allowing the UN flexibility to call on the parties to the agreement to support different parts of its work.¹⁹¹

Indeed, the UNVM continues to play this trust-building role of “proactive verification” and support in overcoming bottlenecks on issues such as housing, sustainability of reincorporation projects, and other issues that require effective communication – and even continued negotiation - between the Government and the Comunes (FARC) political party in order to overcome.¹⁹² For example, according to the March 2021 report of the Secretary-General on the UNVM, one of the most significant events of the peace process was the meeting – facilitated by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and the Head of the UNVM, Carlos Ruiz Massieu, between the President of Colombia, Iván Duque, and the president of the Comunes political party, Rodrigo Londoño, on 10 March 2021.¹⁹³ Emerging from that meeting, the Government and Comunes reiterated their commitment to the Final Agreement, and agreed to work together to strengthen its implementation.

The UN has also built trust and promoted dialogue between the State security forces and former members of the FARC-EP in order to strengthen security conditions through the Tri-partite Mechanism for Security and Protection. Similarly, the UNVM has facilitated communication and indeed reconciliation efforts between former members of the guerrilla group and members of the communities in which they live. Dialogues have taken place to promote economic reincorporation at both the national and the regional levels, and the UNVM in particular uses its field presence to maintain its knowledge of and support to reincorporation sub-processes including those focused on gender, youth, and other areas. Indeed, at the beginning of implementation of the reincorporation process the UNVM joined donors in providing seed funding for economic reincorporation projects as a form of “solidarity” when the Government met challenges in initial stages of these activities – and these funds continue to be used for projects that the UNVM considers need targeted support.¹⁹⁴ Part of this trust-building process and “good offices” role is reflected in the continued interest of the Government and the Comunes party in extending the mandate of the UNVM to continue its verification role, and in the role of the UNVM in facilitating dialogue between the Government and the Comunes party.¹⁹⁵ The UNVM also continues to support implementation of the peace agreement through its quarterly reporting to the UN Security Council. Through this communication of

^{vii} Estimates of how many individuals formed part of the FARC-EP varied in the lead-up to the peace agreement, from approximately 7,000 to 17,500: Camilo Echandía Castilla, “Cincuenta años de cambios en el conflicto armado colombiano (1964-2014),” Universidad del Externado, 27 August 2015, <https://zero.uexternado.edu.co/cincuenta-anos-de-cambios-en-el-conflicto-armado-colombiano-1964-2014/>. “Santos dice que unos 17.500 miembros de las FARC se desmovilizarían,” *Semana*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/presidente-santos-dice-el-numero-de-gerrilleros-de-las-farc-que-se-desmovilizarian/465502/>.

information, it can emphasize priorities such as protection for ex-combatants, the need for land to support reincorporation, and the need to implement the agreement in an integrated, mutually reinforcing manner¹⁹⁶ – priorities that are often then reflected in the Council’s public meetings and press statements on Colombia. The UNVM also plays an important role in supporting the Government in adapting to the new geography of reincorporation, as people leave the old TATRs and form NARs that the Government has yet to formally recognize – and the provision of benefits and services becomes more uneven across the old TATRs and these new sites.¹⁹⁷

In other areas of the UN, UNICEF played a key role in early implementation of the DLP to receive the 124 adolescents who were leaving the FARC. The ICBF was initially in disagreement with the creation of a new process (preferring rather to use the existing process that they had implemented for years) so UNICEF stepped in and established the homes in which the children were received at this early stage. UNICEF later turned management of these homes over to the ICBF as part of the DLP. UNICEF is currently leading efforts to find approximately 285 young people who were registered as adults at the time of laying down weapons, but were actually under 18 years old at the time, but never received reintegration support.¹⁹⁸ Elsewhere, the Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Sustaining Peace (MPTF) has promoted activities to improve the productive and labour capacities of those formerly associated with the FARC-EP, and UNDP, IOM, UN Women, and others continue to implement diverse processes to support reincorporation, with UN Women taking a strong lead in interventions that aim to address the gender dimensions of reincorporation – an aspect that would otherwise be lacking in both the DLP and the adult reincorporation process.¹⁹⁹ Across the board, these UN entities and others have bolstered government-led interventions that support individuals’ transition to civilian life, ranging from financial resources to technical and other forms of support. Overall, government efforts and UN support on reincorporation are perceived as a success – the disarmament process was credible and effective, the overwhelming majority of former members of the FARC remain committed to their transition to civilian life, and the legal guarantees surrounding their judicial status remain intact, among other successful aspects of this “work in progress” on fulfilling the ambitious model laid out – albeit in broad strokes - in the peace agreement.²⁰⁰

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

There is much to be learned from this long trajectory of DDR in Colombia. Looking at the current context, it seems clear that processes that aim to support individuals’ transitions to civilian life will be implemented in Colombia for years to come. The ELN continues armed activity. Recruiting from local communities and influxes of Venezuelan migrants, this guerrilla group and newer post-demobilization groups are expanding into areas previously occupied by the FARC, seeking to fill the gaps in territorial control and the drug trade. Adding to this landscape of violence are the FARC dissident groups, most notably the 1st Front led by Iván Mordisco, the 7th Front led by Gentil Duarte, and most recently the ‘Segunda Marquetalia’, led by Iván Márquez. Some of these dissident groups are parts of fronts or blocs who opposed the peace accord and refused to demobilize with the rest of the guerrilla organization in 2016. Others, like Segunda Marquetalia, rose up after the FARC laid down their weapons, when Márquez and a group of leaders became frustrated with the state of implementation of the peace agreement. While the FARC dissident groups are smaller and have a more limited geographic presence than their predecessors, their presence is associated with similar levels of violence in the communities in which they are present. These groups carry out killings, attack strategic military locations, threaten local leaders and authorities, and recruit children, among other activities – and still claim to have political motives.²⁰¹

The case of Colombia has much to contribute at the international level in terms of lessons learned. In the framework of negotiations, government political will to negotiate with armed groups has been key. The three defining moments in the evolution of DDR in Colombia over the last 30 years were the

peace agreements with the guerrilla groups of the early 1990s, the demobilization agreements with the AUC in 2003 to 2006, and the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in 2016. All of these shaped the design and implementation of DDR as different groups became eligible to enter, and made their different needs known as a result of successful negotiations. Without each respective government's political will to sit down at the table – whether as a result of public fatigue over weak security measures, a desire to take advantage of an armed group's weak position on the battlefield, or other factors – this progress would have been impossible.

Buy-in to both negotiations and DDR from armed group leadership has also been demonstrated as being crucial. An obvious first step towards reaching the above mentioned agreements was the decision by armed group leadership to meet the Government at the negotiating table. Whatever these groups' political or other objectives may have been, a second step was always agreeing, buying into, and urging the rest of the group to participate in, a model of DDR that aimed to dismantle the armed group, allow associated individuals to exit the conflict, and support their transition to civilian life. On this point, the FARC case contrasts with that of the AUC because the former's political aspirations were clear and the leadership had always been ideologically driven. The FARC had a clear idea of how the reincorporation process was intimately tied to their post-armed group political objectives, whereas the AUC seems not to have projected a clear picture of their political motivations. However, the challenges currently seen in implementation of the FARC reincorporation process may stem, at least in part, from their very insistence in moulding the reincorporation process to fit their political objectives and the consequent lack of attention – under pressure to reach an agreement – to the details of the reincorporation process as a form of support for former combatants transitioning to civilian life.

Furthermore, there are three factors both within and outside the context of peace negotiations that clearly facilitated progress in the development and inclusivity of DDR processes in Colombia, and that reflect shifts at the international and national levels that impacted specific subgroups within ex-combatant populations over time: 1) the formalization of the institutional architecture around DDR; 2) international attention to the need to include children and women in DDR processes; and 3) flexible support and response to DDR needs by the UN.

- 1. The formalization of the institutional architecture around DDR.** Throughout the evolution of DDR in Colombia, reintegration policy and programming have gained increasing support and prominence in the hierarchy of government, and have become ever more inclusive processes. From the small National Normalization Council created under President Gaviria to manage aspects of the guerrilla groups' reintegration in the early 1990s, to the elevation of the topic to the level of a Presidential Office for Reinsertion and the recognition of the difference between collective and individual processes – thereby allowing individuals to exit armed groups and receive support without a peace agreement – through to the creation of the High Council for Reintegration in 2006 to manage all aspects of reintegration, CONPES 3673 of 2010 to support the ICBF's work, and finally the creation of ACR, later the ARN, relevant policies and programmes have been increasingly supported through the institutional architecture of peace. This kind of legal, normative, and bureaucratic framework has proven essential to ensuring that the resources necessary for DDR are available, that there is clarity on who is eligible and what they must do to maintain eligibility, and that the trust necessary for individuals to lay down their weapons and enter these institutional processes is built and sustained. These lessons have been learned over time in Colombia, but have policy and programming implications for other contexts, including those in which overall institutional capacity may be lower than in Colombia, and the UN may have more of a role in leading the institutional response to DDR needs while the relevant government institutions are built.

- 2. International attention to the need to include children and women in DDR processes.** From the Machel Report on the impact of conflict on children, to the ILO's recognition of child recruitment as one of the worst forms of child labour, to the Security Council's resolutions on both Children and Armed Conflict and Women, Peace, and Security – international norms, standards, reporting, and other attention have moved the dial on these issues in Colombia. This increased international interest – and scrutiny – shaped different Colombian Governments' and armed groups' reactions to domestic events. In the case of children, the reaction has not always been as the international community intended, with evidence that the AUC avoided registering children in its ranks for DDR interventions in an effort to avoid international justice mechanisms. More broadly, although more must be done to effectively address the needs of children and women in reintegration processes around the world, it is clear from the timeline of programmatic and political shifts in Colombia that the “differential approaches” that aim to address these subgroups' needs may not have developed as far as they did had it not been for the international attention paid. This is an important lesson for the international community, as it demonstrates the impact of work on these issues of inclusivity, the potential for perverse and unintended outcomes, and the risks of not pushing the agenda forward for other subgroups, as will be seen below.
- 3. Flexible support and response to DDR needs by the UN.** As the landscape of DDR in Colombia evolved, and as the UN gained experience in the implementation of DDR elsewhere in the world, so too the role of the UN changed – to implementer, arbiter, and coordinator – to meet the Colombian Government's needs. Over time, various UN agencies including IOM, UNICEF, and UNDP, have provided increasing support to different components of DDR, from data collection and weapons disposal at demobilization sites to job training programmes and coordination of psychosocial support within reintegration interventions. The UN's ability in Colombia to act flexibly, support Government planning of DDR processes, and react to changes on the ground as they occurred, has made it a key support for the implementation of reintegration policies. This again is an important lesson for the international community: although the UN's impartiality has been questioned in some contexts in recent years, and UN entities often find it difficult to find the flexibility necessary to effectively respond to evolving peacebuilding and security needs, positive results can be achieved when the UN is able to adapt to changing circumstances and serve as a capable and impartial third party that can fulfil multiple roles – arbiter, trust-builder, verifier, and implementer of peace. This is a key lesson that should be taken into account in other contexts in which similar issues of trust and capacity may affect the design and implementation of relevant interventions.

There are also three factors that hindered progress on DDR, and that prevented the processes identified above from reaching their full potential: 1) rushed negotiations leading to a lack of clarity on DDR design and implementation; 2) a lack of attention paid in negotiations to specific subgroups such as children and ethnic groups leading to patchy efforts to address their needs; and 3) lack of attention to the need to include ethnic groups in DDR, including in its design, leading to low levels of buy-in to national processes by these populations.

- 1. Rushed negotiations leading to a lack of clarity on DDR design and implementation.** In the AUC process, both the Government and the paramilitary negotiators focused on the judicial and institutional changes that would be necessary for the AUC leadership to leave the armed conflict. The rank-and-file reintegration process was an afterthought at best, and mid-ranking commanders were not addressed at all, meaning that they were funnelled into the same reintegration process as the rank-and-file – something that analysts believe ultimately motivated some of them to return to armed activity. In the FARC process, due to pressures on both the Government and the FARC, the relevant chapter of the peace agreement was drafted in a hurried negotiation, with much detail of the design and implementation of the

reincorporation process left to the CNR rather than being agreed before signature of the accord. This meant that necessary resources and processes were not confirmed as part of the agreement, causing delays, uncertainty, and a lack of resources in the resulting reincorporation process. In addition, in both cases the lack of time given to agreeing the details of the transition to civilian life during negotiations prevented the leadership from carrying out the internal communications efforts necessary to ensure buy-in from mid-rank commanders and the rank-and-file. In the FARC case, this led to mistrust in the process and ultimately a failure of some blocs to enter the reincorporation process at all, preferring instead to continue armed activity. In both cases, the failure to address the needs of the majority of former members of the armed group resulted in their disenchantment with and departure from the process, some to reconstitute armed groups and others to reinvent their own transitions to civilian life with little to no support. This highlights the importance of ensuring that peace negotiations address not only the reintegration needs of the negotiators themselves, but also of those under their command, in a way that makes sense to them and does not force them into another structure or organization with which they want no connection. It may therefore point to a need for women, representatives from the rank-and-file, and members of other ex-combatant subgroups to be included in armed group delegations in negotiations on DDR in order to ensure their inclusivity and therefore their effectiveness. For despite the symbiotic relationship between politics and DDR, it is clear that many former armed group members want no part in political projects and want to shape and control their own transition to the next phase of their lives. Parties considering future negotiations in Colombia – for example with the ELN – and elsewhere should take this lesson to heart. It is essential that DDR processes – whether in Colombia or elsewhere – are given the attention, time, and space required at the negotiations phase to ensure that it has the financial and political support necessary to be effective at the point of implementation.

2. **A lack of attention paid in negotiations to specific subgroups such as children and ethnic groups leading to patchy efforts to address their needs.** Although broad progress was made in national reintegration policy as international standards on children and women in conflict advanced, attention paid to these groups, and to ethnic minorities, in the negotiations carried out across this 30-year period was uneven, leading to gaps in participation in and effectiveness of relevant interventions and in some instances increased risk of recidivism. In the case of children, there is evidence that they were excluded from some processes altogether – sent home with no support for their transition to civilian life, because either the armed group negotiators were too focused on their own political objectives or the parties wanted to avoid the long arm of international justice and therefore denied the involvement of children in armed groups at all. Women’s needs and priorities went similarly unaddressed, although this did not result in their exclusion from DDR altogether, though in some cases participation rates are arguably lower than they should be given estimates of the numbers of women involved in each group. This reduced participation is likely because they did not feel that the reintegration process met their needs. In the case of ethnic groups, again the lack of attention paid in negotiations to their inclusion in DDR had a detrimental effect on their experiences of reintegration, as only *post-facto* efforts were made to ensure their inclusion, and where ethnic authorities were indeed consulted, their perspectives were not fully taken into account in implementation. Future negotiations and efforts to design inclusive DDR processes must include these groups’ perspectives and be built on a comprehensive understanding of armed group composition to truly understand what subgroup needs are likely to arise during DDR processes. Children, women, and individuals of diverse ethnicities have all been involved in armed groups throughout the conflict in Colombia. It is important that future talks and efforts to support group transitions to civilian life not only include them but also take targeted efforts to address their specific needs in order to ensure their sustained participation in DDR

processes, and to make those processes more effective in bolstering the transition to civilian life.

- 3. Lack of international – as well as national - attention to the need to include ethnic groups in DDR, including in its design, leading to low levels of buy-in to national processes by these populations.** The above point about the necessity to address the needs of sub-groups in reintegration processes recognizes that ethnic groups in Colombia often have parallel and autonomous governance structures who must have a role in the design and implementation of DDR. The failure to consult with and address the needs of ethnic groups in different phases of DDR in Colombia has over time been reinforced by the fact that little to no attention was paid to the need to address ethnic groups' needs in DDR processes at the international level. Whereas for children and women, norms and standards have urged that their needs be taken into account, for ethnic groups no such standards exist and relevant considerations are not taken into account in security discussions. Furthermore, not enough has been done over time to consult with ethnic authorities on these matters and ensure that they and their communities are truly engaged in the process. National policymakers and practitioners at the national level have made recent efforts to increase this consultation with indigenous and Afro-Colombian representatives, and hopes are high that the results of the coming months of joint process design will result in effective and inclusive processes. At the international level, policymakers and practitioners should bear in mind that more should be done to address these groups' needs in DDR, and that the lack of international standards on the need for DDR processes that respond to different ethnic groups' needs has negatively impacted their experiences of relevant interventions in Colombia and potentially elsewhere.

Looking Ahead to Future Research

Colombia is perhaps one of the most studied cases of DDR in the world, but there are still gaps in understanding what has contributed to the effectiveness of DDR in the country over time. Many of these lessons from Colombia point to a need for further research – especially on ways to make interventions more effective for and inclusive of children, women, and ethnic groups – and for more data to reach the hands of policymakers and practitioners who work on DDR in this country and elsewhere. Real time data collection rather than *post-facto* efforts to learn from past interventions is particularly important here, as the landscape of DDR is ever changing and data can be used to make adjustments to programming as it takes place, therefore strengthening it as it happens. The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project takes such an approach. The project's work in Colombia will continue to draw these themes and lessons out by collecting and examining individual-level data that will truly show the impact of political and programmatic shifts on individual ex-combatants, and making practical recommendations to stakeholders in real time on how to better address the needs of those making the transition to civilian life in the future.

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