

Keeping Hope Alive

**Christian Aid's
work on peace**

Case study: Colombia



**christian
aid**

Authors:

This summary is based on a longer case study completed by Kas Sempere, Christian Aid.

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Violence and peacebuilding in Colombia

After more than 50 years of conflict, the Final Peace Agreement was signed between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. Nearly three years later, peace is still not a reality for many people. For example, different armed groups have seized areas formerly controlled by FARC, creating more conflict. Social leaders are being killed when they are vocal about land restitution and redistribution, and about replacing illicit crops, such as coca, with legal ones. The 2018 elections brought a government to power that has reservations about implementing the Final Peace Agreement.

Internally displaced people

Colombia hosts the largest number of internally displaced people in the world. The total figure varies, but the UN High Commissioner for Refugees registered 7.7 million at the end of 2017.¹ This affects people's ability to continue and develop their livelihoods, culture and wellbeing. Displacement could increase if agribusinesses and extractive industries gain more access to certain lands after the Final Peace Agreement. For many communities, peace means returning to their land.²

Human rights violations

The country has a long history of impunity for human rights violations, including what some consider to be the largest number of people disappeared in Latin America.³ Its conflict has been brutal and deadly, with more than 8,700,000 victims of multiple forms of violence to date, including forced disappearance, extra-judicial executions, kidnappings, torture, and sexual and gender-based violence.⁴ More than 260,000 people were killed and more than 80,000 people disappeared between 1958 and 2017.⁵ Achieving justice for the victims of violence and the armed conflict is key to preventing further violence and building real peace.

These factors make progress towards peace fragile, despite the long-awaited Final Peace Agreement. Ensuring the agreement is implemented is crucial for peace in Colombia, and for Christian Aid's contribution to the country's future.

Below: Maria Liga has been violently displaced several times and now lives in a humanitarian zone. Our partner CIJP has supported her to travel to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to put pressure on the Colombian Government to return land taken her community by palm oil companies.



Christian Aid's peacebuilding work in Colombia

Christian Aid has worked on violence and peace with its partners in Colombia for more than 20 years.⁶ During this time, the country programme has adapted its approach, recently starting work on reducing violence and building peace through two theories of change – supporting displaced people and victims of human rights violations. Christian Aid Colombia supports 12 partners.

To reduce the levels of violence, we have mainly worked in two areas:

1. Helping people stay on or return to their land.
2. Tackling impunity for human rights violations and injustice.

Helping people stay on or return to their land

Christian Aid partners Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) and Small-scale Farmer Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) help communities in the Naya and Cimitarra river valleys stay on and return to their lands despite conflict.⁷

This prevents and reduces displacement, which, in turn, supports people's capacity to develop their livelihoods and identity. Supporting communities to stay on and return to their lands further supports the return of others. In a positive loop, those staying can help the smooth return of those who fled and maintain the economic livelihoods and historic and cultural bonds that are so vital for the populations in the area.

This work is achieved through:

- Achieving legal land ownership for excluded communities.
- Developing community self-protection mechanisms.
- Keeping a strong component of international accompaniment.

Below: Jose de los Santos Avila Fuentes lives in the Las Camelias Humanitarian Zone. His brother and daughter were killed at the height of the conflict in 1995. With support from our partner CIJP, community members are now able to live in relative peace in humanitarian zones.



'If impunity is reduced, in particular through focusing on those with high levels of responsibility, e.g. army generals, this will contribute to preventing future human rights violations and will break the connection between criminals and the state'

CCAJAR's theory of change, Colombia partners' theory of change, Christian Aid Ireland, 2017

Tackling impunity for human rights violations and injustice

Our partners CIJP, Lawyers Collective 'José Alvear Restrepo' (CCAJAR), Sisma Mujer, CONPAZ and Coordination Colombia Europe United States (CCEEU) work to help achieve justice for victims.⁸

Tackling impunity and injustice achieves public acceptance of guilt from perpetrators, a sense of respect and the promise of no repetition of violence for victims, and reconciliation for both sides. Ignoring massive abuses destroys a society's values and leaves a path open for abuses to be repeated. Real peace can only be achieved through a process of justice for victims, where they are given truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of no repetition of violence, and where a society has healed and is ready for peace.

This work is achieved through:

- Denouncing all types of perpetrators of human rights violations, especially state actors in high-level positions.
- Using multiple strategies to tackle impunity.
- Supporting victims in justice processes.
- Drawing on international legal mechanisms and actors.

Our impact

- The Naya Afro-Colombians were handed 177,817 hectares of land in 2016 after a legal battle lasting more than 16 years, benefiting 18,000 people (CIJP).⁹
- Around 20 humanitarian zones have been declared in the Naya River Valley and more than 50 in the country (CIJP).¹⁰
- In 2011, the Colombian state recognised the Cimitarra River Valley as a Peasant Reserve Zone, benefiting 8,935 peasant farmers and their families (ACVC).¹¹
- Peasant Reserve Zones are part of the Final Peace Agreement (ACVC).¹²
- Reconciliation between victims and FARC for the Bojayá and Chinita massacres (CIJP).¹³
- A record of cases of impunity for human rights violations was published; it was designed to build collective memory to challenge injustice (CIJP).¹⁴
- Several high-level state perpetrators, including officials from the Department of Administrative Security, have been jailed (CCAJAR).¹⁵
- Cases against the former President of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe, and his brother, Santiago Uribe, are in process (CCAJAR and CIJP).¹⁶
- Former President Uribe is obliged to publicly retract accusations against victims and human rights organisations (including CCAJAR).¹⁷
- A criminal complaint has been submitted in the International Criminal Court, asking it to consider opening a formal

'A historical benchmark was the international meetings in Choco... An ethical commission [was created] with highly recognised figures such as the grandmothers of the May Square and Aviva Chomsky... so that the evidence of the victims could be conserved until justice materialises, with hundreds of testimonies'

CIJP interviews, 2018

investigation into systematic impunity for sexual violence in Colombia (CCAJAR and Sisma Mujer).¹⁸

- Recognition by the Constitutional Court that victims are entitled to participate in processes affecting their rights (CCAJAR, CCEEU).¹⁹
- A new national protocol to protect activists in demonstrations was introduced in 2018 (CCEEU).²⁰
- Sexual violence in the Final Peace Agreement was exempted from amnesty in Special Peace Courts (Sisma Mujer, survivors of sexual violence).²¹
- A chapter on ethnicity was included in the Peace Agreement (Communities Building Peace in the Territories; CONPAZ).²²

Lessons learned

Christian Aid Colombia and its partners take a strategic approach to reducing violence, supporting displaced people and victims of human rights violations to achieve peace. We have recently started to work on promoting alternatives to illicit crops and developing a just and inclusive economy that builds peace. These have potential as key multipliers of the impact achieved through the land and justice theories of change.

There will be no peace if illicit crops are not replaced, economic inequalities are not reduced and peace is not financed. The denial of economic, social and cultural rights is both a result and a cause of conflict. The accountability of the state on peace processes is not only about addressing violence from armed actors, but also about addressing the root causes of the conflict, such as access to services, land and inequality. It is evident that conflict can end, but violence can stay. Economic inequality is a key booster of violence and it is important to keep integrating measures to address this into our current work.

Christian Aid Colombia has recently started to work on addressing and preventing gender-based violence. This type of violence has its own nature and is not likely to disappear with responses that do not take into account gender discrimination. More work is needed in this area.

There is a need to clarify the connections between peacebuilding and poverty – that is, the theories do not only end at building peace but also at reducing or eliminating poverty, which is Christian Aid's ultimate mission. For example, there are connections between becoming displaced and being a victim of violence and being able to maintain one's livelihood, and there is a relationship between peace and legislating on land redistribution for the poorest people.

A final reflection to be held with other country programmes is – how exportable is the Colombian case study and its theories of change for peace to other countries? What successful strategies can be taken up elsewhere? There is a need to reflect and compare Colombia to other country programmes to understand what theories of change work best where, and why.

Endnotes

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Cover: The river crossing near Las Camellias. The conflict-affected region of Curvarado and Jiguamando is constantly patrolled by military forces.

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