



Beyond the Pandemic

Colombia Case Study - 2021



Background

This briefing note is part of HERE's broader project "Beyond the Pandemic". The COVID-19 pandemic has created vast new needs and has exacerbated those already in existence. The pandemic has had an enormous impact on health systems, and is increasingly destabilising global food security and nutrition, education, and livelihoods. The negative effects of the pandemic are significant, they are growing, and they are likely to have a lasting impact. The purpose of the Beyond the Pandemic project is to capture evidence and provide insights into the changes the COVID-19 pandemic has anecdotally been forcing on the humanitarian sector and the implications for humanitarian organisations. HERE's research has shown that the pandemic has brought to the surface and amplified pre-existing gaps and tensions. In Colombia, the humanitarian community has had to carefully tread its relationship with the state, given also the lack of a clear structure in the existing aid architecture.

Methodological approach

- *The project used qualitative research methods and incorporated the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data.*
- *The global level analysis is complemented by four country case studies: Cameroon, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar. The four countries were selected based on pre-defined context criteria: protracted humanitarian crisis; armed conflict; mixed displacement; urban context; low-middle income countries.*
- *The purposive sample of humanitarian actors included a number of selected donors, INGOs, national/local NGOs, and UN agencies. In some cases, data collection also included interviews with philanthropic and private sector actors and consortia.*
- *In Colombia, the research team held a total of sixteen (16) key informant interviews (KII) with donor representatives (3), INGOs (3), the RCRC movement, (2) national/local NGOs (3), UN agencies (4), and one philanthropic actor.*

Acknowledgements

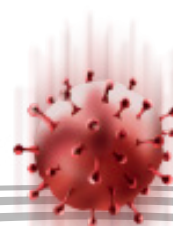
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HERE-Geneva
Tourelle Emilio Luisoni
Rue Rothschild 20
1202 Geneva
Tel +41 22 731 13 19
contact@here-geneva.org
www.here-geneva.org



The Colombian Context

When COVID-19 reached Colombia in March 2020, the country was already coping with two major crises of national concern.

First, the conflict with armed groups that persisted despite a peace agreement brokered in 2016. The landmark peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was supposed to mark the end of a 50-year long deadly conflict.¹ By 2021, however, the number of people displaced by conflict was the highest since 2016.² Most conflict-related displacements took place in the Pacific Region, particularly in Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Chocó y Cauca.³ Rebel groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) progressively filled the space left by the progressive dissolution of FARC.⁴ The new government, sworn in 2018, has struggled to deliver along the peace agreement, with rural reforms to overcome spatial inequalities still pending and an imperfect reintegration of former combatants.⁵

Second, political and socio-economic unrest in neighbouring Venezuela has triggered one of the most considerable mixed migration flows ever witnessed in Latin America, significantly impacting on Colombia's humanitarian landscape. 1.84 million Venezuelans have crossed the border into Colombia, making it the country with the largest share of the estimated six million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide.⁶

1 Then Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 for his efforts to end the war.

2 The Economist, 2021. Today, Colombia has the third largest internally displaced population globally, ranking just behind Syria and DR Congo. IDMC, 2021, p. 14.

3 El Universal, 2021. See also ACAPS, 2021, p. 2.

4 See International Crisis Group, 2021.

5 WOLA, 2021; New York Times, 2021b.

6 R4V, 2021, p. 187.

COVID-19 in Colombia

Prior to the appearance of Omicron in December 2021, Colombia saw three COVID waves which peaked in August 2020, January 2021, and June 2021, respectively. The infection and mortality rates of each novel surge overturned the records set by the one preceding it.⁷ While Colombia's rates were substantively inferior to those recorded in Brazil,⁸ the country still ranked highly in comparison with other countries in Latin America.⁹

Just days after the first COVID case was reported in March 2020, Colombia imposed one of the strictest national lockdowns worldwide, which remained in force for six months.¹⁰ Key health indicators such as incidence and mortality rates signaled the measure as effective,¹¹ but it took a heavy toll on the economy. The public health emergency quickly evolved into a socio-economic crisis: at the peak of the first wave in the summer of 2020, unemployment rose above 20%, double the rate reported a year before.¹² That year, the share of Colombia's population considered poor increased from 35.7% to 42.5%. More than 15% of the total population experienced extreme poverty, compared to 9.6% in 2019.¹³ In November

7 Colombia's Covid case peaks: 16 August 2020: 81k weekly cases, 2,255 weekly deaths; 17 January 2021: 122k weekly cases, 2,743 weekly deaths (recorded 24 January); 27 June 2021: 214k weekly cases, 4,744 weekly deaths. Data extracted from John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

8 Brazil's Covid case peaks: 26 July 2020 : 320k weekly cases, 7,539 weekly deaths ; 28 March 2021 : 540k weekly cases, 21,784 weekly deaths (recorded 11 April) ; 20 June 2021: 511k weekly cases, 14,433 weekly deaths. Data extracted from John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

9 See confirmed cases and deaths on a per capita basis provided by CEPR : <https://cepr.net/cases-of-covid-19-latin-american-and-caribbean-countries/>

10 ABC, 2020.

11 De la Hoz-Restrepo et al., 2020, in : Internat. Journal of Infectious Diseases.

12 See CNN, 2020.

13 See El Economista, 2021.

2020, an additional USD 5 million were allocated to Colombia from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which identified the country as an underfunded emergency.¹⁴

To forestall a further hit on the economy, the rigid prevention measures were discontinued, and paired with a slow start in vaccine distribution it led to a sudden and sustained upsurge of daily cases by June 2021. Despite the late start, the vaccination campaign saw more than half of the population fully vaccinated by December 2021.¹⁵ President Duque¹⁶ reverted previous announcements to exclude undocumented Venezuelan migrants from the national vaccination rollout by announcing a ten-year temporary legal/protection status (TPS) for undocumented Venezuelan migrants.¹⁷ The TPS, which came into effect in May 2021, helped reduce the vulnerability of the *caminantes* and was applauded by the international community as a historic decision.¹⁸

The 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) projected a 31% increase of people in need (PIN) compared to the 2020 needs overview. This upsurge was significantly sharper than the trend seen in the five previous years, and it is partially explained by the new needs created by the pandemic.¹⁹

14 United Nations Colombia, 2020. Compare also: <https://cerf.un.org/what-we-do/allocation-by-country>

15 Colombia and Chile are the only countries ranked top 20 in [Bloomberg's Covid resilience ranking](#), an indicator to see where the virus is being handled the most effectively.

16 This report was written when Duque was still ruling president, and based on information and perceptions gathered up to and including 2021.

17 <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/03/colombias-trailblazing-model-for-refugees.html>. The measure applies to Venezuelans that have entered Colombia before 31 January 2021, whether through formal or informal crossing.

18 New York Times, 2021a.

19 "La situación humanitaria e interna del país determinada en gran parte por el reciente impacto de la pandemia del COVID-19, junto a dinámicas de violencia, la pobreza, los desastres naturales tuvo un deterioro considerable de las consecuencias humanitarias, reflejado en un aumento del 31 por ciento de las personas con necesidades respecto al año anterior". OCHA, 2021a, p. 12.

Calling for a record-high USD 283m (an unprecedented increase of 63% compared to 2021), the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) puts forwards four key drivers of needs: the pandemic, violent conflict, climate change, and mixed migration movements.²⁰

The Impact of COVID-19 on Needs: Shifting Humanitarian Priorities

The 2021 HNO confirmed pre-existing inequalities: humanitarian needs were primarily located in hard-to-reach rural areas, most of them marked as protection-related. African-Colombian and indigenous communities – at a higher risk of displacement and discrimination²¹ – figured prominently among the targeted population. Most aid workers interviewed for this case study confirmed that COVID-19 most heavily impacted those already in need, as per the beneficiary targeting established before the pandemic. Still, the appearance of new needs pushed for reprioritisation: interviews with donor representatives highlighted that, in a context where the focus was continuously on resilience and durable solutions programming, life-saving programmes needed to be flagged. This also impacted the distribution of people targeted per cluster. In 2017, only 8% of all targeted people were supposed to be reached with aid provided by the health sector. In 2021, that number spiked

20 The steep increase of 63% is also conditioned by the relatively low funding appeal the year before (USD 173m), which is likely to have been a reaction to the incessant low funding coverage in Colombia.

21 See IDM Colombia frontpage, [subsection Impacts](#) (last accessed on 9 March 2022).

to 68%, and in 2022, health was the sector targeting the most people in total numbers, as an immediate impact of the coronavirus.²² The years 2020 and 2021 also witnessed an increase in food assistance.²³

In addition to the sectoral focus on health and food, the 2021 HRP also visibly prioritises people under the control of armed groups.²⁴ Colombia's guerrilla groups were able to ensure significant wins during the pandemic. They took advantage of lockdowns²⁵ and the economic downturn to expand their territorial control, tighten their grips over communities, and recruit young men in their ranks. Some relief actors developed remote monitoring tools that would later prove beneficial in mitigating protection risks.²⁶ Some respondents also found that the humanitarian response to COVID-19 provided an opportunity to reach peripheral indigenous communities that had previously not seen protection and assistance.²⁷ However, in most cases, lockdown measures effectively restricted access and mobility of protection actors and thus impeded humanitarian and state presence in remote areas, especially during the months of complete lockdown in 2020.

²² See OCHA 2021b, p. 9.

²³ Interestingly, in 2019 it was estimated that all people targeted by international aid had protection needs. This ratio dropped to 48% in 2020 only to then increase again to 59% in 2021.

²⁴ OCHA, 2022, p. 4.

²⁵ Compare with ACAPS numbers on Colombia's areas most affected by confinements: ACAPS, 2022.

²⁶ For example, one donor representative explained that some organisations had anticipated school closures and distributed radios and installed broadcasts in isolated communities to enable virtual schooling. The measure was meant not only to maintain a basic provision of education, but also to shield young boys from potential recruitment by armed groups.

²⁷ Improved humanitarian access may be considered as one explanatory factor behind the slight increase in people living in indigenous communities targeted by international aid in 2022 (+4k/+2%) despite the significant decrease of people in need living in those communities (-325k/-34%). Compare OCHA, 2022, p. 19 with OCHA 2021b, p. 17.

COVID-19 as a Catalysing Force

In Colombia, the pandemic enhanced pre-existing dynamics. Not only did the consequences of the disease entrench the vulnerabilities of those already in need of humanitarian assistance, but the pandemic particularly highlighted two inter-related challenges of the humanitarian response in the country: the relationship between the humanitarian community and the government of Colombia, and the complex humanitarian coordination architecture. These challenges predated COVID-19, but the unprecedented crisis served as a reminder of their criticality and highlighted the need to acknowledge and tackle them as a priority. In this regard, the pandemic also played a certain catalysing role towards a positive change, providing opportunities for better humanitarian access and information-sharing, at least in the short term.

The interplay between different actors

The relationship between the government of Colombia²⁸ and the humanitarian community on conflict-related relief work has been complicated for years. The pandemic brought the challenges stemming from pre-existing dynamics to the surface, but it also provided opportunities for leveraging complementarities between humanitarian actors and national plans.

The international humanitarian community and the government, for example, have had diverging opinions over the years regarding the source of humanitarian needs and the intensity of the violence in Colombia. Several external legal analyses have determined the existence of simultaneous non-international

²⁸ The notion of government is a wide-ranging one and it englobes both authorities at the national and at the local level. This paper focuses in particular on the perceptions of different humanitarian actors about their relationship with government officials between 2016-2018 and 2021.

armed conflicts (NIACs) on Colombian soil.²⁹ However, while Colombia has implemented some International Humanitarian Law (IHL) over the last decades of war and issued a directive ruling FARC dissidents as an armed group in 2019,³⁰ the government has also publicly denied the existence of NIACs on numerous occasions.³¹ Downgrading the conflict to internal disturbances outside the rule of IHL has created a debate as to the prevalence of 'inconvenient' principled international humanitarian aid. The relationship between the government and humanitarian actors has at times been characterised by mistrust. The government has taken a leading role in directing the humanitarian response and has appeared resolute to facilitate international relief efforts alongside parameters that reflect the state's priorities and needs analysis. The state has refused to engage in talks with ELN,³² and respondents have confirmed that the criminalisation of engagement with armed groups significantly impacts on the humanitarian community's ability to interact with those in control of an area to reach the people most in need.

29 Extensive consensus prevails especially with regards to the characterisation of the ELN conflict as a NIAC. See for example Serralvo, 2020, in: Anuario Iberoamericano sobre Derecho Internacional Humanitario; Pappier & Johnson, 2020, in: Blog of the European Journal of International Law.

[RULAC classified](#) the government's conflict with ELN and the FARC-EP as two separate non-international armed conflict and concluded the existence of a NIAC between ELN and another armed group, the AGC. The [ICRC estimates the existence of five NIACs on Colombia soil](#).

30 Muñoz, Serralvo, 2019, in: International Red Cross Review.

31 Then consultant on human rights and international affairs for the president Ivan Duque in 2019 [explained with regard to ELN activities that](#), "in this case, what we have seen, and this government will not begin any kind of negotiations with this group, is the degradation towards the idea of pure and hard crime, which must be combated in another way and not through qualifications of internal armed conflict". See also Travesi & Rivera, 2016, in: Centro Internacional para la Justicia Transicional.

32 United Security Council Report of 27 December 2021, [S/2021/109](#).

Since the pandemic, however, the state's public positioning on the nature of the conflicts has occasionally leaned towards the use of IHL-related language. The government has acknowledged the escalation of violence at the Venezuelan border, publicly designating violence in Arauca as armed conflict³³ and a humanitarian crisis.³⁴ While the language is in line with the government's preferred narrative – underscoring Venezuela's role in the deterioration of the conflict at the border – the use of the IHL lexicon has made it easier for international aid workers to negotiate their presence and programmes in these contested areas. One respondent asserted that the government has become more proactive in reaching out to the international humanitarian community to discuss relief work in contested areas, especially in Chocó, to find effective ways to reduce suffering. These instances notwithstanding, the government still resists a general determination of NIACs. **Humanitarian response plans for Colombia have been reflecting this preference: while the 2020 HRP included a plethora of references to 'armed conflicts' in Colombia, the last two response plans only refer to 'situations of violence'.** The added footnotes in both response plans state that the "term violence is used without prejudice to the ICRC's classification of conflicts", which does conclude for the existence of NIACs.³⁵

The interplay between the government and the humanitarian community has suffered from misalignment with regard to needs-analysis and prioritisation. Protection work

33 See for example [the statement made](#) on the official Twitter profile of the Human rights Ombudsman Office of Colombia.

34 Ombudsman Office of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo), 2021.

35 See OCHA, 2021, p. 10; OCHA, 2022, p. 7.

led by humanitarian actors, for example, has generally been met with wariness by the government.³⁶ Interviews with humanitarian agencies have pointed to tensions between the need to prioritise protection and upholding the principle of independence, and the necessity to maintain access: at times these were seen as incompatible. One protection actor interviewed for this research deemed the ongoing Venezuelan migration crisis the only reason protection organisations persist on Colombian soil. Another pointed to the lack of reference to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the final version of the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).³⁷ The pandemic has shifted the focus from conflict-induced needs to new and changing vulnerabilities leading to a different dynamic between the government and (international) humanitarian actors. Based on agreement on the source of needs, respondents reported being able to hold valuable consultations with the authorities to make sense of the needs brought on by the pandemic. Aid actors were then able to integrate government programmes into humanitarian responses in areas where humanitarian access had been previously constrained. During the vaccination roll-out, humanitarian actors further worked with the government to deliver vaccines in remote areas with little state presence.

The complex humanitarian coordination architecture

The other key element that the pandemic has brought to the fore is one inherent to humanitarian action: the role of humanitarian coordination – in both its purpose and structures – in supporting an effective

humanitarian response. Respondents in Colombia highlighted how the government's determination to tackle conflict and needs in the country primarily as a domestic affair had an impact on how humanitarians would coordinate their activities in the country. There was, for example, no humanitarian coordinator for several years.³⁸ Preference has been given to foreign assistance that supports development or peace efforts. As one respondent put it: "everything we do must be framed around the peace process. If we do not consolidate and support the peace process, we are not a relevant actor in this country, period." Humanitarian actors had to make way for the international community's most ardent desire to sustain the 2016 peace accords. The traditional humanitarian architecture was therefore sidelined in favour of one that supports development and peace work.

The pandemic added a new layer of complexity, with the activation of new COVID-19 focal points in the country, such as the Pan American Health Organization (OPS/OMS). Some aid workers were occasionally overwhelmed by the amount of different reporting lines to concurrent coordination bodies, increasing the bureaucratic burden for accountability and funding purposes. With armed groups taking advantage of the pandemic,³⁹ the new situation highlighted the importance of paying more attention to the coordination architecture: the increase of violence pushed humanitarians to revamp traditional inter-cluster coordination to respond to the new multisectoral needs in a comprehensive manner. The last two years

36 OCHA, 2021b, p. 21.

37 For the full document : https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/cf-documents/06a52490-0fef-426b-bda9-2f7b39ffd085_Evaluacion_UNDAF-VF_.pdf

38 Read [NRC's appeal in 2017](#) to revert the decision to remove the most senior aid position in Colombia.

39 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/09/10/Colombia-conflict-armed-groups-child-recruitment>.

saw an enhancement of information-sharing between actors. **Aid workers revitalised neglected mechanisms and communication channels, established a new Humanitarian Access Working Group (HAWG), and shifted back to area-based coordination. The new way of working facilitated the delivery of a comprehensive response to both COVID-19 and the upsurge of violence.**

In addition, the vacant position of Resident Coordinator (RC) was filled as of July 2021.⁴⁰ While the designated RC did not assume the role of humanitarian coordinator (HC) in a double-hatted arrangement, one respondent affirmed to be confident that clarity provided by the appointment will facilitate humanitarian coordination and improve relations with the government.

Respondents also addressed the existence of a second humanitarian coordination platform in Colombia: the *Response for Venezuelans* (R4V). Set up in 2018 and dedicated to needs created by the migration flow departing Venezuela, R4V is co-led by UNHCR and IOM and is the government's favoured type of humanitarian platform. The R4V platform coordinates response efforts across 17 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and runs in parallel to the conventional Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)-led response in Colombia. Destined to complement the host state's leading efforts in responding to the migration influx, this platform's *raison d'être* lies not in Colombia's internal conflicts but instead in the mass displacement and humanitarian needs that originated in Venezuela. With the media and the government's eyes on this crisis, one respondent expressed concern over donor preferences to finance aid delivery to the refugee crisis over livelihood solutions to IDPs, once again shadowing aid efforts

informed by the HRP. Other respondents described occasional confusion and duplication of aid efforts funded by the traditional response plan and those backed by the R4V. For example, the revitalised territorial inter-cluster coordination does not necessarily differentiate between Colombian or Venezuelan; and the R4V considers the needs of affected host communities – which are sometimes already covered by the HRP.

Concluding Remarks

Pre-COVID-19, the relationship between the government of Colombia and humanitarian actors was strained because of a misalignment in the analysis of needs. Beyond needs arising from the crisis in neighbouring Venezuela, humanitarian actors saw humanitarian needs arise from ongoing internal conflicts which the government was reluctant to acknowledge. This also had an impact on the way the humanitarian community had organised itself, through two parallel coordination mechanisms.

The pandemic has acted as a catalysing force, entrenching these existing challenges. To respond to the multisectoral needs emerging as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 in a comprehensive manner, aid workers revamped traditional inter-cluster coordination which had been dormant in the wake of the 2016 peace accords, adding yet another layer of complexity. At least in the short term, however, the pandemic also brought a number of opportunities for positive change. The vulnerabilities created by the pandemic, different from conflict-induced needs, brought the government and the aid community closer together, allowing for better collaboration. Humanitarian actors

⁴⁰ United Nations, 2021.

were able to access – at least temporarily – groups in need who had previously been cut off from any assistance.

Looking ahead, this new phase of collaboration between Colombian authorities and humanitarian actors may open a window of opportunity for the aid community for future humanitarian access negotiations with armed groups. A key challenge to effective humanitarian coordination in Colombia will continue to be the synchronisation between different coordination platforms to avoid duplication of humanitarian efforts.

Curious to read more about gaps and tensions in the humanitarian aid architecture? HERE-Geneva is currently undertaking research on ‘[The Future of Humanitarian Coordination](#)’, a project that aims to provide actionable suggestions on how to address some of the longstanding challenges in the way of effective humanitarian coordination, i.e. to identify what needs revitalisation, reinvigoration, or renewal.

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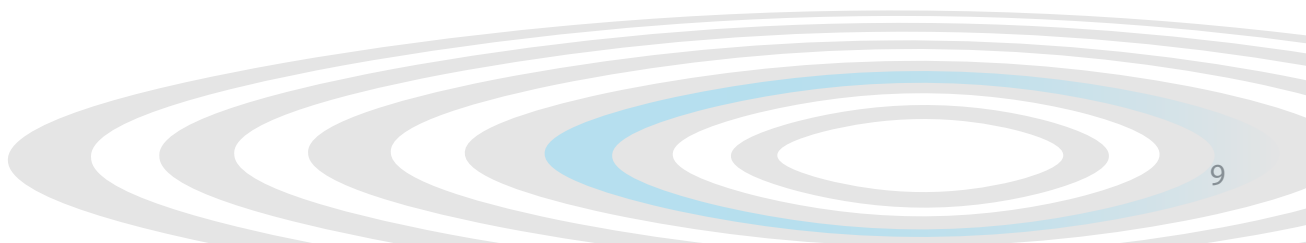
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HERE-Geneva
Tourelle Emilio Luisoni
Rue Rothschild 20
1202 Geneva
Tel +41 22 731 13 19
contact@here-geneva.org
www.here-geneva.org

 @HEREGeneva

 HERE Geneva

