

The dynamics of violence and armed conflict have remained significant throughout Colombia despite the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) in 2016 ([GPC 21/02/2022](#)). The newly elected president and administration are committed to implementing the protection measures foreseen in the Peace Agreement, but constraining factors remain ([OpenDemocracy 03/08/2022](#)). Over the last five years, the multiplication and consolidation of armed groups in certain territories have intensified the level of violence, particularly towards peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afrodescendant communities ([ICRC 09/08/2022](#)).

Colombian women, girls, boys, men, and communities in general face numerous protection concerns, including forced displacements, confinements, and massacres, which have increased since 2016 (see table 1 on page 5). Explosive ordnance indiscriminately kills and injures civilians in conflict-affected areas. Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities are particularly under serious threat; some of them are forced to leave their ancestral territories. Human rights defenders (HRDs) are killed and attacked, and entire communities are harassed, intimidated, and even displaced. Armed groups forcibly recruit and use girls and boys; women, girls, and LGBTQI+ communities are subject to different forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), sexual exploitation, and abuse.

Providing a comprehensive response to prevent, respond to, and mitigate protection threats is a challenge. The scale of protection needs, which exceeds the response capacity, constrains the institutional response of the Government of Colombia despite its strong legal framework. Humanitarian organisations tend to focus mainly on life-saving emergency assistance and do not systematically mainstream and integrate protection services ([KII 13/06/2022](#); [KII 23/06/2022](#); [Valencia Agudelo and Chaverra Colorado 15/05/2021](#)).

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Key messages

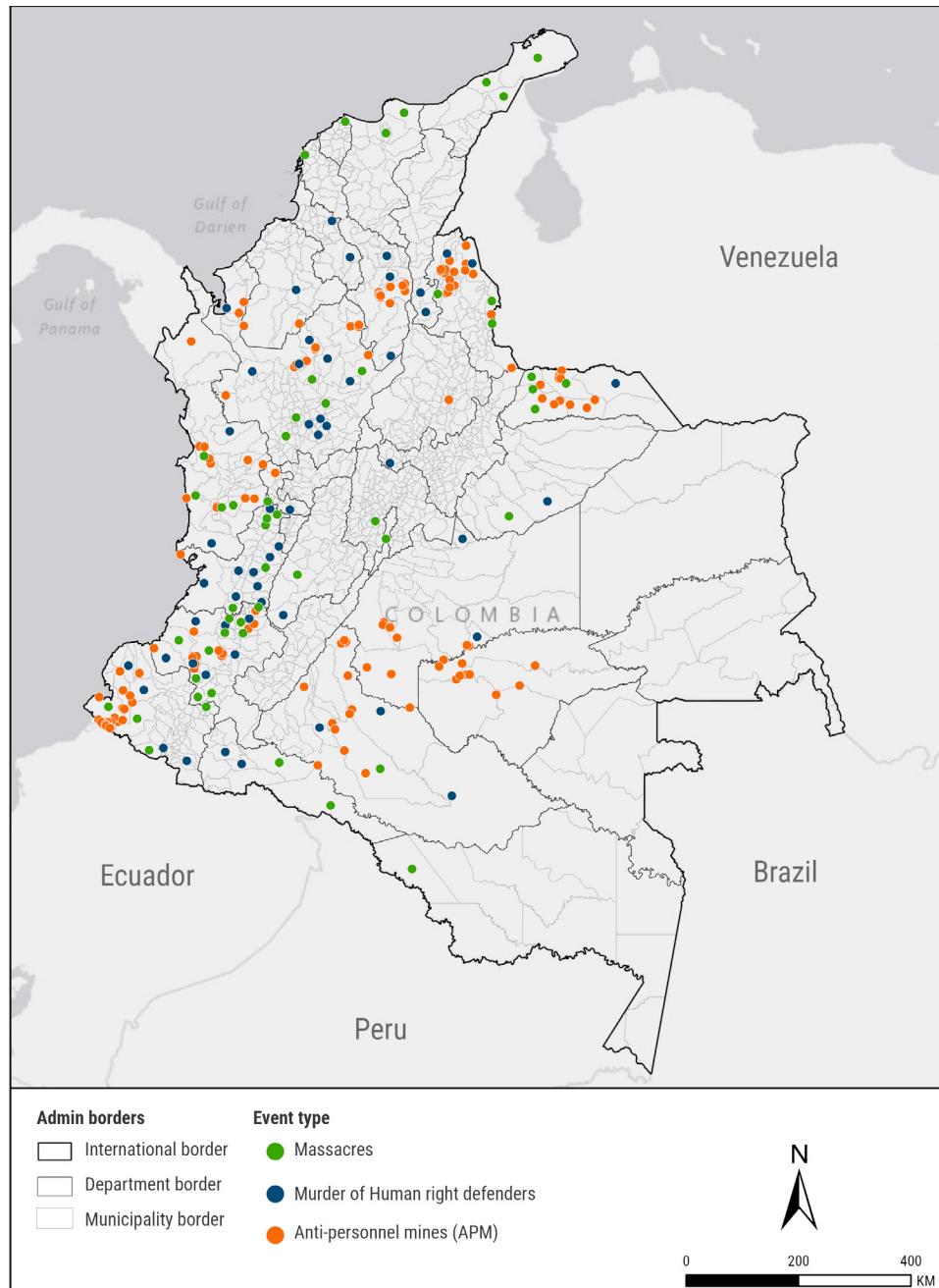
- Communities in Colombia face many protection threats, and the institutional and humanitarian protection response deals with multiple challenges. In response, communities have developed protection capacities decreasing their and their members' exposure to threats and harmful coping mechanisms. Such mechanisms also create a more conducive environment for the respect of their rights, dignity, lives, and territories.
- In some contexts, depending on the protection threat, women, girls, boys, men, human rights defenders (HRDs), people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, and ethnic communities implement and engage in various mechanisms and strategies to prevent, mitigate, adapt to, and recover from protection incidents.
- Considering the extent of protection needs in Colombia, institutional and humanitarian responders need to be aware of and, where possible, strengthen the community's existing protection responses. That said, while community-based protection strategies may be crucial for survival, they do not by themselves provide the degree of safety, security, and dignity that people need ([URD 23/12/2021](#)).
- When addressing needs arising from protection concerns and threats, the humanitarian response tends to focus primarily on responsive and remedial activities. Programmes that address the root causes of protection concerns and threats are lacking, preventing a comprehensive, collective, and strategic protection response.

About this report

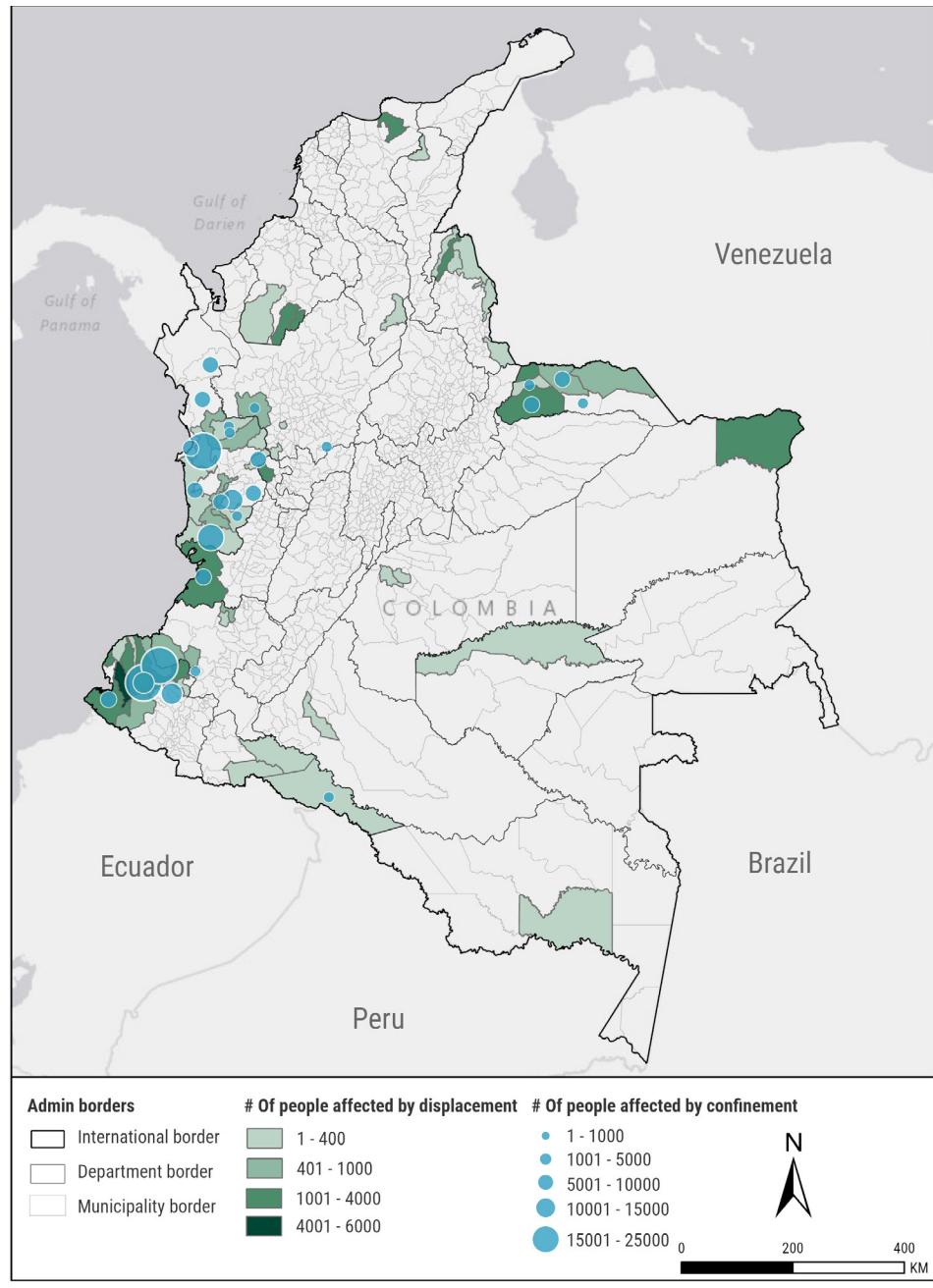
Aim: the report provides an overview of the main protection concerns in Colombia. It exposes the main threats of armed conflict and its differentiated impact on the population. It presents by population group the community's coping mechanisms and reactive responses to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from the various protection threats they are exposed to.

Methodology: ACAPS did a secondary data review and conducted fifteen key informant interviews with MIRE partners, NGOs, UN agencies in Colombia, and leaders and representatives of grassroots organisations.

Colombia: massacres, killings of human right defenders, and anti-personnel mines
 (APM) events between January-June 2022



Colombia: confinement and forced displacement events between January-June 2022



LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND PROTECTION PRINCIPLES

Responsibility to protect

The **responsibility to protect lies primarily with the State**, which has a legal obligation under international law to protect and promote human rights and ensure that people can realise their rights without discrimination ([UN World Summit A/60/L.1 2005](#)). In situations of armed conflict, States and armed groups are responsible for implementing international humanitarian law (IHL), which aims to protect certain categories of people and objects and restrict the methods and means of warfare ([Australian Red Cross 2011](#)).

International humanitarian law asserts that parties to a conflict, such as States and armed groups, are obliged to protect the civilian population and objects during armed conflict. IHL regulates the general conduct of hostilities based on three core principles:

1. **distinction**, as IHL draws a line between civilians (non-combatants) and combatants and requires that parties to a conflict treat civilians without adverse distinction
2. **proportionality** in the use of force, as IHL prohibits attacks that cause incidental civilian harm that would be considered excessive in relation to concrete and direct military advantage
3. **precaution**, as IHL demands all parties to take necessary precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects and minimise incidental civilian harm.

Specific groups, such as women, children, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced people, are granted the status of protected people against the effects of hostilities in armed conflicts ([ICRC 10/06/2020](#)).

International human rights law is the body of international law that applies at all times, whether during a peace or armed conflict situation. Under this law, States assume obligations and duties to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights. These rights, which are inherent in all human beings regardless of nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status, are interrelated, interdependent, and indivisible. The law expresses and guarantees these rights through treaties, customary international law, general principles, and soft law ([OHCHR 01/07/2012](#)).

International refugee law protects people seeking asylum from persecution and those who have been recognised as refugees. Colombia is a party to the Refugee Convention of 1951 and its protocol. It is also a signatory to the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, a non-binding Latin American instrument reaffirming the importance of the right to asylum, the

principle of non-refoulement, and the importance of finding durable solutions ([MPI accessed 10/10/2022](#)). Humanitarian organisations also refer to the Guiding Principles on Forced Internal Displacement, which address the specific needs of IDPs worldwide. They identify rights and guarantees relevant to protecting people from forced displacement and their protection and assistance during displacement, return or resettlement, and reintegration ([OCHA 01/09/2004](#)).

Government of Colombia institutions are responsible for protecting individuals and communities in the country against threats and guaranteeing measures to enhance the protection of civilians, particularly women, children, and ethnic peoples. In the context of armed conflict, international treaties, conventions, and declarations constitute the legal framework the Colombian Government uses to guarantee the protection of civilian human rights ([KII 06/09/2022; KII 19/07/2022; ICRC 11/2019](#)). Colombia is a party to many international human rights conventions, such as the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its additional protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Colombia is also party to several regional human rights conventions, such as the American Convention on Human Rights ([OHCHR accessed 19/10/2022](#)).

In Colombia, a large regulatory framework for prevention and protection, with more than 27 mechanisms, norms, and policies, exists to prevent violence and protect individuals and groups. The framework defines and develops institutional competencies for the protection of individuals, groups, and communities at risk. It includes a significant number of coordination fora at the national, regional, and local levels. Different entities design and implement protection strategies, such as the Ministry of the Interior, the National Protection Unit, the Ombudsman's Office, the Attorney General's Office, the National Police, municipal, governors', and mayors' offices, the Unit for Attention and Reparation of Victims, and the different coordination mechanisms at local and national levels ([HBS 27/01/2020; SUIN accessed 19/10/2022; Gobierno de Colombia accessed 19/10/2022; OHCHR 26/07/2022](#)).

Humanitarian organisations have a responsibility to help States fulfil their responsibility to protect. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee – the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system – affirms that all humanitarian entities are responsible for placing protection at the core of their actions ([IASC 17/12/2013](#)). Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams have a collective responsibility in a number of areas, including addressing protection challenges that have system-wide implications and ensuring that the most critical protection concerns are addressed ([IASC 14/10/2016](#)).

Protection principles in humanitarian action

Protection in humanitarian action is both a mainstreaming approach and a sector of intervention. As a mainstreaming approach, it implies that four protection principles guide all humanitarian organisations, even those without a distinct protection mandate. These principles apply to all humanitarian organisations and reflect universal concerns that should guide humanitarian action at all times. They are as follows:

- to enhance people's safety, dignity, and rights and avoid exposing them to further harm
- to ensure access to impartial assistance
- to protect people from violence
- to assist with rights claims, access to remedies, and recovery from abuse.

These principles support the rights set out in the Humanitarian Charter, including the right to protection and security (Sphere 2018).

The centrality of protection expands beyond protection mainstreaming. It includes ensuring that leadership, coordination, and engagement in protection and all sectors are strategic, aligned, and directed towards a stronger response. While the protection of the rights of people is primarily the duty of States and, in conflict, the parties to a conflict, Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams are responsible for ensuring that protection is the purpose and intended outcome of humanitarian response (IASC 17/12/2013).

Protection by presence and proximity is a preventative modality that the international community and humanitarian organisations are implementing. It is crucial in areas under the control of armed groups (OCHA 23/02/2022). The premise is that the sustained presence of humanitarian organisations within a community will strengthen security conditions and reduce cycles of violence. Effective protection by presence involves strong community engagement, either by enabling the community to plan on its own or alongside the response. It also requires an established foundation of trust with the community (KII 06/09/2022). It includes support in the form of physical accompaniment, support to mediation, and actions to understand the protection risks that communities face.

Community-based protection programming is a specific methodology where humanitarian and development organisations support and strengthen community responders to identify, prioritise, and address the protection concerns they are facing, including by supporting the development of community safety plans (UNHCR 01/01/2008). Community-based protection programmes help people gain awareness of their rights, develop responses, and learn where and how to seek assistance (FMR 10/2016).

PROTECTION RESPONSE

In Colombia, practical issues that arise under decentralisation challenge the government responsibility to protect, constraining effectiveness and accountability in terms of resources and institutional capacity. Some of the methodologies and road maps used vary, hindering the implementation of concrete actions. Government protection responsibilities, such as immediate assistance and rapid response to people's needs, have been relegated to municipalities without considering that they have greater exposure to risks and less financial capacities. People need timely and accurate information on imminent threats and resources for survival strategies, including the location and availability of basic needs, health, food, and shelter for those on the move. The humanitarian response has limited capacities and resources to support communities at risk and help them better prevent the risks and threats they face.

Coordination among government institutions and the implementation of prevention and protection strategies take a lot of time. A significant number of early warning alerts foresee many attacks, but responses do not come in time.

The weak coordination between security, justice, and protection institutions and policy frameworks across all levels of the Government undermines the effectiveness of protection efforts (Sanchez Lozano and Sanchez Amaya 01/01/2020)

Humanitarian protection response involves a number of organisations that carry out protection activities as stand-alone or integrated programmes. Humanitarian organisations, including NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies, work in consultation and collaboration with authorities at the local and national levels to assist people in need, providing protection and durable solutions. Humanitarian protection response is often in coordination with the protection cluster, its subclusters, and local coordination teams. Their actions can be responsive (the prevention or alleviation of the immediate effects of protection incidents), remedial (long-term assistance and support to people while they live with the effects of violence), or environment-building (consolidating an environment conducive to the full respect of the rights of individuals) (GPC 09/08/2021). Still, humanitarian protection actions in urgent cases of distress face difficulties in responding to the severity of humanitarian needs. Assistance has to cater to differentiated conflict impacts on children, women, LGBTQI+ communities, HDRs, and ethnic groups. Responders also face access constraints in responding to people in need and a lack of financial resources to respond to the confluence of multiple crises.

Community protection responses, which are the focus of this report, refer to the ability of households and violence-afflicted communities to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks while adapting and transforming their means for a living in the face of long-term stressors, change, and uncertainty (UNHCR 2013).

Communities do so in a manner that reduces their exposure to threats and harmful coping mechanisms, creating a conducive environment for the respect of their rights, dignity, lives, and territories. Resilience refers to the capability of communities to use available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations. While community-based and individual self-protection strategies may be crucial for survival, they do not by themselves provide the degree of safety, security, and dignity that people need and are entitled to.

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Despite the Peace Agreement in November 2016 between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP, Colombia continues to face multiple challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the country's economy and created an opportunity for armed groups to exert greater influence of power over their regions of control. As at July 2022, armed groups had consolidated and expanded their presence in 12 departments: Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca departments in the Pacific region; Córdoba and Magdalena departments in the subregion of Magdalena Medio; La Guajira in the Caribbean subregion, Norte de Santander in the subregion of Catatumbo; and the departments of Antioquia, Arauca, Caquetá, Guaviare, and Putumayo (OHCHR 26/07/2022). The country also faces environmental hazards, such as flooding and landslides during the rainy seasons (April–May and October–November) and droughts during the dry seasons (December–January and July–August). Migrants and refugees, particularly the 2.48 million from Venezuela, face risks associated with conflict and necessitate additional response capacity from state institutions and humanitarian organisations (R4V 12/10/2022; OCHA 21/02/2022).

Since the start of 2022, armed conflicts have been escalating, especially in rural areas. The situation has led to increased protection concerns (ICG 27/01/2022). The reorganisation of armed groups around the country and associated territorial disputes directly affect and subject communities to violence. Between January–June 2022, fighting among armed groups in departments like Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, and Putumayo increased human rights violations against civilians and deepened the humanitarian crisis in these areas (MAPP/OEA 21/09/2022; OCHA 28/07/2022).

Armed groups are gaining territorial and social control in both rural and urban areas, where they regulate social and economic life under coercion. Their methods include extortion practices; controlling the transportation of food, goods, and provisions; imposing forced

confinements; drafting recruits, including children; and extracting rents. They also conduct searches of people's houses and belongings and establish curfews. Armed groups force rural populations to abandon their traditional crop, fishing, and hunting activities and engage them in illegal activities, such as planting illicit crops. In conflict-afflicted areas, armed groups impose roadblocks that disrupt the flow of goods and people; control river transport; rule over community members by extracting rents from small shops, merchants, fishers, miners, and transporters (MAPP/OEA 21/09/2022; ACAPS 18/02/2022; ICG 26/02/2021; OHCHR 26/07/2022).

MAIN PROTECTION CONCERN IN COLOMBIA

Despite the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, there has been a significant increase in violence and abuses against communities, deepening existing social and economic inequalities. These abuses include forced confinements, forced displacements, massacres, and weapon and explosive ordnance contamination (see table 1). Armed groups use violence to silence those defending land rights, the rights of ethnic peoples, the environment, and the implementation of the Peace Agreement and those opposing illegal mining, abuses, and the territorial control of armed groups (KII 01/07/2022; KII 19/07/2022). Armed groups force children and women in particular to engage in illegal mining activities. They also subject them to sexual violence, human trafficking, forced labour, and risks related to landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXO), and other warfare tactics contaminating their territories (Defensoría del Pueblo 05/2018; KII 13/06/2022; KII 09/09/2022).

Fear of reporting manifests in the form of selective silence to incidents; communities fear the retribution and stigmatisation that result from reporting, which can pose serious risks to their safety.

Table 1. Tally of affected people and protection incidents.

EVENTS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022*
The killing of human rights defenders	207 victims	298 victims	279 victims	166 victims	171 victims	114 victims
Forced confinement	1,411 people; 5 events	20,611 people; 16 events	28,983 people; 26 events	74,312 people; 36 events	65,685 people; 56 events	74,963 people; 38 events
Forced displacement	18,022 people; 150 events	33,000 people; 112 events	27,563 people; 183 events	23,366 people; 94 events	73,973 people; 166 events	43,406 people; 127 events
Massacre	11 events	29 events	36 events	91 events	96 events	48 events
Weapon and explosive ordnance contamination	57 victims	244 victims	352 victims	392 victims	486 victims	377 victims

*Until June 2022

Sources: OCHA (accessed 18/10/2022); Indepaz (accessed 11/09/2022); UNGA (04/02/2019); ICRC (27/07/2022 and 23/03/2022)

Forced confinements

Forced confinements affect the population's ability to access basic services and goods. They also increase protection needs associated with gender-based violence (GBV) and forced recruitment (ACAPS 18/02/2022). Between January–June 2022, mobility restrictions and confinements affected twice the number of people as in the same period in 2021. The incidents occurred in Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, La Guajira, Magdalena, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, and Sucre departments (OCHA 28/07/2022). In February and May, armed groups imposed so-called armed strikes, forcing people to stop their commercial activities and blocking transportation to and from affected areas. They implemented these armed strikes in Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Magdalena, Nariño, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca departments (OCHA 29/03/2022 and 23/06/2022). Between January–June, these confinements and mobility

restrictions, threats of attacks, and intimidations were also reported in areas previously unaffected in 2021, including Bolívar, Caquetá, Guaviare, Quindío, Sucre, and Vichada (OCHA 28/07/2022).

Forced displacements

Between January–June 2022, forced displacement events occurred in more departments than in the same period in 2021, in particular affecting Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Magdalena, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Valle del Cauca, and Vichada. The number of displaced people is likely higher than recorded in table 1 as some affected communities avoid reporting displacements for fear of retaliation by armed groups (OCHA 28/07/2022). The targeted killing of an HRD, massacres, attacks, incursions, violence, and abuses by armed groups forcibly displace individuals, families, and communities from their homes and territories (CODHES 16/02/2021). People also move as a preventive measure to avoid armed violence and death threats, sexual exploitation and abuse, and the forced recruitment of children by armed groups (KII 09/09/2022; MAPP/OEA 21/09/2022). The massive expulsion of the civilian population is mainly a result of the territorial takeover of different armed groups and their alliances with criminal organisations to consolidate their presence at the regional and subregional levels. To be specific, armed groups concentrate the forced displacement of people from critical areas of intervention serving as strategic corridors, such as urban centres, villages along rivers, irregular border crossings or trails, and rural areas strategic to territorial control (KII 24/08/2022; KII 06/09/2022; RID 21/07/2022). Natural hazards, such as floods, landslides, and droughts, can also increase forced displacement events. The impact of sudden-onset disasters in areas with the presence of armed groups aggravates protection risks for the population (OCHA 21/02/2022).

Massacres

Armed groups in Colombia use massacres¹ to intimidate communities, deepen their social control, and target people accused of collaborating with other armed groups, especially in areas facing territorial disputes (Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022 a). Since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, the number of reported massacres has increased in the country, particularly in the departments of Antioquia, Cauca, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, and Valle de Cauca (OHCHR 26/07/2022). Between January–June 2022, at least 164 people died in massacres, with the most affected departments being Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó, Magdalena, Norte de Santander, and Valle del Cauca (Indepaz accessed 11/10/2022).

¹ In this document, 'massacre' follows the OHCHR definition – i.e. the murder of three or more people in the same event or in events related by authorship, place, and time (OHCHR 09/03/2000).

Killings of Human Rights Defenders

In Colombia, HRDs seek to protect their community's human rights through non-violent means, either individually or collectively. Defenders most at risk in Colombia are social leaders who advocate the protection of human rights, the implementation of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP, access to land and environmental protection, and the rights of ethnic communities (UNGA 26/12/2019).

HRDs are vulnerable to threats, attacks, and killings by armed groups, particularly when HRDs defend territorial rights in environments offering significant economic opportunities, such as mining (ABColumbia 22/09/2016; UN GA 26/12/2019). In 2021, Colombia was recognised as the most dangerous country in the world for HRDs. It registered 202 allegations of homicide, 100 of which were verified by the Human Rights Office in Colombia as directly tied to the nature of their work (OHCHR 26/07/2022; Front Line Defenders 15/03/2022; The Guardian 02/03/2022). At least 137 HRDs were assassinated between 1 January and 6 October 2022 (Indepaz accessed 11/10/2022).

Weapon contamination

The presence of anti-personnel mines (APMs) improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and UXO continues to threaten communities, particularly in rural areas. People living in areas with explosive ordnance contamination suffer from mobility restrictions and psychological trauma. The presence of landmines and explosive devices near their homes, crops, health centres, roads, and public spaces presents a constant threat, limiting their mobility and safe access to basic services and livelihood activities, like farming and fishing (ICRC 09/08/2022; ACAPS 02/06/2022). Between January–June 2022, the number of victims of explosive devices (377) increased by 43% compared to the same period in 2021. As in past years, APMs, IEDs, and UXO mostly affected civilians (53% of reported events). Events occurred in 16 departments, predominately affecting the departments of Cauca (89 events), Antioquia (66), Arauca (40), Norte de Santander (31), and Meta (27) (ICRC 27/07/2022).

COMMUNITY PROTECTION

Community protection mechanisms are integral in addressing human rights violations and protecting communities and land rights. Communities and individuals have developed community and individual strategies (long-term) and mechanisms (short-term) to protect specific population groups, including HRDs, boys and girls, women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and ethnic communities, from violence and human rights abuses.

The strengthening of community protection responses allows for the design and implementation of practical protection measures and prevents and mitigates the risk of protection threats.

Human rights defenders

Protection threats

HRDs seek to protect communities' human rights through non-violent means, either individually or collectively. The majority of HRDs are often part of community action councils or carry out their work as social and ethnic leaders and defenders of victims' rights. The nature of the conflict in Colombia has placed HRDs at risk of violence from armed groups, especially social leaders advocating the protection of human rights, the implementation of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP, access to land and environmental protection, and the rights of ethnic communities (UNGA 26/12/2019).

Protection responses

A lack of confidence in state measures to protect HRDs has led to the development of community and individual protection measures, including collective measures like the creation of humanitarian zones, refuges, and spaces in urban and rural areas (CIJP 20/01/2009; ABColumbia 22/09/2016). These areas are typically visibly delimited settlements offering security to residents by declaring themselves civilian areas off-limits to armed entities. Some have received protection measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Corte IDH 30/08/2010). While these areas are meant to protect people from violence, coercion, and deliberate deprivation, threats can continue (ABColumbia 22/09/2016). In 2021, HRDs of the Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space, established in 2013 in Buenaventura, received threats. Locals also reported the presence of members of armed groups in the area (CIJP 09/01/2021; WOLA 28/02/2021).

HRDs use displacement as a last resort when the risk to their and their families' lives becomes imminent. HRDs in rural areas are often forced to move to urban settlements, altering their involvement in their communities and often forcing them to devise strategies to continue their work remotely (Dejusticia 10/12/2019). Displaced HRDs often become the spokespeople of their organisations (Verdad Abierta 23/09/2020). The displacement of HRDs also has negative repercussions within the communities they belong to, hindering local organisational processes (EE 07/05/2022; KII 13/09/2022).

HRDs may set up communication strategies within the community for sharing information regarding emergencies and security incidents (Dejusticia 16/08/2022; KII 09/09/2022). Changing how information is relayed is another strategy (KII 19/09/2022; Dejusticia 10/12/2019). Such is the case for HRDs in Magdalena, where leaders around the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta use timers on messaging applications or send information to collaborators in urban areas through family members to avoid being targeted by armed groups for sharing information about human rights violations (KII 19/09/2022).

HRDs also apply personal protection measures, like constantly changing daily routines to make it harder for them to be followed and observed, changing phone numbers, changing meeting places or limiting public meetings and engagement with outsiders, and establishing daily check-ins with family members or trusted collaborators (CODHES 03/2021; Dejusticia 16/08/2022; KII 09/09/2022). When faced with increasing threats or attacks, HRDs stop or restrict their work as visible leaders within their communities, opting instead to increase the visibility of the local and national organisations they represent. In other cases, HRDs seek individual protection measures from the Government through collective action led by national organisations (Dejusticia 10/12/2019).

Children

Protection threats

Children in Colombia experience not one but several forms of violence, and violence towards children can occur anywhere in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Protection threats include exposure to explosive ordnance contamination, forced displacement and confinement, child labour, recruitment in armed groups, sexual abuse, violence, and threats to their mental health and development. The degree and type of threats vary from one territory to another. Between January–June, at least 22 children belonging to indigenous groups fell victim to forced recruitment by armed groups (ONIC 2022 and 04/08/2022).

The recruitment and use of children by armed groups constitutes a grave violation against children during armed conflict and often leads to other grave violations, principally killing and maiming but also sexual violence and abduction (UN SC 08/12/2021). Recruitment often starts with children being assigned support roles, such as informants, porters, and traffickers (ICG 06/10/2020). Once recruited, children are exposed to high levels of violence as witness or direct victims. In 2022, at least 20 indigenous children have committed suicide when faced with no option but to join armed groups (KII 12/07/2022; KII 01/07/2022; EE 24/04/2022).

Protection responses

Through community awareness campaigns, including via radio, parents, caregivers, and teachers become aware that they can denounce cases of violence or abuse of children before the justice system. In rural areas, the denunciation of armed conflict events remains rare because it risks putting children and their parents in danger of retaliation from armed groups. A lack of trust in police and government institution services also deters people from reporting violence (KII 12/07/2022; KII 01/07/2022; EE 24/04/2022).

The community plays an essential role in building the protection environment of children. It falls upon teachers, leaders, and caregivers to lead community-based education initiatives

to raise children's awareness of threats and risk prevention and management (KII 30/08/2022). The establishment of protection committees can also strengthen local responses, raising awareness of possible risks and complaint mechanisms (KII 24/07/2022).

Child-friendly spaces provide an alternative to schools, which are the main protection environments for children. These spaces provide boys and girls, including those forcibly displaced, a way to distance themselves from the immediate risks they are exposed to. Such spaces allow them to engage in playful and pedagogical activities, along with cultural and manual activities (theatre, dance, music, art), oriented towards managing emotions and resilience exercises even within crisis-affected areas (KII 24/06/2022; KII 23/06/2022). These spaces also share protection messaging to generate individual protection for children. It includes raising awareness on the risk of SGBV, educating about the risk of explosive ordnance contamination, preventing school dropouts, and informing the community about the importance of mental health and psychosocial support for child victims and survivors (KII 30/08/2022).

Women

Protection threats

Women and girls experience different forms of SGBV because of their gender. Women and adolescent girls living in areas with the presence of armed groups in particular face a high risk of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, rape, sexual and labour exploitation, human trafficking, slavery, and forced marriage. Parties to the armed conflict employ these forms of violence against women and girls because of their gender and central role in familial and societal structures, targeting them as a strategy to regulate behaviours, gain social legitimacy, and obtain control over territories and populations. Through acts of physical, psychological, and sexual violence, armed groups seek to intimidate, punish, and control adolescent girls and women for having affective relationships with members of the opposing faction, for disobeying the norms or for participating in organizations perceived as the enemy (Comisión de la Verdad 07/2022 and 08/2022 b; GAAMAC 18/11/2021; CINEP 08/04/2021; Linardelli and da Costa Marques 29/06/2020).

Women who take on leadership roles or expose human rights situations are often the target of violence by armed groups in the form of intimidation, threats, and attempts on their lives and their families (ICG 06/10/2020). One example is the assassination of a female prosecutor in the Catatumbo subregion in June 2021. The female prosecutor was investigating the murder of ten women in the region, among other criminal cases. Armed groups exerting territorial control in the region shot her to death (EE 13/09/2021; Cerosetenta 09/12/2021).

Increased insecurity and fear of attacks cause women and their dependents to flee, sometimes forcing them into a cycle of multiple displacements (NRC 08/04/2022). Displaced women and girls face difficulties accessing healthcare (including reproductive healthcare), food, and shelter (Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres 25/09/2014). Legal barriers to women's access to land, particularly in cases of land grabbing, also affect their access to reparation measures (Comisión de la Verdad 07/2022).

Protection responses

Women's associations play an essential role in helping women access justice and reparation measures, political participation, and community-led projects (Comisión de la Verdad 07/2022). A local organisation coordinates efforts among rural women in the municipality of Buenos Aires, Cauca. The organisation has become a key player in claiming women's rights, particularly in Afrodescendant communities. It has formed alliances with other women's associations, such as the Matamba and Guasá Network, which have similar goals. These objectives include advocating women's access to land, promoting the local leadership of women, and implementing protection strategies for them (UN Women 13/11/2020; ASOM Cauca accessed 21/09/2022). Venezuelan women's associations have also been integral in providing newly arrived women and their families with information on access to protection routes, including legal documentation (such as temporary residence permits) and access to healthcare (Proyecto Migracion Venezuela accessed 19/10/2022; Proyecto Migración Venezuela 11/10/2022).

Individuals and women's associations use national human rights platforms and national and international NGO networks to denounce the situations affecting them and demand improved security conditions (UN Women 13/11/2020; ASOM Cauca accessed 21/09/2022). Women's organisations have also been key in documenting the abuses suffered by women in the context of the armed conflict and campaigning for the inclusion of sexual violence cases in the transitional justice system (Corporación Humanas 10/06/2022). Denouncements can pose additional threats as they expose the individuals involved, making them susceptible to retaliation from perpetrators. Women face specific challenges when denouncing sexual violence, including barriers to justice mechanisms (ICG 06/10/2020).

Several organisations provide legal representation for women seeking protection or reparation measures before national, regional, and international justice systems (Corporación Humanas 10/06/2022). Organisations like Colectiva Justicia Mujer, Corporación Humanas, and Sisma Mujer provide SGBV survivors with legal aid and carry out strategic litigation to expand the legal framework for the protection of women (Sisma Mujer accessed 18/10/2022; CCJM 31/12/2020; Corporación Humanas 10/06/2022).

Networks set up safe spaces and temporary shelters for women affected by violence. In Quibdó municipality, Chocó department, a women's network has set up safe houses for women affected by forced displacement or SGBV. While these shelters are temporary, they

provide women with immediate protection during emergencies (KII 28/09/2022). Other safe spaces are more permanent. Since 2003 in Turbaco, Bolívar, the City of Women (Ciudad de las Mujeres) has offered safety to women (and their families) fleeing violence. Built for and by women as part of the League of Displaced Women, the community advocates human rights and justice for SGBV survivors (AOTF 02/03/2022; BBC 16/02/2020; Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas accessed 19/10/2022).

Women's associations use technology and applications that act as panic buttons and alert other women and authorities of emergencies, particularly in Antioquia and Nariño (UN Women 03/2022 and 2022). That said, the scope of these measures is likely limited to urban areas and their surroundings, as rural areas lack access to adequate communications infrastructure (LR 22/07/2021).

LGBTQI+ community

Protection threats

Members of the LGBTQI+ community face SGBV and other types of violence intended to punish them for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Historically, the LGBTQI+ population has been discriminated against and has suffered violence from armed groups. Violence against LGBTQI+ people is part of armed groups' strategies of social and territorial control, as it allows them to impose behavioural norms and act as administrators of justice. Members of the LGBTQI+ community regularly face threats, attacks, and other violent acts that aim to stigmatise the community and remove them from the territory (Comisión de la Verdad 07/2022; Colombia Diversa 09/2020). A lack of access to basic services and forced displacement hinder their realisation of basic rights and increase their risk of becoming victims of sexual violence or hate crimes in the areas where they relocate.

LGBTQI+ people struggle with economic opportunities to cover their basic needs, alongside facing rampant violence. LGBTQI+ people forcibly displaced from their homes are forced to engage in survival sex – i.e. providing sexual services in exchange for money to obtain a degree of economic security. They often experience human rights violations, including sexual violence and exploitation, human trafficking, and the risk of disappearance and death (Comisión de la Verdad 07/2022; Colombia Diversa 09/2020). For members of the LGBTQI+ community, protecting themselves and their communities includes the added complexity of facing discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Protection capacities

Organisations, including Colombia Diversa, Caribe Afirmativo in the Caribbean Coast, and Fundación Arcoíris in Nariño, advocate at local and regional levels the rights of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and seek justice for survivors of violence during conflict (JEP 14/12/2021; Colombia Diversa 09/2020).

As people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in the Pacific subregion of Colombia continue to become victims of violence, these foundations have put in place several protection strategies. These strategies include teaching LGBTQI+ people methods to protect themselves from violence (such as going to protection shelters in urban areas), implementing protocols to bring attention to victims, and creating a violence prevention board with the support of the Colombian Ombudsman's Office and local authorities in Tumaco and other municipalities in Nariño's Pacific Coast (EE 27/03/2022). At the national level, organisations like Colombia Diversa document violence against members of the LGBTQI+ community in the context of the armed conflict and provide legal assistance for survivors. In 2021, the organisation handled 31 legal cases and represented 11 victims of armed conflict in the transitional justice system (Colombia Diversa accessed 18/10/2022).

Caribe Afirmativo provides members of the LGBTQI+ community with safe spaces called Casas Afirmativas (for Venezuelan migrants and refugees) and Casas de Paz (which are open to any member of the community). The organisation has also published several protection guides for LGBTQI+ people covering individual and collective protection measures (Caribe Afirmativo accessed 18/10/2022 a; Caribe Afirmativo accessed 18/10/2022 b).

Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant communities

Protection threats

Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant communities face direct threats against their lives, confinements, and mass displacements seeking to remove them from their land (KII 09/09/2022; KII 12/09/2022). Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant communities that cohabit with armed groups in their territories face direct abuses. In their territories, conflict dynamics threaten their survival and right to govern their natural resources. The presence of armed groups in and around Indigenous people's reservations (resguardos) and Black Community Councils (Consejos Comunitarios de Comunidades Negras) increases the risk to communities, as the involvement of armed groups with illicit economies place members of the community at risk of violence, forced labour, and risks relating to weapons contamination in their territories that limit their access to basic services and livelihoods (Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022 c; Defensoría del Pueblo 05/2018; KII 13/06/2022, KII 09/09/2022).

Indigenous peoples fear that the confinement of their communities is aimed at forcing them to displace and permanently dispossess them of their lands (OHCHR 26/07/2022; KII 06/09/2022; KII 29/08/2022). Forced displacement affects these communities' relationships with their territory, threatening their livelihoods, cultural integrity, and collective rights over their land. The presence of UXO in and around indigenous reserves and Black Community Councils increases the risk for communities fleeing their territories and the number of confinement events (Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022 c).

Despite community protection capacities, the reconfiguration of armed groups within territories has reduced the effectiveness of communities' mechanisms for prevention and protection (KII 24/04/2022). Between January–June, indigenous peoples fell victim to 18 confinement events, which affected over 400,000 people, and 12 events of forced displacement, which affected over 5,000 people (ONIC 2022; ONIC 2022a). During the same period, Afrodescendant communities fell victim to 20 forced displacement events and 11 confinements (JEP accessed 19/10/2022). Armed groups have killed over 30 indigenous leaders and nine Afrodescendant leaders throughout 2022 (Indepaz accessed 11/10/2022).

Protection capacities

Indigenous guards walk their lands and maintain an intelligence network of checkpoints to track who goes in and out of their territories. In small groups of about 15 people, women, men, and children participate in the indigenous guards' patrols, with wooden staves adorned with red and green ribbons to monitor their communities. The indigenous guards assess the level of risk they are exposed to and alert the populations to the presence of outsiders in their territories through whistles, animal sounds, voice codes, and walkie-talkies. Indigenous guards have become a central element in the protection of different indigenous peoples, although they do not cover all indigenous reservations in Colombia. In the department of Cauca, the Nasa indigenous people have established an unarmed pacific indigenous guard (Kiwe Thegnas in Nasa language) to defend their lives and territory through peaceful resistance and dialogue (KII 24/08/2022; KII 29/08/2022).

Ethnic leaders and traditional authorities converse with armed groups and seek agreement on ground rules and behaviours to safeguard human security, release people being held against their will, and improve the protection of their population in areas under the control of armed groups (KII 12/09/2022). To protect their children and adolescents from use and recruitment by armed groups, the indigenous guard converses with armed groups and implements strategies to search for and rescue abducted or recruited children (KII 24/08/2022; KII 22/03/2022; KII 24/03/2022; T Indígena y Gobernanza accessed 10/07/2022). That said, constant disputes over lands or corridors and river access among armed groups can break those agreements (KII 12/09/2022).

Local indigenous councils or cabildos protect their leaders and authorities from the municipal capitals and channel their participation through NGOs, networks, and regional platforms ([KII 24/08/2022; KII 22/03/2022; UN SC 27/06/2022](#)). When dialogues fail, indigenous communities flee to nearby towns to keep their children from armed conflict or send them elsewhere for their safety ([KII 01/07/2022](#)). Temporary displacements act as a last resort in the face of incursions and clashes among armed groups in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, and Putumayo and the subregion of Montes de María.

Indigenous organisations and platforms at regional and national levels coordinate to advocate and raise awareness of the situation of indigenous peoples and communities. These platforms include the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (ACIN), Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC), and Organización Nacional de Indígenas de Colombia (ONIC), which play key roles in making human rights violations visible ([KII 12/09/2022](#)).

INFORMATION GAPS

- Given the sensitivity of the topic, information about protection concerns, threats, and incidents in Colombia is limited. Community protection responses are not always known or recognised, and there is little reliable and comprehensive information available. Plenty of the measures people adopt prior to and during displacements or forced confinements to cope with the new situation and meet their protection needs are rarely acknowledged.
- Although there is an increased number of SGBV cases in Colombia, the reporting of incidents of sexual abuse, especially during displacements and confinements, is limited. Nevertheless, collecting prevalence data on GBV is a complex process in most humanitarian settings and should not be a condition of funding GBV protection programmes.
- The scale of forced recruitment and use of children by armed groups is under-reported. Movement restrictions lead to increased difficulties for children, their families, and their networks to denounce events of forced recruitment and set up protection and prevention mechanisms, particularly in rural areas.
- Fear of reporting and the stigmatisation of families and communities also prevent them from reporting to the justice system ([UN SC 08/12/2021](#)). When reported, children recruited or used by armed groups are registered as displaced or missing ([Comisión de la Verdad 08/2022 b](#)).