Collective Action and Civilian Agency in Conflict: Peasant Strategies for Peacebuilding in Rural Colombia

Andrea Dávila Saad

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Joel Peters, Chair
Karin E. Kitchens
Timothy W. Luke
Desiree Poets

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach to examine how peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives contribute to violence prevention and peacebuilding in Colombia's conflict-affected rural areas. Grounded in the agrarian question, it combines municipal-level data analysis with testimonies and a regional case study to explore how collective action and civilian agency shape conflict dynamics and foster local resilience. The findings highlight the role of rural organizations not only in resisting armed actors, but in constructing alternative economic that support long-term peace from below.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In Colombia's countryside, land has long been a source of inequality and conflict. Known as the "agrarian question," this refers to how land, resources, and political power have historically been concentrated in the hands of a few, leaving small farmers marginalized and rural communities exposed to violence. This dissertation explores how rural people—through peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives—have responded not only with resilience, but with organized efforts to build peace and protect their way of life. Analyzing municipal-level data from across Colombia, the study finds that in areas hardest hit by the armed conflict, stronger local organizing—especially through agricultural cooperatives—is associated with lower levels of violence. However, this relationship is not uniform. The findings suggest that cooperatives may offer particular protection in places where state presence is weak and communities have developed internal cohesion. Still, these organizations are not immune to co-optation or collapse; their ability to endure depends on broader conditions of political support, economic stability, and territorial justice. Through testimonies from rural Colombians and a case study in Sur del Tolima—a region deeply affected by conflict but rich in cooperative organizing—the dissertation reveals how people resisted armed groups through quiet acts of refusal, protected one another through informal networks of trust, and cultivated economic alternatives grounded in solidarity and care. These stories challenge the idea that peace only comes through official agreements or external aid. Instead, peace emerges from below, in the day-to-day efforts of communities who plant together, decide together, and persist together—often against overwhelming odds. Ultimately, the study shows

that collective action is not just protest or survival. It is also a form of local governance, memory-keeping, and economic imagination. In a landscape marked by uncertainty, rural Colombians continue to defend their right to live, work, and build futures on their own terms.

Dedication

To Carlos, for your strength, your unwavering support, and for always believing in me, even in the hardest moments. To Jacobo and Adelaida, for your love, your laughter, and for walking this journey with me in your own beautiful way. To my father, whose memory continues to guide me, and whose faith in me never faded. To my mother, whose unwavering love, strength, and presence have guided and sustained me every step of the way. And to the rural communities in Colombia who, with courage and dignity, continue to organize, resist, and build peace—this work is for you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the years following the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, many rural communities remain caught in cycles of violence, institutional neglect, and economic exclusion. Despite the formal end of war with the country's largest insurgent group, violence has not disappeared—it has merely transformed. In areas historically marginalized by the state, new armed actors have filled power vacuums, and promises of rural development and participation have yet to materialize. And yet, amid this fragile peace, local organizations continue to mobilize. Peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives—often dismissed as peripheral or purely economic entities—have played an overlooked but critical role in sustaining rural life, defending territory, and asserting community autonomy.

This dissertation examines the relationship between collective action and violence in rural Colombia, with a particular focus on agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations in municipalities included in the *Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial* (PDET). These municipalities were prioritized as part of the post-accord rural reform agenda due to their history of armed conflict, poverty, and institutional abandonment. The study investigates how community-based organizations function in these contexts of risk and exclusion—both as protective structures and as vehicles for building alternative social, political, and economic models.

The analysis is guided by two interrelated research questions:

> (1) To what extent are local rural organizational structures—specifically agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations—associated with different patterns

of violence at the municipal level in Colombia?

(2) In what ways have grassroots community organizations shaped local peacebuilding initiatives and violence prevention strategies in conflict-affected regions?

Each question entails a distinct analytical approach. The first is addressed using quantitative methods to assess patterns of association between collective organization and municipal-level violence across PDET and non-PDET zones. The second is examined through qualitative inquiry, drawing on interviews and testimonies to understand how cooperatives and associations operate as platforms for resistance, autonomy, and peacebuilding.

This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for a deeper understanding of civilian agency in contexts of violence and state weakness. Moving beyond top-down frameworks of peacebuilding, it foregrounds local actors and their capacity to transform the conditions of conflict from below. In doing so, it highlights how collective action—when grounded in trust, reciprocity, and local institutions—can become a source of resilience in the face of violence.

Conceptually, the dissertation draws from second-generation theories of collective action, particularly the work of Elinor Ostrom, whose Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework helps explain how communities organize under conditions of scarcity, uncertainty, and weak enforcement. Ostrom's insights into the role of informal rules, social norms, and trust are complemented by more recent work on Collective Action Capacity (CAC) and civilian agency. CAC emphasizes the structural and relational dimensions that enable communities to cooperate under pressure—especially in conflict zones. It includes factors such as generalized trust, bridging social capital, and inclusive local decision-making mechanisms (Rubin, 2019). Civilian agency, in turn, underscores how communities are not merely victims of violence, but actors who negotiate, resist, and reimagine governance in the midst of armed conflict (Masullo, 2021a).

In Colombia, this dynamic has played out through diverse grassroots initiatives—many of

which have been systematically marginalized in the academic literature. While studies have examined cooperatives and solidarity-based organizations in post-conflict contexts in Africa and Europe (Okem, 2016; Omeira & Morsy, 2009), there is limited evidence on their role in Latin America's rural conflict zones. In Colombia, the potential of community organizations to prevent violence and promote sustainable livelihoods remains underexplored—particularly in PDET (Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial) municipalities that are central to post-accord transformation efforts. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies evaluating their impact in these contexts are especially limited, despite the crucial role these organizations play in shaping local peacebuilding dynamics(Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2020; Rodríguez Prada et al., 2019; Silva-Prada, 2012).

This dissertation addresses that gap through a mixed-methods design, following an explanatory convergent approach grounded in a pragmatic paradigm (see Chapter 4). The quantitative component focuses on the post-accord period, using panel data from 2016 to 2022 to assess associations between the presence of agricultural cooperatives and associations and municipal-level violence. The qualitative strand, while secondary in structure, spans a broader historical timeframe. It draws on testimonies from the Colombian Truth Commission and a regional case study (1958–2020) of agricultural cooperatives in Sur del Tolima to explore how rural organizations have contributed to peacebuilding before and after the peace accord. This dual timeframe and dual-method structure allow the study to connect statistical patterns with historically grounded accounts of resistance, organization, and community resilience.

The Truth Commission, established as part of the 2016 Peace Accord, produced one of the most comprehensive narrative accounts of Colombia's internal armed conflict. Its mandate was not judicial but restorative and dialogical: it aimed to uncover the structural causes of violence, document the experiences of victims, and highlight collective resilience. Despite facing political opposition—particularly from conservative sectors—the Commission successfully engaged a broad range of actors and foregrounded community-based responses

to conflict. However, its coverage was uneven, with limited attention to formal economic alternatives and solidarity-based organizing in rural areas. This dissertation builds on the Commission's legacy while extending it: by analyzing testimonies and case studies from the period 1958–2016, it explores how cooperatives and peasant associations functioned as grassroots mechanisms of protection, resistance, and economic reconstruction in regions where state presence was weak or contested. In doing so, the study not only draws from the Commission's findings but also contributes new empirical evidence on how local organizations have shaped territorial governance and peacebuilding from below.

This study centers its qualitative analysis on a regional case study of Sur del Tolima, a historically marginalized area that has played a central role in Colombia's armed conflict and peasant organizing. As the birthplace of the FARC in 1964 (Marquetalia, Planadas), Sur del Tolima has long experienced overlapping forms of state neglect, guerrilla control, and intermittent paramilitary incursions. While some military operations and paramilitary presence were recorded during the 2000s, the region remained predominantly under FARC influence, allowing for the consolidation of local governance arrangements and territorial order. The region combines mountainous zones (e.g., Planadas) characterized by smallholder coffee production and strong cooperative traditions, with lowland areas (e.g., Natagaima and Coyaima) marked by agroindustrial expansion and Indigenous resistance. This territorial heterogeneity and continuity of rural organizing make Sur del Tolima a compelling case for examining how communities navigate violence and exclusion through localized forms of collective action. Compared to other conflict zones in Colombia, Sur del Tolima is notable for its dual identity as both a site of insurgent origins and a locus of emerging economic alternatives, particularly through peasant associations and specialty coffee cooperatives[1].

Methodologically, the dissertation integrates municipal-level statistical models with in-depth qualitative analysis based on testimonies from the Truth Commission and case-based sec-

[1]See Baquero-Melo et al. (2022) and Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020) for an analysis of territorial disputes and post-war collective action in Sur del Tolima.

ondary sources. The objective is not to establish causal effects, but to identify patterns of association and explore the mechanisms through which collective action may contribute to violence prevention and peacebuilding. The qualitative analysis focuses on how agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations cultivate social cohesion, mutual trust, and collective resilience—dimensions that are difficult to measure statistically but are essential for understanding how rural communities navigate conflict and construct alternatives to violence.

By focusing on agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations as expressions of Collective Action Capacity and civilian agency, this dissertation contributes to several scholarly debates: (1) it brings new empirical evidence to theories of collective action in conflict-affected settings; (2) it deepens understandings of local peacebuilding, particularly in post-accord Colombia; and (3) it engages critically with development paradigms by showing how solidarity-based models challenge market-driven, top-down approaches to peace.

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2, *Socioeconomic and Political Landscape*, traces the historical and structural roots of Colombia's armed conflict, beginning with an overview of agricultural dynamics in Latin America to contextualize Colombia's rural development trajectory. The chapter emphasizes the agrarian question, the role of the state, and the evolution of rural political economy. It examines how territorial inequality, coca-based economies, and the shifting presence of armed actors have shaped peasant vulnerability and development challenges across rural territories. Chapter 3, *Collective Action as a Framework*, presents the conceptual foundation of the study, integrating theories of civilian agency, social capital, and the social and solidarity economy (SSE) to explain how grassroots actors mobilize to construct peace from below. Special attention is given to agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations as key forms of rural collective action. Chapter 4, *Methods*, details the convergent mixed-methods design. The quantitative analysis explores the association between agricultural cooperative membership, the presence of peasant associations, and levels of victimization across Colombian municipalities between 2016 and 2022. The qualitative component draws on testimonies from the Colombian Truth Commission—covering

the period from 1958 to 2016— and a regional case study of agricultural cooperatives in Sur del Tolima—based on fieldwork and secondary sources documenting developments from the mid-20th century through 2020, applying reflexive thematic analysis to uncover the lived experiences and mechanisms through which rural communities engage in collective action.

Chapter 5, *Results*, presents the empirical findings. The quantitative analysis identifies a statistically significant negative association between the presence of agricultural cooperatives and levels of victimization, particularly in PDET municipalities most affected by the armed conflict. This suggests that rural collective action—measured through agricultural cooperative membership —has a greater violence-reducing effect in high-conflict areas, whereas this relationship is not evident in less affected municipalities. The qualitative findings deepen these insights by tracing how communities enacted collective action through three interrelated mechanisms. First, in the theme of *Strategic Noncooperation*, testimonies reveal how rural communities employed subtle, nonviolent strategies—such as ethical refusal, discretion, and informal protection systems—to resist cooptation by armed actors and preserve moral and territorial autonomy. Second, under *Social Cohesion and Trust*, the analysis highlights how informal trust networks, spiritual practices, and community assemblies fostered emotional resilience and collective decision-making, especially through the moral labor of women and intergenerational solidarity. Third, the theme of *Economic Alternatives* shows how both informal peasant associations and formal agricultural cooperatives enabled communities to transform survival economies into solidarity-based models of production, distribution, and governance. These alternatives, grounded in shared values and local agency, offered not only economic resilience but a reimagining of life, work, and belonging in post-conflict territories. Chapter 6, *Discussion and Conclusion*, integrates these quantitative and qualitative results to reflect on the implications for collective action theory, territorial peacebuilding, and the role of grassroots economic alternatives in reconstructing rural Colombia from within.

Chapter 2

Socioeconomic and Political Landscape

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the socioeconomic and political landscape in Latin America, with a particular focus on agricultural development and its manifestations in Colombia. It examines the pivotal role of smallholder peasants in shaping these dynamics, particularly through the lens of the agrarian question and its relationship to the armed conflict. In this study, the terms smallholders and peasants (peasants) are used interchangeably, referring to individuals engaged in small-scale agriculture, typically residing in rural areas and maintaining a direct relationship with the land. This definition applies broadly, regardless of ethnicity, and encompasses a diversity of rural producers who are often characterized by communal practices and collective social organization. These groups frequently form associations or cooperatives to advocate for their rights and interests (Vásquez-León, 2017). The evolution of the conflict is explored through the involvement of key actors, including peasant associations, guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, the Colombian government, and the influence of coca cultivation. Additionally, this chapter analyzes how development trajectories, land ownership patterns, and socioeconomic inequalities have both driven and perpetuated the conflict, while highlighting the complex interactions between agriculture, land distribution, and violence in the region.

2.1 Agricultural Context in Latin American and Colombia

The agricultural sector in Latin America and Colombia is not merely an economic component but a pivotal element that shapes social, economic, and political dynamics both locally and globally. The concept of the "agrarian question" provides a framework to understand the different roles that agriculture plays in this region (Moyo et al., 2013). Historically, the agrarian question has been dominated by the myth of industrialization as the primary objective of transformation, a perspective that emerged in the late 19th century and was reinforced during the Cold War era. However, contemporary analyses recognize that this classical agrarian question must be redefined to incorporate both industrialization and national liberation. The latter refers to a country's ability to control its own development and make independent decisions about its economy, including how it interacts with the rest of the world. It's about achieving sovereignty, meaning the country has the freedom and power to decide its own path, including how to industrialize and manage its resources (Moyo et al., 2013). National liberation is a critical aspect of the agrarian question, which underscores the significance of land and peasant struggles in shaping development trajectories (Moyo et al., 2013). Understanding this context is essential for recognizing the role of agriculture in promoting sustainable development and addressing historical injustices, positioning the countryside as a crucial arena for advancing development in the Global South, and, in the case of Colombia, for peacebuilding efforts.

The Colombian case illustrates how the unresolved agrarian question—expressed through unequal land distribution, exclusion from rural development, and limited sovereignty—has fueled long-standing grievances that contributed to the onset and persistence of armed conflict. These tensions over land and territorial control became central to struggles for national liberation, as rural communities sought to assert autonomy over their livelihoods and

challenge elite dominance (Grajales, 2011; F. Thomson, 2011). In this context, peasant associations emerged not only as actors within agrarian reform processes but also as grassroots expressions of resistance and civilian agency. Their role in advocating for land rights, organizing collective production, and resisting armed groups underscores the intersection of the agrarian question with broader struggles for peace and sovereignty. These associations are therefore not just economic entities, but key political and social actors whose mobilization reflects—and responds to—the deeper structural contradictions at the heart of Colombia's rural conflict.

2.1.1 Agricultural Sector Dynamics and Rural Context: Data and Trends

Agricultural development in Latin America is a critical factor in the region's economic growth, accounting for an average of 4.7% of GDP in 2015-17 (FAO & OECD, 2019). This share is 1.4% lower than in 1996-98, and shows a decline in most countries in the region, except for one (Argentina). While the region has exhibited the highest agricultural productivity growth among developing regions, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s (Ludena, 2010), the significance of agriculture as a share of GDP has diminished in recent decades. Despite this, agriculture still makes up around 10% or more of GDP in various countries throughout the region (FAO & OECD, 2019).

With vast amounts of fertile land and abundant water resources, countries in Latin America[1] have become major players in the global agriculture and fisheries markets accounting for 14% of global production and 23% of the world's exports of agricultural and fisheries

[1]The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region spans over 2 billion hectares across 34 countries, with a 2018 population of 657 million and a low average density of 0.34 persons per hectare. Of this land, 38 % is used for agriculture (9.5 % for crops and 28.5 % for pasture), while 46 % is covered by forests. The region holds 15 % of the Earth's land, receives 30 % of global precipitation, and generates 33 % of the world's water. Its vast latitudinal range, diverse topography, and rich biodiversity contribute to one of the most varied and complex farming systems globally (FAO & OECD, 2019).

commodities (FAO & OECD, 2019). While this positions the region as one of the major contributors to global food security, the benefits of this growth have not necessarily translated into improved living conditions for the rural poor. Despite a reduction in rural poverty by nearly 20 percentage points from 1990 to 2014, recent trends indicate a reversal, with rural poverty rates remaining alarmingly high at 48.6%, and extreme poverty at 22.5% (FAO & OECD, 2019). Moreover, since 2015, the gap between rural and urban poverty has widened, particularly when considering access to basic public services.

In this context, some scholars suggest that the economic gains from agricultural exports have disproportionately favored economic elites, largely due to land appropriation (Carlson, 2019; Carter et al., 1993; Kay, 1997, 2015) and market imperfections that benefit large farms over smallholders (Berdegué & Proctor, 2015; Vásquez-León, 2017).

The first factor, land ownership, restricts the fair distribution of agricultural growth benefits between smallholders and the agro-industry. This is due to the dominance of *latifundios*—large landholdings that are often underutilized and primarily reserved for extensive activities such as cattle grazing, rather than intensive agricultural production (Carlson, 2019). The persistence of these large, underproductive landholdings is sustained by specific property relations that shield them from market pressures to improve productivity[2].

This type of agriculture keeps rural wages low, reduces demand for industrial goods, and keeps food prices high, which harms local industries and limits economic development. The continued low productivity of latifundios remains a major barrier for smallholders in Latin America (Carlson, 2019).

This imbalance is reflected in the distribution of agricultural land[3]: although 81.3% of the estimated 20.4 million farms in the region are smallholder family farms, they occupy only

[2]The agrarian question remains unresolved because large estates (latifundios) continue to control vast amounts of land without pressure to increase productivity. These landowners often acquire land for reasons other than farming, such as diversifying their portfolios, which allows them to maintain low-risk, low-investment practices. As a result, small farmers are consistently at a disadvantage (Kay, 1997)

[3]For detailed information on land concentration differences by country, refer to (Carlson, 2019)

23.4% of the total agricultural land. In contrast, a mere 18.7% of farms, control 76.6% of the land (FAO & OECD, 2019). This disparity underscores the structural barriers that prevent smallholders from fully benefiting from agricultural growth, perpetuating inequality and limiting the broader socio-economic development potential in the region.

The second factor, market imperfections, has been linked to the influence of neoliberal agricultural policies. The evidence suggests that these policies, including trade liberalization and reduced government intervention, have predominantly favored large-scale agroindustry over smallholders in developing countries (Huddell, 2010; Kay, 1997)[4]. The shift towards export-oriented production has made smallholders more vulnerable to market fluctuations and technological dependency (Huddell, 2010) have marginalized family farming and smallholder production, thereby exacerbating challenges in agricultural development and promoting the dominance of corporate agribusiness (Kay, 1997, 2015; Vásquez-León, 2017). The unequal benefits from the rise in agro-exports have created numerous challenges for smallholders. First, the rural population has declined due to a rural-urban exodus driven by persistent poverty in rural households within the family farm subsector. Second, investment in smallholder agriculture, including access to credit, inputs, technical assistance, and work incentives, has significantly decreased. Third, there has been a shift toward market-based strategies that prioritize traditional and non-traditional exports within the agricultural sector. This has placed smallholders at a disadvantage, as they face increased competition from large agribusinesses, struggle to meet stringent global market standards, and often lack access to necessary resources and infrastructure. This shift has also pressured smallholders to switch to cash crops, making them more vulnerable to market volatility and undermining their local food security. Lastly, the farm systems that participate in these export-based markets are predominantly large-scale agribusiness firms, leaving smallholder farmers largely

[4]Focusing specifically on coffee farmers in Brazil, the data reveals that while production initially increased for all producers, market competitiveness soon began to favor capital-intensive landowners and foreign interests, leaving small rural farmers marginalized. Additionally, the reforms led to unintended consequences, such as a rapid increase in urban migration and environmental degradation (Huddell, 2010).

excluded from these opportunities (Vásquez-León, 2017). Consequently, these changes have deepened inequalities within the agricultural sector, limiting the benefits smallholders can derive from global market opportunities.

Although agriculture's importance has diminished in recent decades, rural transformation continues to impact the region (Kay, 1997, 2015). Colombia exemplifies the evolution of this process and its impact on the rural population.

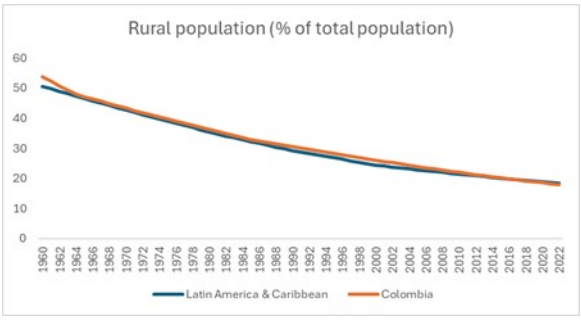


Figure 2.1: Rural population as a percentage of total population in Colombia and selected Latin American countries.

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2022).

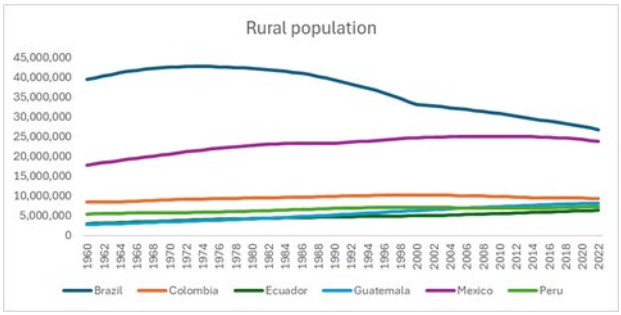


Figure 2.2: Total rural population in Colombia and selected countries.

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2022).

In 1940, Colombia was predominantly rural, with 60% of its population residing outside municipal centers. The demographic landscape shifted significantly during the "Violence," as many peasants and rural dwellers moved to urban areas. By the end of this period, there was a notable increase in the population residing within municipal centers (Orozco Collazos

et al., 2013). This trend has continued to evolve, with recent data from the National Census (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2018) indicating that only 15.8% of the population now lives in dispersed rural areas, comprising approximately 7.6 million people. Figure 2.1 illustrates the declining trend in Colombia's rural population growth, aligning with broader patterns observed across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Colombia is among the countries with the highest rural population in Latin America, following Brazil and Mexico (Figure 2.2)[5] (World Bank, 2022). Although the proportion of the rural population is not as large compared to the total population, this is significant when considering the agrarian question and the critical role of the countryside in national development.

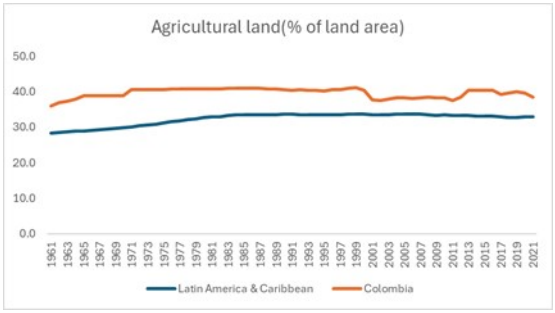


Figure 2.3: Agricultural land as a percentage of total land area.

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2022).

In Colombia, the area dedicated to agriculture surpasses the Latin American average (Figure 2.3). According to the latest Agricultural Census (DANE, 2014), agricultural land covers 43,024,739 hectares, accounting for 38.6% of the total dispersed rural area [6]. Specifically, 7,111,482 hectares are used for cultivating crops out of the total agricultural land. This

[5]The rural population in Colombia accounts for only 14% of the total population, which is significantly lower than the highest proportion of 80% in some countries (World Bank, 2022).

[6]The Census covers 111.5 million hectares of dispersed rural areas, representing 99% of the total dispersed rural area in the country. This census includes Agricultural Production Units (UPA), which involve any organization engaged in agricultural production, from parts of a plot to multiple plots managed by a single producer, and Non-Agricultural Production Units (UPNA), which are plots dedicated to non-agricultural activities like industry, commerce, and services. Of the UPA, 20% of the hectares are used for agro-industrial crops(Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2018).

statistic underscores the sector's significance in Colombia's economy and its vital role in supporting rural livelihoods.

Colombia's agricultural landscape has historically been marked by a strong presence of small-scale farming. This contrasts with the agricultural patterns in other Latin American countries, where the size and structure of farms can vary widely (FAO & OECD, 2019). In the Southern Cone, for example, agriculture is predominantly characterized by large, commercial, and export-oriented farms, as seen in Argentina and Brazil, and increasingly in Uruguay. In contrast, much of the rest of Latin America relies on smallholder and family farming. In the region, there are an estimated 15 million smallholder and family farmers, who play a significant role in food production (FAO & OECD, 2019).

The historical development of Colombia's agriculture has been shaped by factors such as land distribution and rural policies, contributing to its distinct agricultural characteristics compared to other Latin American nations (Zamosc, 1986). The 2005 agricultural census revealed that 87% of productive farm and livestock units were part of the smallholder economy (Garay et al., 2010). Although this percentage has decreased, small-scale agriculture remains crucial to rural livelihoods and the national economy. It plays a central role in ensuring food security, supporting rural development, and sustaining traditional farming practices. The 2014 Agricultural Census (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2018) shows that 60.5% of Agricultural Productive Units (UPA) fall under Peasant, Family, and Community Agriculture (ACFC)[7], which includes peasant communities (84.7%) and ethnic communities (15.3%). This is supported by data from a 2019 survey showing that 60.8 of UPAs are on less than 5 hectares[8]. Approximately 2.7 million producers in the

[7]A production system managed by various communities including peasant, indigenous, black, Afro-descendant, Raizal, and Palenquera groups living in rural areas. This system focuses on agricultural, livestock, fishing, aquaculture, and forestry activities, often combined with non-agricultural pursuits. Activities are managed through family, associative, or community labor, although hired labor may be used. The system integrates economic, social, ecological, political, and cultural functions (Resolution 464, December 29, 2017)

[8]This study will include both, the smallholders that focus more on market-oriented production and Peasant, Family, and Community Agriculture with a broader scope, including cultural and community aspects. Both involve small-scale agriculture that faces similar challenges and contributes to food security and rural development. However, ACFC has a more cultural and communal emphasis.

entire rural area of Colombia make decisions related to agricultural and production activities (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2018). This means that approximately 1.62 million producers (60% of 2.7 million producers), are involved with small-scale agriculture. This production system is widespread, present in every state across the country, and associated with over 453 different crops.

The prominence of the rural population, despite its smaller proportion relative to the urban population, highlights the importance of rural areas in sustaining the nation's economy and food systems. This dynamic reflects the broader struggles of peasants, who have historically faced challenges such as land dispossession, limited access to resources, and political marginalization. Those struggles are deeply intertwined with the country's agricultural sector, which serves as both a source of livelihood and a foundation for food security (Zamosc, 1986). Understanding these dynamics is key to addressing the agrarian question in Colombia, which is closely linked to national development and remains intimately tied to Colombia's violent conflict and development trajectory (F. Thomson, 2011).

2.2 Armed Conflict

The Colombian armed conflict has primarily victimized civilians, with violence deeply affecting the population and territory (Truth Comission, 2022b). According to the Truth Commission,[9] the conflict significantly impacted smallholder farmers and rural communities, exacerbating rural inequality and impeding development (F. Thomson, 2011). Historical injustices have made the land of many lower-income rural families, especially smallholders, vulnerable to misappropriation. This vulnerability has contributed to widespread rural poverty, exacerbated by a lack of access to basic necessities and services (Berry, 2017). When smallholders lose their land, they also lose their primary source of livelihood. The inability to cultivate

[9]The Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad operated between 2018 and 2022, documenting patterns of violence and victimization between 1958 and 2016.

or sell their produce further deepens poverty and marginalizes these rural families. In addition to economic hardship, displaced families often face barriers to accessing education, healthcare, and infrastructure, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Berry, 2017).

To situate Colombia's conflict within broader academic debates, various bodies of literature have proposed different mechanisms for understanding the origins and persistence of armed violence. Some scholars emphasize military asymmetries and state weakness in rural or inaccessible terrains as the key factors enabling insurgent territorial control (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). Others focus on the role of resource competition and illicit economies, linking fluctuations in global commodity prices and the proliferation of coca and gold markets to the funding strategies of armed actors (Dube & Vargas, 2006; Rettberg, 2010). Additional explanations center on local governance gaps, arguing that weak or absent state institutions foster the emergence of alternative armed governance, especially in peripheral regions(F. S. Torres & del Mar Palau, 2006).

While each of these approaches contributes valuable insights, the present study supports the view that there is a strong connection between Colombia's internal armed conflict and its historical trajectory of agrarian political economy (Cramer & Richards, 2011; Grajales, 2011; F. Thomson, 2011; H. Thomson, 2016). This perspective emphasizes how structural inequalities in land distribution, failed agrarian reform, and the exclusion of peasant populations from political representation have fueled both grievance and resistance. As Cramer and Richards (2011) notes, an understanding of violence in rural contexts must account for the political economy of land, labor, and capital, as well as the institutions that mediate access to them. In Colombia, these institutions have historically reinforced elite interests, while producing cycles of dispossession and enclosure for peasant communities.

This structural context is closely linked to the emergence of civilian agency as a decisive factor in territorial politics. As recent scholarship has shown, civil wars are not only contests of armed power or economic extraction, but also unfold through the strategies of local

populations who negotiate, resist, or adapt to armed presence. Rubin (2019), for example, highlights how civilian agency and local organizational capacity can enable communities to shape conflict trajectories through practices of negotiation, autonomy, and collective self-protection. In this view, territorial control is not determined solely by the presence of state or rebel forces, but also by the ability of rural communities to reorganize life amid violence, maintain social cohesion, and assert forms of localized governance. This perspective reinforces the relevance of rural associations and cooperatives not merely as economic structures, but as key platforms of political resilience and territorial self-determination (see Chapter 3.

2.2.1 Historical Evolution of Agrarian Political Economy

Colombia's agrarian structures, deeply rooted in its colonial legacy, have long been characterized by the concentration of large landholdings controlled by economic elites. In regions like the Atlantic Coast, for example, cattle ranchers expanded their estates by dispossessing smallholders, while in the interior, especially in departments such as Santander, Cundinamarca, and Tolima, coffee hacienda owners consolidated power through systems of tenant labor and land monopolization (Cantor, 2004). These dynamics entrenched a hierarchical rural order that reinforced structural inequalities and perpetuated the exclusion of the majority of the rural population from land ownership and political influence (Berry, 2017).

Throughout the twentieth century, the hacienda system continued to dominate rural economies. Large estates often operated through sharecropping arrangements and exploitative tenant relationships, in which peasants were required to work the land of the hacendado, sell their produce through intermediaries tied to the estate, and were frequently restricted in the types of crops they could grow or sell independently (Cantor, 2004). This system deepened the divide between landowners and a predominantly landless or semi-landed peasantry, reproducing conditions of dependence and subordination across generations.

While ethnic and racial divisions have shaped rural life in distinct ways, the boundaries

between Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and non-ethnic mestizo populations in Colombia's countryside have often overlapped. Many Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have historically engaged in subsistence agriculture and small-scale farming under socio-economic conditions similar to those experienced by the broader peasant population. As Melo (2015) shows in his study of the Lower Atrato region, the identities of rural peoples are often shaped by a fluid interplay of race, class, and ethnicity, which are reconfigured by agrarian transformations and state multicultural policies. Before the recognition of ethnic rights in the 1990s, particularly through Law 70 of 1993, rural struggles for land and livelihood were articulated largely through class-based demands, uniting Afro-descendant and mestizo peasants in defense of collective use rights and resistance to corporate land grabs (Melo, 2015). Following the institutionalization of multicultural reforms—such as the 1991 Constitution[10] and Law 70 of 1993, which granted collective land rights to ethnic groups—, these struggles became increasingly framed in ethnic terms, sometimes creating tensions over recognition and inclusion, especially for mestizo peasants who did not fit neatly into ethno-legal categories but shared similar histories of displacement and agrarian dispossession. Despite these challenges, Melo (2015) finds that solidarity practices between racial groups often persisted, with peasant organizations advocating for inclusive territorial rights. These dynamics reveal how, in practice, the category of *peasant* (campesino)—although not formally recognized as an ethnic subject—remains a politically and socially relevant identity that cuts across racial and ethnic lines, particularly in regions where land, labor, and survival are deeply interconnected.

The expansion of Colombia's coffee export economy in the late nineteenth century intensified competition for land, as wealthy landowners sought to capitalize on growing global demand. This expansion often resulted in violent confrontations, as large landholders pushed peasants

[10]The 1991 Constitution marked a turning point in Colombia's legal and political history by officially recognizing the country as a multiethnic and multicultural nation. It expanded political participation, decentralized governance, and established collective rights for Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, including territorial autonomy and cultural protection. Official text available at: https://www.constitucioncolombia.com/

off their lands to expand coffee production (del Pilar López-Uribe & Torres, 2018; F. Torres et al., 2007)[11]. Peasants who attempted to establish small, independent farms were met with resistance from landlords determined to maintain their dominance over vast agricultural territories (Berry, 2017). By the early twentieth century, the conflict over land had escalated further, exacerbated by foreign investments in large-scale agro-export enterprises, particularly in coffee and banana production. These investments, supported by government policies that favored wealthy landowners, led to the violent dispossession of peasant lands and the further consolidation of agrarian monopolies (F. Thomson, 2011).

Amid increasing marginalization, peasants and agricultural workers aligned with two main political groups: left-wing liberals and communists. While the Communist Party remained marginal, left-wing liberalism gained significant traction among settlers and sharecroppers, particularly in regions like Cundinamarca (del Pilar Lopez-Uribe & Sanchez Torres, 2024). In response to rising tensions over land, the first major state-led agrarian reform came with Law 200 of 1936 under the administration of President Alfonso López Pumarejo. This law sought to formalize property rights by granting legal titles to settlers who had cultivated land for five years. However, in practice, its implementation disproportionately benefited large landowners, as many peasants lacked the documentation or legal support to claim land, resulting in further dispossession and proletarianization.

Within the Liberal Party, tensions over land redistribution widened. Left-wing liberals, led by figures like Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, advocated for peasant rights and challenged the party's elite leadership. Gaitán gained national prominence following his 1928 congressional denunciation of the massacre of United Fruit Company workers. His break from the Liberal Party in 1933 and the creation of the Revolutionary Leftist National Union (UNIR) reflected grow-

[11] del Pilar López-Uribe and Torres (2018) investigates the impact of peasant land dispossession on the origins of Colombia's civil conflict, focusing on the rise of the FARC guerrilla movement between 1974 and 1985. Using a matching-pair instrumental variable approach and municipal-level data, the study shows that land dispossession, driven by floods during the export boom (1914-1946), significantly contributed to peasant grievances. These grievances, combined with military experience and ideological cohesion from radical liberals and communists, facilitated the emergence and consolidation of rural guerrilla movements like FARC in conflict-affected areas (del Pilar López-Uribe & Torres, 2018).

ing ideological divisions. UNIR focused on defending the legal rights of settlers and peasants, particularly in conflict-prone areas like western Cundinamarca and Eastern Tolima (del Pilar Lopez-Uribe & Sanchez Torres, 2024). The 1940s were marked by escalating conflict between and within parties. Gaitán's assassination in 1948 ignited the brutal conflict known as *La Violencia*, though violence had already been intensifying since 1946 (F. Thomson, 2011; Truth Comission, 2022a).

During *La Violencia*, an estimated two million people were forcibly displaced. Landowners took advantage of the chaos to seize abandoned land, often violently dispossessing remaining peasant families. In many cases, violence was not just a consequence but a mechanism of dispossession itself, as powerful actors used intimidation and coercion to consolidate agricultural control (Truth Comission, 2022a).

In response, reform efforts during the National Front period (1958–1974)—a bipartisan power-sharing agreement between Liberals and Conservatives aimed at ending partisan violence—sought to stabilize the country and address agrarian grievances (Hartlyn, 1988). The Land Reform Law of 1961 (Law 135), part of a broader development agenda supported by the U.S. Alliance for Progress, aimed to modernize land use and decrease concentration by distributing public lands to landless and poor peasants. However, the reform avoided expropriating large private estates and thus failed to challenge the core structures of inequality. Over 23 million hectares of land were redistributed between 1901 and the 1990s, but these efforts largely reinforced the frontier colonization model and left land concentration intact (Faguet et al., 2018). Resistance from powerful landowners and political elites, coupled with institutional weaknesses, undermined these initiatives. As the Truth Commission notes, the failure to address rural inequality during this period allowed conflict drivers to persist, reinforcing the peasant grievances that would later fuel insurgency (Truth Comission, 2022a).

This historical context highlights the crucial role of land in Colombia's conflict. Agrarian inequality has not only shaped patterns of rural violence but also catalyzed the formation

of insurgent movements and collective forms of resistance. It is within this framework that peasant associations emerged as both targets and agents of transformation—defending territorial rights, resisting encroachment, and demanding political inclusion.

Sur del Tolima offers a particularly illustrative case of how Colombia's agrarian tensions and state absence shaped territorial conflict. Located in the southwestern part of Tolima department, this region has historically been marginalized, with high levels of poverty, weak institutional presence, and frequent land disputes. Its rugged terrain and strategic location between Huila and Cauca made it a stronghold for guerrilla movements such as the FARC, whose origins trace back to peasant resistance in areas like Marquetalia and Gaitania. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Sur del Tolima was a site of intense military operations, state repression, and insurgent organizing—resulting in widespread displacement and enduring grievances against both state and armed actors. Agriculturally, Sur del Tolima is dominated by smallholder farming, particularly coffee production in the highlands and subsistence or mixed cropping in lower-lying areas, with limited access to state extension services or formal credit. The region also contains Indigenous territories, particularly in municipalities like Natagaima and Coyaima, where struggles over land rights and autonomy intersect with broader agrarian and armed conflict dynamics (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022). Despite being heavily affected by the armed conflict, Sur del Tolima—particularly municipalities such as Planadas, Rioblanco, and Ataco—experienced relatively limited paramilitary presence compared to other regions of Colombia. Unlike zones such as Urabá or Montes de María, where paramilitary forces advanced through alliances with local elites and agro-industrial interests, Sur del Tolima remained under sustained guerrilla control. This was largely due to the long-standing territorial dominance of the FARC-EP, which maintained a hegemonic presence in the region since the 1960s and effectively restricted the entry of paramilitary actors (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). The region's geographical isolation, predominantly smallholder agrarian economy, and strong community alignment with insurgent movements reduced its strategic appeal to paramilitary groups (Sanín, 2020). The Truth Commission

explicitly notes that in these municipalities, the conflict was primarily shaped by guerrilla governance rather than paramilitary domination, a distinction that influenced local dynamics of resistance, civilian agency, and later peacebuilding. These conditions, coupled with an economy heavily reliant on smallholder coffee production, set the stage for the emergence of cooperative organizing as a form of resistance and survival. As discussed in later chapters, this regional experience exemplifies how agrarian conflicts and civilian agency intertwined in territories where formal governance structures were largely absent.

The following sections explore the evolution of the armed conflict in Colombia with particular attention to how peasant organizations have responded to socio-economic pressures and state neglect. By analyzing the key actors and phases of the conflict, including the emergence of guerrilla movements, drug trafficking, and paramilitary violence, we aim to show how peasant associations have articulated claims to justice, land, and peace from below.

2.2.2 Dynamics and Trends in Colombia's Armed Conflict

As discussed in the previous section, Colombia's agrarian structure produced deep rural grievances rooted in land concentration, exclusion, and failed reform. Research on rebel groups and peasant-state relations shows that such grievances—especially when tied to violent dispossession—are fertile ground for insurgent movements (del Pilar Lopez-Uribe & Sanchez Torres, 2024; Peters & Richards, 2011). In Colombia, these dynamics gave rise to guerrilla organizations that initially sought to represent the demands of excluded rural populations through armed struggle.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) emerged from these conflicts. As Molano (2000) explains, the origins of the FARC lie in the violent clashes between land-hungry peasants and the conservative landowning elite in the early twentieth century. The situation escalated after the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, which triggered a decade-long civil conflict known as *La Violencia*, costing more than 300,000

lives. In response to repression and political exclusion, Liberal and Communist-aligned peasant militias formed in rural areas. One of their leaders was Pedro Antonio Marín—later known as Manuel Marulanda Vélez—who would become the FARC's first commander. In 1964, after a military offensive against autonomous "independent republics" in regions like Marquetalia and El Pato, Marulanda and Jacobo Arenas formally established the FARC as a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group (del Pilar Lopez-Uribe & Sanchez Torres, 2024; Molano, 2000). Other groups, such as the ELN, EPL, and M-19, also emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionary movements. These organizations, despite their ideological differences, shared common goals: to address rural inequality, land dispossession, and political exclusion through armed insurgency (Norman, 2003; PÃ Fonseca, 2016). The ELN, for instance, drew from a diverse base of students, oil workers, Christians aligned with liberation theology, and rural communities (PÃ Fonseca, 2016).

While united by general revolutionary aims, Colombia's guerrilla organizations differed significantly in ideology, social base, and strategy. The FARC-EP adhered to a Marxist-Leninist line with strong ties to peasant communities, emphasizing prolonged people's war and territorial control from rural zones outward (Leongómez, 2011; Molano, 2000; Pizarro Leongómez, 1996). Its roots lay in peasant self-defense militias shaped by communist influence and material grievances in regions like Tolima and Meta. By contrast, the ELN combined Marxist theory with influences from liberation theology, drawing support from students, radical priests, and segments of the urban middle class (PÃ Fonseca, 2016). The ELN initially adopted a more "foquista" strategy inspired by Che Guevara, focusing on armed propaganda and moral-political transformation over mass-based organizing (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). Unlike the FARC, which maintained a hierarchical military structure and prioritized territorial presence, the ELN operated in smaller, decentralized columns with an emphasis on ideological formation and symbolic targets. These differences not only shaped their interactions with rural communities but also their internal governance and responses to peace negotiations.

Compared to other Latin American insurgencies—such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, who seized power in 1979 after a relatively short revolutionary war, or the Shining Path in Peru, which pursued a highly centralized, ideologically rigid campaign centered on violent urban disruption—the Colombian case was marked by the coexistence of multiple guerrilla projects and a protracted war of attrition. Rather than mounting rapid takeovers of national capitals or aligning closely with foreign revolutionary regimes, groups like the FARC and ELN embedded themselves in Colombia's rural peripheries, sustaining low-intensity warfare for decades. This endurance was enabled by Colombia's fragmented geography, deep state absence in rural zones, and the adaptability of insurgent organizations to illicit economies, including coca cultivation and extortion (Pizarro Leongómez, 1996; Wickham-Crowley, 1992). As a result, Colombia's insurgency landscape featured competing guerrilla logics—mass-based organizing, foquismo, and ideological pluralism—unfolding not as a singular revolutionary moment but as a drawn-out, territorially fragmented conflict.

Over time, these guerrilla movements became increasingly militarized. Their initial commitment to social transformation gave way to coercive practices that harmed the very communities they aimed to defend (Molano, 2000; Norman, 2003; Truth Comission, 2022a).

During its first two decades of existence, FARC, the biggest guerrilla group, operated in remote, rural areas, extorting local farmers and waging a low-intensity war against government forces (Echandía Castilla, 1999b). In the 1970s, Colombia's conflict intensified as guerrilla groups, particularly the FARC, expanded from impoverished, isolated regions to areas closer to the center with higher incomes and resources (Arjona, 2014; Echandía Castilla, 1999b). This expansion involved extortion, kidnapping, taxation, and drug trafficking, which provided substantial resources. In the early 1980s, the FARC restructured, adopting a military organization with a strategic focus on increasing their fronts, resulting in a rapid geographical expansion. They established new fronts in regions like Caquetá, Meta, and Magdalena Medio, driven by financial gains from coca production (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). By the late 1990s, guerrilla presence was estimated in about three-fourths of Colombian municipal-

ities (Echandía Castilla, 1999a).

The geographical expansion of guerrillas, along with national reforms like decentralization, prompted local elites to form paramilitary forces in response to political changes. Paramilitaries emerged in the early 1980s, particularly during peace negotiations with leftist guerrillas and the political opening that followed, culminating in the first mayoral elections in 1987 (Arjona, 2014; Romero, 2003). These paramilitary groups, although a few were self-defense groups organized by peasants, were often associated with cattle ranchers, large landowners, and drug traffickers, consolidated territorial control through a process known as the Counter-Agrarian Reform[12], seizing significant land areas (Romero, 2003). The counter-agrarian reform reversed land redistribution efforts aimed at benefiting peasants and rural workers. Instead of supporting agrarian reform that promoted land access and equity for small farmers, paramilitaries engaged in widespread land grabbing, forced displacement, and violence to consolidate large estates and control over rural areas (Grajales, 2011; Romero, 2003). Grajales (2011) suggest that they originated to protect their allies' property rights against landless peasants' demands and rebel movement threats.

Understanding who fought—and who died—is essential to analyzing the dynamics of Colombia's internal conflict. The guerrilla ranks, especially within the FARC-EP and ELN, were primarily composed of rural youth, many of whom joined due to ideological alignment, economic desperation, or coercion (Truth Comission, 2022b). Testimonies compiled by the Truth Commission highlight that in coca-growing regions and conflict zones, insurgents pressured families to contribute sons and daughters to the cause, with some recruitment occurring as early as adolescence (Truth Comission, 2022b). By contrast, paramilitary groups—especially those affiliated with the AUC—were frequently linked to cattle ranchers, large landowners, and narco-trafficking elites. While some recruits were drawn from marginalized urban neigh-

[12]It has deep roots in the country's violent history, particularly during key moments when land and power were contested. The seeds of the Counter-Agrarian Reform were sown during La Violencia in the 1940s and 1950s, a period of intense political and social conflict between liberal and conservative factions. Land became a central issue during this time, leading to early forms of land concentration and the displacement of peasants (Truth Comission, 2022a).

borhoods, many paramilitary units were also composed of former military personnel or individuals incentivized through pay and local power (Grajales, 2011; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017). These divergent origins and motivations influenced how each group engaged with rural populations. Guerrillas often merged with peasant communities but later imposed authoritarian rule, while paramilitaries waged campaigns of violent control to dismantle grassroots organizations. Victims of the conflict were overwhelmingly civilian: the majority were rural peasants, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and social leaders targeted for their organizing roles. As detailed by the Truth Commission and CNMH, this violence was not incidental but strategic—used to seize land, disrupt local governance, and assert dominance in contested areas (de Memoria Histórica, 2020; Truth Comission, 2022a).

The consequences of Colombia's armed conflict extended far beyond direct violence. Civilians endured a wide range of interconnected human rights violations—including homicides, forced disappearances, kidnappings, and torture—that reshaped entire communities and altered the social fabric of the country. These violations were often strategic: designed to control territory, displace populations, and undermine civic life amid clashes between guerrilla groups, paramilitary forces, and the state (Truth Comission, 2022b).

To understand the scale and patterns of these violations, this study draws on the consolidated findings of the Colombian Truth Commission. This study also acknowledges earlier efforts to document conflict-related violence, such as the Human Rights Observatory of the Vice President's Office (DIH, 2006), which in the early 2000s produced influential reports tracking violence trends. However, those reports often relied heavily on military and prosecutorial data, limiting their capacity to include civilian testimony and structural analyses. The Truth Commission later built upon and expanded this work with a more inclusive, victim-centered approach. As part of the JEP-CEV-HRDAG project, the Truth Commission undertook an unprecedented data integration effort, merging 112 distinct databases to construct a unified picture of the conflict's impact. This process allowed for a more accurate analysis of victimization trends across categories, including homicides, disappearances, and recruitment.

For displacement data, however, the Truth Commission relied exclusively on the Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV), the official registry of victims since 1985[13].

The Truth Commission treated displacement as a distinct category in its analysis, recognizing that its magnitude—numbering in the millions—could obscure patterns in other types of violence when visualized together. Following this approach, this study presents separate figures for different forms of victimization: Figure 2.4 focuses on homicides, forced disappearances, kidnappings, and recruitment, while Figure 2.9 presents data on displacement. This separation allows for clearer comparisons and highlights distinct dynamics and spatial patterns across different types of violations.

The Truth Commission also documented how mass expulsion, forced confinement, and restrictions on mobility were used as tools to assert military and economic control. These tactics violated fundamental rights such as residence, territorial belonging, and freedom of movement. Fleeing violence often resulted in the loss of homes, land, and personal dignity. Meanwhile, those who remained under coercive control—immobilized in their own communities—faced persistent threats to their liberty and autonomy (Truth Comission, 2022b)[14].

Colombia's alarmingly high homicide rates between 1987 and 1997 laid the groundwork for the sustained levels of violence that characterized the broader armed conflict. During this decade, the national average reached 75.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants—tripling the rate of countries like Brazil and Mexico, quadrupling that of Venezuela, and exceeding by six times the rates of countries with greater relative poverty, such as Peru and Ecuador (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). Colombia's figures not only surpassed regional averages—nearly 30 per 100,000 in Latin America—but also matched or exceeded those of countries undergoing civil wars, such as El Salvador in the 1980s.

[13]RUV is maintained by the Unidad para las Víctimas and has become the standard for measuring displacement figures in national and international reports.

[14]For the analysis of displacement in Chapter 5, this study draws on data from the RUV.

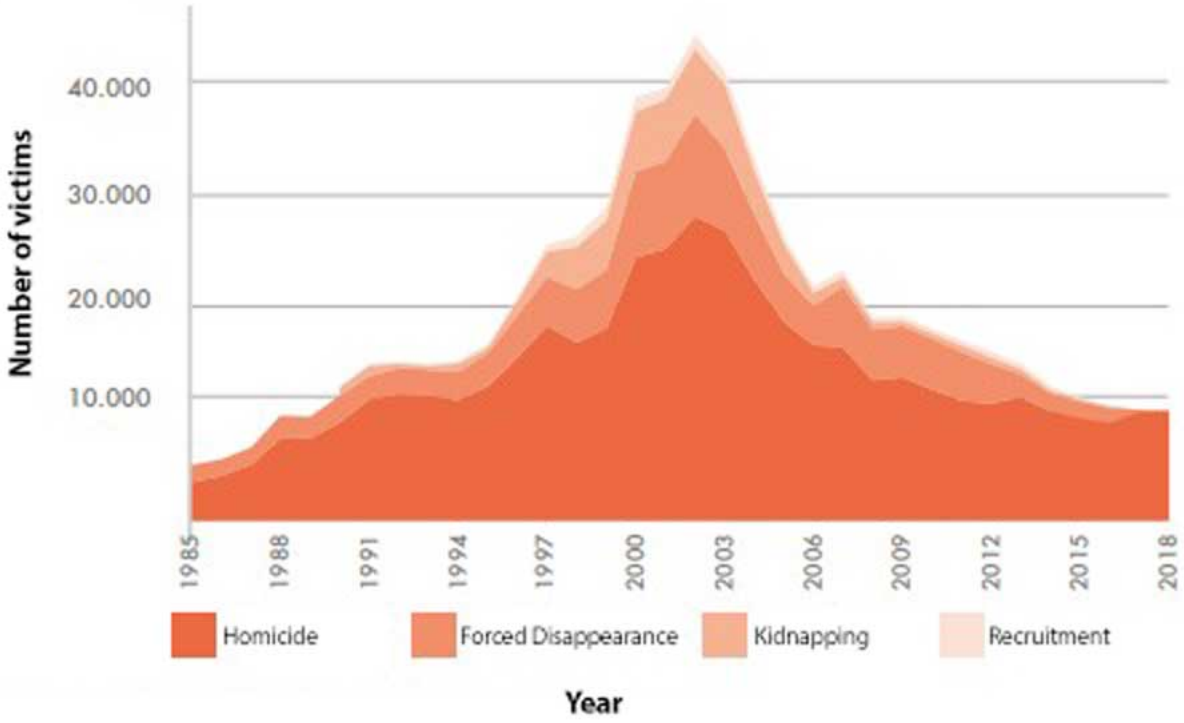
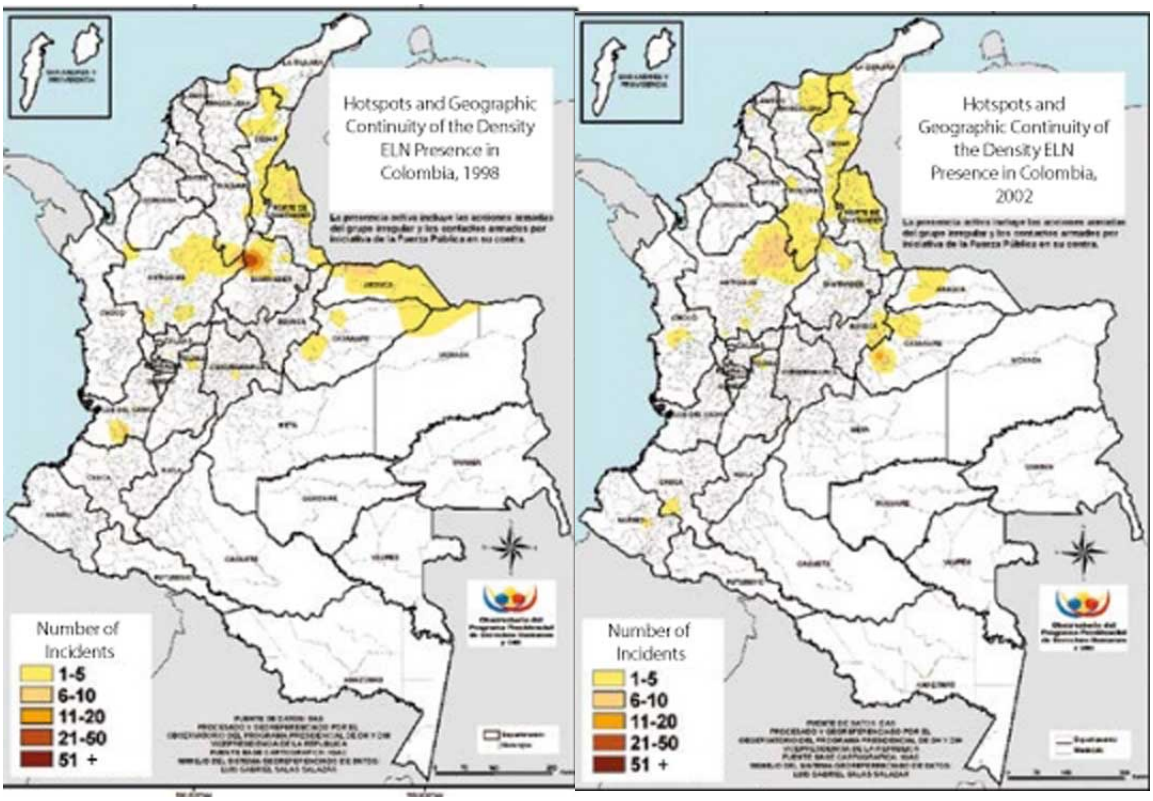


Figure 2.4: Number of Victims Over Time.

Source: JEP-CEV-HRDAG, as of June 26, 2022.

This historical pattern is consistent with the findings of the Truth Commission, which documented a peak in homicides (Figure 2.4) and forced displacement (Figure 2.9) in 2002, followed by a steady decline between 2010 and 2016. However, the data also reveal a resurgence in lethal violence during 2017–2018, pointing to the evolving nature of armed conflict and the reconfiguration of violence after the peace accord (Truth Comission, 2022b) (see section 2.2.5.)

The expansion of guerrilla forces in the 1980s, coupled with the rise of paramilitary groups in the 1990s, was driven less by ideological motivations than by the pursuit of territorial control in areas of high strategic value (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). By the early 2000s, as violence reached its peak, guerrilla and paramilitary groups were engaged in fierce competition over

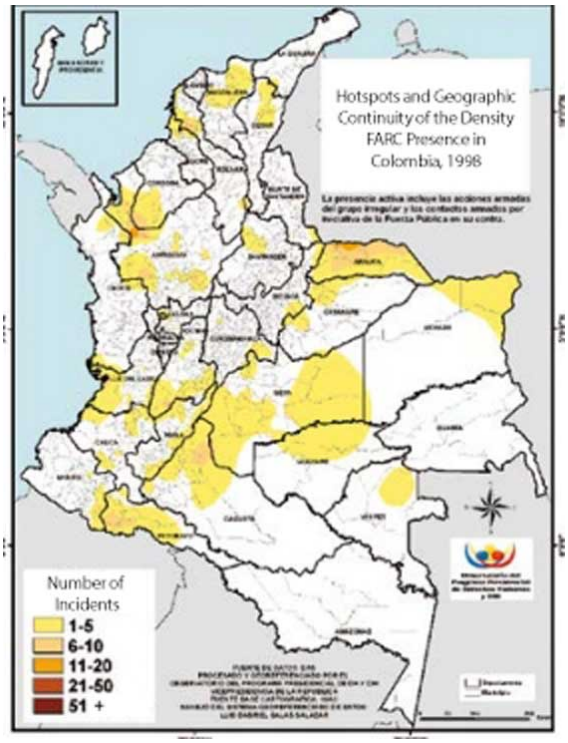


(a) ELN presence 1998 (b) ELN presence 2006

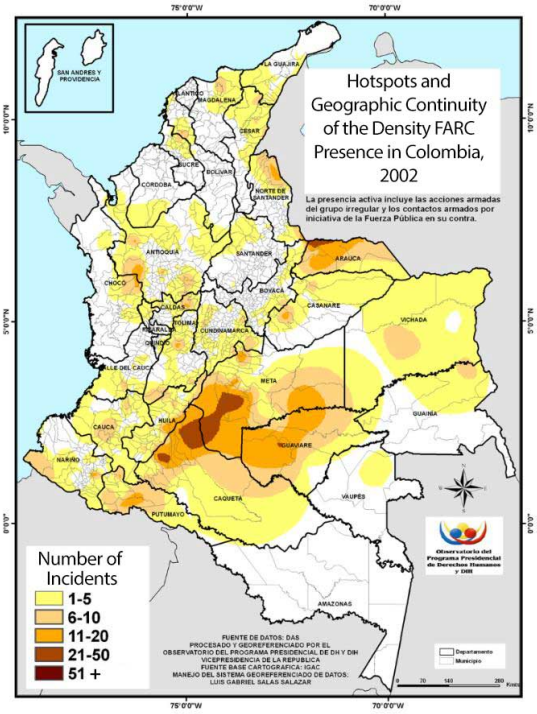
Figure 2.5: ELN presence 1998 - 2006

these territories. However, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that paramilitaries fully expelled guerrilla forces from their traditional zones of influence. In fact, guerrilla groups such as the FARC and ELN maintained strongholds in key regions despite increasing paramilitary pressure. In the northeast, for example, the ELN retained significant presence in Arauca and Norte de Santander—areas considered strategic and symbolically important by the group. Arauca, in particular, was seen by the ELN as a revolutionary enclave, comparable in symbolic value to Cuba in 1959, due to its favorable structural and cultural conditions. This control persisted until the arrival of paramilitary factions like the Bloque Vencedores de Arauca (BVA) in the early 2000s (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). Meanwhile, FARC fronts remained active across the southwest, including Valle del Cauca, Cauca, Nariño, Huila, Tolima, and Putumayo (Figure 2.5, Figure 2.6).

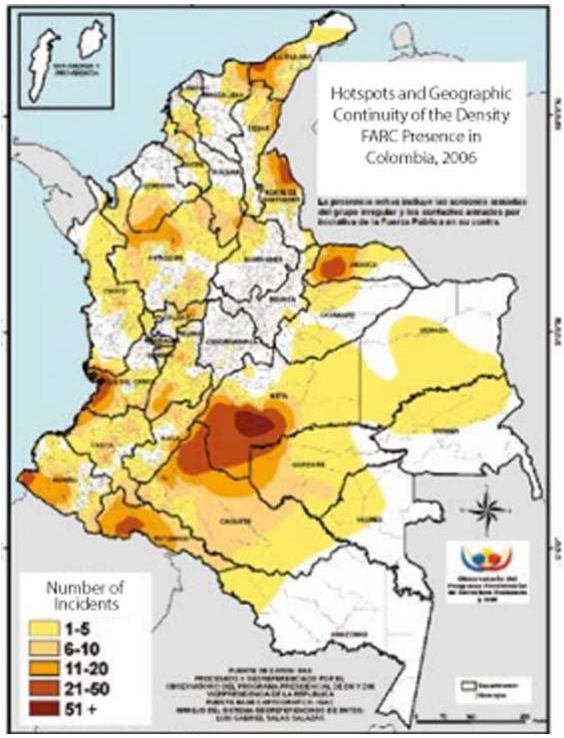
Althouth in regions with strong paramilitary influence, such as northern Colombia, the



(a) FARC presence 1998



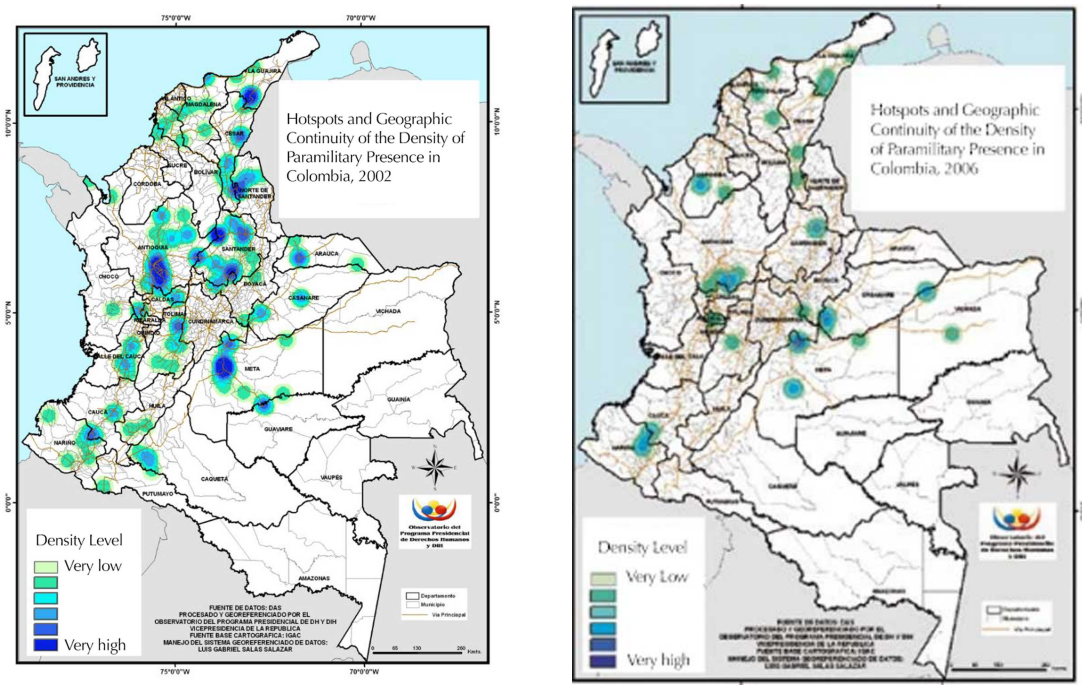
(b) FARC presence 2002



(c) FARC presence 2006

Figure 2.6: FARC presence 1998, 2002, 2006

Bloque Norte (BN) was responsible for over 80 massacres and nearly 600 deaths between 1998 and 2005, significantly weakening the presence of guerrilla groups like the ELN and FARC across most of the Atlantic region (Córdoba, Atlántico, Magdalena, Sucre, Bolívar, Cesar, and La Guajira) (Figure 2.7) (Echandía Castilla, 1999a).



(a) AUC presence 2002 (b) AUC presence 2006

Figure 2.7: AUC presence 2002 - 2006

Nonetheless, the Atlantic coast had specific characteristics, such as less guerrilla presence, no dense forests or mountains, and fewer illicit crops, which guerrilla groups relied on for financing. These conditions contrast with those in the northeast and southwest. This struggle for dominance further fueled the high homicide rates and ongoing violence, as noted in the Truth Commission's findings, which identified peaks in killings and forced displacement during key periods of the conflict, particularly in territories marked by overlapping armed group presence (Echandía Castilla, 1999a).

The Truth Commission reported that paramilitary groups were responsible for 45% of the conflict's homicides, while guerrilla forces, primarily FARC-EP and ELN, accounted for

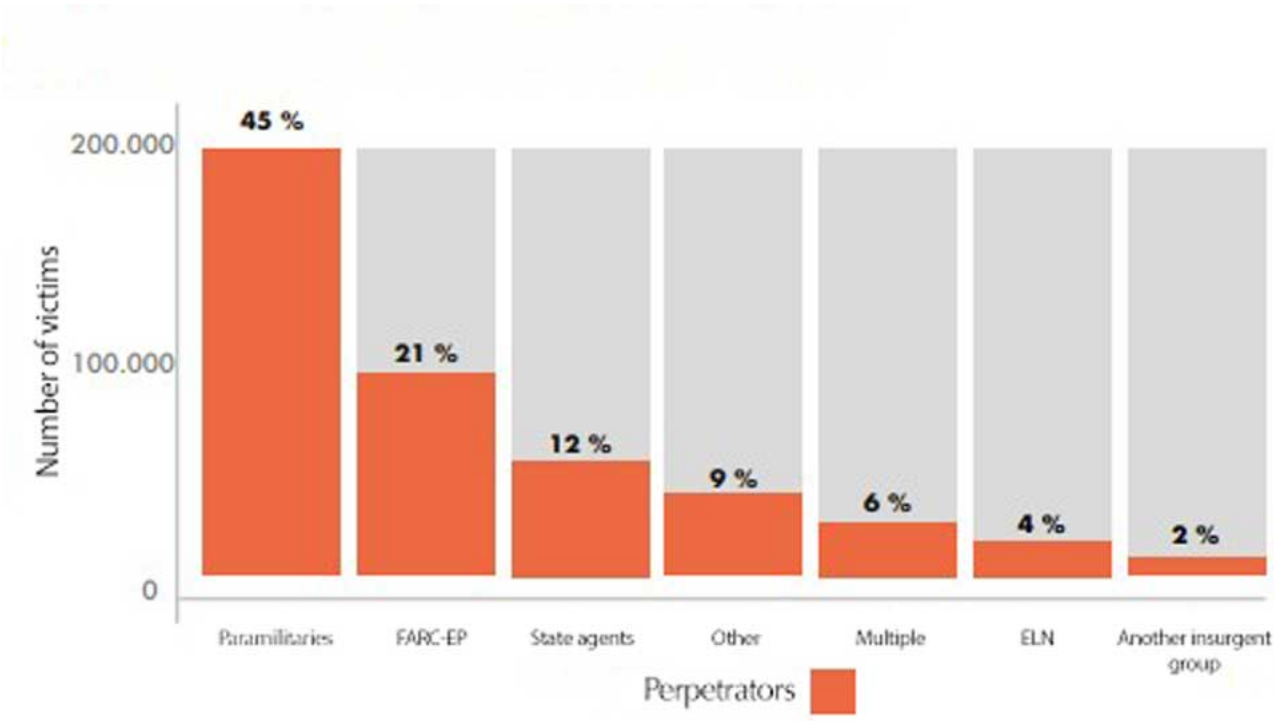


Figure 2.8: Responsible by Homicides.

Source: JEP-CEV-HRDAG, as of June 26, 2022.

25%, and state agents were directly responsible for 12% (Figure 2.8). These numbers reflect a fragmented and highly violent landscape shaped by competing actors, including state forces, paramilitaries, insurgents, drug traffickers, and civilian collaborators. Historical data supports this complexity: between 1988 and 1997, 84.8% of homicides attributed to organized actors were committed by paramilitary or non-guerrilla armed groups, while guerrillas were responsible for 15.2% (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). These actors did not simply emerge in response to guerrilla threats, but were part of broader counterinsurgency strategies supported by landowning elites and, at times, state complicity (Medina Gallego, 1990; Reyes Posada, 1991). The result was a multilayered conflict, where organized violence became a method for territorial control and social regulation, particularly in rural zones affected by coca cultivation and land disputes (Pizarro Leongómez, 1996).

In addition, forced displacement—one of the most widespread and devastating consequences of the armed conflict—surged in 2002, largely as a result of these territorial battles between guerrilla and paramilitary forces. This violence profoundly disrupted social structures, territorial governance, and traditional ways of life. According to the JEP-CEV-HRDAG joint project, a total of 7,752,964 people were victims of forced displacement between 1985 and 2019. While displacement initially peaked during La Violencia (1946–1958), it intensified dramatically during the broader internal conflict, reaching its highest levels between 1995 and 2002. In 2002 alone, 730,904 victims were recorded, marking the worst year and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis across both rural and urban zones. Though displacement rates declined after the 2016 Peace Agreement, they remained alarmingly high, especially in rural and peasant communities, highlighting the ongoing challenges in addressing the legacies of violence (Truth Comission, 2022b).

2.2.3 Key Armed Actors and Their Interaction with Rural Organization

Colombia's armed conflict was shaped by the strategies and territorial expansion of guerrilla insurgencies and paramilitary groups. Each of these actors developed distinct approaches to governance and control, particularly in rural areas where state presence was limited and social movements—including peasant associations—played a central role in community life. Understanding how these armed groups operated, and how they engaged with or undermined rural organizational structures, is essential to grasping the broader dynamics of the conflict. While some groups sought to mobilize or co-opt peasant organizations, others targeted them as threats. In many cases, the interaction between armed actors and rural communities redefined the political and institutional landscape of the countryside.

This section offers a brief overview of the evolution of each key actor, focusing on their role in shaping rural governance and their relationship with local civil society. Importantly,

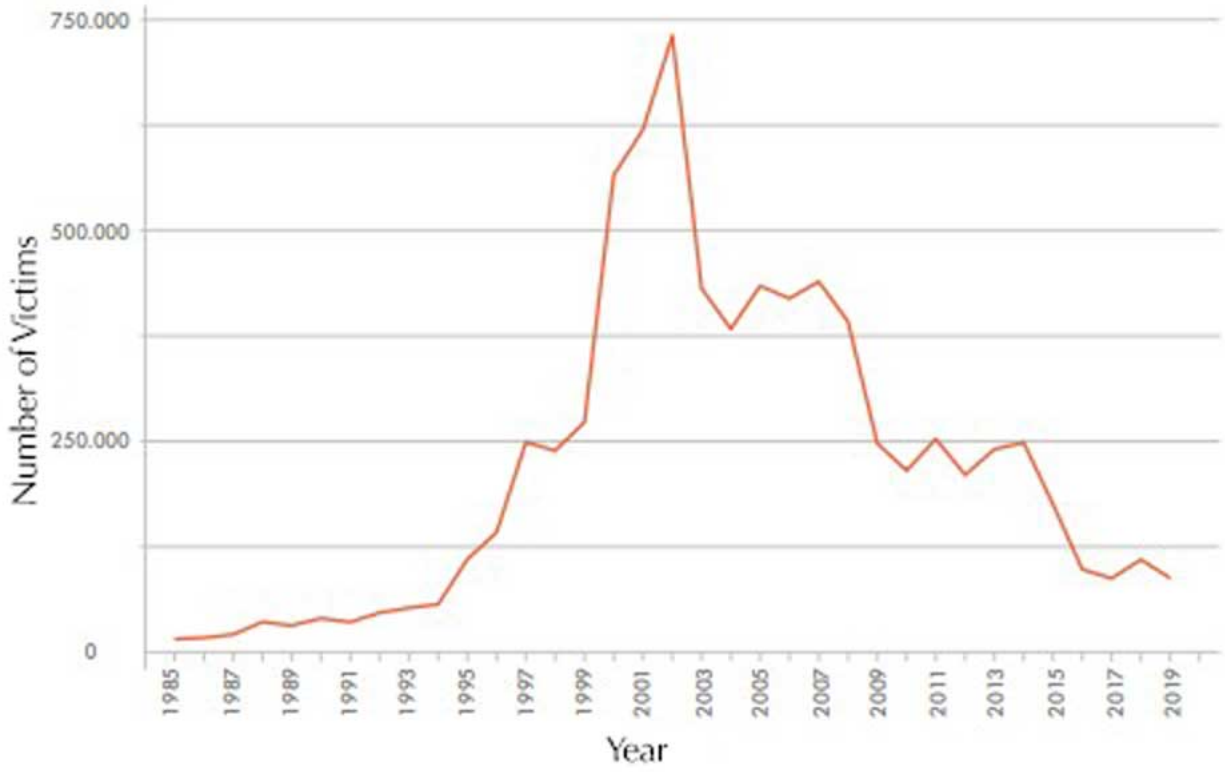


Figure 2.9: Forced Displacement (1985–2019).

Source: JEP-CEV-HRDAG, as of June 26, 2022.

the emergence and expansion of the coca economy also shaped these dynamics, not only by providing a financial base for guerrilla and paramilitary actors, but also by drawing state intervention into contested territories under the banner of eradication and counter-narcotics. This introduced new layers of militarization and civilian vulnerability, especially in regions where coca was one of the few viable sources of rural income (Marín Llanes et al., 2024). This section offers a brief overview of the evolution of each key actor, focusing on their role in shaping rural governance and their relationship with local civil society.

Guerrilla Strategies: From Mobilization to Control

As discussed in the section 2.2.2, Colombia's guerrilla insurgencies emerged from the structural exclusion and land inequality that marked the country's rural development. Early guerrilla groups like the FARC-EP and the ELN initially sought to position themselves as defenders of the rural poor, aligning with peasant demands for land reform, security, and state presence in marginalized areas (Arjona, 2014; Molano, 2000). In this early phase, guerrilla organizing often overlapped with existing peasant struggles. Rural communities—many of which had already mobilized through groups like the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios peasants (ANUC)—found common cause with guerrilla discourse, particularly around the right to land and territorial defense (Grajales, 2011; Truth Comission, 2022a).

However, as these insurgent movements expanded and consolidated territorial control—particularly from the 1980s onward—their strategies shifted. What began as political and ideological mobilization evolved into more hierarchical forms of authority marked by coercion and territorial domination (Arjona, 2016; Echandía Castilla, 1999b; Kaplan, 2017a). Armed groups increasingly viewed autonomous peasant organizing as a threat to their legitimacy and control. In regions such as Meta, Caquetá, Putumayo, Arauca, and southern Cauca, guerrilla commanders imposed strict regulations on daily life, including labor, mobility, and participation in local associations, blurring the line between civilian and combatant life (Arjona, 2016; Echandía Castilla, 1999a). Over time, these actors developed alternative governance systems that sought to supplant the state, offering security and dispute resolution, but also extracting labor, enforcing rules, and sanctioning disobedience (Arjona, 2014; Kaplan, 2017a).

Guerrilla interaction with local institutions—especially Juntas de Acción Comunal (JACs), cooperatives, and other grassroots structures—varied significantly across regions. In some areas, these organizations were absorbed or co-opted into guerrilla political projects (Kaplan, 2017b). In others, guerrilla groups sought to dismantle or replace them, installing

their own representatives or displacing community leaders viewed as uncooperative (Gáfaro et al., 2014b; Truth Comission, 2022b). Testimonies collected by the Truth Comission (2022a) detail how, particularly in coca-growing zones, guerrilla actors demanded obedience from peasants, pressured families to contribute youth to their ranks, and imposed fines or displacement for those who resisted their authority. These pressures were not universal: where ideological alignment or protection needs existed, some rural communities maintained cooperative relations with guerrilla forces. However, such arrangements often came at the cost of autonomy.

The case of the 1996 Cocalero Marches illustrates the shifting relationship between guerrilla groups and rural communities. Although the FARC-EP sought to align with the demands of coca-growing peasants protesting eradication policies, their involvement created tensions and undermined the movement's credibility in the eyes of the state, ultimately leading to increased repression (Truth Comission, 2022a). Similarly, in regions like San Vicente de Chucurí, peasant protests for basic rights and protections were violently repressed under the assumption that they were guerrilla-driven, illustrating how the insurgents' presence could endanger rather than empower rural communities.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, as detailed in the previous section (see Section 2.2.2, guerrilla groups had expanded their presence to over 70% of Colombian municipalities, many of them rural and economically strategic (Echandía Castilla, 1999a). Yet their deepening entrenchment often came with increased authoritarianism. Scholars note that guerrilla control in some zones meant the substitution of one form of marginalization for another: while the state had been absent or predatory, guerrilla governance could be equally coercive, curtailing civil liberties and suppressing grassroots initiative (Arjona, 2016; Kaplan, 2017b).

Thus, the trajectory of guerrilla engagement with rural communities evolved from an early period of shared struggle to one marked by vertical imposition and conflict over autonomy. This evolution had lasting implications for rural civil society. In places where peasant orga-

nizations retained independence, they were often caught between the suspicion of the state and the domination of insurgent actors. In others, community institutions were co-opted or destroyed, fundamentally altering the landscape of local governance. These dynamics—of alignment, imposition, and resistance—help explain not only the patterns of violence experienced across rural Colombia but also the varied resilience and reorganization efforts that emerged in response.

State–Paramilitary Alliances and the Repression of Rural Organizing

The relationship between paramilitary groups and state forces during Colombia's armed conflict remains the subject of significant academic and political debate. While some scholars argue that paramilitarism emerged as a self-organized reaction to guerrilla threats—particularly by large landowners, cattle ranchers, and drug traffickers—others contend that these groups became deeply embedded in state institutions and were constitutive of state-building processes in conflict-affected regions (Grajales, 2011; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017). The Truth Comission (2022b) also highlights that paramilitarism was not merely an expression of illegal violence but part of a broader ecosystem linking armed actors, sectors of the state, legal and illegal economies, and political and business elites.

Rather than a uniform relationship, the connection between the state and paramilitaries varied by region and period. In some areas, elements of the military and local government turned a blind eye to paramilitary activities or actively supported their actions under the guise of counterinsurgency[15]. In others, the state's absence or institutional weakness created the conditions for paramilitary groups to impose their own forms of governance[16]. What is

[15]Particularly in regions such as Magdalena Medio, Cesar, northern Antioquia, Córdoba, and Sucre, elements of the military and local officials tolerated or collaborated with paramilitary groups. See Truth Comission (2022b, vol. 2, pp. 96–98, vol. 3, pp. 372–375) and Gutiérrez-Sanín and Vargas (2017) for detailed cases in Urabá and Meta.

[16]In regions such as Catatumbo, southern Bolívar, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Córdoba, and southern Cesar, the weak or absent state presence enabled paramilitaries to govern directly. See Arjona (2016) and Truth Comission (2022b, vol. 3, pp. 356–364).

widely acknowledged, however, is that paramilitary violence often aligned with elite interests, especially in disputes over land and political control at the municipal level (Arjona, 2014; Grajales, 2011).

Paramilitary groups used both violence and social capital to expand their influence in rural areas. They were not only armed actors but political entrepreneurs who co-opted local institutions, enforced property rights through coercion, and embedded themselves in networks of elected officials and public servants (Grajales, 2011). These dynamics were particularly evident in regions marked by strong peasant mobilization, where paramilitaries viewed community organizations—such as the ANUC, social movements, and JACs—as potential guerrilla collaborators or as threats to elite power structures.

This resulted in what has been termed a "Counter-Agrarian Reform": a violent reconfiguration of land and territorial control that reversed earlier efforts at land redistribution. Paramilitary groups, often supported by drug lords seeking to launder capital through land investments, engaged in widespread forced displacement and land grabbing. These efforts were legitimized or left unchecked by legal mechanisms and weak enforcement, allowing paramilitaries to consolidate power without formally challenging the state (Grajales, 2011). In this view, their operations reflected not a breakdown of state authority but an alternative mode of state formation through violence and exclusion.

While there is no consensus on the degree to which the Colombian state created paramilitary groups, substantial evidence points to collusion and tacit approval across multiple levels of government. In many regions, paramilitaries benefited not only from the state's failure to prevent atrocities but also from legal reforms and institutional arrangements—such as the authorization of "convivirs" or rural security cooperatives—that provided a veneer of legitimacy to their operations (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Barón, 2005; Romero & Valencia, 2007). These relationships were further reinforced through shared political and economic interests, particularly in areas where local elites faced peasant demands for land

and political inclusion. The Truth Comission (2022b) found that the relationships between paramilitaries and military units were closer and more persistent than previously acknowledged. In many areas, paramilitaries benefited not only from the state's failure to prevent atrocities but also from legal reforms that allowed them to operate as rural security cooperatives under the guise of civilian self-defense. Legislation passed in the 1990s facilitated this integration, culminating in the formation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 1997—a federation of paramilitary blocs that retained significant regional autonomy while expanding national influence (Grajales, 2011; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008).

Over time, paramilitary governance extended beyond violence to include regulation of labor, taxation of economic activities, and direct involvement in municipal politics. Their evolution from localized militias into actors capable of shaping public policy, often with the complicity of public officials, underscores their role in institutional capture. Paramilitary actors used both threats and political patronage to embed themselves in local administrations, securing access to contracts, infrastructure budgets, and security coordination mechanisms (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Vargas, 2017).

The implications for rural civil society were devastating. Peasant organizations—already weakened by earlier waves of repression—faced renewed and systematic attacks. Leaders were assassinated, meetings infiltrated or banned, and organizational structures dismantled. As the Truth Comission (2022a) documents, entire networks of rural associations were displaced or destroyed, not only by guerrilla violence but by the calculated counterinsurgency strategies of paramilitary actors, often operating with the tacit approval or direct support of state agents (Truth Comission, 2022b). In regions such as Urabá, paramilitary groups targeted banana workers' unions and peasant cooperatives aligned with land reform agendas; the assassination of union leaders in Apartadó and Turbo in the late 1990s exemplifies this pattern (Romero & Valencia, 2007). In Córdoba, peasant leaders affiliated with the ANUC were systematically persecuted, and ANUC's influence was dismantled through a combination of armed violence and state inaction (Grajales, 2011; Truth Comission, 2022a). In Magdalena

Medio, the expansion of paramilitary control included the seizure of collective farms and the suppression of the Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra (ACVC), which faced displacement, stigmatization, and arrest of its leaders (Grajales, 2011; Silva-Prada, 2012). These cases reflect how organized peasant resistance—especially when tied to demands for land and autonomy—was viewed as a threat by local elites and armed actors alike, prompting campaigns of targeted violence and institutional sabotage (see section 2.2.4).

In sum, the interplay between state and paramilitary actors profoundly reshaped the institutional and territorial landscape of rural Colombia. Whether through formal policy, legal ambiguity, or strategic neglect, the state's role in enabling paramilitary violence contributed to the dismantling of peasant autonomy and the consolidation of elite and armed control over land and governance. These dynamics—framed not as exceptions to state authority but as mechanisms of authoritarian governance—highlight how organized violence served not only military and political ends but also the reorganization of rural institutions and the suppression of alternative forms of grassroots authority. Yet despite this violence, rural communities were not merely passive victims. Across many regions, peasant associations and local organizations continued to assert claims to land, resist displacement, and build autonomous forms of governance—often at great personal and collective risk. The following section examines the diverse strategies employed by these actors to survive, adapt, and mobilize in the midst of protracted armed conflict.

2.2.4 Peasants and Their Role in Conflict and Resistance

The relationship between Colombia's peasant communities and armed actors has been shaped by both cooperation and conflict. While rural organizations have long mobilized around demands for land reform, economic support, and protection from violence, their position within the armed conflict was never uniform. Guerrilla groups, particularly in the early decades of the conflict, often aligned themselves with these social demands—establishing ties with

peasant communities through shared struggles or, in many cases, through coercive control (Truth Comission, 2022a). At the same time, peasant associations developed their own forms of collective action, rooted in long-standing agrarian organizing traditions that predated the rise of insurgencies. As the conflict deepened, these organizations found themselves navigating shifting pressures from guerrilla, paramilitary, and state forces—sometimes forming alliances, sometimes resisting, and often paying a high price for defending territorial autonomy and community life.

One of the earliest and most influential peasant mobilizations in Colombia was the ANUC, which played a pivotal role in shaping agrarian demands and resistance strategies during the twentieth century. Founded in 1967 during the presidency of Carlos Lleras Restrepo, ANUC was initially supported by the state as part of an institutional strategy to channel rural discontent. However, the organization quickly evolved into an autonomous platform that united peasants to demand land redistribution and challenge the dominance of large landowners (Fals Borda, 1985; Grajales, 2011; Zamosc, 1986). In its early years, ANUC successfully mobilized rural communities across the country, engaging in mass land occupations and pressuring the state for structural agrarian reform.

This momentum was significantly disrupted following the election of Conservative President Misael Pastrana in 1970. His administration reversed many of the reforms ANUC had fought for and prioritized policies that benefited large landholders. The Pacto de Chicoral in 1973, a key turning point, blocked redistributive reforms and symbolized the exclusion of rural residents from meaningful political participation (Kaplan, 2017b; Zamosc, 1986). In response, many peasants radicalized, resorting to land invasions and protest as alternative forms of pressure. Despite these efforts, the government's shift toward repression—alongside legal and military crackdowns—led to the weakening and eventual fragmentation of ANUC.

In many regions, this repression was brutal. In Córdoba, for example, ANUC leaders described how the military and later paramilitary groups systematically dismantled the organi-

zation by criminalizing its members and labeling them guerrillas. As one testimony collected by the Truth Commission recounts, slain peasants were "dressed in guerrilla uniforms and left with their ANUC membership card beside their bodies" to justify their murder (Truth Comission, 2022a, p. 91). This tactic spread fear across the countryside, turning peasant affiliation into a liability. Even those who did not support insurgent movements were targeted due to their visible participation in land rights advocacy (Reyes, 2009; F. Thomson, 2011).

By the 1990s, the repression of ANUC and its successors had intensified. Peasant leaders were assassinated, detained, or displaced, and meetings were infiltrated or banned. Organizations like the National Association of Black, Indigenous, and Peasant Women of Colombia (Anmucic) were targeted for their land rights advocacy and opposition to paramilitary violence (Truth Comission, 2022a). This systematic assault was not just reactive—it was part of a broader strategy to suppress autonomous peasant organizing and neutralize demands for justice and redistribution.

As the armed conflict escalated in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between peasant organizations and guerrilla groups grew increasingly complex and, in many cases, conflictual. Initially, some insurgent groups sought to align with peasant demands for land, protection, and state presence—particularly in regions where community-based organizing had taken root through land occupations or alternative development efforts. However, over time, many of these relationships soured as guerrilla movements, especially the FARC-EP, ELN, EPL, MIR, and PRT, sought to instrumentalize or co-opt autonomous peasant initiatives to serve their political and military goals (Kaplan, 2017b; Truth Comission, 2022a).

Rather than fostering alliances, guerrilla actors often imposed their authority on territories previously organized by peasant associations, such as those established under ANUC. In these cases, communities found themselves caught between state and elite actors who branded them as guerrillas, and insurgent groups that sought to subsume their autonomy under revolutionary objectives. This dual pressure contributed to a wave of repression,

stigmatization, and violence that dismantled many local initiatives and eroded trust in all sides of the conflict (Reyes, 2009; F. Thomson, 2011).

Two emblematic episodes illustrate the perilous dynamics of this period. First, the 1988 massacres in San Vicente de Chucurí, where peasant protests demanding better treatment and protection were violently repressed by state forces in response to perceived guerrilla involvement. These massacres, including those at La Fortuna and Llana Caliente, underscored how guerrilla presence often escalated state responses to rural mobilization (Truth Comission, 2022a). Second, the 1996 Cocalero Marches in southern Colombia saw peasants mobilize against forced eradication and in favor of economic alternatives. Though driven by grassroots demands, these movements were quickly stigmatized as guerrilla-led due to the FARC's attempts to align with the protests—ultimately undermining their legitimacy and exposing participants to further state and paramilitary violence (Truth Comission, 2022a; Zamosc, 1986).

Despite these pressures, many peasant communities sought to distance themselves from armed actors and assert their autonomy. As violence intensified, calls for neutrality and self-governance grew stronger. Peasants were not simply caught in the crossfire—they developed strategies of resistance, negotiated coexistence, and built institutional alternatives aimed at preserving community cohesion and local governance (Kaplan, 2017b).

These dynamics illustrate how, as the conflict escalated in the 1990s, peasant associations played a crucial role in both resisting and negotiating with various armed actors. Campesino territories became contested battlegrounds, especially with the expansion of narcotrafficking and new forms of political violence. At the same time, the criminalization of rural organizing intensified, and participation in collective action was increasingly treated as a sign of subversion. Despite this, many communities sustained local governance structures and defended collective autonomy in the face of mounting violence (Kaplan, 2017b).

In response, peasant communities formed formal associations aimed at protecting their rights

and rebuilding their social fabric. These initiatives did not emerge in a vacuum: they were deeply influenced by earlier rural development policies, political organizing by groups such as the Patriotic Union and the Communist Party in the 1980s, and church-based activism rooted in Liberation Theology[17]. These factors helped foster resilient, autonomous peasant organizations that positioned themselves as civilian, non-aligned actors in a conflict marked by state and insurgent polarization.

Among the most emblematic examples of autonomous peasant organizing is the Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra (ACVC). Formed in the mid-1980s by peasants in the Cimitarra River Valley, the ACVC initially emerged as Coopemantioquia, a cooperative aimed at improving agricultural commercialization and supply access. However, by the 1990s, in response to growing paramilitary violence and a vacuum of state support, the organization evolved into a more explicitly political actor, focused on defending land rights and promoting rural development. In 1996, after years of marginalization and insecurity, peasants from several municipalities organized a mass mobilization to Barrancabermeja. This protest led to the formulation of a Comprehensive Agricultural Development Plan and the official recognition of the ACVC as a regional voice for campesino communities (Silva-Prada, 2012).

Since then, the ACVC has become a powerful model of territorial resistance and civilian governance. Through its advocacy for food sovereignty, sustainable development, and participatory democracy, the association has positioned itself not just as a development actor but as a political subject—capable of challenging state and armed group control alike. Despite ongoing threats, arrests, and surveillance, the ACVC has maintained its commitment to nonviolent resistance and has been recognized for its role in building local peace and promoting human rights in the Magdalena Medio region (Grajales, 2011; Silva-Prada, 2012).

[17]Kaplan highlights that the revival of grassroots associational life in conflict-affected regions was shaped by intersecting legacies of state-led rural development, leftist political movements, and ecclesiastical organizing (Kaplan, 2017b).

Peasant organizing in this period did not occur in isolation. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous movements also developed frameworks for autonomy and territorial defense that profoundly influenced rural associational life. As Melo (2015) argues, these communities must not be understood as separate from the peasantry but as part of an intersectional peasant identity, where race, ethnicity, class, and territorial belonging converge in shared histories of dispossession and collective resistance. Their political demands were rooted not only in land access but also in cultural recognition and self-determination, and they often mobilized in ways that combined peasant struggles with ancestral and collective rights (Melo, 2015).

The 1991 Constitution granted legal recognition to Indigenous authorities and their right to manage collective territories, while Law 70 of 1993 recognized Afro-Colombian communities' land rights along the Pacific coast. These legal victories provided institutional grounding for the formation of self-governing authorities capable of asserting autonomy and resisting the imposition of external armed actors. Examples include the Nasa (Paez) communities in Cauca, which have sustained long-standing traditions of Indigenous resistance, and the Afro-Colombian organization ACIA in Chocó, which played a leading role in territorial defense and cultural preservation during the height of the conflict (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022; Kaplan, 2017b).

Meanwhile, initiatives like the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó and the ATCC (Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare) in Santander emerged in direct response to violence from all sides. Declaring themselves neutral and non-aligned, these communities developed internal codes of conduct, conflict resolution procedures, and early-warning systems to protect their members and assert local control over governance and land. Their survival—despite systematic attacks by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and state forces—demonstrates the potential of civilian resistance rooted in territorial solidarity and collective action (Kaplan, 2017b; Truth Comission, 2022a).

These associations aimed to address the immediate needs of their communities while as-

serting their right to self-determination and protecting their land and livelihoods amidst ongoing violence. However, as social struggles over land evolved into broader contests for territorial control in the late twentieth century, the consequences for organized rural life were profound. Peasant communities faced intensified dispossession, militarization, and criminalization, which fractured their capacity to organize and undermined the cohesion of rural civil society (Reyes, 2009). The shift from land reform to territorial dominance marked a turning point in Colombia's internal conflict, reshaping the nature of violence and deepening the vulnerability of grassroots movements.

Yet, despite these pressures, the persistence of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant organizations reflects the resilience and creativity of Colombia's rural populations. Their efforts to resist displacement, defend territory, and build autonomous forms of governance underscore the critical role of collective action in contexts of protracted violence (Kaplan, 2017b; Melo, 2015). These experiences laid the groundwork for alternative models of community-led development and political engagement—even as these same communities became entangled in the expanding geographies of illicit economies and armed control. The following section examines one of the most consequential of these dynamics: the role of coca cultivation and drug trafficking in shaping rural governance, transforming conflict trajectories, and constraining or enabling peasant agency.

Drugs and Governance: Armed Control and Peasant Economies

The expansion of coca cultivation and cocaine trafficking marked a critical transformation in Colombia's rural conflict. What began as localized struggles over land evolved into territorial disputes shaped by the political economy of illicit crops. As global demand for cocaine surged in the late twentieth century, Colombia became a central producer, and coca emerged not only as a survival strategy for marginalized peasant communities, but also as a strategic resource for guerrilla and paramilitary groups. These actors used drug revenues to finance

their operations, consolidate territorial control, and impose systems of armed governance—particularly in rural areas where the state was weak or absent (Cornell, 2007). In these contested zones, coca cultivation both enabled community subsistence and exposed peasant organizations to new forms of violence, regulation, and criminalization.

Coca cultivation in Colombia dates back to the 1970s, when production began to shift from Peru and Bolivia. By the early 1980s, Colombia had become a major player in the cocaine trade, initially dominated by large trafficking cartels such as the Medellín and Cali cartels[18]. Though the drug trade accounted for between 10% and 25% of Colombia's exports during this period, it was initially not seen as a direct threat to state authority (Thoumi, 1995).

However, the 1990s marked a turning point. Colombia's economic liberalization, launched alongside the 1991 Constitution, restructured the country's political economy. Trade liberalization, privatization, and the withdrawal of state support for rural development programs devastated smallholder agricultural economies. Coffee exports—once the backbone of rural livelihoods—fell from 50% of national exports in 1985 to just 8% by 2000 (Truth Comission, 2022b). At the same time, global protectionist measures displaced many Colombian agricultural products from international markets. In this context, coca cultivation emerged as a coping mechanism for rural communities pushed out of legal markets and denied access to state services. Armed groups capitalized on this transition by embedding themselves in coca-producing regions, providing protection, infrastructure, and sometimes rudimentary governance.

In these areas, coca became not just a cash crop but a terrain of armed governance. Guerrilla and paramilitary groups taxed coca production, regulated local commerce, resolved disputes, and imposed rules on daily life (Arjona, 2016; Gáfaro et al., 2014a). While these arrangements sometimes provided a degree of security or economic stability, they also came with

[18]Following the collapse of the Medellín cartel in the early 1990s and the gradual weakening of the Cali cartel, cocaine trafficking became increasingly decentralized. New armed actors—especially guerrilla and paramilitary forces—stepped into the vacuum, embedding themselves into local production and logistics networks (Reyes, 2009).

coercion, surveillance, and violent repression—especially toward autonomous peasant organizing. Rural associations and JACs were co-opted, infiltrated, or dismantled, and leaders who resisted were threatened or killed (Truth Comission, 2022b).

The ambiguous role of coca in rural life also exposed communities to violence from multiple fronts. While coca provided income and territorial continuity for some peasant groups, it made them targets of paramilitary incursions and state eradication campaigns. The U.S.-backed War on Drugs—particularly through Plan Colombia—intensified this cycle of violence. Aerial fumigation and forced eradication policies disrupted already fragile rural economies, contributing to displacement, protest, and further marginalization (Marín Llanes et al., 2024; Youngers et al., 2005). The 1996 Cocalero Marches in southern Colombia, in which peasants mobilized against eradication, reflected widespread frustration and a demand for alternative development—yet these movements were often stigmatized as guerrilla-aligned and met with state repression (Uribe & Ferro, 2014). This entanglement of coca with overlapping systems of coercion, marginalization, and survival also shaped the complex relationship between rural communities and insurgent actors. While groups like the FARC-EP capitalized on coca revenues to sustain their operations, their involvement in these economies cannot be reduced to narco-trafficking alone. As Gutiérrez D. and Thomson (2021) and argue, characterizing insurgents solely as drug dealers ignores the broader structural context in which they operated—particularly the historical neglect of rural areas and the demands of smallholder economies. In many territories, the FARC's presence was tied to a political project that sought to stabilize peasant livelihoods, tax illicit economies, and fill the governance void left by the state.

The War on Drugs, especially through the aggressive strategies implemented under Plan Colombia, often failed to account for this complexity. By targeting coca growers without addressing the root causes of cultivation—such as poverty, land inequality, and institutional abandonment—eradication campaigns not only disrupted local economies but frequently intensified armed conflict (Marín Llanes et al., 2024). Empirical research supports this view:

coca production itself is not the main driver of guerrilla violence. Instead, studies show that forced eradication correlates with increases in violence, while greater access to legal economic opportunities is associated with declines in insurgent activity (Holmes et al., 2006). These findings underscore the need to understand coca as more than a commodity—it was also a terrain of conflict, governance, and contested legitimacy in Colombia's rural war.

In sum, the entanglement of coca with rural governance, state absence, and armed territorial control reshaped not only local economies but also the institutional terrain in which peasant organizations operated. The drug trade financed war, but it also transformed the conditions under which rural communities navigated conflict, exercised agency, and struggled for autonomy. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing the differentiated impacts of violence and the possibilities for local peacebuilding in coca-producing territories.

2.2.5 The 2016 Peace Agreement and the Post-Accord Landscape

In 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) signed a comprehensive peace agreement aimed at ending over five decades of armed conflict. The accord, ratified after a revised version was approved by Congress, represents one of the most ambitious efforts in contemporary peacebuilding, addressing both the immediate cessation of hostilities and the structural roots of violence, particularly rural inequality and state abandonment (Echavarría Alvarez et al., 2020; Fernández-Osorio, 2019).

A central pillar of the 2016 peace agreement is the *Reforma Rural Integral* (Integrated Rural Reform IRR), which proposes a transformative agenda for Colombia's rural territories. It aims to address longstanding inequalities through land redistribution, infrastructure development, expanded access to public services, and support for solidarity-based economies. The IRR also introduced the *Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial* (PDETs), which prioritized 170 municipalities historically affected by armed conflict, poverty, and institutional neglect. These municipalities are grouped into 16 regions (see Figure 2.10), each rep-

resenting distinct conflict histories, geographic conditions, and institutional contexts (Graser et al., 2020; Rettberg, 2019).

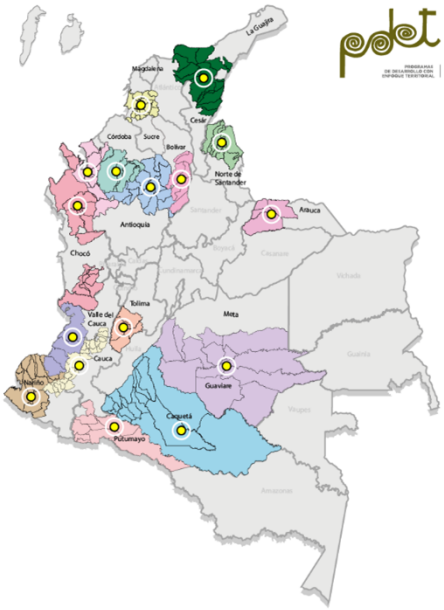


Figure 2.10: PDET municipalities in Colombia

Retrieved from: https://portal.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/Publicaciones/municipios$_p$det$_s$ubregiones

PDET municipalities are therefore far from homogeneous. The 16 regions exhibit stark differences in conflict dynamics, state presence, and levels of collective action. Urabá experienced intense paramilitary violence in the 1990s; the Pacific coast now faces expanding criminal control; Bajo Cauca is marked by illegal mining; and Arauca and Catatumbo remain zones of active armed competition. In contrast, regions like Sur del Tolima and La Macarena—historical strongholds of the FARC—demonstrate how organized rural communities can play a proactive role in building peace from below (Weintraub et al., 2022).

To better understand how these peacebuilding efforts are experienced on the ground, the MAPS (Measuring Attitudes for Peace and Security) project conducted surveys across 80 PDET municipalities—a survey representative at the regional level[19]. While overall sup-

[19]The MAPS survey was a collaborative endeavor between the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Universidad de Los Andes, University of Amsterdam, and UNDP Colombia. Is a three-wave panel survey conducted in 2019, 2021 and 2023 with over 12,000 respondents across Colombia's PDET municipalities

port for the peace accord remained relatively strong, satisfaction with its implementation was significantly lower. Respondents cited persistent insecurity, limited progress in land formalization, and weak institutional presence. However, the survey also noted that communities with stronger social networks tended to report higher levels of local trust and civic engagement (Weintraub et al., 2022).

These findings are reflected differently in the lived experiences of several regions. In Catatumbo, the situation is more acute due to the reconfiguration of armed groups after the demobilization of the FARC-EP. Former guerrilla-controlled areas became the site of territorial disputes between the ELN, EPL, and the Clan del Golfo[20]. This has led to renewed violence, particularly in coca-producing municipalities like Tibú, which registered 250 homicides between 2016 and 2017 alone. Communities continue to face threats, displacement, and extortion, all of which directly undermine the participatory principles of the PDETs (de Desarrollo Territorial – ODERPAZ, 2023; Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020; Sanín, 2020).

In contrast, Sur del Tolima offers an example of community resilience. A former stronghold of the FARC, the region is characterized by mountainous geography, rural dispersion, and decades of state neglect. Yet, as the report *Paces desde abajo* documents, peasant associations, cooperatives, and education-based collectives in Sur del Tolima have led locally rooted peacebuilding processes. These efforts are often built on long-standing traditions of mutual aid and are sustained by a strong sense of community identity and organizational continuity (*Paces desde abajo: desafíos y oportunidades de otra paz*, 2022).

Similarly, in Antioquia, residents report frustration with the top-down nature of peace implementation. Despite infrastructure improvements, many community leaders have noted that the planning and execution of PDET projects failed to involve their participation or

[20]The Clan del Golfo, also known as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) or Los Urabeños, currently is the Colombia's largest and most powerful criminal organization. Emerging from the remnants of demobilized right-wing paramilitary groups in the mid-2000s, the AGC has evolved into a transnational drug trafficking network with significant territorial control (Crime, 2023)

reflect their lived realities. As Villanueva (2021) explains, the sustainability of local peace depends not just on institutional frameworks, but on the vitality of rural human networks and the social infrastructure that sustains them.

In addition, as part of the transitional justice framework established in the peace agreement, the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* (Truth Commission) was created to clarify the causes, patterns, and impacts of the armed conflict. Operating from 2018 to 2022, the Commission's work culminated in the publication of its final report, *Hay futuro si hay verdad*, which provides a comprehensive narrative of the conflict and issues recommendations for institutional reform and non-repetition (Truth Comission, 2022b). The Commission's non-judicial mandate prioritized testimonial evidence, offering a platform for victims and marginalized groups, particularly rural and peasant communities, to voice their experiences. These testimonies not only document the scale of violence but also highlight strategies of resistance, collective action, and territorial governance that emerged amidst state absence and armed coercion. For this study, the Commission's findings are essential both as a historical account and as a source of empirical insight into the civilian agency of peasant organizations.

This chapter has traced the historical, institutional, and territorial foundations of Colombia's armed conflict, emphasizing the centrality of rural inequality, land dispossession, and the evolving role of peasant organizations. From the colonial legacies of exclusion to the reconfiguration of violence in the post-accord era, the analysis has shown how rural communities have simultaneously been victims, resistors, and key political actors. The overview of PDET municipalities highlighted the differentiated conditions across regions and the uneven implementation of peace-related reforms, setting the stage for a more focused analysis of local agency and collective responses.

Within this complex landscape, this dissertation examines the role of rural organizations—particularly agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations—in shaping violence preven-

tion and grassroots peacebuilding in Colombia's post-accord period. While the qualitative and historical analysis spans the broader arc of conflict and civilian resistance, the empirical component focuses on the period after the 2016 peace agreement. This analytical choice reflects both the urgency and opportunity presented by the PDET framework, which explicitly positioned rural territories as sites of transformation and participation. Focusing on this timeframe allows for a systematic assessment of how communities have responded to renewed challenges of violence, state presence, and organizational continuity under conditions of institutional fragility and territorial dispute.

The next chapter presents the conceptual framework that guides this inquiry. Drawing on theories of collective action, civilian agency, and social capital, it outlines the analytical tools necessary to interpret how rural actors mobilize to assert autonomy, navigate contested governance, and foster locally embedded processes of peacebuilding in Colombia's fragmented post-conflict peripheries.

Chapter 3

Collective Action as a Framework

3.1 Rethinking Collective Action in Conflict-Affected Settings

The study of collective action has long been dominated by the foundational work of Olson (1971), whose rational-choice approach framed collective behavior as fundamentally inhibited by the problem of free-riding. In this view, individuals would only act in pursuit of common interests if compelled by selective incentives or external enforcement mechanisms. While influential, this model has proven insufficient to explain the persistence and success of collective action in many real-world contexts—especially in rural and conflict-affected regions, where cooperation frequently emerges in the absence of strong state structures or material inducements.

In response, second-generation theories of collective action, most notably developed by Ostrom (2005) and Poteete et al. (2010), offered a paradigmatic shift. Drawing on empirical evidence from communities managing common-pool resources, Ostrom challenged the assumptions of purely self-interested actors and emphasized the importance of bounded rationality, trust, social norms, and the repeated nature of interactions. These contributions repositioned collective action as an institutionally embedded process, sustained by community-based governance rather than imposed from above.

Crucially, Ostrom's work also broadened the analytical lens through the *Institutional Anal-*

ysis and Development (IAD) framework, which defines institutions not narrowly as state apparatuses, but as the rules, norms, and shared strategies—both formal and informal—that structure social behavior and guide interactions (Ostrom, 2005; Poteete et al., 2010). In this sense, institutions are the "rules of the game" rather than the actors themselves. They encompass laws, contracts, and regulations, but also unwritten community practices, moral expectations, and customary authority. Government is one type of institution, but not the only one, and often not the most relevant in fragile or marginalized settings.

This distinction is central to my analytical approach: understanding collective action in conflict-affected settings requires attention to institutional arrangements that operate across formal and informal domains. While many grassroots responses emerge through local and customary institutions—often in ways that are autonomous from or even in tension with state control—other forms, such as *cooperatives organized within the framework of the social and solidarity economy*, rely on enabling laws, supportive policy environments, and formal recognition to function effectively. Thus, collective action cannot be reduced to either state-led governance or informal community practices; rather, it must be analyzed as a hybrid process, where different types of institutions—customary, legal, political, and economic—interact to support or constrain cooperation and resilience.

Building on this tradition, recent scholarship has called for a multiscalar and multidimensional view of collective action, one that accounts for the interplay between grassroots organization, institutional governance, and broader socio-political structures[1]. Scholars such as Rubin (2019) and Kaplan (2017a) have shown that community-level organization can shape the behavior of armed actors, influence conflict trajectories, and provide alternative forms of governance. These works highlight the strategic capacity of civilian populations, particularly in territories where state institutions are weak, contested, or complicit in violence.

[1]For example, cooperatives take the logic of the commons and institutionalize it within the economic sphere. Cooperatives embody many of the principles found in commons-based governance: collective ownership, democratic decision-making, and mutual aid. See Ostrom (1990) on commons institutions, and Vieta (2020) on cooperatives as spaces of solidarity economy. For the foundational cooperative principles, see the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA).

Arjona (2014) adds to this perspective by demonstrating how civilians and combatants co-construct local wartime institutions, creating diverse forms of social order—ranging from full rebel governance (rebelocracy) to more decentralized or contested arrangements. Her work underscores the importance of institutional variation at the local level in shaping collective behavior and post-conflict transitions. At the same time, studies by Ratner et al. (2013, 2017) and Yasmi et al. (2011) underscore the conditional role of institutions in shaping whether collective action contributes to peacebuilding or exacerbates conflict—especially where natural resource governance, land disputes, and questions of legitimacy are at stake.

Moreover, recent empirical findings demonstrate that exposure to violence does not uniformly erode social cohesion. On the contrary, under certain conditions, conflict can galvanize communities, foster internal solidarity, and lead to heightened political engagement (Bellows & Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009; Gilligan et al., 2014). However, the direction and durability of these effects are contingent on institutional variables—such as the inclusiveness of local governance, the credibility of community leadership, and the alignment between informal norms and formal rules.

In this dissertation, I engage with these theoretical currents to develop a framework that situates collective action as both a response to violence and a proactive strategy for social reproduction and economic transformation. In conflict-affected rural areas, collective action often emerges as a mechanism of *civilian agency*, enabling communities to resist armed actors, defend territory, and maintain forms of autonomous governance (Kaplan, 2017a; Masullo, 2021a; Rubin, 2019). This is particularly evident in the case of peasant associations, which have historically served as platforms for organized resistance and claims-making, rooted in local political traditions and social solidarity forged through adversity.

At the same time, I expand the analytical scope of collective action beyond reactive or defensive modes. In many rural settings, collective organization is not only born of conflict, but also grows organically as a form of everyday cooperation and economic resilience. In this

sense, collective action is more than just resistance—it's a form of institutional and social capacity that communities build, often over time (Chaskin, 2001). Agricultural cooperatives—especially those aligned with the principles of the social and solidarity economy (SSE)—represent a distinct trajectory of collective action, one that does not necessarily arise in direct response to violence but rather from longstanding communal values of reciprocity, mutual aid, and shared governance (Momesso et al., 2023). These initiatives embody an alternative economic logic that challenges market-driven models, prioritizing dignity, sustainability, and democratic participation over profit. For many rural communities, they offer viable economic alternatives that can support livelihoods, strengthen community cohesion, and reduce vulnerability to both violence and economic exclusion.

Thus, I move beyond narrow conceptions of collective action as episodic protest or crisis-driven resistance, and instead approach it as a field of ongoing institutional construction, rooted in both necessity and aspiration (Chaskin, 2001; Ostrom, 2005). This view encompasses a range of organizational forms and motivations: from efforts to resist dispossession and assert territorial autonomy, to initiatives aimed at constructing more equitable and sustainable forms of economic life. It demands an analytical framework capable of integrating the political, economic, and normative dimensions of collective behavior, particularly in settings marked by institutional fragility, contested authority, and historical marginalization[2].

The sections that follow build upon this conceptual foundation, first by articulating the mechanisms of *civilian agency and social capital* that enable collective action under conditions

[2]In this regard, Chaskin (2001)'s work on community capacity provides both a conceptual and empirical foundation. His framework defines community capacity as the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital that can be mobilized to solve collective problems and enhance community well-being. The variation in strategies observed across the cases he studies—such as the Harambee initiative in Milwaukee and the UANC in Hartford—demonstrates how collective action is contextually shaped by both internal community dynamics and external constraints. Whereas Harambee prioritized building institutional infrastructure to support economic development, UANC emphasized grassroots participation through networks of block clubs and resident associations. These divergent paths illustrate that community capacity is not only about creating formal organizations, but also about fostering relational networks, participatory governance, and embedded trust. Such insights reinforce the importance of examining how collective action is assembled and sustained in contexts of marginalization—where the forms it takes, and the mechanisms it relies on, often reflect a dual imperative to survive and to transform.

of armed conflict, and then by exploring how *economic alternatives such as cooperatives* serve not only as tools for income generation, but as expressions of institutional resilience, solidarity-based development, and peacebuilding from below.

3.2 Civilian Agency and Social Capital as Mechanisms of Collective Action

A central premise of this dissertation is that civilian agency is a foundational but underutilized lens for understanding collective action in conflict settings. While much of the conflict literature has traditionally emphasized military capacity, elite bargains, or territorial control as the primary drivers of wartime dynamics (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006), an emerging body of scholarship challenges this top-down paradigm. Civilian agency theory asserts that communities are not merely passive recipients of violence or beneficiaries of peace; rather, they are political actors capable of shaping conflict trajectories through everyday acts of resistance, organization, and governance (Kaplan, 2017a; Masullo, 2021b; Rubin, 2019).

This perspective diverges significantly from conventional wisdom. As Kalyvas (2006) argues, civilians often appear in civil war literature only as instruments or victims, not as political actors. Yet, recent contributions demonstrate that civilians influence the incentives, behavior, and costs faced by armed groups. Whether through providing information, withholding support, or organizing autonomously, civilians actively shape conflict trajectories (Eli Berman & Felter, 2011; Kentaro Hirose & Lyall, 2017).

Among the most compelling expressions of civilian agency is *noncooperation*, defined by Masullo (2021a) and Scott (1990) as the intentional refusal of civilians to collaborate with armed groups. These practices include nonviolent resistance, covert defiance, the establishment of autonomous governance, or the reassertion of local norms. Importantly, these acts are not

only expressions of resistance—a rejection of imposed power—but also processes through which communities generate meaning in the face of violence. Resistance, in this sense, is not purely reactive but part of broader struggles over autonomy, dignity, and legitimacy (Masullo, 2021a).

To understand how this collective agency is organized and sustained, I adopt the framework of *Collective Action Capacity (CAC)* developed by Rubin (2019). CAC captures a community's ability to mobilize, make decisions collectively, and engage in strategic behavior under conditions of scarcity and insecurity. It is closely intertwined with social capital[3], particularly in its role as a relational infrastructure for trust, cooperation, and reciprocity (Ostrom, 2005).

Rubin identifies four key components of CAC that are directly supported by social capital:

1. **Generalized trust** — the belief that others will follow shared norms even under risk or stress.

2. **Other-regarding preferences** — a normative commitment to collective welfare over narrow self-interest.

3. **Inclusive local institutions** — participatory mechanisms for equitable decision-making.

4. **Bridging social capital** — ties across social divisions that support broad-based cooperation and social monitoring.

Together, these mechanisms help explain why some communities are able to resist violence, negotiate with armed actors, and construct alternative forms of governance. Resistance, in

[3]Social capital emerges as a pivotal concept within second-generation theories. Defined by Ostrom (1998) as the networks, norms, and trust that enhance individuals' capacity to address collective-action problems, social capital integrates elements like reciprocity, civic engage ment, and formal and informal institutions. Trust serves as a critical link between social capital and collective action, fostering conditional cooperation and enabling communities to overcome collective challenges.

this framework, is not merely defensive or oppositional. It is also an assertion of agency, of meaning-making through action, often embedded in collective memories, identity, and historical struggle (Masullo, 2021a; Scott, 1990). Meanwhile, resilience refers to the capacity to absorb shocks and adapt without losing core social cohesion or organizational capacity. In contexts of protracted violence, resilience often overlaps with resistance but may also involve pragmatic strategies of endurance, reorganization, and redefinition of local priorities.

In the Colombian context, this framework is particularly salient. Peasant associations often emerge as expressions of collective resistance—organized responses to state abandonment, land dispossession, or armed group encroachment. Their actions are shaped by immediate threats but also by long histories of struggle and mutual support. Yet not all collective action is organized around resistance. Many rural communities also engage in long-term institutional construction, even in the absence of direct threats. These include forms of cooperation grounded in social reproduction, agricultural production, and the creation of economic infrastructure.

While these varied forms of collective action demonstrate the agency and adaptability of rural communities, it is equally important to recognize the structural limits they face. Clarifying the boundaries of collective agency is essential for this study's framework. While rural organizations such as cooperatives and peasant associations demonstrate remarkable capacity in building internal governance, promoting solidarity, and advancing alternative economic practices, their power remains bounded by structural and contextual constraints. Drawing from Rubin's Collective Action Capacity (CAC) and Masullo's typology of civilian self-protection, this dissertation distinguishes between what these organizations can control—such as membership rules, trust-building practices, and strategic noncooperation—and what lies beyond their control, including the actions of armed actors, institutional failures, or macroeconomic shocks. As Arjona (2016) and Pizarro Leongómez (1996) argue, communities embedded in conflict often operate under severe asymmetries of power. Their capacity to act is real, but conditioned by histories of exclusion, territorial contestation, and limited state

presence. Recognizing this tension not only grounds the analysis in the realities of rural Colombia, but also opens the door to exploring how communities engage in collective action beyond survival—particularly through alternative economic projects.

While this section has focused on collective action as a mechanism of civilian agency and social resilience in the face of violence, the next section turns to a related but distinct dimension: *economic alternatives*. In particular, I explore how cooperatives and solidarity-based production systems reflect a different logic of collective action—one centered not on survival or resistance, but on the construction of inclusive and democratic economic futures. These initiatives extend the logic of social capital and community capacity into the domain of production and distribution, offering new insights into what peacebuilding and resilience can look like beyond the absence of violence.

3.3 Economic Alternatives through Collective Action

The economic dimension of collective action is fundamental to understanding not only how communities survive in conflict-affected contexts, but how they build dignified lives through autonomous development models. In this section, I explore the role of *economic alternatives*—initiatives that challenge the logic of capital accumulation and embrace principles of solidarity, reciprocity, and collective well-being—as central expressions of collective action. While earlier sections emphasized civilian agency in response to violence, this section focuses on a broader and often proactive trajectory: how rural communities construct new economic circuits, grounded in historical memory, social ties, and bottom-up institutional innovation.

Building on this foundational perspective, Latin American scholars have developed rich conceptual frameworks that frame these alternatives as systemic, not peripheral, responses to capitalist exclusion. As Razeto (1986) argues, alternative economies are not marginal deviations but expressions of different logics of production and exchange. Drawing from Latin

American experiences, Razeto articulates the concept of *circuitos económicos alternativos al capital*—economic circuits that are defined not by profit maximization, but by solidarity, mutual aid, and the self-determined use of resources. These circuits are rooted in local traditions, community control over land and labor, and an ethic of cooperation that offers a stark contrast to the extractive dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. In Razeto's vision, defending community resources enables people to act collectively and opens space for diverse organizational forms and bottom-up development models.

These logics of solidarity and cooperation are exemplified—though not limited—to the framework of the *Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)*[4], which includes cooperatives, mutual associations, community savings groups, and other collectively owned and democratically governed economic initiatives (Guerra, 2021; Macpherson, 2015; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2021). These organizations not only provide income or access to services; they restructure economic relationships around participation, dignity, and inclusion. As Momesso et al. (2023) emphasizes, solidarity is "the core principle of the collective dynamics between subjects and democracy" (p. 2), and thus central to understanding the motivation and sustainability of collective action in economic life.

Unlike temporary or reactive forms of resistance, these economic alternatives are often embedded in long-standing community practices. Particularly among smallholders, women, and Indigenous groups, such initiatives express a proactive form of collective action centered on production, reproduction, and survival—especially in contexts where the state and market have failed to meet basic needs. In this way, the solidarity economy is not only a tool for resilience, but a means of building power, identity, and autonomy over time.

Rural cooperatives exemplify how these logics operate in practice across Latin America. Historically, they have enabled marginalized communities to mobilize resources, access markets, and resist exclusion (Vásquez-León, 2017). While some cooperatives emerged from top-down

[4]SSOs (Social Solidarity Organizations) are autonomous groups formed to satisfy economic, social, and cultural needs through democratically controlled, collectively owned enterprises (Macpherson, 2015).

development initiatives—particularly after World War II—others grew independently out of peasant and Indigenous organizing as grassroots responses to structural inequality (Vásquez-León, 2017). These organizations offered collective strategies for production, credit, and commercialization in the face of land concentration, market exclusion, and limited access to public services.

Two major intellectual currents have shaped the solidarity economy in Latin America. The first is a moral-ethical tradition rooted in Catholic social thought and liberation theology, emphasizing solidarity and cooperation in the economic cycle (Guerra, 2002, 2021; Razeto, 1986). The second is an economic and political critique of neoliberalism and capitalism, advocating alternative models of development grounded in local autonomy, collective ownership, and social justice (**CoraggioFerrarini2015 santos2006**; Coraggio, 2015). Emerging in response to the social impacts of structural adjustment and free-market reforms in the 1980s, the solidarity economy provided a counter-hegemonic framework to the dislocation of smallholders and the deepening rural-urban divide.

By emphasizing collective benefit over profit, and democratic participation over hierarchical control, these organizations challenge neoliberal and imperialist models of development. They prioritize local values, resource sovereignty, and ecological sustainability, while expanding the notion of economic efficiency to include quality of life and community well-being. As such, cooperatives and solidarity-based initiatives are not merely survival strategies, but expressions of alternative development imaginaries grounded in dignity, mutual aid, and grassroots agency.

These ideas find expression in diverse organizational forms across the region, from the *economía popular y solidaria* in Ecuador[5], to agroecological networks in Brazil[6], and ances-

[5]Ecuador's 2011 Organic Law on the Popular and Solidarity Economy institutionalized a plural economic system that includes cooperatives, community enterprises, and associative organizations as equal to the private and public sectors (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020).

[6]In Brazil, the agroecological movement—supported by networks such as the Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia (ANA)—has fostered practices that prioritize food sovereignty, ecological sustainability, and campesino autonomy, often in direct opposition to agribusiness and monoculture models (Rosset & Altieri,

tral economies in Indigenous territories[7]. These models integrate not just economic logics, but cultural and political ones—grounded in communal identity, interdependence, and care for territory.

3.3.1 Reframing Peacebuilding from Below

While these alternative economies offer practical responses to exclusion and marginalization, they also carry important implications for how peace is conceptualized and pursued. The economic dimension of collective action is critical for addressing the underlying drivers of conflict and fostering sustainable peace. Peacebuilding, as conceptualized by King (2012), seeks to move beyond the mere absence of violence (negative peace) to tackle the root causes of conflict—economic despair, social injustice, and political oppression—ultimately achieving positive peace. While this concept became institutionalized within the United Nations and the broader international community after the Cold War (Boutros-Ghali, 1992), its implementation has faced challenges, particularly in addressing the systemic economic inequalities that perpetuate conflict and hinder sustainable development. This mainstream liberal peacebuilding, rooted in liberal internationalism, prioritizes market liberalization, electoral reform, and institution-building as pathways to peace (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Doyle, 1983), has been widely critiqued for its top-down nature, its reliance on neoliberal economic principles, and its failure to address the structural conditions of inequality that underlie many conflicts (Mundy, 2020; Richmond, 2005, 2011; Smith, 2004).

In response, critical scholars have proposed post-liberal and hybrid peacebuilding frameworks that emphasize local agency, context-sensitive governance, and the negotiation between international norms and everyday practices (Richmond, 2011; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). These models value the contributions of communities in shaping their own peace trajecto-

2017).

[7]In Colombia and Bolivia, Indigenous movements have revitalized ancestral economic practices—such as the *minga* or *ayni*—not only as forms of survival, but as expressions of political resistance and cultural continuity tied to land and cosmology (Gudynas, 2011).

ries, though some caution that hybridity can still reinforce dominant power structures if not grounded in genuine participation (Nadarajah & Rampton, 2014).

Building on this shift toward local agency, scholars of peacebuilding from below have emphasized the importance of everyday practices, social relationships, and community-led initiatives in sustaining peace. Lederach (1997) foregrounds the role of grassroots actors in conflict transformation, arguing that sustainable peace emerges through the reconstruction of relationships and the strengthening of locally rooted institutions. Similarly, Ginty (2021) develops the concept of "everyday peace" to capture how so-called ordinary people manage conflict and build trust through informal practices, often outside of formal peacebuilding structures. These approaches reject the notion that peace must be delivered by external actors and instead center the agency of communities in shaping their own futures. In this view, peace is not a singular event but a continuous, relational process rooted in cultural knowledge, social networks, and context-specific forms of resilience. This emphasis on peace from below aligns with broader critiques of externally imposed development and helps expand the notion of peacebuilding to include local economies, social reproduction, and alternative visions of well-being.

While not situated within peacebuilding scholarship directly, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's theory of *Epistemologies of the South* offers a valuable lens for rethinking development and challenging Eurocentric assumptions that often underpin externally imposed models of post-conflict reconstruction (de Sousa Santos, 2014, 2018). His call for an "ecology of knowledges" and cognitive justice underscores the importance of recognizing Indigenous, communal, and non-capitalist ways of knowing and organizing life—many of which are embodied in the solidarity-based economic practices examined in this study.[8] Applied to economic peacebuilding from below, this perspective affirms the legitimacy of locally defined development paths and collective economic systems as expressions of autonomy, cultural survival, and

[8]Santos's work primarily critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies in law, development, and global governance, rather than proposing a direct peacebuilding framework. However, his concepts are widely used to support decolonial and community-centered approaches to social transformation.

resistance to extractive paradigms.

Building on these critiques, this dissertation engages with the idea of peacebuilding from below by highlighting the economic dimensions of collective action as essential to sustaining locally rooted peace. While scholars such as Ray and Esteban (2017) and Todaro (1981) emphasize the potential of economic development to mitigate conflict, others have shown that liberal models of market access and interdependence often fail to produce equitable or lasting outcomes (Gartzke et al., 2001; Tadjbakhsh, 2009). In contrast, economic practices grounded in solidarity, mutual aid, and community control offer pathways to peace that are more inclusive, participatory, and responsive to local needs. These approaches underscore the significance of material well-being, collective autonomy, and economic justice as central—not peripheral—to the construction of durable peace.

In this context, cooperatives are not merely economic units but institutional expressions of collective agency and resilience. This dissertation examines them as concrete examples of how bottom-up economic organization can contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Drawing from SSE theory and Razeto's concept of circuitos económicos alternativos al capital, cooperatives are seen as models of development organized around cooperation rather than competition, oriented toward collective benefit rather than individual accumulation, and rooted in territorial belonging rather than extractive logics. In regions marked by conflict and exclusion, these organizations support not only material survival but also the reconstruction of social ties and the cultivation of dignified, autonomous livelihoods.

3.4 Collective Action in Agriculture and Rural Contexts

Collective action in agriculture has gained renewed interest as a vital mechanism for farmers to confront the challenges posed by globalization and market liberalization. By fostering co-

operation, resource management, and political advocacy, collective action empowers smallholders to build resilience and advocate for sustainable development models (Desmarais, 2007a, 2007b). Organizations such as La Via Campesina exemplify global expressions of collective action, uniting smallholders to demand equitable resource distribution and to share agricultural knowledge (Faure, 2004). These efforts emphasize the importance of creating both intra-group bonds and inter-group bridges, which are essential for collective mobilization (Herbel & Haddad, 2012). Additionally, producer organizations—including cooperatives and products labeled with geographical indications—are increasingly recognized as policy tools to overcome market barriers and support development grounded in social justice and sustainability. Geographical indications (GIs) are labels that identify products as originating from a specific place, where their quality, reputation, or characteristics are closely linked to that geographical origin. This recognition helps small producers differentiate their products, add value, and protect traditional knowledge (Bouamra-Mechemache & Zago, 2015).

In the Latin American context, collective action has historically played a significant role in addressing systemic inequalities and fostering rural development. Peasant associations have emerged as critical platforms for knowledge sharing, advocacy, and climate adaptation. These organizations facilitate the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices and promote social cohesion among rural communities (Desmarais, 2007b; Vásquez-León, 2017; Vergara-Camus, 2013). In particular, Latin American peasants have demonstrated agency through associations that resist economic exploitation and challenge unfavorable policies (Desmarais, 2007b).

In contexts where traditional economic models marginalize vulnerable populations, such as Colombia's rural smallholders, collective action offers a vital alternative. The persistent concentration of land ownership among elites has displaced rural peasants, leaving them to navigate informal economies or face forced migration (Amin, 2017; Yeros & Moyo, 2006). These dynamics are exacerbated by globalization and market liberalization, which often exclude smallholders from regional and global markets. As Vásquez-León (2017) explains,

smallholders struggle to achieve economies of scale in competitive environments dominated by large corporations, further deepening their vulnerabilities.

Cooperatives and producer organizations emerge as essential forms of collective action, providing marginalized groups with tools to mobilize resources, share knowledge, and advocate for policy changes. Vásquez-León (2017) highlights cooperatives as sustainable mechanisms for enhancing the well-being of under-resourced communities, countering the stratification that characterizes rural Latin America. By integrating diverse expressions of collective action, including SSE and grassroots advocacy, these initiatives address structural inequalities and foster resilience.

In Colombia, collective action takes on additional significance due to the compounded challenges of economic hardships and violence. Rural peasants, often victims of conflict and displacement, have mobilized through grassroots initiatives to reclaim agency over their livelihoods and to build economic resilience. While cooperatives are a common form of collective organization in agriculture, the Colombian countryside has a distinctive tradition of peasant associations tied to the broader campesino movement. These associations not only advocate for equitable land distribution and agricultural development but also serve as platforms for social cohesion and community empowerment (Vieta & Lionais, 2015).

The Colombian case underscores the transformative potential of collective action in contexts of systemic inequality and armed conflict. Peasant associations and cooperatives enable rural communities to address structural barriers, enhance social solidarity, and create pathways to sustainable development. This study focuses on the critical role of peasant associations in Colombia, examining their strategies and contributions to violence prevention and economic resilience. By situating these findings within the broader context of collective action, the research highlights the significance of grassroots mobilization in transforming rural economies and fostering sustainable peace[9].

[9]Community-based approaches have demonstrated significant potential in strengthening social cohesion and resilience, particularly in post-conflict settings. Initiatives such as women's cooperatives in Nepal (Ram-

The insights from this analysis pave the way for the subsequent chapter, which details the methods employed to explore these dynamics. The next chapter turns to the empirical analysis, exploring how these economic alternatives are manifested through smallholder cooperatives in conflict-affected regions of Colombia, and how they interact with other forms of collective action—particularly peasant associations—to build pathways toward peace, dignity, and development.

narain, 2015) and agroecology projects in Colombia (Chavez-Miguel et al., 2022) illustrate the transformative power of local collective action. These efforts foster collaboration, empower marginalized groups, and provide sustainable solutions to address the underlying causes of conflict. In Indonesia, local peacebuilding initiatives like the Mosintuwu Women's School further highlight the role of grassroots approaches in promoting sustainable peace. By addressing the root causes of conflict and empowering community members, such programs contribute to long-term resilience and social harmony (Kristimanta, 2021).

Chapter 4

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the relationship between collective action and violence in rural Colombia, with a particular focus on agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations in PDET municipalities in Colombia. It is guided by two interrelated research questions: (1) To what extent have local rural organizational structures, specifically agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations, are associated with different patterns of violence at the municipal level in Colombia? and (2) In what ways have grassroots community organizations, particularly agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations, shaped local peacebuilding initiatives and violence prevention strategies in conflict-affected regions in Colombia? These questions require distinct forms of evidence and analysis. The first is addressed through quantitative methods, while the second is explored through qualitative inquiry.

The quantitative component addresses the first question by using regression models to assess whether the presence of agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations is statistically associated with lower victimization rates (from 2016 to 2022). The qualitative component addresses the second question by exploring the mechanisms and meanings behind these associations through narrative and case-based evidence. Drawing on selected testimonies from the Colombian Truth Commission—covering the period from 1958 to 2016— and a regional case study of agricultural cooperatives in Sur del Tolima—based on fieldwork and secondary sources documenting developments from the mid-20th century through 2020 (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022; Morales, 2020; Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2020; Rodríguez, 2022; Triana et al., 2022),

the qualitative analysis provides insight into how communities interpret, enact, and sustain collective practices of resistance and peacebuilding.

This mixed methods study follows an explanatory convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), grounded in a pragmatic paradigm (Morgan, 2007). In this design, the quantitative component forms the primary strand of analysis, providing statistical evidence on the association between rural organizational forms and patterns of violence. The qualitative component, while secondary in structure, plays a crucial explanatory role by offering insight into the local meanings, strategies, and experiences that may underlie the observed statistical relationships. Both strands are conducted independently but brought into dialogue during interpretation, allowing the study to integrate general patterns with grounded, narrative accounts. The pragmatic paradigm enables this integration by emphasizing methodological flexibility and real-world applicability over strict adherence to a single epistemological tradition. This approach supports the study's overarching goal: to better understand the relationship between collective action and violence by combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth.

Additionally, this study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks to operationalize collective action in rural Colombia. First, the concept of *civilian agency*, as developed by Rubin (2019) and Masullo (2021b), provides a lens for understanding **peasant associations** as political and organizational expressions of resistance. These associations reflect communities' capacity to assert autonomy, negotiate governance, and resist armed group influence—especially in contexts of state absence or contestation.

Second, the framework of the (SSE), particularly as articulated by Vásquez-León (2017), Razeto (1986) and Momesso et al. (2023), informs the interpretation of **agricultural cooperatives**. These cooperatives represent bottom-up economic alternatives to capitalist models, grounded in collective ownership, mutual aid, and democratic governance. They reflect a proactive logic of cooperation and economic self-determination, not necessarily tied

to violence, but rooted in the defense of territory, livelihoods, and dignified life.

Together, these frameworks allow for a dual operationalization of collective action:

- **Peasant associations** are approached as expressions of civilian agency in conflict settings.
- **Agricultural cooperatives** are approached as institutional forms within the social solidarity economy, offering alternative economic circuits to capital-centered development.

This conceptual distinction guides the empirical strategy of the study, enabling an analysis of how different forms of collective organization function as mechanisms of resilience, autonomy, and peacebuilding in rural territories affected by armed conflict.

The methodological structure is as follows:

- The quantitative analysis (see Section 4.1) statistically assesses whether the presence of agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations correlates with lower violence levels.
- The qualitative analysis (see Section 4.2) explores individual and collective strategies and mechanisms employed by peasants to mitigate the risks of violence and sustain their livelihoods under conflict conditions.

4.1 Quantitative Methods

This section outlines the quantitative approach employed in this study to analyze the impact of peasant organizations and agricultural cooperatives on violence prevention and peacebuilding in PDET municipalities in Colombia. Given the mixed-methods nature of this research,

the qualitative analysis complements the empirical evidence of the relationship between collective action and violence reduction. However, it is important to acknowledge that, as this study relies on observational data, the quantitative analysis cannot establish causality. While statistical methods can help identify associations and control for confounding variables, they do not eliminate the possibility of unobserved factors influencing the observed relationships.

4.1.1 Research Design

The study employs an econometric analysis using panel data from 2016 to 2022[1], where the unit of analysis is the municipality-year. This analysis focuses on Colombia, specifically examining 1,120 municipalities with available data, with a particular emphasis on the 170 PDET municipalities. These municipalities play a crucial role in assessing the impact of peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives as forms of collective action. This study measures violence levels as the dependent variable, while the main independent variables capture the presence and activity of peasant organizations through cooperatives and peasant associations.

PDET municipalities are among the most war-affected and impoverished areas in Colombia. Established as part of the 2016 peace agreement, they aim to address historical violence and promote development. These 170 municipalities are distributed across 16 regions, each with distinct characteristics that shape their experiences with violence and peacebuilding (see section 2.2.5). As shown in Table 4.1, the PDET municipalities exhibit significant variation in rural and urban population distribution. While regions such as Alto Patía–Norte del Cauca and Pacífico y Frontera Nariñense have over 68% rural populations, others like Sierra Nevada–Perijá and Pacífico Medio are predominantly urban. This heterogeneity reflects the

[1]It is important to note that data availability varies across variables. In Appendix A.1, you will find the specific years available for each variable. Consequently, different panel datasets were used for the analysis based on data availability.

diverse territorial and demographic dynamics across conflict-affected regions.

Table 4.1: PDET Regions

REGION	Average Inhabitants	Average km²	% Rural Population	% Urban Population
SIERRA NEVADA - PERIJA	1,760,226	20,464	17.6	82.4
MONTES DE MARIA	406,265	6,404	46.0	54.0
CATATUMBO	194,110	9,230	67.2	32.8
SUR DE BOLIVAR	147,427	10,331	46.1	53.9
BAJO CAUCA Y NORDESTE ANTIOQUEÑO	436,109	17,657	39.2	60.8
SUR DE CORDOBA	282,803	9,488	49.0	51.0
URABA ANTIOQUEÑO	494,637	9,660	38.0	62.0
CHOCO	252,049	30,470	68.1	31.9
PACIFICO MEDIO	400,138	14,321	32.0	68.0
PACIFICO Y FRONTERA NARIÑENSE	482,210	17,198	68.2	31.8
ALTO PATIA - NORTE DEL CAUCA	833,930	13,104	70.1	44.2
SUR DEL TOLIMA	125,023	6,769	61.1	53.5
PUTUMAYO	346,512	24,877	49.1	68.0
CUENCA DEL CAGUAN Y PIEDEMONTE CAQUETEÑO	449,097	91,458	35.3	31.8
MACARENA - GUAVIARE	209,304	98,588	55.8	29.9
ARAUCA	204,008	10,626	46.5	53.5

Source: Data collected from the Colombian government's PDET website: https://centralpdet.renovacionterritorio.gov.co/conoce-los-pdet/, 2022.

Dependent Variable: Measuring Violence

This study measures violence using data from the *Unidad para las Víctimas* (Unit for Victims), an official Colombian government entity established under the *Victims' Law* (Law 1448 of 2011). The dataset records incidents of *hechos victimizantes* (victimizing events), which encompass a range of violent acts affecting individuals and communities. The key categories include:

- Homicide
- Forced disappearance
- Forced displacement
- Forced recruitment of minors
- Torture and cruel treatment
- Sexual violence related to conflict
- Kidnapping
- Land dispossession and abandonment
- Threats and extortion

For this study, a new variable was constructed to aggregate all victimizing events into a single measure of violence at the municipality-year level. The generated variable counts the number of individuals affected by any of these events within a municipality-year. Given that victimization data is not consistently available for all 1,120 municipalities in Colombia from 2014 to 2022, the dataset consists of 8,968 municipality-year observations, of which 1,544 report zero victims. However, these zeros may reflect either a true absence of victimization or unreported cases due to data limitations.

To address this uncertainty, I estimate models using two alternative versions of the dependent variable:

- Restricted Sample: Only municipality-year observations where at least one victim was reported. This approach ensures that the analysis focuses on municipalities where violence was recorded. The dependent variable is used as a log-transformed form ($\log(victims\_rate)$).
- Full Sample with Imputed Zeros: Includes all municipality-year observations, retaining the original 1,544 zero cases and imputing missing values as zero, assuming that the absence of reported data corresponds to a true zero.

These two modeling approaches allow for a comparative analysis under different assumptions about missing victimization data, influencing how the distribution of violence across municipalities is interpreted[2].

Additionally, while forced displacement constitutes the majority of victimization events [3], this study adopts a broader approach to measuring violence by aggregating multiple forms

[2] A detailed discussion of the different modeling strategies and their implications is provided in the section 4.1.2.

[3] According to the Victims Unit (*Unidad para las Víctimas*), approximately 89% of the registered victims of the armed conflict in Colombia from 1985 to 2024 were forcibly displaced. This statistic underscores the extensive impact of internal displacement on the Colombian population over nearly four decades. For more details, see the official database: Victims Unit - Registro Único de Víctimas (Accessed 2024).

of victimization. This ensures a more comprehensive assessment of conflict intensity across different regions.

The final dependent variable is structured as:

$$\log(ViolenceRate_{it}) = \log\left(\frac{Victims_{it}}{Population_{it}} \times 100,000\right) \tag{4.1}$$

where $Victims_{it}$ represents the total number of victims recorded under relevant categories in municipality i at time t, and $Population_{it}$ is the corresponding municipal population (See histogram in Figure 4.1).

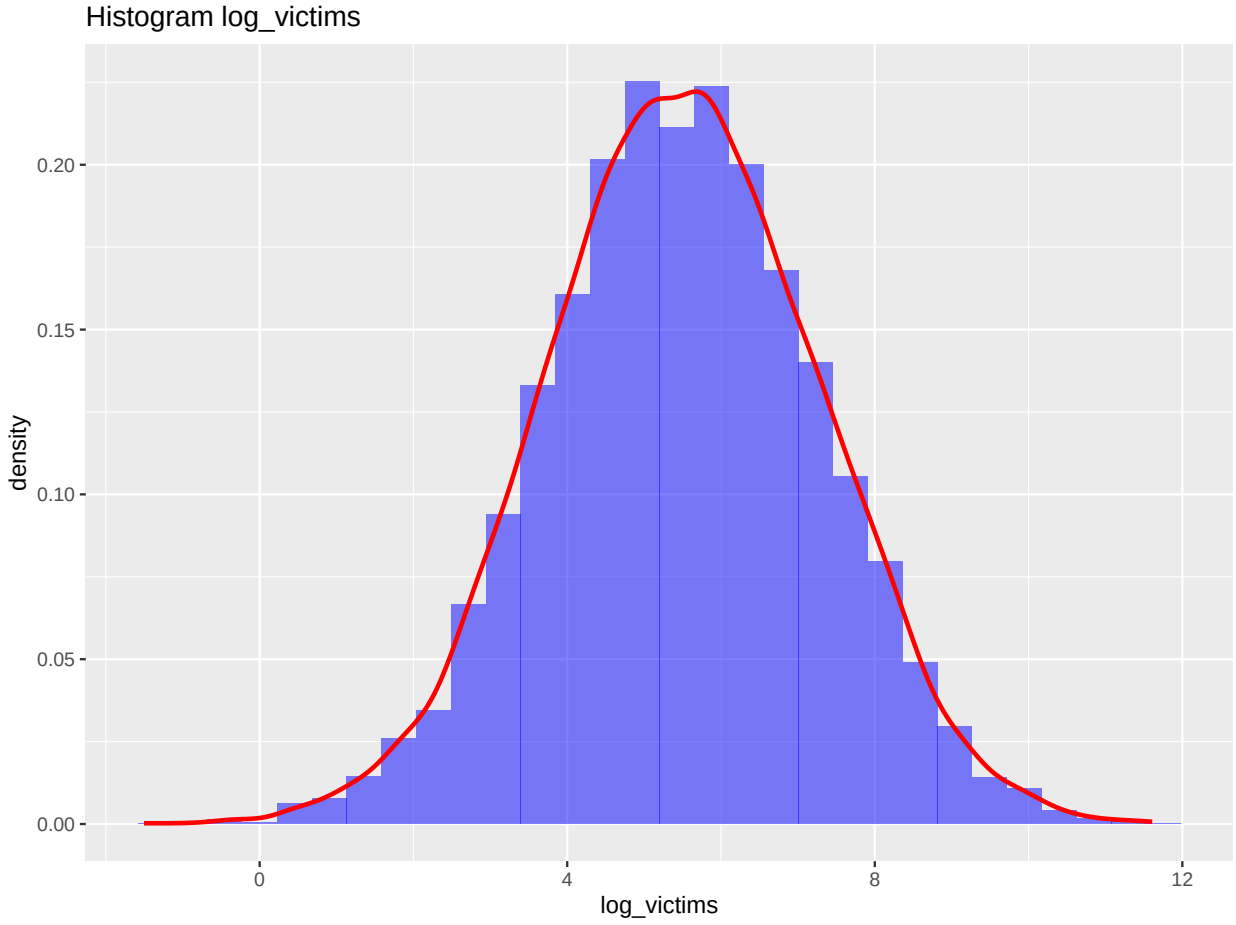


Figure 4.1: Log-Transformed Victimization Rate

This approach ensures that the measurement of violence intensity is standardized across municipalities and over time, facilitating meaningful comparisons in the statistical analysis.

Independent Variables: Measuring Collective Action

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the impact of collective action on violence prevention and peacebuilding. As discussed in Chapter 3, collective action is conceptualized as the capacity of individuals and communities to self-organize and cooperate to achieve shared objectives, particularly in contexts characterized by social and economic adversity.

In the Colombian countryside, collective action is not merely an abstract concept but a tangible force shaping rural resilience. One of its most prominent manifestations is the formation of *peasant associations* and *agricultural cooperatives*, which have historically played a pivotal role in strengthening social capital, fostering economic stability, and reinforcing social cohesion. These organizations provide a framework through which communities mobilize resources, engage in self-governance, and resist the adverse effects of violence and marginalization.

This study examines two distinct dimensions of collective action:

- **Agricultural Cooperatives:** Representing *resource-driven collective action*, agricultural cooperatives are member-owned enterprises that provide essential agricultural services, including access to credit, input supply, and market coordination. They operate under cooperative principles[4] to enhance productivity, reduce economic vulnerability, and ensure financial sustainability for farmers. Examples include dairy cooperatives that organize milk production to stabilize prices and ensure market access, coffee cooperatives that support small-scale farmers with processing, certification,

[4]Social Solidarity Organizations (SSOs) are autonomous groups of associated individuals that come together to satisfy economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through democratically controlled enterprises (Macpherson, 2015). The International Labour Organization (ILO) includes associations, cooperatives, mutual funds, and foundations within the category of SSOs ((ILO), 2010) While SSOs emphasize service provision, well-being, and economic development, they cannot be solely defined by their purpose, as they operate across various sectors such as finance, agriculture, labor, services, and housing (Soler-i-Martí et al., 2021). The literature highlights challenges in establishing a universal legal framework for SSOs (Dávila, 2017; Guerra, 2021; (ILO), 2010), but there is general agreement on their fundamental principles and values. For a more detailed discussion on SSOs, see Chapter 2.

and export opportunities, regional cooperatives that provide agricultural inputs and technical assistance at reduced costs, and producer associations that facilitate access to credit, commercialization, and advocacy for cooperative business models at the national level. Additionally, some cooperatives focus on sustainable forestry and agroecological practices, integrating environmental conservation with rural economic development.

- **Peasant Associations:** Representing *civilian agency*, peasant associations emphasize the proactive role of rural communities in shaping conflict dynamics and resisting armed group influence. These organizations engage in land defense and territorial governance, collective decision-making and political advocacy. They enable communities to negotiate with external actors, assert land rights, and develop autonomous governance structures that strengthen social cohesion and reduce reliance on armed groups.

Our assumption is that by facilitating cooperation and trust among members, peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives serve as mechanisms of resilience, enabling rural populations to navigate economic uncertainties and mitigate the risks of armed conflict. This study, therefore, situates these organizations within the broader framework of collective action, examining their potential to contribute to long-term peacebuilding and violence reduction in conflict-affected regions of Colombia.

Given the challenges of directly measuring collective action, this study employs two proxy indicators that capture different dimensions of collective action:

- **Agricultural Cooperative Membership Rate**: The number of cooperative members per 10,000 inhabitants specifically in the agricultural and livestock sector, capturing participation in solidarity economy initiatives. This measure is sourced from the *Superintendencia de la Economía Solidaria*, the regulatory body overseeing cooperatives in Colombia. Unlike peasant associations, cooperatives require formal registration

and must submit financial statements, making them a more institutionalized form of collective action[5].

This study specifically examines cooperatives in the agricultural sector, distinguishing them from other types of cooperatives such as service cooperatives, transportation, housing, worker-owned enterprises, and health cooperatives. The emphasis on agricultural cooperatives is motivated by their unique role in rural development, economic resilience, and community stability, particularly in conflict-affected regions of Colombia.

According to data from the Superintendencia de la Economía Solidaria (SES) for the year 2022 (Martínez-González et al., 2022), there were a total of 3,770 registered social and solidarity entities in Colombia, encompassing approximately 7.2 million members. However, agricultural cooperatives represent only a small fraction of this total. In the present study, we analyze data on 44,928 members of agricultural cooperatives for the same year, which constitutes approximately 0.65% of the total social and solidarity entities in Colombia.

Despite this relatively small proportion, agricultural cooperatives operate under the core principles of solidarity, cooperation, and collective well-being, making them a vital component in the broader analysis of peasant organization. These cooperatives facilitate resource pooling, enhance access to markets, and promote economic stability, particularly in rural areas where other forms of economic organization are limited. By focusing on agricultural cooperatives, this study contributes to understanding their role in fostering social capital and economic resilience within the framework of collective

[5]In Colombia, cooperatives are legally regulated under Law 79 of 1988, which establishes their registration, financial reporting, and operational requirements. Additionally, Law 454 of 1998 defines the *Economía Solidaria* as a formal socioeconomic system and creates regulatory institutions such as the Superintendencia de la Economía Solidaria (Supersolidaria) to oversee compliance. Further regulations, such as CONPES 3639 of 2010 and CONPES 4005 of 2020, reinforce financial oversight, governance, and risk-based supervision. In contrast, peasant associations, such as the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC), function with varying degrees of formalization and are not always subject to the same legal and financial obligations (de Colombia, 1988; de Memoria Histórica (CNMH), 2023). See also (Vásquez-León, 2017) for a discussion on cooperatives in Colombia.

action and peacebuilding.

- **Peasant Associations Rate**: The number of active peasant associations per 10,000 inhabitants in each municipality-year. Unlike cooperatives, these associations do not require formal registration with regulatory authorities. Instead, they function as grassroots social movements advocating for land rights, rural development, and political representation. While some peasant associations choose to register as legal entities (e.g., cooperatives or non-profits) to access state support and funding, many remain informal, organizing protests, land occupations, and negotiations without legal recognition (de Memoria Histórica, 2020). Their presence indicates the extent to which peasant communities engage in collective efforts to address shared challenges.

The decision to use these two distinct proxies stems from the recognition that collective action in rural Colombia takes both informal and formal organizational forms. Peasant associations provide a decentralized and flexible platform for mobilization, often emerging in response to pressing social or political needs. Cooperatives, in contrast, offer a structured mechanism for economic cooperation and stability, necessitating greater institutional engagement.

Both indicators are transformed into rates per 10,000 inhabitants to standardize comparisons across municipalities of varying population sizes. However, they represent different measurement scales: while the **members of agricultural cooperatives rate** captures individual membership per 10,000 inhabitants, the **peasant associations rate** reflects the number of active organizations per 10,000 inhabitants. Additionally, the municipality assigned to each measure differs: the **members of agricultural cooperatives rate** corresponds to the municipality where the individual member resides, whereas the **peasant associations rate** is linked to the municipality where the association primarily operates.

To ensure that missing data does not bias the results, different models were estimated using both the original variables and imputed datasets. This approach tests the robustness of the findings and confirms that the main results are not driven by missing data patterns.

A detailed explanation of the methods used to handle missing data, including multiple imputation techniques, is provided in the Appendix C.

By integrating these measures, this study captures a more comprehensive view of peasant collective action, allowing for an empirical assessment of its role in mitigating violence and fostering peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions.

Control Variables

To account for alternative explanations of violence trends, several control variables are included in the analysis. These variables capture key aspects of municipal capacity, economic development, and social services, ensuring a more comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing violence.

- **PDET:** A dummy variable that indicates whether a municipality is classified as a *Territorial Approach Development Program* (PDET) area, which means it was more affected by the armed conflict ($PDET = 1$).
- **Municipal Management:** A component of the *Municipal Performance Measurement* (MDM), which evaluates municipal performance based on governance and public administration outcomes. This metric assesses how local governments manage resources.
- **Education Coverage:** Measured as the net enrollment rate (*Net Coverage Rate, NCR*), which represents the proportion of students enrolled in a given educational level who are within the official age range for that level.
- **Health Coverage:** The number of active affiliates in the national healthcare system, representing access to health services in each municipality.
- **Access to Public Services:** Coverage of essential services, including electricity,

broadband internet, water supply, and sewerage systems. This variable captures disparities in infrastructure and basic services.

- **Added Value:** A measure of economic growth, calculated as the difference between total production and intermediate consumption. It reflects the contribution of each municipality to national economic development.
- **Community Councils:** The number of officially recognized community councils (*Consejos Comunitarios*), which represent Afro-descendant communities and play a key role in local governance and territorial management.
- **Indigenous Reserves:** The number of indigenous reserves (*Resguardos Indígenas*) in each municipality, reflecting the presence and territorial rights of indigenous communities.

These control variables help isolate the effects of key explanatory factors by accounting for differences in governance, public services, economic conditions, and social structures across municipalities.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics by Municipality Type

Variable	Municipalities PDET	Municipalities Rest	Mean PDET	Mean Rest	Median PDET	Median Rest	SD PDET	SD Rest	Category
Victims Rate	170	892	315.38	56.40	136.31	16.46	669.77	214.2	DV
Members Rate	88	525	28.02	73.74	6.83	11.37	50.01	191.10	IV Main
Peasant Associations Rate	158	862	6.44	5.31	2.43	2.08	9.71	8.98	IV Main
Municipal Management	170	929	46.04	51.79	46.79	51.96	9.51	10.80	Control
Education Coverage	170	929	42.71	50.46	42.70	50.40	9.42	8.81	Control
Health Coverage	170	929	82.84	84.10	85.59	85.05	10.78	7.98	Control
Public Services Coverage	170	929	41.49	47.94	42.00	47.80	12.92	11.27	Control
Added Value	170	949	484.01	874.99	210.15	133.86	891.30	8036.58	Control
Community Councils	54	43	4.43	2.19	2.00	1.00	6.49	2.18	Control
Indigenous Reserves	112	173	4.07	3.37	2.00	1.00	4.14	5.05	Control

The descriptive statistics in Table 4.2 highlight stark differences between PDET municipalities and the rest of the country, particularly in terms of victimization. The average victimization rate in PDET areas is 315.38 per 10,000 inhabitants, compared to just 56.40

in non-PDET municipalities—a fivefold difference. This aligns with national figures from the Unidad para las Víctimas, which reports over 9.6 million victims of the armed conflict across Colombia, with a disproportionate concentration in historically marginalized rural areas such as those designated as PDET ((Unidad para las Víctimas, 2024). The extreme variability in PDET is reflected in the standard deviation (669.77), indicating significant heterogeneity in exposure to violence.

In contrast, agricultural cooperative membership rates are lower in PDET municipalities (mean of 28.02 per 10,000 inhabitants) compared to the rest of the country (73.74), suggesting weaker cooperative infrastructure in conflict-affected areas. It is important to note that this variable captures only agricultural cooperatives, based on registries that may underreport smaller or informal associations. Peasant association rates are more comparable across groups, with PDET areas showing a slightly higher average (6.44 vs. 5.31), though both have relatively low medians, indicating that these organizations are sparsely distributed.

Key control variables further contextualize the structural disadvantages of PDET areas. Indicators of municipal capacity—such as the municipal management index, education coverage, and public services coverage—are systematically lower in PDET municipalities. The municipal management score, developed by the Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP), measures institutional performance across budgeting, planning, and service delivery dimensions ((Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2024)). Education coverage is nearly 8 percentage points lower on average, and access to public services lags by more than 6 points.

Added value per municipality, drawn from DANE's regional accounts, reflects local economic activity at current prices and is expressed in thousands of millions of pesos (*miles de millones de pesos a precios corrientes*) ((Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2024)). PDET municipalities generate significantly less added value (mean of 484.01 vs. 874.99), with much lower medians, confirming the economic marginalization of these territories.

Overall, these statistics confirm that PDET municipalities not only face higher levels of victimization but also contend with lower institutional capacity, weaker cooperative infrastructure, and reduced economic output. This context supports the study's focus on exploring how local collective action through cooperatives and peasant associations might help mitigate the effects of violence in regions historically affected by armed conflict.

4.1.2 Econometric Model and Addressing Missing Data

This analysis examines the relationship between collective action and violence prevention by estimating the following econometric models.

$$\log(ViolenceRate_{it}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(PeasantAssociationsRate_{it}) + \beta_2 \log(CooperativeMembershipRate_{it}) + X'\gamma + \epsilon_{it} \quad (4.2)$$

where:

- $ViolenceRate_{it}$ is the log-transformed violence rate in municipality i at time t.
- $PeasantAssociationsRate_{it}$ and $CooperativeMembershipRate_{it}$ are the log-transformed rates of active peasant associations and cooperative membership per 10,000 inhabitants.
- $X'\gamma$ includes control variables capturing socioeconomic conditions, institutional capacity, and conflict-related factors.
- ϵ_{it} is the error term.

To account for the municipalities most affected by conflict and poverty, a dummy variable $PDET_i$ is included, where $PDET = 1$ denotes municipalities that are part of the *Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDET)*. Additionally, interaction terms between $PDET$ and the measures of collective action are incorporated to assess whether the effect of cooperative membership and peasant association rates on violence differs in these municipalities.

In models with interaction terms, the coefficient for `log_members_rate` captures its effect on victimization in non-PDET municipalities (the baseline group), while the interaction term `PDET*log_members_rate` measures the difference in the slope between PDET and non-PDET areas—that is, how the effect of cooperative membership changes in conflict-affected municipalities. The total effect in PDET municipalities is obtained by summing the main effect and the interaction coefficient. This helps assess whether collective action plays a stronger role in reducing violence in historically marginalized areas.

In addition, to assess the impact of missing data, models were estimated under two conditions:

1. Original variables with missing values.

2. Imputed values where missing values were replaced with zero.

This dual strategy allows the analysis to test whether the estimated relationships are robust to different assumptions about unobserved data—specifically, whether missingness reflects a lack of reporting or the true absence of victims or organizations. All models were estimated using both Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and Between-Effects (BE) specifications, and interaction terms with `PDET` were included consistently to capture potential differences in conflict-affected areas. By applying the same control variables across all model variations, the strategy ensures comparability and avoids confounding due to inconsistent specifications. A detailed explanation of the imputation logic, model combinations, and reflections on the implications of each approach is provided in **Appendix C**.

OLS Pooled Model

The first set of models is estimated using *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) pooled regression*, treating the data as a cross-sectional pool and not accounting for municipality- or time-specific effects. The dependent variable is the log-transformed rate of victims per 10,000

inhabitants. This transformation addresses skewness in the distribution and helps stabilize variance, making the results more interpretable. Although the normality of residuals is commonly discussed in the context of OLS, it primarily affects inference, not the consistency of the coefficient estimates. In this case, residuals were approximately normally distributed, and to ensure valid statistical inference, all models were estimated using heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (HC3). This approach corrects for potential violations of the homoscedasticity assumption and improves the reliability of hypothesis testing[6].

This OLS specification serves as a baseline model to examine the overall association between collective action and violence. However, it does not control for unobserved heterogeneity at the municipality level—such as historical exposure to violence, quality of local leadership, or other structural factors—which may bias the estimated relationships. As such, the model provides a useful descriptive benchmark but should be interpreted with caution when drawing causal inferences.

Between Effects (BE) Model

Since the key independent variables (*cooperative membership rate and peasant association rate*) exhibit **limited variation within municipalities over time** (Figure 4.2) but **substantial variation between municipalities**, a *Between Effects (BE) model* is estimated instead of a Fixed Effects (FE) model [7].

Figure 4.2 displays the yearly average of the two main independent variables used in the analysis: the rate of agricultural cooperative members (`rate_members_agro`) and the rate of peasant associations (`rate_peasant_associations`), both standardized per 10,000 in-

[6] In simpler terms, this means that even if the spread of errors (residuals) is uneven across municipalities—which would normally affect the accuracy of our results—the use of robust standard errors helps adjust for that, making our statistical conclusions more trustworthy.

[7] A *Fixed Effects (FE) model* is **not appropriate** because the main independent variables ($\log(CooperativeMembershipRate_{it})$ and $\log(PeasantAssociationsRate_{it})$) have **little to no variation within municipalities over time**. Since FE models rely on *within-municipality variation* to identify effects, the lack of variation would lead to unreliable or dropped coefficients.

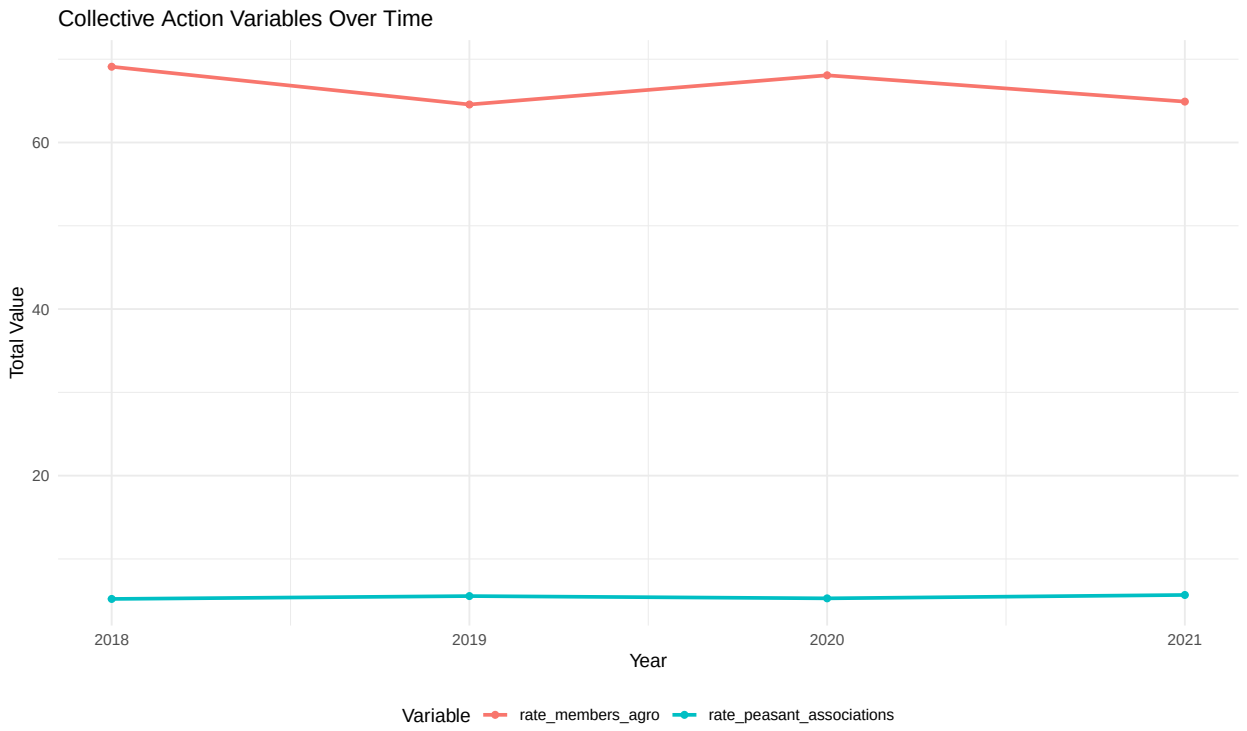


Figure 4.2: Collective Action Variables Over Time

habitants. These values reflect the average number of individuals affiliated with agricultural cooperatives and the average number of active peasant organizations per municipality, respectively[8]. The figure shows minimal variation over time for both variables during the 2018–2021 period. While the cooperative membership rate starts slightly higher and trends downward, and the peasant association rate remains relatively flat, these trends are stable and consistent across years. This lack of change is not only observed in the average rates but is also reflected in the raw totals of members and organizations, where the total number of cooperative members and peasant associations likewise shows no substantial variation.

The differences in scale between the two lines result from the nature of each variable: one counts individual cooperative members, while the other counts organizations. Overall, the stability of these variables over time supports the use of models that focus on between-

[8]For the regression models, both variables are log-transformed to address skewness and stabilize variance. However, in this figure, we present the original (non-transformed) variables to illustrate their overall levels and trends over time.

municipality comparisons rather than relying on within-unit temporal variation.

The *BE model* averages all variables over time for each municipality and all variables are **time-averaged for each municipality** i. This model estimates *long-term cross-sectional relationships*, providing insights into how structural differences in collective action relate to violence levels across municipalities. The *BE model* is used to capture differences across municipalities while preserving the variation in the main independent variables.

In summary, this study employs both the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) pooled model and the Between Effects (BE) model to examine the relationship between collective action and violence. The OLS pooled model provides a broad estimate of the association by combining all available data across municipalities and years, treating the dataset as a large cross-section. However, this approach does not account for unobserved heterogeneity at the municipality level, which may introduce omitted variable bias if important structural differences between municipalities are not included in the model. To address this limitation, the BE model is used to capture long-term cross-sectional differences across municipalities by averaging values over time. This model allows for the estimation of structural differences in cooperative membership and peasant associations while eliminating short-term fluctuations that could distort the results. While the BE model accounts for municipality-level heterogeneity, it does not capture within-municipality variations over time, meaning it cannot assess the effects of policies or conflict dynamics that change from year to year. By using both models, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between collective action and violence, ensuring that results are not solely driven by either short-term variations or long-term structural differences.

To systematically assess the relationships, the following models are estimated:

- **OLS Bivariate Models**:
  - Model 1: $\log(ViolenceRate_{it}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(CooperativeMembershipRate_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}$

  - Model 2: $\log(ViolenceRate_{it}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(PeasantAssociationsRate_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}$

- **OLS Full Models (With Controls & Interactions)**:
  - Model 3: Includes controls, $PDET$, and interactions for *cooperative membership*.
  - Model 4: Includes controls, $PDET$, and interactions for *peasant associations*.
- **Replication with Between Effects (BE) Model**:
  - The same four models are replicated using the BE specification to capture cross-sectional relationships.

Model	Specification	Controls	Interactions	Panel Treatment
OLS (1)	Log cooperative membership rate only			Pooled
OLS (2)	Log peasant association rate only			Pooled
OLS (3)	Full model with controls & interactions	x	x	Pooled
OLS (4)	Full model with controls & interactions	x	x	Pooled
BE (5)	Log cooperative membership rate only			Between Effects
BE (6)	Log peasant association rate only			Between Effects
BE (7)	Full model with controls & interactions	x	x	Between Effects
BE (8)	Full model with controls & interactions	x	x	Between Effects

Table 4.3: Summary of Model Specifications

While the main models presented in this chapter rely on the original observed values of the key variables, additional models were estimated to assess the robustness of the results to different assumptions about missing data. Specifically, combinations of original and zero-imputed versions of both the dependent and main independent variables were tested to evaluate whether missingness reflects true absence or underreporting. These alternative model specifications, along with detailed discussion and results, are presented in Appendix C, highlighting how assumptions about missing data may influence the direction, magnitude, and significance of estimated effects.

4.1.3 Expected Outcomes and Limitations

It is hypothesized that municipalities with higher levels of collective action, as measured by peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives membership, will exhibit lower rates of violence. However, given the observational nature of this study, the analysis identifies associations rather than causal effects. A central concern is endogeneity, where collective action may be both a cause and a consequence of violence. For instance, while stronger local organization might reduce victimization, it is also plausible that lower violence levels enable communities to form and sustain collective action efforts.

Relatedly, selection bias may occur if municipalities with better governance, institutional capacity, or active civil society are systematically more likely both to support collective action and to experience lower violence. These structural differences—often unobserved—can confound the relationship of interest. To mitigate these risks, the analysis incorporates a wide set of municipal-level control variables, and applies between-effects models to account for unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity. Additionally, robustness checks based on alternative model specifications and imputation strategies—detailed in Appendix C—assess the sensitivity of the results to different assumptions about missing data and model design.

Finally, this quantitative approach offers a systematic way to examine the relationship between collective action and patterns of violence in conflict-affected municipalities. While the analysis does not aim to establish causality, it provides important empirical insights into the geographic distribution of collective organization and its association with victimization trends. These findings, however, only capture part of the story. To more fully understand how collective action emerges and operates on the ground—as a lived practice shaped by historical memory, resistance, and social meaning—the following qualitative section turns to testimonies and case-based evidence. This interpretive strand complements the statistical analysis by illuminating how rural communities experience, construct, and sustain collective responses to conflict from within.

4.2 Qualitative Methods

The qualitative component of this study deepens our understanding of how rural communities in Colombia have actively contributed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violence from below. Whereas the quantitative strand examines associations between collective forms of organization and patterns of violence, the qualitative analysis is geared toward exploring the processes and meanings behind these relationships. In particular, this study investigates the ways in which agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations serve as platforms for collective action—enabling communities to articulate resistance, foster mutual support, and reimagine local governance in the midst of conflict. Guided by the theoretical lenses of civilian agency (Masullo, 2021a; Rubin, 2019) and the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) (Momesso et al., 2023; Razeto, 1986; Vásquez-León, 2017), the qualitative inquiry interprets narratives and contextual accounts as expressions of social imagination and moral resilience. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns of solidarity, territorial defense, and ethical economic practices that reveal how communities organize themselves and transform adversity into collective agency. This approach not only enriches the overall understanding of rural peacebuilding but also illuminates the specific mechanisms by which local organizations contribute to both immediate and long-term strategies for preventing violence.

The qualitative component plays an explanatory role within the study's broader explanatory convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While the quantitative analysis identifies associations between collective organization and patterns of violence, the qualitative strand seeks to interpret the mechanisms and meanings that may underlie these patterns. This approach is grounded in a pragmatic paradigm (Morgan, 2007), which allows for methodological flexibility and emphasizes the importance of using diverse types of data to answer different dimensions of the research problem. In this context, reflexive thematic analysis

provides a flexible and robust method for identifying and interpreting themes across narrative materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Rather than aiming to generalize findings, this method supports an iterative and theory-informed reading of testimonies and case accounts that foregrounds how rural communities narrate agency, resistance, and collective strategies for peacebuilding. The qualitative analysis thus complements the statistical findings by helping to illuminate the processes and logics through which rural organizations contribute to the prevention of violence from below.

4.2.1 Data Sources

This analysis draws on two complementary forms of qualitative material: testimonies gathered by Colombia's Truth Commission and documentary sources related to rural organizing and solidarity-based economic practices. The primary source consists of 16 testimonies selected from the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* (CEV). These testimonies offer situated accounts of how rural communities, particularly those organized through peasant associations, have responded to violence and negotiated alternative forms of social and economic life.

Although the Commission faced significant political challenges during its formation and implementation, it has been widely recognized as a critical and innovative mechanism within Colombia's transitional justice architecture. As detailed in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.5, the 2016 Peace Accord between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP created the CEV as part of the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition. However, its mandate and activities were shaped by a polarized political environment. Key sectors of the Colombian right, particularly the administration of President Iván Duque (2018–2022) and members of the Centro Democrático party (a conservative political party founded by former president Álvaro Uribe), actively resisted the peace process and repeatedly questioned the legitimacy and scope of the Truth Commission's work. Despite these efforts

to delegitimize the institution, the Commission successfully engaged a broad spectrum of victims, civil society actors, and former combatants. Its participatory methodology and focus on listening as a political and ethical practice contributed to what Prada Ramírez and Wingender (2025) describe as a "legacy strategy" that mobilized trust, dialogue, and engagement far beyond the lifespan of the institution itself. The Commission's narrative-based approach positioned testimonies not as neutral data but as socially embedded accounts that carry epistemic and political weight—making them highly appropriate for the type of interpretive, reflexive analysis conducted in this study.

The 16 testimonies included in this study were selected for their focus on rural and peasant life and their alignment with Mandato 12 of the Truth Commission, which highlights "collective resilience processes" (procesos de resiliencia colectiva) and the "strengthening of the social fabric" (fortalecimiento del tejido social) (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022)[9].

From the 43 testimonies initially reviewed from the Truth Commission's archives, 16 were selected for in-depth analysis based on their relevance to this study's regional and thematic focus. The selection prioritized testimonies situated in PDET municipalities, where the intersection of peasant organizing, territorial exclusion, and civilian agency is most clearly articulated. These cases were chosen not only because they align with the Commission's Mandato 12 on collective resilience, but also because they offer grounded insights into how rural actors in post-accord territories have responded to violence through economic and social organizing.

Twelve of these testimonies are drawn from Núcleo 6 (Resistencias y afirmaciones en medio del conflicto — Resistance and Affirmations in the Midst of Conflict), and four are from Núcleo 4 (Dinámicas del conflicto armado y vida cotidiana en los territorios rurales —

[9] Additional context on the organization of the Truth Commission's testimonies is provided in Appendix C. This appendix describes how the Commission grouped and contextualized individual narratives based on its broader methodological approach to fieldwork. It includes details such as the type of interview conducted (Tipo de entrevista) and the thematic focus or research area (Núcleo de investigación) through which each testimony was approached, offering insight into the narrative framing and dialogic orientation of the CEV's listening process.

Dynamics of the Armed Conflict and Daily Life in Rural Territories). These narratives explore themes such as mutual aid, community protection, cooperative farming, and spiritual resistance—elements central to this study's interest in solidarity-based collective action.

To complement the CEV's focus on informal community structures, this study also incorporates secondary materials that document the experiences of formal agricultural cooperatives in Sur del Tolima. In particular, the work of Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020), Rodríguez (2022), and Baquero-Melo et al. (2022) provides insight into how cooperatives contribute to peacebuilding and community resilience in this PDET region. These sources offer valuable descriptions of local organizations such as CAFISUR, ASOPEP, and Asoprocafees, helping to illustrate the formal institutional expressions of collective action that coexist with more informal forms of civilian agency in conflict-affected areas. Additionally, Triana et al. (2022) emphasize the broader framework of solidarity economy models in Colombia, which support cooperative-based development as a strategy for territorial cohesion and sustainability. Likewise, Morales (2020) underscores the role of sub-national cooperation and local governments in promoting rural development within culturally significant regions like the Coffee Cultural Landscape, reinforcing the relevance of territorial approaches to peacebuilding in Tolima.

Sur del Tolima was selected as a focal region not only for its symbolic importance during the armed conflict but also because of its high concentration of cooperative membership and its marked decline in violence following the 2016 Peace Accord. Municipalities such as Planadas and Ataco exemplify how organized economic alternatives can foster civic participation, territorial governance, and community-based peacebuilding. Taken together, the testimonies and complementary sources offer a layered and nuanced understanding of how rural communities in Colombia have mobilized collective action, resisted violence, and advanced bottom-up processes of peacebuilding.

Justification for Mixed Qualitative Sources

The integration of a regional case study— agricultural cooperatives in Sur del Tolima—was both necessary and theoretically justified. While the Truth Commission provides invaluable accounts of civilian resistance and community resilience, it does not systematically document formal cooperatives or the principles of economic solidarity central to the Social and Solidarity Economy. Given that cooperatives represent a more institutionalized expression of collective action, particularly in PDET regions, their omission would have left a critical analytical gap.

As mentioned above, Sur del Tolima was selected as a focal region due to its high density of cooperative membership, its symbolic significance in the armed conflict, and its notable reduction in violence in the post-peace accord period. Cooperatives in this region—especially in Planadas and Ataco—offer concrete examples of how organized economic alternatives can sustain peace, counteract illicit economies, and strengthen territorial governance from below.

4.2.2 Analytical Approach

The analytical approach used in this study is grounded in the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, guided by the conceptual frameworks of civilian agency and the social and solidarity economy. Rather than following a rigid or linear coding structure, the process was iterative, reflective, and theory-informed. The goal was not to classify or quantify testimonies, but to interpret how rural communities articulate resistance, rebuild social life, and construct alternatives to violence.

The analysis began with a close, immersive reading of 16 testimonies selected from the broader corpus of 43, specifically those related to the dynamics from municipalities included in the PDET framework. These municipalities are central to Colombia's post-conflict development agenda and were prioritized for their historical exposure to armed conflict and

institutional exclusion. This narrower focus allowed for a more detailed and context-sensitive interpretation of the narratives, with particular attention to how communities in these territories articulate strategies of resistance, territorial defense, and collective reconstruction. I approached these testimonies with sensitivity to the language, metaphors, silences, and relational cues embedded in each narrative, generating interpretive notes and provisional themes that captured meaningful patterns without reducing them to discrete categories.

This interpretive work was then expanded by bringing the testimonies into dialogue with secondary case materials focused on agricultural cooperatives and community organizing in Sur del Tolima. These additional sources helped contextualize certain narrative elements and introduced key dimensions—such as cooperative governance and the construction of economic circuits grounded in solidarity principles (Triana et al., 2022), agroecological practices and community resistance to extractive models (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022), and youth participation and sub-national coordination for rural development (Morales, 2020)—that were less visible in the Truth Commission's corpus but central to the study's research questions.

The construction of themes was not purely inductive, but emerged through an interpretive process that brought the narratives into conversation with the quantitative patterns, the conceptual framework of civilian agency (Masullo, 2021a; Rubin, 2019) and the social and solidarity economy (Momesso et al., 2023; Razeto, 1986), as well as scholarship on collective action in conflict-affected contexts. Observations from the quantitative strand—such as the association between cooperative presence and lower victimization—raised questions that guided the qualitative reading toward potential mechanisms and everyday practices of resistance. At the same time, theoretical concepts such as strategic autonomy, relational trust, and community resilience served as sensitizing lenses through which patterns of meaning became more legible. Rather than simply illustrating statistical results, the qualitative analysis was used to deepen and contextualize them—highlighting how community-based forms of agency are grounded not only in material practices but also in ethical commitments, shared responsibilities, and locally embedded visions of peace and coexistence.

Through this process, I constructed three interconnected themes that organize the qualitative analysis:

- **Strategic Noncooperation:** Civilian strategies of refusal, evasion, and negotiated distance from armed actors;
- **Social Cohesion and Trust:** The cultural, relational, and emotional foundations of collective life that sustain long-term resistance and reconstruction;
- **Economic Alternatives:** Collective practices of production, distribution, and governance rooted in solidarity rather than extraction or dependency.

These themes are not intended as exhaustive categories, but as interpretive entry points into the lived experiences and imaginative practices of rural communities. They help illuminate the ways in which collective action becomes a vehicle for asserting autonomy, building peace from below, and confronting conditions of structural violence.

4.2.3 Linking Methods to Theoretical Frameworks

The qualitative analysis in this study was deeply informed by the conceptual frameworks of civilian agency and SSE, both of which emphasize community-driven responses to structural violence, exclusion, and institutional abandonment. Rather than approaching testimonies as objective evidence, the analysis treated them as situated accounts that reflect local understandings of resistance, authority, and care. These narratives were read both inductively—allowing themes to emerge through deep engagement with the material—and deductively, using key concepts from the literature as sensitizing devices.

The theory of civilian agency, particularly as articulated by Masullo (2021a) and Rubin (2019), informed the interpretation of how rural actors develop intentional strategies to avoid cooptation, navigate moral dilemmas, and sustain collective life under conditions of

coercion. This lens made visible subtle forms of noncooperation, relational autonomy, and community self-governance. Civilian agency was not framed as heroic resistance, but as the capacity to generate alternative pathways for survival, dignity, and local control—even when formal institutions were absent or threatening.

In parallel, the SSE framework offered an interpretive scaffold for understanding cooperative organizing and associative economic practices as expressions of both material resilience-surviving economically-and political imagination-envisioning and building new ways of living and governing (Momesso et al., 2023; Razeto, 1986). Within this lens, economic life is not separate from ethics, history, or social reproduction. Instead, production and exchange are grounded in shared values such as reciprocity, democratic governance and mutual care. SSE helped illuminate how grassroots economies—whether formal cooperatives in Sur del Tolima or informal food networks in conflict zones—represent collective alternatives to extractive models of development and rural abandonment.

This dual theoretical orientation enabled a reading of the data that moved beyond typologies of victimization or binaries of armed vs. unarmed actors. It foregrounded the lived complexity of rural resistance, showing how civilian agency and economic solidarity are often intertwined and context-specific. Strategic noncooperation, for instance, was frequently embedded in cooperative work, religious practice, or community rituals. Similarly, collective farming and savings schemes doubled as protective strategies against forced recruitment or economic dependency.

By combining testimonies and a regional case study of cooperative experiences, this analysis offers a layered understanding of how rural communities enact everyday forms of peace-building from below. These narratives enrich the quantitative findings by illuminating the social mechanisms and moral logics that underpin grassroots collective action in Colombia's conflict-affected territories.

Chapter 5

Results

5.1 Quantitative Results

This section presents the results of both the *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) pooled models* and the *Between Effects (BE) models*, which examine the relationship between collective action and violence in conflict-affected municipalities.

In all models the dependent variable is the **log-transformed rate of conflict-related victims per 10,000 inhabitants**, and the key independent variables are the **log-transformed rates of agricultural cooperative membership and active peasant associations per 10,000 inhabitants**.

The analysis begins with two bivariate models that estimate the relationship between each key independent variable and violence without additional controls. Subsequently, two complete models introduce control variables and interaction terms with the *PDET* dummy, which identifies municipalities that are more affected by conflict and poverty. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 present the regression results.

The *OLS pooled models* provide an overall estimate of the association between collective action and violence, using data across municipalities and time periods without accounting for unit- or time-specific effects. These models do not control for unobserved municipal characteristics and treat all observations as independent, regardless of their municipality or year. In contrast, the *Between Effects (BE) models* focus on long-term structural differences

	OLS (1)	OLS (2)	OLS (3)	OLS (4)
Dependent Variable	Log Victims Rate			
Independent Variables	Log Cooperative Membership Rate	Log Peasant Associations Rate	Full Model (Cooperatives)	Full Model (Peasant Associations)
Log Members Rate	0.089*** (0.019)		0.033** (0.017)	
Log Peasant Associations Rate		0.188*** (0.028)		0.040 (0.026)
PDET			2.029*** (0.115)	1.894*** (0.101)
Municipal Management			-0.002 (0.003)	0.006** (0.002)
Education Coverage			-0.043*** (0.005)	-0.042*** (0.004)
Health Coverage			0.030*** (0.005)	0.012*** (0.004)
Public Services Coverage			-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.006** (0.002)
Log Added Value			-0.377*** (0.029)	-0.434*** (0.022)
Community Councils			0.067*** (0.017)	0.089*** (0.013)
Indigenous Reserves			0.080*** (0.010)	0.059*** (0.007)
PDET × Log Members Rate			-0.286*** (0.040)	
PDET × Log Peasant Associations Rate				-0.119** (0.055)
Constant	2.502*** (0.065)	2.636*** (0.051)	4.575*** (0.387)	5.689*** (0.290)
Observations	2,095	3,732	2,095	3,678
R-squared	0.010	0.012	0.428	0.446
Adjusted R-squared	0.009	0.012	0.425	0.445

Table 5.1: OLS Pooled Regression Results

	BE (5)	BE (6)	BE (7)	BE (8)
Dependent Variable	Log Victims Rate			
Independent Variables	Log Cooperative Membership Rate	Log Peasant Associations Rate	Full Model (Cooperatives)	Full Model (Peasant Associations)
Log Members Rate	0.059* (0.035)		0.029 (0.027)	
Log Peasant Associations Rate		0.191*** (0.053)		0.051 (0.044)
PDET			2.282*** (0.227)	1.956*** (0.198)
Municipal Management			-0.013* (0.007)	0.008 (0.005)
Education Coverage			-0.059*** (0.009)	-0.068*** (0.007)
Health Coverage			0.035*** (0.010)	0.030*** (0.008)
Public Services Coverage			-0.005 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.005)
Log Added Value			-0.313*** (0.049)	-0.414*** (0.042)
Community Councils			0.039 (0.035)	0.088*** (0.028)
Indigenous Reserves			0.105*** (0.024)	0.068*** (0.013)
PDET × Log Members Rate			-0.373*** (0.085)	
PDET × Log Peasant Associations Rate				-0.154 (0.109)
Constant	2.435*** (0.122)	2.359*** (0.098)	4.781*** (0.700)	5.025*** (0.648)
Observations	531	940	531	923
R-squared	0.005	0.014	0.538	0.525
Adjusted R-squared	0.003	0.013	0.529	0.520

Table 5.2: Between Effects Regression Results

between municipalities by averaging values over time, isolating cross-sectional variation. The number of observations in the BE models corresponds to the number of municipalities, which is lower than in the OLS models, because BE models use the time-averaged value of each variable per municipality. While the pooled OLS models capture broader temporal trends across all observations, the BE models highlight how average levels of collective organization are associated with average levels of violence across municipalities.

The results indicate significant differences in the relationship between collective action and violence across municipalities, particularly between those classified as PDET and non-PDET areas.

The Role of Collective Action in Conflict-Affected and Non-Conflict Areas

The results presented in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 reveal important differences in how cooperative membership is associated with victimization across municipalities. In the *OLS models*, the main effect of cooperative membership (`log_members_rate`) is positive and statistically significant in the bivariate model (Model 1), and remains significant—though smaller in magnitude—when control variables are included (Model 3: 0.033, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that, on average, cooperative membership is associated with higher victimization rates in non-PDET municipalities.

However, the inclusion of the interaction term between `PDET` and `log_members_rate` reveals an important contextual dynamic. In Model 3 (OLS), the interaction coefficient is negative and highly significant (-0.286, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the effect of cooperative membership is different in PDET municipalities. As shown in the marginal effects table (Table 5.3), while the effect of cooperative membership is not statistically significant in non-PDET areas (average marginal effect = 0.0334), it becomes negative and highly significant in PDET municipalities (AME = -0.2525, $p < 0.001$). This pattern is visually confirmed in Figure 5.1.

Table 5.3: Marginal Effects of Cooperative Membership by PDET Status

Factor	PDET	AME	SE	95% CI (Lower, Upper)
log_rate_members	0 (Non-PDET)	0.0334	0.0174	(-0.0006, 0.0674)
log_rate_members	1 (PDET)	-0.2525	0.0418	(-0.3344, -0.1705)

The *Between-Effects (BE) models*, which account for unobserved time-invariant characteristics across municipalities, show consistent but somewhat weaker patterns. In Model 5 (bivariate BE), the main effect of cooperative membership is positive and marginally significant ($0.059, p < 0.10$), but becomes smaller and non-significant in the full model (Model 7: 0.029, n.s.). Importantly, the interaction between `PDET` and `log_members_rate` remains negative and highly significant ($-0.373, p < 0.001$), reinforcing the pattern observed in

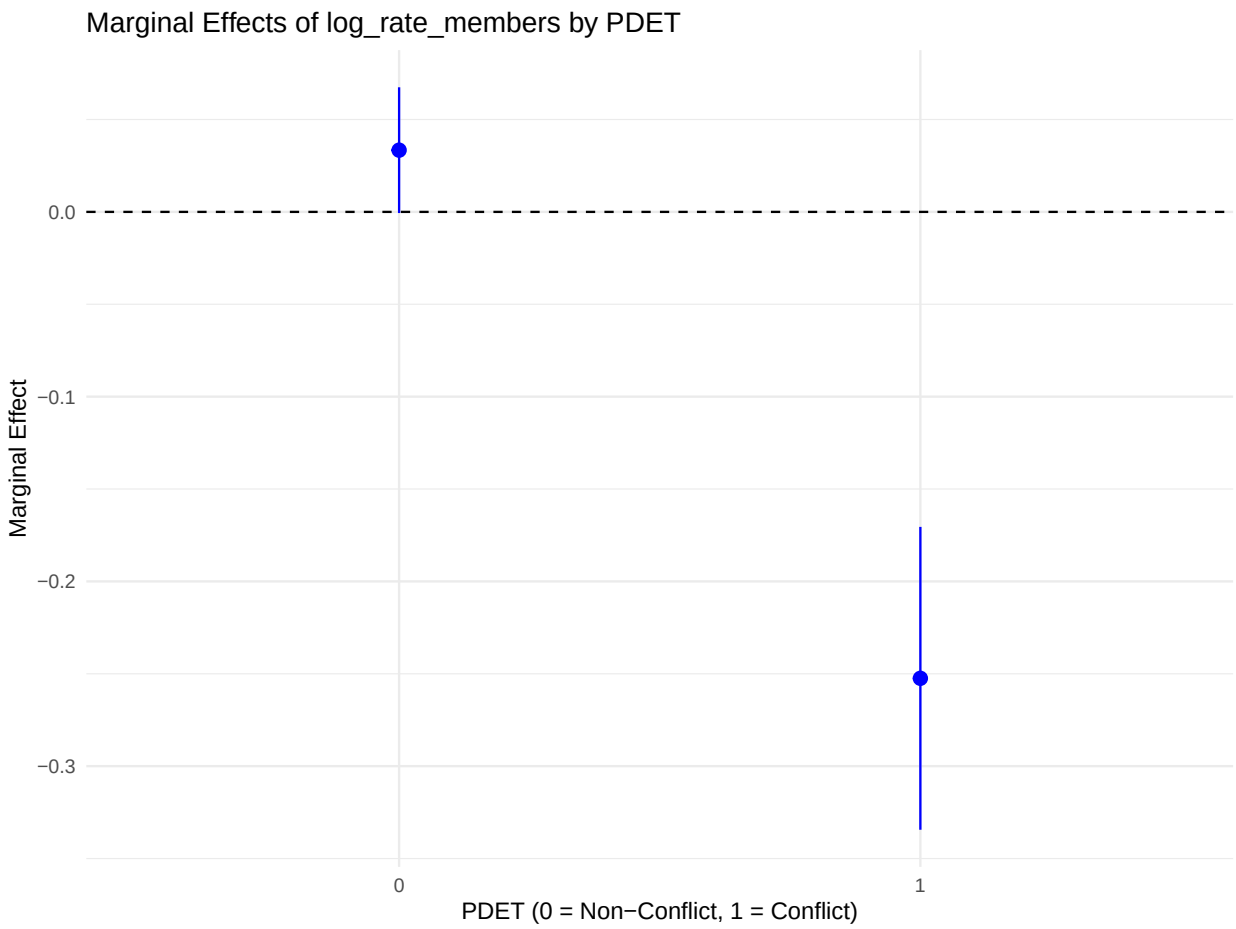


Figure 5.1: Marginal Effects of Cooperative Membership by PDET

the OLS models: cooperative membership is associated with lower victimization only in conflict-affected municipalities. Specifically, while the effect of cooperative membership in non-PDET municipalities is negligible and statistically insignificant, the combined effect in PDET municipalities is negative and substantial ($0.029 - 0.373 = -0.344$), suggesting that cooperatives are linked to lower violence levels in these areas.

Notably, the negative and statistically significant interaction between cooperative membership and PDET status persists across all model specifications in which it is included—including those using zero-imputed versions of the dependent and independent variables (see Appendix C). This consistency strengthens the conclusion that cooperatives may serve a protective function specifically in conflict-affected areas, even if they are not associated with

reduced violence in more stable municipalities.

Together, these findings point to a context-dependent relationship between collective action and violence. In non-PDET municipalities, agricultural cooperative activity may be neutral or even associated with greater exposure to violence—perhaps due to visibility, competition over resources, or political contestation. In contrast, in PDET municipalities, where institutional fragility and historical violence are more prevalent, agricultural cooperatives may offer mechanisms for community coordination, local legitimacy, and social protection that contribute to prevent violence.

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 also report the results for models using the log-transformed rate of peasant associations as the main independent variable. In the *OLS bivariate model* (Model 2), the coefficient for `log_peasant_associations` is positive and statistically significant $(0.188, \mathrm{p} < 0.001)$, suggesting that higher rates of peasant associations are associated with higher victimization in non-PDET municipalities. However, once control variables are included in the full model (Model 4), the coefficient becomes small and statistically insignificant $(0.040, \mathrm{p} > 0.10)$, indicating that the initial association may be explained by other municipal-level characteristics.

In the *BE models*, a similar pattern emerges. The bivariate model (Model 6) shows a positive and significant relationship $(0.191, \mathrm{p} < 0.001)$, but the effect diminishes and becomes statistically insignificant in the full model (Model 8). This suggests that, once structural differences across municipalities are accounted for, the presence of peasant associations alone does not have a consistent association with violence rates.

The interaction term between `PDET` and `log_peasant_associations` in Model 4 (OLS) is negative and significant $(-0.119, \mathrm{p} < 0.05)$, indicating that the effect of peasant associations differs in conflict-affected municipalities. However, the same interaction in the BE model (Model 8) is negative but not statistically significant $(-0.154, \mathrm{p} > 0.10)$. This contrast with the cooperative membership results suggests that the role of peasant associations may be

less robust or more context-dependent.

A comparison across models shows important differences between the two forms of collective action. While both cooperative membership and peasant associations are positively associated with victimization in bivariate OLS and BE models, only agricultural cooperative membership retains a statistically significant interaction with `PDET` across all specifications—including in the BE model. This finding suggests that cooperatives play a more consistent and protective role in conflict-affected municipalities, whereas the influence of peasant associations appears weaker and more sensitive to model specification.

It is also important to note that the `PDET` dummy variable is positive and highly significant across all full models (OLS and BE), confirming that, on average, PDET municipalities experience significantly higher rates of violence compared to non-PDET areas. This reinforces the importance of examining how different forms of collective action operate under varying conditions of conflict and institutional fragility.

Control Variables: Socioeconomic and Institutional Factors

The full OLS and BE models include several control variables to account for socioeconomic and institutional differences across municipalities. These variables provide additional insights into the broader structural conditions associated with variation in victimization:

- **Municipal Management (Institutional Capacity)** is negative and significant only in the BE model for cooperatives (Model 7), suggesting that municipalities with stronger institutional capacity tend to experience lower levels of violence, but this association emerges more clearly when focusing on long-term structural differences rather than pooled data.
- **Education Coverage** is consistently negative and highly significant across all full models (OLS and BE), indicating a robust association between higher education access

and lower victimization rates. This finding aligns with expectations that education expands economic opportunities and reduces vulnerability to recruitment by armed actors.

- **Health Coverage** is positive and statistically significant across all models, which may appear counterintuitive. One possible explanation is that areas with higher victimization attract more humanitarian investment in healthcare services, reflecting a reactive rather than protective relationship.

- **Public Services Coverage** is negative and significant only in the OLS models, and not significant in BE models. This suggests that the provision of public services may be associated with reduced violence over time but is not consistently linked to structural differences between municipalities.

- **Log Added Value**, a proxy for local economic output, is negative and highly significant in both OLS and BE models. This consistent result supports the idea that municipalities with stronger economic performance tend to have lower levels of violence, likely due to greater employment opportunities and reduced incentives to engage in armed activity.

- **Community Councils** and **Indigenous Reserves** are positive and statistically significant in nearly all models. This indicates that municipalities with higher presence of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities continue to experience disproportionate levels of violence. This pattern is consistent with documented historical targeting of these groups in the armed conflict, linked to their territorial claims, access to natural resources, and political activism.

The data suggest distinct patterns of associativity between cooperative membership and peasant associations (see Figure 5.2b and 5.2c). On one hand, the peasant association rate per 10,000 inhabitants presents an upward trend in PDET regions, particularly after 2018,

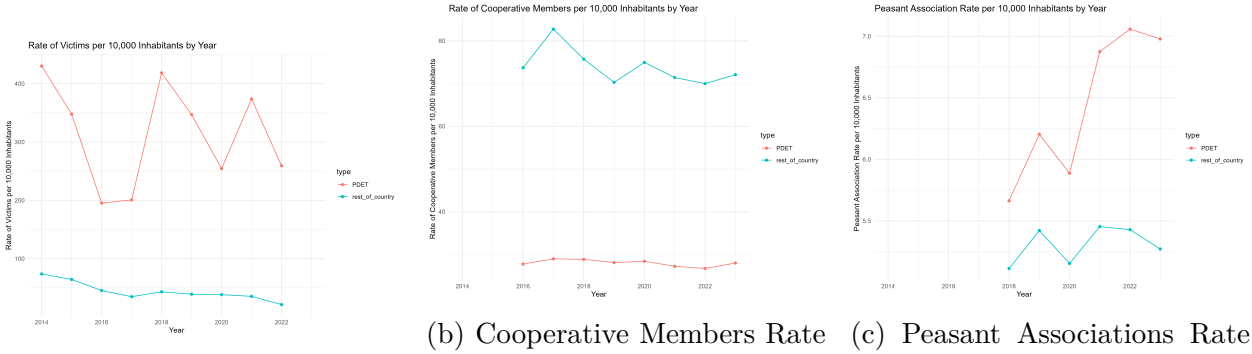
where a sharp increase occurs. In contrast, non-PDET areas display smaller fluctuations without a pronounced upward trend. The rise in peasant associations in PDET regions suggests a growing effort to organize collectively in conflict-affected areas.

The descriptive trends in cooperative membership rates by year (Figure 5.2b) further support the interpretation of the regression results. In PDET regions, the rate of agricultural cooperative members per 10,000 inhabitants remains consistently low and stable, while in non-PDET regions, it is significantly higher and more variable—peaking around 2017 and gradually declining thereafter. This suggests that agricultural cooperatives are more established in areas less affected by conflict, where institutional capacity is stronger and legal formalization is more feasible. In contrast, peasant associations appear more prevalent in PDET areas, likely due to their greater flexibility, informal governance structures, and adaptability to rural and conflict-affected contexts.

These structural differences may help explain the regression results, which show that cooperative membership is associated with a reduction in victimization rates specifically in PDET municipalities (as indicated by the negative and significant interaction term). In regions where cooperatives are less widespread and likely face more barriers to formalization, their presence may signal stronger local organization and institutional resilience—factors that contribute to violence prevention. Meanwhile, the weaker and inconsistent association between peasant associations and violence across models may reflect their broader dispersion but more limited institutional reach in mitigating conflict dynamics.

The victim rate per 10,000 inhabitants shows a clear distinction between PDET and non-PDET regions (see Figure 5.2a. PDET municipalities have significantly higher rates, with notable fluctuations over time. The highest peaks appear around 2014 and 2020, with drastic declines followed by rebounds. In contrast, non-PDET areas exhibit a relatively stable decline in victimization rates.

Given the significant interaction between PDET and cooperative membership rate, a descrip-



(a) Victims Rate Over Time

(b) Cooperative Members Rate Over Time

(c) Peasant Associations Rate Over Time

Figure 5.2: Collective Action and Violence Over Time

tive analysis of the 16 PDET regions helps to understand regional variations in associativity and violence levels. The following section explores these patterns in greater depth.

Regional Patterns

The breakdown by PDET regions highlights stark variations. For agricultural cooperative membership rates, most regions display very low values, with a notable exception in **Sur del Tolima**, which has an exceptionally high rate[1] (see Figure 5.4). This suggests a strong cooperative movement in this specific region, potentially driven by localized initiatives rather than a broad trend across PDET municipalities.

In terms of victimization rates, Sur del Tolima exhibits lower levels compared to other conflict-affected regions (Figure 5.3). This trend is also evident in other indicators not included in the regression model. For instance, none of the municipalities within Sur del Tolima have recorded coca crop hectares over time, suggesting a lack of direct involvement in illicit economies, as seen in Figure 5.6. Furthermore, regarding homicide rates at the regional level, Sur del Tolima ranks among the lowest five regions, highlighting its relatively lower

[1]It is important to highlight that **Planadas** and **Ataco** both municipalities that are considered part of Sur del Tolima have consistently high cooperative membership rate across different years, which drive the higher cooperative membership rates in this region compared to others. However, at the national level, these municipalities from Sur del Tolima do not rank among the top 50 municipalities with the highest cooperative membership rates. This further supports the significant differences in average cooperative membership rates between PDET and non-PDET municipalities.

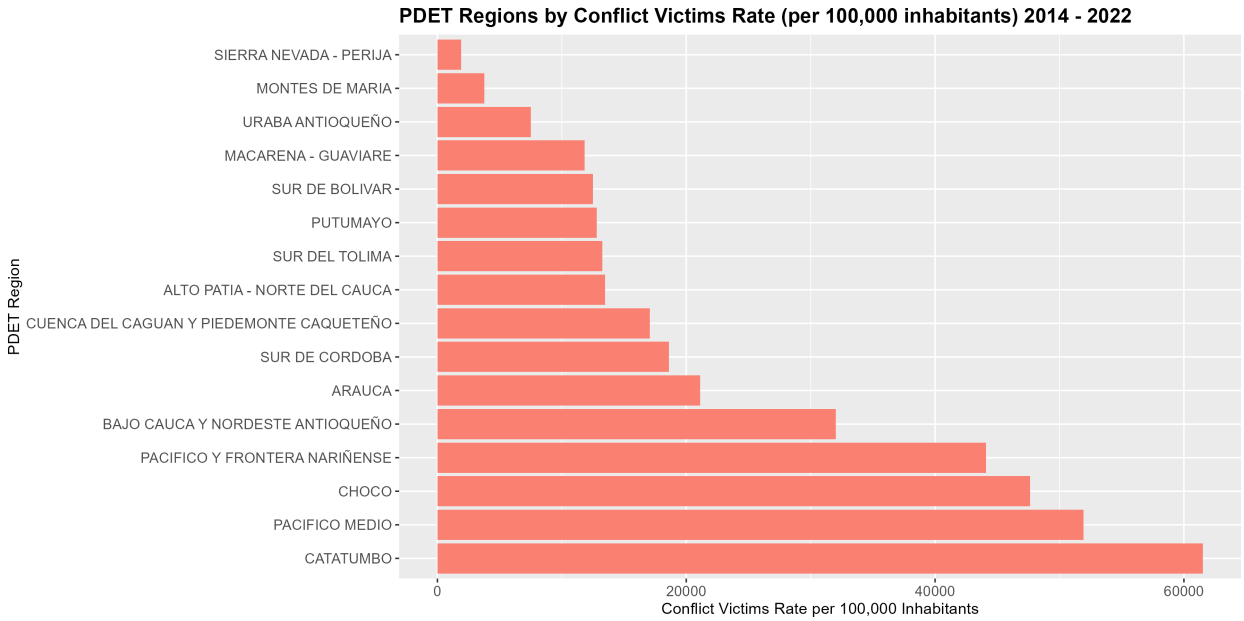


Figure 5.3: Victims Rate Over Time

levels of violence (Figure 5.7). While other structural or contextual factors may contribute to explaining this trend, the descriptive analysis suggests that Sur del Tolima stands out as a region with comparatively lower levels of violence than other conflict-affected areas.

Peasant association rates in PDET regions follow a more distributed pattern, with multiple regions exhibiting moderate to high values (see Figure 5.5). **Sur de Bolivar**, **Arauca**, and **Cuenca del Caguán y Piedemonte Caqueteño** stand out as areas with high levels of peasant organization. This suggests that in certain conflict-affected areas, peasant associations are more prevalent than cooperatives.

A closer look at **Arauca**, which ranks second in terms of peasant association rates, reveals a complex relationship between organized peasant movements and violence. Arauca is among the regions with the highest homicide rates in PDET municipalities, ranking fifth (see Figure 5.7). Additionally, although it does not have the highest victimization rates, it holds the sixth-highest position among PDET regions. This indicates that while peasant associations are strong in these territories, they coexist with significant levels of conflict and violence.

Examining peasant association trends over time (see Figure 5.5), it is evident that they have

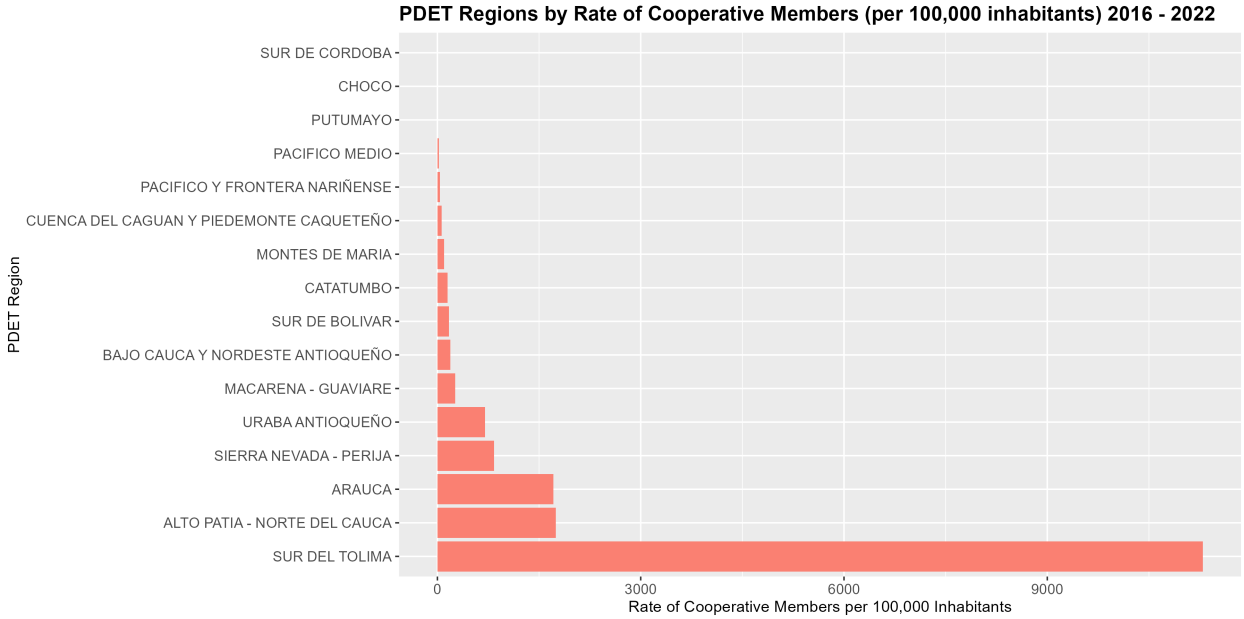


Figure 5.4: Cooperatives Membership Rate Over Time

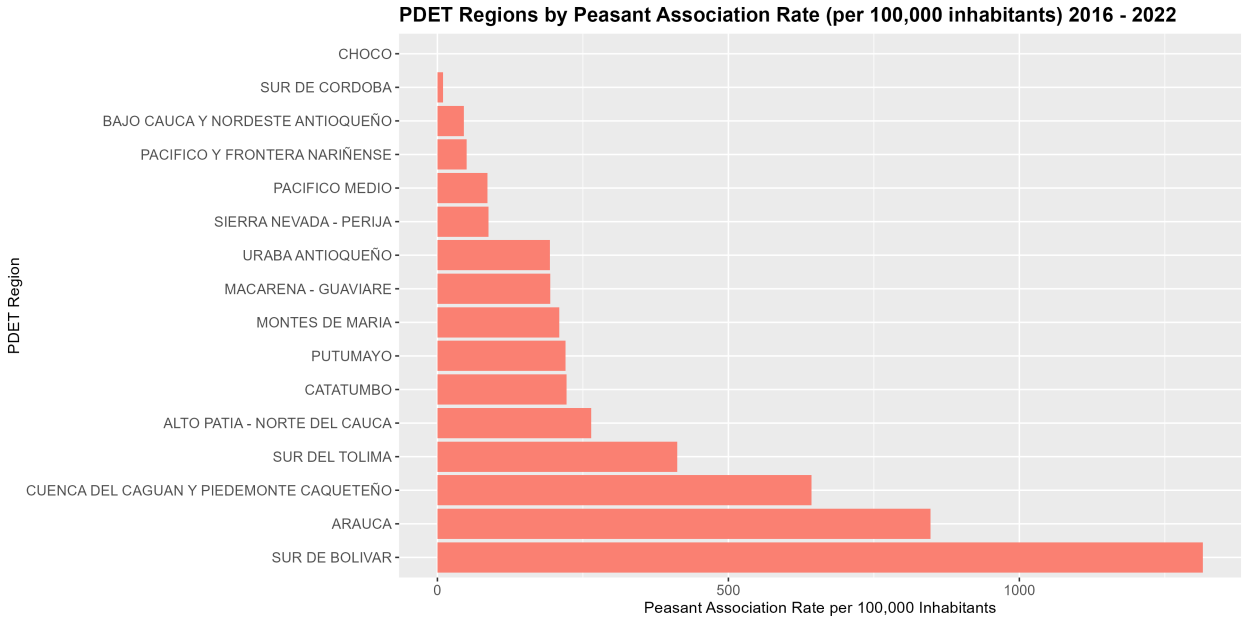


Figure 5.5: Peasants Associations rates Over Time

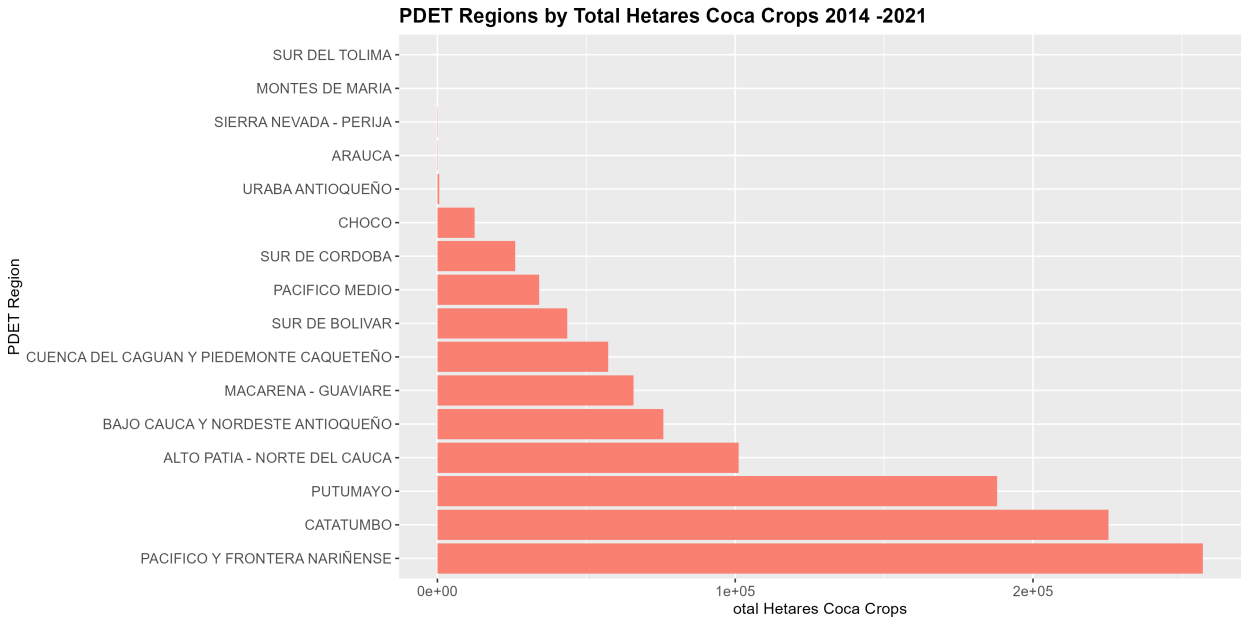


Figure 5.6: Coca Crops Hectares Over Time

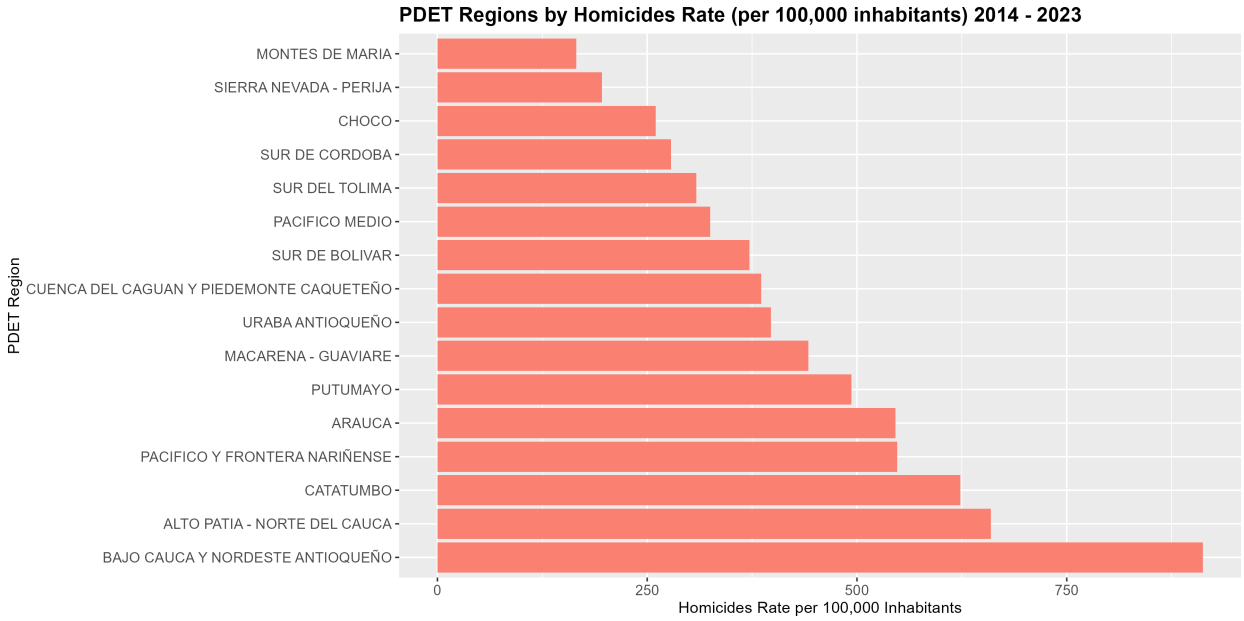


Figure 5.7: Homicides rates Over Time

maintained a strong presence in PDET municipalities, compare to cooperatives. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, historical patterns suggest that peasant associations have played a crucial role in resistance and organizing against various forms of oppression. The qualitative section of this study presents testimonies that illustrate how these associations have historically mobilized in response to socio-political and economic pressures.

Despite these observations, the regression analysis does not show a statistically significant relationship between peasant associations and a reduction in violence. This may indicate that while peasant associations contribute to social cohesion and organization, they do not necessarily mitigate conflict in a measurable way. Instead, their presence may reflect a legacy of resistance and mobilization in areas historically affected by violence and social unrest.

Final Insights

The negative and statistically significant interaction between `PDET` and `log_members_rate`, observed consistently across all models in which it is included, indicates that the effect of cooperative membership on victimization differs meaningfully between conflict-affected and non-conflict municipalities. Because the interaction term modifies the slope of the main independent variable in PDET areas, it must be interpreted alongside the lower-order term (`log_members_rate`), which reflects the effect in non-PDET municipalities. As shown in the average marginal effects presented earlier, cooperative membership is generally associated with higher victimization in non-PDET areas, while in PDET municipalities, the association becomes less positive or, in some models, significantly negative. This pattern is robust across specifications, including models that use zero-imputed versions of both the dependent and independent variables (see Appendix C).

This pattern reinforces the idea that cooperatives can serve as stabilizing institutions in areas where state capacity is weaker and communities face long-term exposure to violence. For example, in regions like **Sur del Tolima** and **Arauca**, where cooperative membership

is relatively high, the local economic organization may provide mechanisms for collective economic resilience and governance, which in turn reduce violence. In contrast, regions like **Pacífico Medio** and **Chocó**, which experience some of the highest victimization rates and have negligible cooperative presence, may lack the institutional infrastructure required for cooperative formation and sustainability (see Figure 5.3). This disparity points to structural barriers that limit the potential stabilizing effects of collective economic organization in the most vulnerable regions.

On the other hand, the interaction between `PDET` and `log_peasant_associations` is not statistically significant in the BE model and only marginally significant in the OLS model. This suggests that peasant associations, while widespread and politically active, do not exhibit a systematic association with reduced violence. Unlike cooperatives, which are economically oriented and often require formal legal recognition, peasant associations are more socially and politically driven. Their impact on victimization may therefore depend heavily on local dynamics, including political representation, land struggles, or the presence of armed actors. While these associations are frequently found in highly conflict-affected areas, their presence alone does not appear to consistently reduce violence across municipalities.

In sum, the results underscore a key distinction: cooperatives are associated with violence reduction in PDET areas, particularly where they are active and institutionally embedded, whereas peasant associations, despite their prevalence, do not show the same stabilizing effect. This difference likely stems from the economic orientation and formal structure of cooperatives, which may better equip communities to withstand the pressures of conflict. These findings support the need for context-specific analysis of local organizational forms and their roles in peacebuilding.

Taken together, the quantitative results suggest a differentiated relationship between collective action and violence, shaped by territorial context and institutional legacies. In particular, the protective association between cooperative membership and victimization in PDET

municipalities points to the potential role of grassroots organization in conflict-affected settings. However, statistical models alone cannot capture the lived experiences, meanings, and mechanisms that underpin these patterns. The next section turns to qualitative evidence—drawing from testimonies collected by the Colombian Truth Commission and a regional case study in Sur del Tolima—to explore how peasant associations and cooperatives operate as platforms for resistance, mutual support, and community governance. Through the voices of local actors, the analysis sheds light on how collective action is practiced, narrated, and sustained amid violence and state neglect.

5.2 Qualitative Results

This chapter explores how rural communities in Colombia have responded to violence and institutional abandonment by developing collective strategies for care, resistance, and reimagining local governance. Rather than offering causal explanations or generalizable results, the analysis interprets how community members narrate their own roles in processes of resistance and reconstruction. The qualitative approach adopted here—reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019)—treats narratives as situated and constructed, acknowledging the co-constitutive role of memory, identity, and moral imagination. In this sense, storytelling becomes a form of world-making, where individuals draw on memory, identity, and ethical vision to frame their experiences and envision a different future (Das, 2007; Jackson, 2013; Ricoeur, 2004).

The analysis is grounded in a close reading of sixteen testimonies from the Colombian Truth Commission. These testimonies were curated from two thematic lines of inquiry within the Commission's archives: Núcleo 6 ("Confrontations, Nonviolent Resistance, and Transformations for Peace") and Núcleo 4 ("Economic Dynamics, Dispossession, Displacement, and Armed Conflict"). Testimonies were selected using Mandato 12 as a guiding principle, which

highlights the importance of recognizing collective resilience and the reconstruction of the social fabric (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). The testimonies reflect how rural actors—whether as individuals, families, or organized groups—made sense of their experiences, asserted moral agency, and envisioned alternative futures in the midst of conflict.

Drawing on the theoretical lenses of civilian agency (Masullo, 2021a; Rubin, 2019) and the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) (Momesso et al., 2023; Razeto, 1986; Vásquez-León, 2017), this chapter examines how agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations have served as platforms for community-based peacebuilding. These organizations have allowed rural populations not only to navigate adversity but to sustain alternative visions of economy, territory, and political participation. The analysis was informed by sensitizing concepts drawn from the civilian agency and SSE frameworks—namely strategic noncooperation, social capital and trust, and economic alternatives. These concepts did not serve as fixed categories but rather as interpretive tools that offered a starting point for noticing patterns and making sense of the data. As I engaged more deeply with the testimonies, these themes were refined and redefined through an iterative, interpretive process grounded in the narratives themselves.

Across diverse rural contexts—including those commonly associated with regions like Urabá, Alto Patía, Sur de Córdoba, Catatumbo, Montes de María, and Caquetá—testimonies recalled how communities navigated conditions of armed conflict, institutional neglect, and territorial dispute. While the testimonies do not identify exact locations to protect the identity and safety of participants, they evoke patterns of response that speak to broader territorial dynamics. Narrators described how their communities avoided entanglement with armed actors, organized responses to displacement and destruction, and transformed illicit or subsistence economies into new collective initiatives. Rather than presenting these as fixed or replicable models, the testimonies reflect dynamic and evolving practices grounded in trust, ethical commitments, and a sense of shared destiny.

To complement the voices documented in the Truth Commission testimonies—none of which originate from Sur del Tolima—this chapter incorporates a focused case study on the region, which has emerged as a nationally recognized hub for agricultural cooperativism and peacebuilding from below. While absent from the Commission's testimonies, Sur del Tolima holds unique analytical value for this research. It is one of Colombia's PDET regions with the highest cooperative membership rates (as shown in the quantitative analysis), and its municipalities—Planadas, Ataco, Chaparral, and Rioblanco—have historically blended peasant organizing with economic sustainability, particularly in the coffee sector.

This section situates the case study of Sur del Tolima by examining the emergence and consolidation of agricultural cooperatives in the region—particularly in Planadas—as platforms for community-based reconstruction and solidarity-driven development. Research based on interviews with peasants and cooperative members (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022; Morales, 2020; Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2020; Triana et al., 2022) highlights how historical legacies of armed conflict, local organizing traditions, and external partnerships have shaped cooperative forms of governance, production, and mutual support. Organizations such as CAFISUR (Cooperativa de Caficultores del Sur del Tolima), ASOPEP (Asociación de Productores Ecológicos de Planadas) ("ASOPEP – Asociación de Productores Ecológicos de Planadas", 2024), and ASOPROCAFÉES (Asociación de Productores de Café Especial de Planadas) ("La Orquidea Asoprocafees FW IMPACT", 2024) exemplify how rural communities have responded to structural exclusion through models of fair trade, agroecological innovation, youth engagement, and democratic self-management. These cooperatives reflect broader efforts to reconfigure local economies and territorial relations around values of solidarity, sustainability, and community autonomy.

In parallel, studies focusing on gender and rural life in Sur del Tolima underscore the vital, often overlooked, role of women in sustaining both agricultural and communal life (Baquero-Melo et al., 2022; Rodríguez, 2022). Drawing from interview-based fieldwork, this research reveals how rural women—particularly in post-conflict contexts—act as informal leaders,

moral anchors, and stewards of land and social reproduction. Their labor, encompassing both agricultural contributions and emotional, cultural, and care work, is fundamental to the collective strategies of recovery, territorial care, and intergenerational resilience that underpin peacebuilding efforts in the region.

These regional insights, while not drawn from the Truth Commission's testimonies, are consistent with its broader recognition of the peasantry as a political and ethical subject (Truth Comission, 2022a). The Commission's analysis tends to emphasize grassroots political organizing, informal peasant associations, and social movements rooted in civil resistance and territorial autonomy. In contrast, the Sur del Tolima case study foregrounds another expression of collective agency: the construction of economic solidarity through formal agricultural cooperatives. These cooperatives represent a durable and institutionalized alternative that combines livelihood generation with ethical principles such as reciprocity, sustainability, and democratic governance. Their inclusion in this chapter expands the analytical lens, highlighting the diversity of strategies through which rural communities reimagine development and sustain peace from below.

At the same time, the testimonies and case material analyzed in this chapter complicate overly idealized narratives of grassroots agency. The findings presented in this chapter highlight the dual reality experienced by rural communities in Sur del Tolima: while they have exercised remarkable agency through organizing, mutual support, and economic innovation, their capacity to transform structural conditions remains constrained. Testimonies reveal that peasant associations and cooperatives have succeeded in building trust, resisting certain forms of coercion, and sustaining alternative livelihoods. Yet they also underscore the persistent limitations imposed by armed group presence, institutional abandonment, and recurring violence. As such, this chapter foregrounds not only what communities *do*, but also what they *endure*. This contrast—between capacity and constraint—serves as an analytical thread throughout the thematic analysis that follows.

In attending to this tension, the chapter foregrounds the intentional, creative, and often spiritual dimensions of civilian action. Rural communities are not merely reacting to violence—they are cultivating alternative ways of being and belonging.

The following sections explore three interpretive themes that emerged from the narratives and conceptual framework: (1) strategic noncooperation, (2) social cohesion and trust, and (3) economic alternatives. These themes are not rigid categories but rather overlapping terrains of meaning that illuminate how communities understand and enact collective agency in conditions of conflict and uncertainty.

Strategic Noncooperation

Strategic noncooperation, as narrated in the testimonies, was not defined by open confrontation but by a set of subtle, ethical, and situated actions aimed at avoiding entanglement with armed actors. Rather than heroic gestures, these were grounded practices—often quiet, sometimes ambiguous—that allowed rural communities to defend their moral and territorial boundaries without provoking retaliation. Drawing on Masullo (2021a), this form of agency is best understood as a continuum: from individual acts of refusal to collective strategies of avoidance, informal regulation, and the construction of protective social infrastructures.

These practices were not spontaneous. They were the product of collective deliberation, emotional labor, and accumulated memory—what Rubin (2019) calls CAC. CAC refers to a community's ability to organize under threat, grounded in shared norms, generalized trust, and inclusive local institutions. While overlapping with social capital and trust, noncooperation in this context reflects a distinct orientation: it is an outward-facing refusal to collaborate, designed not only to preserve life but to maintain moral clarity and political autonomy in environments shaped by coercion. Across testimonies, participants described how community norms, affective bonds, and informal governance structures allowed them to resist cooptation and reassert moral boundaries even in the absence of formal state protec-

tion.

A recurring dynamic involved the use of silence and discretion to avoid alignment with armed actors. Narratives suggest that this was not simply fear-driven, but an ethical strategy to maintain cohesion. In multiple accounts, communities refrained from naming perpetrators or attending meetings organized by armed groups. Spiritual language was often invoked to mark a refusal, such as in one testimony where a woman declined participation by saying, "She said God was stronger than their bullets" (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 088-VI-00014_SIERRA NEVADA PERIJA_VALLEDUPAR.pdf).Such refusals were quiet but potent—they signaled a collective stance against violence and created social boundaries that helped preserve community identity.

Beyond symbolic resistance, many testimonies referenced forms of informal coordination that functioned as protective infrastructure. These included self-organized patrols, community-agreed rules to prevent recruitment, and early warning systems communicated through gestures, whispers, or prayer circles. In one case, families found ways to send their children to safer areas: "Some parents found ways to send them to other towns... people helped however they could—even with small things like covering bus fare." These practices emerged from within the community, relying on shared obligation rather than institutional mandates.

The issue of child recruitment, in particular, prompted widespread communal response. The Truth Commission documented over 16,000 cases of minors forcibly recruited between 1990 and 2017 (Truth Comission, 2022b). While recruitment was often imposed by armed actors, testimonies illustrated how communities acted collectively to resist. Assemblies were convened, intergenerational dialogues took place, and Juntas de Acción Comunal (JACs) were mobilized to debate responses. In one narrative, an elder recalled: "We met with the old people and talked about what we could do... That's how we decided not to let them take the kids."

These forms of everyday governance reflect the dual nature of JACs as both administrative

and protective structures. As Truth Comission (2022a) notes, JACs were instrumental in many rural territories where state authority was absent, acting as intermediaries between communities and external actors. Kaplan (2017a) further emphasizes how such grassroots organizations serve as nodes of autonomy—capable of rule-setting, moral enforcement, and internal deliberation in the midst of conflict.

Although not captured in the Truth Commission testimonies, the Sur del Tolima case study illustrates a parallel form of strategic noncooperation through the structure of agricultural cooperatives. As Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020) document, cooperatives such as CAFISUR, ASOPROCAFÉES, and ASOPEP implemented codes of conduct, traceability systems, and collective decision-making to insulate their members from armed group interference. These institutions reinforced civilian agency not just economically, but morally and territorially. As one cooperative member put it, "When you are in a network, you are not alone"[2].

Women played a particularly vital, if often unrecognized, role in sustaining these forms of resistance. In interviews with women in Sur del Tolima, Rodríguez (2022) finds that the moral labor of women—as caregivers, informal educators, and memory-keepers—was central to protecting youth and holding communities together. Their actions, grounded in relational care and spiritual strength, anchored many of the noncooperation strategies described across regions.

In sum, strategic noncooperation did not follow a singular script. It unfolded through silence, coded gestures, spiritual refusal, and communal decision-making. In some cases, it was supported by institutional mechanisms—JACs, peasant assemblies, or cooperatives; in others, it emerged through ethical restraint and informal mutual commitments. These actions were not always coordinated, nor were they free from fear or contradiction. But they collectively illustrate a repertoire of survival and resistance—anchored in the everyday, shaped by local histories, and sustained through shared moral purpose.

[2] https://sucafina.com/na/offerings/la-orquidea-asoprocafees-fw-impact

Yet while these practices demonstrate agency and resolve, they also unfolded in a context where the threat of violence was constant and the margin for dissent was narrow. While strategic noncooperation allowed communities to assert autonomy and reject direct collaboration with armed actors, this form of agency was always exercised under pressure. Testimonies make clear that civilian strategies—such as neutral zones, silent protest, or rejecting coca—offered some protection but could not fully insulate communities from threats, surveillance, or retaliation. These actions reveal the intentionality and resolve of local actors, yet also underscore the limits of what unarmed civilians can achieve when armed presence remains embedded in daily life.

If social capital provided the cultural and relational glue of community life, strategic noncooperation was its outer shield—a way of marking limits, saying no, and holding the line against violence without taking up arms. In the next section, we turn to the inner logic of that cohesion: how trust, mutual aid, and care-based relationships made such refusal possible in the first place.

Social Capital and Trust

While the previous section examined how communities enacted noncooperation to maintain distance from armed actors, this section focuses on the social infrastructure that made such strategic agency possible. Drawing on Rubin's framework of *Collective Action Capacity* (CAC) (Rubin, 2019), this section explores how trust, norms, and relational practices enabled coordinated action and emotional endurance under threat. According to Rubin, CAC depends on four interrelated components: *generalized trust*, *other-regarding preferences*, *inclusive local institutions*, and *bridging social capital*. Through this lens, we analyze how communities cultivated cohesion, resilience, and mutual accountability even amid fear, fragmentation, and state absence.

Rather than viewing social capital as background context, this section treats it as an ac-

tive and generative force. It is not merely what enables resistance—it is, itself, a form of resistance, enacted through everyday relationships, shared rituals, and structures of mutual care. The testimonies and case study from Sur del Tolima reveal how these forms of capital operated both informally and institutionally to hold communities together and sustain hope.

Informal Trust Networks and Everyday Protection

In many conflict-affected communities, everyday protection did not rely on formal systems of security but on deeply embedded networks of interpersonal trust. These informal trust networks—composed of kin, neighbors, and faith communities—enabled the circulation of vital information, allowed for coordinated responses, and offered a sense of stability in volatile environments. As Rubin's framework on CAC suggests, the ability of communities to act collectively under threat is not only a matter of resources or organization, but of shared norms and generalized trust (Rubin, 2019). Testimonies from various regions describe how these relational infrastructures enabled early warning systems, evacuation planning, and quiet acts of mutual protection.

Rather than using alarms or formal alerts, communities warned each other of danger through discrete signals—gestures, subtle changes in behavior, or words passed through known, reliable messengers. One narrator explained: "We didn't have alarms or sirens. Just gestures, or word from someone you trusted. That's how we managed to keep people safe" (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 083-PR-00236_URABA_APARTADO.pdf). In another account, a participant described how everyday activities, such as walking together to a well or sharing a prayer circle, became opportunities to quietly coordinate and share risk-sensitive information.

These protective systems were possible because of prior investments in trust and mutual accountability. Trust in this context was not abstract—it was embodied in daily interactions and shaped by past behavior. Communities often knew who could be relied upon and who

could not, and reputational trust served as a form of social regulation. The effectiveness of these networks relied on what Rubin terms the "predictability of others' behavior"—the expectation that individuals would act in ways that align with shared norms and collective interests (Rubin, 2019).

Importantly, these networks did not require formal leadership or centralized control. Their strength came from distributed participation and relational familiarity. In settings where state institutions were absent or actively complicit in violence, these informal systems enabled a degree of coordination and care that was both practical and ethical. They reflect a localized form of CAC in action: grounded not in policy or enforcement, but in trustworthiness, discretion, and shared moral commitments.

Moral Anchoring Through Spiritual and Cultural Practice

Spiritual practices also played a crucial role in sustaining trust and providing moral orientation. Faith offered more than personal comfort; it gave people shared language, meaning, and moral cohesion. In one testimony, a woman emphasized: "As a Christian, I was embraced by the Christian church, and I have cried out to God for all the harm we have suffered... it's not easy to carry the struggle we've had to endure." (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 444-CO-00180.pdf). These religious spaces often served as informal institutions—settings where other-regarding preferences were taught, reinforced, and practiced.

Prayer circles, biblical teachings, and communal rituals created opportunities to reaffirm collective values and resist fragmentation. They allowed community members to process trauma collectively and to define shared ethical boundaries. By invoking divine justice or strength, people reinforced moral commitments and reduced internal dissent. These practices also elevated the roles of women and elders as spiritual guides—key to maintaining cohesion and reinforcing predictable, prosocial behavior under duress.

Assemblies and Intergenerational Dialogue

Testimonies also highlighted how informal institutions—community assemblies, meetings, and intergenerational consultations—created inclusive spaces for deliberation and trust-building. These were not always organized by formal leaders but often emerged organically around moments of crisis. In one case, a participant recalled: "We met with the old people and talked about what we could do... That's how we decided not to let them take the kids" (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 150-PR-00189_CARTAGENA DEL CHAIRA.pdf).

These gatherings served multiple functions: they diffused fear, distributed responsibility, and maintained internal legitimacy. According to Rubin, CAC is strengthened when local institutions are inclusive and allow for horizontal coordination. These testimonies show how community governance—even when improvised—enabled ethical decision-making and reinforced bonds of trust across generations.

Mutual Support and Everyday Solidarity

Beyond coordination, social capital was embodied in everyday acts of care. In the face of displacement, scarcity, and grief, communities offered mutual support through food sharing, informal counseling, childcare, and collective labor. These forms of everyday solidarity exemplify what Rubin refers to as other-regarding preferences: a disposition to prioritize communal wellbeing over individual gain.

One participant recalled: "We had nothing, but we had each other. We started with seeds and built from there. We shared the harvest" (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 295-VI-00012_ALTO PATIA_BUENOS AIRES.pdf). These practices were not framed as charity but as ethical obligations—norms of mutual aid deeply embedded in the community's moral economy. They helped stabilize communities emotionally and materially, even in moments of extreme volatility.

Institutionalizing Trust: The Case of Sur del Tolima

The Sur del Tolima case provides a powerful example of how social capital can be institutionalized through cooperative governance. Organizations such as CAFISUR, ASOPROCAFÉES, and ASOPEP did not simply function as economic entities—they became platforms for community accountability, democratic decision-making, and protection from armed group influence. According to Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020), the rules, traceability systems, and collective assemblies that governed these cooperatives were grounded in principles of reciprocity and transparency. Baquero-Melo et al. (2022) further shows how these cooperatives emerged from long-standing grassroots efforts to resist exclusion and territorial control, reinforcing trust as both a moral and spatial practice.

These structures enabled both bonding and bridging social capital. Internally, they reinforced trust and ethical discipline; externally, they created networks of legitimacy and protection with NGOs, certification agencies, and state actors. Rodríguez (2022) further highlights the essential role of women in sustaining this infrastructure. Through care work, moral leadership, and organizational continuity, women in Tolima preserved the ethical and emotional foundations of trust—often in contexts of displacement, uncertainty, and violence. In line with this, Triana et al. (2022) emphasizes how solidarity-based economic organizations rely on associative governance to institutionalize values of mutual aid and shared responsibility, embedding social capital within everyday decision-making. Morales (2020) illustrates how localized governance efforts in the Coffee Cultural Landscape depended on cross-municipal collaboration and shared identity, reinforcing inter-organizational trust as a key element in building territorial cohesion.

While social capital alone could not shield communities from violence, it often made the difference between fragmentation and resilience. Trust, reciprocity, and shared norms were not absolute defenses—but they created the conditions under which people could continue to act, decide, and care together. Social capital helped communities endure the conflict

without losing their moral compass or their collective sense of self.

The rebuilding of trust and cohesion through assemblies, mutual aid, and shared spiritual practices reflects a powerful expression of civilian agency. These actions helped restore the social fabric and strengthen resilience amid trauma and loss. However, the persistence of fear, selective killings, and community divisions reveals that even the most cohesive networks remain vulnerable to external shocks. Social capital is a necessary condition for civilian survival and resistance—but it is not sufficient to guarantee protection when institutional guarantees are absent.

This internal cohesion laid the groundwork for something more: the ability to imagine and construct alternatives. As we will see in the next section, many rural communities—especially those with strong associative traditions—transformed social solidarity into new economic models. These initiatives were not merely about generating income; they represented efforts to reweave the social fabric, assert autonomy, and build peace through cooperation. Economic alternatives did not emerge in isolation—they were rooted in the same trust, values, and collective commitments explored in this section.

Economic Alternatives

In the territories most affected by Colombia's armed conflict, economic alternatives did not emerge in a vacuum. As detailed in Chapter 2, many of these regions were shaped by the expansion of coca cultivation and the absence of state investment in rural development. In such contexts, illicit economies offered a survival mechanism for communities with few options. At the same time, rural Colombia has long nurtured a tradition of associative life—not always formalized through cooperatives, but expressed through peasant associations, mingas, and mutual aid networks. These cultural and economic practices formed the foundation for localized strategies of resistance and reconstruction.

The testimonies analyzed here reflect this dual condition: scarcity and survival on one hand, and collective resilience on the other. In several accounts, participants recalled how neighbors came together to plant, harvest, and distribute food after displacement or violence. These acts were not framed as charity, but as obligation—rooted in trust, shared memory, and the ethics of care. One narrator stated: "We had nothing, but we had each other. We started with seeds and built from there. We shared the harvest" (*Truth Commission Testimonies* 295-VI-00012_ALTO PATIA_BUENOS AIRES.pdf). Such practices embody what SSE theorists identify as moral economies: systems of exchange driven by values such as reciprocity, dignity, and collective survival rather than profit (Momesso et al., 2023; Vásquez-León, 2017).

These practices were not uniform. In some cases, mutual aid took the form of informal rotational work groups; in others, peasant associations developed local norms to regulate trade or share tools. In zones with greater institutional support, these associative logics evolved into structured cooperatives. Yet across these variations, the underlying principle remained: economic action was not separate from ethical and social life—it was embedded within it.

Agricultural cooperatives represent a more formalized dimension of these alternatives. Although less prominent in Truth Commission testimonies, their impact is evident in specific regions such as Sur del Tolima. Particularly the municipality of Planadas offers a compelling example of how agricultural cooperatives have contributed to territorial peace in a region historically affected by armed conflict. Once a stronghold of FARC activity, this PDET zone has experienced significant post-conflict transitions, where cooperative-led development has played a central role in building economic resilience and community cohesion. As Baquero-Melo et al. (2022) note, these cooperative processes emerged as part of broader community efforts to defend territory, assert local autonomy, and resist externally imposed development logics—especially in the face of violence and state neglect.

In Planadas, coffee cooperatives like CAFISUR and ASOPEP illustrate how producer organizations can contribute to territorial peace by promoting sustainable livelihoods and social cohesion[3] Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020) emphasize that the success of these cooperatives was shaped by a combination of historical organization, war legacies, institutional support, and resilience strategies. These cooperatives leveraged fair trade, organic certification, and youth inclusion programs to offer long-term alternatives to both coca and migration[4] Similarly, Triana et al. (2022) document how cooperative models grounded in solidarity principles—such as shared governance, associative property, and intergenerational collaboration—have enabled rural producers to construct inclusive economic circuits that prioritize community well-being over profit. These practices reflect the principles of the SSE, positioning cooperatives not only as market actors but as political and ethical institutions.

> "What saved us was the association. With coffee, we could keep our youth here, away from coca and the war. The cooperative gave us pride and a future." *(Planadas cooperative member, cited in Navarrete-Cruz et al. (2020))*

> "After the peace deal, we wanted something that would unite us—something clean. Coffee gave us that. The cooperative became a new identity." *(Local cooperative member, paraphrased from Navarrete-Cruz et al., 2020)*

Also, as emphasized in Rodríguez (2022), women were central to these processes—not only as informal caretakers, but as organizers, educators, and ethical anchors. In Sur del Tolima, women played critical roles in intergenerational mentorship, conflict mediation, and cooperative governance. Their work aligned with what SSE theorists recognize as *reproductive and relational labor*: the emotional, moral, and cultural work that sustains solidarity and long-term cooperation (Momesso et al., 2023).In a complementary perspective, Baquero-Melo et

[3]For more information: https://www.elolfato.com/region/caficultores-tolimenses-que-exportan-cafe-y-cacao

[4]Invested in training programs for young producers, marketing collectives, and digital platforms, allowing younger generations to see a dignified future outside of coca cultivation or migration. These initiatives counteract narratives of rural marginalization and give concrete form to *territorial peace* through dignified work and communal recognition.

al. (2022) documents how women in Sur del Tolima led agroecological initiatives that prioritized seed preservation, communal gardens, and ancestral practices. These efforts, often coordinated through associations like ASOMUJER, were instrumental in resisting patriarchal production models and sustaining the social fabric through cultural and ecological care.

This gendered dimension of economic alternatives was also present in the CEV's testimonies. Several narrators referenced how women led seed-sharing initiatives, organized prayer-based savings groups, and held together daily life in times of rupture. Their actions extended beyond household care—they became acts of economic and political imagination.

Resistance to coca and armed actor pressure was not automatic, but enabled by the cooperative infrastructure. In contrast to other PDET zones, where lack of economic alternatives made coca cultivation a necessity, Planadas' cooperative density offered viable livelihoods. The cooperatives also became sites of memory, education, and reconciliation—spaces where economic activity was interwoven with communal healing and moral reflection. Morales (2020) reinforces this view by highlighting how cultural identity, inter-municipal cooperation, and shared territorial vision—particularly in coffee-producing regions—strengthen social cohesion and foster rural development as a peacebuilding strategy.

These alternatives were viable only under three key conditions: basic security, internal cohesion, and sustained external support. This reinforces the argument developed in Chapter 3: that collective economic action requires both horizontal solidarity and vertical scaffolding. When these elements align, communities are better equipped not just to recover from violence, but to remake the terms of rural life on their own terms.

Whether through informal peasant associations or formal cooperatives, the economic practices described here represent more than responses to poverty. They are expressions of civilian agency, grounded in moral economies and social imagination. These alternatives challenged the logic of war and offered grounded models of territorial peace—where work, land, and belonging were redefined through collective labor and shared vision. In a context

of deep loss, such practices were fragile but powerful: not only efforts to survive, but to reimagine what it means to live together with dignity.

The emergence of agricultural cooperatives as vehicles for economic autonomy and ethical livelihood construction demonstrates the capacity of rural communities to innovate and institutionalize solidarity. Yet these alternatives operate within broader political economies shaped by illicit markets, state neglect, and international commodity pressures. While cooperatives like those in Planadas offer concrete pathways toward peacebuilding, they remain exposed to threats beyond their control—including armed actor interference, price volatility, and limited infrastructural support.

This social imagination, as elaborated in the literature on the SSE, involves more than material alternatives—it entails a redefinition of value, of relational obligations, and of the economy itself (Momesso et al., 2023; Razeto, 1986). The communities discussed here did not simply reject violence; they articulated new symbolic and economic horizons rooted in justice, cooperation, and autonomy. Their actions point to the possibility of constructing a different future—not imported from above, but cultivated from within.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Rethinking Peacebuilding from Below

This dissertation investigates how rural communities in Colombia engage in collective action to prevent violence and build peace, with particular attention to agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations in PDET municipalities. Through a mixed-methods approach, it examines both the measurable associations between organizational presence and patterns of victimization, and the lived experiences and strategies through which communities organize in response to conflict, exclusion, and state neglect.

At its core, the study asks not only whether collective action matters in conflict-affected areas, but how it matters: what forms it takes, what mechanisms it activates, and what possibilities it creates for reimagining peace from below. Rather than viewing peacebuilding as a process driven by external interventions or institutional design, this research centers the role of grassroots economic and social organization as a foundation for everyday resilience and political agency.

In many of the territories analyzed, the absence—or strategic retreat—of the state has left rural populations to navigate violence and underdevelopment through their own means. It is in this context that cooperatives and associations emerge as more than functional responses to economic hardship; they become expressions of autonomy, solidarity, and territorial defense. The analysis shows that while these forms of collective action are not immune to pressure or co-optation, they often sustain the social infrastructure necessary to imagine and

enact peace under conditions of profound adversity.

6.2 What This Study Found and Why It Matters

This study offers two central findings: first, that agricultural cooperatives are statistically associated with lower levels of violence in conflict-affected municipalities; and second, that both agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations operate as meaningful expressions of civilian agency and community resilience. These insights carry weight not only because of the associations observed in the data, but because of what they reveal about how rural communities build collective capacity under conditions of structural violence and abandonment.

6.2.1 Cooperatives and the Possibility of Peace

Across both quantitative and qualitative analyses, agricultural cooperatives emerge as particularly significant in shaping local trajectories of peacebuilding. While not universally protective, their presence is consistently associated with lower levels of victimization in PDET municipalities—territories that have faced some of the most acute impacts of armed conflict, state neglect, and illicit economies.

This pattern is not coincidental. Agricultural cooperatives in Colombia operate within a dual structure: they are born of grassroots organizing, yet they also benefit from a degree of formal recognition through institutions like the Superintendencia de la Economía Solidaria (Supersolidaria). This semi-formal positioning enables them to access resources, gain legitimacy, and stabilize local economies—all while remaining rooted in community-defined goals and mutual support.

In contexts where the state is absent, and where coca remains the most viable livelihood option, cooperatives offer an alternative economic model. They serve as protective spaces—

not only materially, but symbolically. Their practices challenge both armed governance and neoliberal models of development that prioritize extraction, privatization, or militarized intervention. In this way, cooperatives become vehicles for constructing peace—not through external blueprints, but through community-driven, solidarity-based forms of organizing.

6.2.2 Mechanisms of Civilian Agency and Collective Action

The qualitative findings deepen and humanize these patterns. Drawing from testimonies collected by the Truth Commission and secondary case studies—particularly from Sur del Tolima—the analysis identifies key mechanisms through which collective action functions as a form of civilian agency. These include:

- **Noncooperation with armed actors**, whether through withdrawal of support, refusal to cultivate coca, or collective resistance.
- **Mutual aid and internal cohesion**, which sustain trust networks and reinforce shared norms of solidarity.
- **Territorial defense**, including organized efforts to return to or remain on land despite threats or displacement.
- **Economic resilience**, wherein cooperatives and associations provide alternatives to violent or illicit economies.
- **Moral economies and cultural identity**, which anchor communities in shared values, religious belief, and historical memory.

These mechanisms show that collective action is not merely reactive. It is forward-looking. It constructs spaces of autonomy in the midst of uncertainty and violence. And while it does not eliminate risk, it transforms vulnerability into shared strength.

6.3 Revisiting the Agrarian Question and Neoliberal Development

The findings of this dissertation speak directly to the long-standing agrarian question in Colombia and Latin America—one centered not only on access to land, but on the social, political, and economic models that define life in the countryside. Historically, the agrarian question was framed through the lens of industrialization, where the countryside was expected to serve as a labor reserve or source of raw materials for urban growth. However, contemporary perspectives, particularly from critical Southern scholars like (Moyo et al., 2013), have redefined the agrarian question to also encompass struggles for sovereignty, territorial autonomy, and alternative development pathways. This "new agrarian question" recognizes that the future of rural societies depends not only on land redistribution, but on the capacity of communities to build collective, democratic, and ecologically grounded forms of production and governance. In Colombia, this means that peacebuilding cannot be separated from the broader struggle to reconfigure rural development from below, in ways that affirm peasant agency, challenge extractivist logics, and create viable alternatives to both violence and market dependency.

This study shows that rural communities have responded to these conditions not merely through protest, but by constructing alternative forms of production and cooperation. Agricultural cooperatives, in particular, are not simply mechanisms of survival; they represent strategic responses to systemic exclusion, inequality, and violence. Through collective governance, solidarity-based labor, and reinvestment in community well-being, these organizations offer a powerful counterpoint to dominant development paradigms—those that frame rural progress primarily in terms of individual entrepreneurship, export competitiveness, or integration into global value chains.

While state and international actors often equate peacebuilding with economic growth, such

growth is frequently modeled on neoliberal assumptions—inviting private investment, scaling market access, or formalizing property titles. These interventions may stabilize macro-level indicators, but they rarely align with the lived realities or aspirations of conflict-affected rural communities. In many of these areas, coca cultivation is not a cultural preference but the most rational economic choice in the face of poverty, exclusion, and institutional abandonment. Without viable, locally grounded alternatives, this dynamic is likely to persist.

The collective practices explored in this dissertation offer a different path—one centered on autonomy, cooperation, and territorial rootedness. These practices resonate with the demands of Latin American peasant movements for food sovereignty, land rights, and "development in our own way." By linking the agrarian question to the concept of economic alternatives, this study suggests that rural peace cannot be achieved without fundamentally rethinking the dominant models of rural development.

These reflections build on and contribute to a critical body of scholarship on the agrarian question in Colombia and Latin America. Scholars such as Berry (2017), Grajales (2011), F. Thomson (2011), and Zamosc (1986) have traced the historical and structural roots of rural inequality and the political economy of land concentration. More recently, Moyo et al. (2013) have expanded the debate to include sovereignty, autonomy, and national liberation as key dimensions of a redefined agrarian question. This dissertation adds to that tradition by demonstrating how collective economic organization—particularly through agricultural cooperatives—serves as a vehicle for both survival and transformation. It reframes the agrarian question as one not only of land redistribution, but of social reconstruction from below.

6.4 State Absence, Institutional Hybridity, and the Power of the In-Between

The findings of this dissertation also shed light on the complex and often contradictory role of the state in rural Colombia. In many PDET municipalities, the state has historically been absent, extractive, or complicit in violence. Despite the formal end of the armed conflict in 2016, its institutions remain unevenly distributed and deeply distrusted in many territories. This structural vacuum has created a space in which community-based organizations must function not only as producers or service providers, but as de facto institutions of governance, protection, and economic coordination.

Yet the role of cooperatives cannot be reduced to a binary of presence versus absence of the state. Instead, what emerges from the analysis is a more nuanced picture of institutional hybridity—a condition in which grassroots organizations operate within partially formalized frameworks that allow them to access resources, recognition, or legitimacy, without fully integrating into state structures. Agricultural cooperatives in Colombia exemplify this hybridity: while rooted in local needs and histories of mutual aid, they must be registered with the Superintendencia de la Economía Solidaria (Supersolidaria) in order to function legally, access financing, or participate in national development programs.

This dynamic resonates with Ostrom's institutionalist perspective, which emphasizes that communities can and do design complex, effective institutional arrangements for collective governance—often outside hierarchical state systems (Ostrom, 2005). Rather than relying solely on formal rules imposed from above, institutions emerge from local knowledge, social norms, and negotiated practices. Cooperatives, in this sense, are not just economic units—they are evolving institutional forms shaped by both grassroots logic and external constraints.

This positioning "in-between" is both powerful and precarious. On the one hand, it allows

cooperatives to stabilize livelihoods and engage with broader markets without sacrificing their community-based logics. On the other hand, their survival often depends on navigating bureaucratic demands, insecure political environments, and uneven state responsiveness. They must perform institutional legitimacy while sustaining internal cohesion—a balance that is especially difficult in conflict-affected regions where governance is contested or fragile.

Institutional hybridity thus challenges rigid categories of formal/informal or state/non-state. It points to the ways in which rural communities actively reshape the boundaries of governance from below, crafting institutional arrangements that fit their realities. In doing so, they expand the political imagination of what peacebuilding can look like—not as a linear process of state-building, but as a dynamic interplay between autonomy and recognition, solidarity and structure.

6.5 Rethinking Land and Territory in International Relations

This dissertation also contributes to the field of International Relations and Peace Studies by re-centering land as a political and analytical category. While dominant approaches in IR tend to treat land as a strategic resource, a backdrop for sovereignty claims, or a site of armed contestation, this study highlights its deeper significance in postcolonial and conflict-affected settings (Peluso & and, 2011). In rural Colombia, land is not merely territory—it is livelihood, memory, identity, and governance. It is where communities build institutions, enact autonomy, and contest both state abandonment and extractive development models.

By examining how agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations organize around land, this study shifts the lens from top-down models of peacebuilding toward grounded forms of territorial governance. These practices challenge conventional IR assumptions that treat peace as a function of security provision or institutional consolidation (Ginty, 2021; Rich-

mond, 2011). Instead, they reveal how everyday actors reconfigure territory through ethical economies, care work, and historical memory. In doing so, this dissertation enters into dialogue with postcolonial critiques of IR (Sabaratnam, 2017; Tickner & Blaney, 2012), which call for epistemologies rooted in the lived realities of communities historically excluded from state-building and policy frameworks.

Theoretically, this reframing of land contributes to a more expansive understanding of what constitutes political agency and order in international affairs. It builds on critical agrarian studies (Grajales, 2011; Moyo et al., 2013; F. Thomson, 2011; Yeros & Moyo, 2006; Zamosc, 1986), and post-liberal peace frameworks (Ginty, 2021; Richmond, 2005, 2011) to argue that territory is not a neutral space, but a field of struggle and imagination. In the Colombian case, this means recognizing that peace is not built on institutional blueprints or securitized logics alone—but on how communities inhabit, defend, and reimagine the land itself.

6.6 The Limits and Risks of Collective Action

While this dissertation highlights the transformative potential of cooperatives and peasant associations, it also acknowledges the limitations and risks of collective action in conflict-affected settings. These organizations do not operate in a vacuum; they are embedded in volatile environments shaped by armed actor control, institutional fragility, and long-standing patterns of exclusion. As such, their ability to protect communities, sustain participation, or achieve long-term stability is often constrained by external pressures beyond their control.

The testimonies and case material examined in this study illustrate these dynamics. In some municipalities, peasant associations became targets precisely because of their visibility, their perceived affiliations, or their success in asserting local autonomy. Cooperatives, too, can face threats of co-optation, fragmentation, or collapse—particularly in areas where territorial

control remains contested, or where state institutions fail to offer meaningful support or protection. In these contexts, the very qualities that make collective action powerful—its rootedness, its resistance, its visibility—can also make it vulnerable.

This reinforces one of the core theoretical insights of the dissertation: civilian agency is real, but it is constrained. Communities are not passive recipients of violence or policy, but their capacity to act is shaped by the structural conditions in which they are embedded. Collective action can generate trust, defend territory, and reduce dependence on illicit economies, but it is not a guaranteed shield against violence. Its success depends on a complex set of factors—internal cohesion, external recognition, political alliances, and territorial stability.

Recognizing these limits does not diminish the importance of collective action. Rather, it underscores the need to support these initiatives not only through legal frameworks and funding mechanisms, but also through broader political strategies that protect civic space, recognize territorial governance, and challenge the systems of power that make collective organizing so precarious in the first place.

The testimonies and regional case study in this dissertation reveal a dual landscape: one of vibrant civic organizing, and one of enduring structural vulnerability. Communities in Sur del Tolima did not simply survive violence—they built systems of trust, governance, and production under pressure. Yet the limits they encountered were not due to lack of capacity or vision, but to the enduring effects of institutional abandonment, territorial contestation, and power asymmetries. As such, collective action must be understood not as a panacea, but as a fragile and situated form of agency—resilient, but not invulnerable.

Foregrounding this tension is critical for any realistic account of peacebuilding from below. Civilian agency matters—not because it is absolute, but because it insists on alternative ways of inhabiting and transforming violent realities. Cooperatives, assemblies, and peasant associations do more than resist; they prefigure more just and participatory futures. But realizing these futures requires more than local action. It requires reconfiguring the broader

systems—legal, political, and economic—that continue to expose collective actors to risk even as they strive for peace.

6.7 Implications for Policy and Research

The findings of this dissertation carry important implications for how peacebuilding and rural development are conceptualized and implemented in post-conflict settings. In the Colombian case—and increasingly in other regions of the Global South—there is a growing crisis of international aid and cooperation (Santos Porras, 2025). While the language of peace and development often features prominently in policy discourse, many of the initiatives implemented in conflict-affected territories are externally designed, top-down in structure, and reliant on short-term technical cooperation or international aid. These models, frequently shaped by donor timelines and state-centered frameworks, tend to overlook or marginalize community-led efforts that are already present on the ground.

As seen in Colombia, externally driven interventions may bring visibility and resources but often lack durability or local ownership. Scholars and practitioners alike have noted that peacebuilding efforts that fail to engage with grassroots collective structures risk reproducing the very exclusion and fragility they intend to address (Rettberg, 2019; Richmond, 2011). In the Colombian context, the presence of agricultural cooperatives and peasant associations—despite being uneven and vulnerable—shows that rural communities have not waited for peace to be delivered from above. They have organized, produced, resisted, and imagined peace on their own terms.

Policy frameworks, therefore, must move beyond the assumption that formal institutions or market integration are sufficient conditions for peace. What this study reveals is the value of co-production: peacebuilding that combines state recognition and support with grassroots initiative and legitimacy. Cooperatives in particular occupy a strategic position—they

are embedded in territorial networks and responsive to local needs, yet often possess the administrative and legal standing to engage with broader systems of financing, planning, and governance. Rather than being absorbed into technocratic programming, these organizations should be strengthened as partners in territorial peace. This includes revisiting how institutional support is allocated, how risk is mitigated in conflict zones, and how to foster enabling environments that do not impose models, but accompany locally grounded alternatives.

From a research perspective, this dissertation contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations in several key areas. First, it refines and extends theories of civilian agency in conflict zones, engaging directly with the work of Rubin (Rubin, 2019), Masullo (Masullo, 2021a), and Kaplan (Kaplan, 2017a). While much of the existing literature focuses on acts of noncooperation or resistance as the core expressions of agency, this study shows that economic organization itself—through cooperatives—can be a powerful form of agency. These are not merely apolitical survival strategies, but expressions of collective autonomy, rooted in territory and oriented toward long-term peacebuilding. In doing so, the dissertation pushes the literature to more explicitly consider how civilian agency is exercised through institutional forms and economic practices—not only through protest or withdrawal, but through everyday production.

Second, the study contributes to the literature on the SSE by building on the work of Razeto (Razeto, 1986) and more recent analyses by Momesso et al. (Momesso et al., 2023). It reinforces the idea that solidarity-based economic models are not marginal or residual; they are active sites of development, capable of structuring social relations and institutional alternatives within conflict zones. This research further suggests that the role of SSE in post-conflict societies must be understood not only in normative terms—as "better" or more ethical—but also in strategic terms: these models can build resilience, generate trust, and fill institutional voids where both markets and states have failed.

Methodologically, the dissertation also offers an important contribution by applying a mixed-methods design to the study of SSE in a conflict-affected context. While much of the SSE literature relies on qualitative case studies, this study integrates municipal-level quantitative data with testimonies and contextual analysis, allowing for both pattern detection and process tracing. This dual approach enhances the rigor and reach of SSE research, demonstrating how economic alternatives can be measured at scale without losing sight of the cultural and political meaning embedded in local practices. It shows that solidarity economies are not only empirically observable but analytically comparable across space—opening new possibilities for mixed-method research within this field.

Finally, this dissertation adds specificity to our understanding of institutional dynamics in conflict-affected areas. While much of the literature treats formal and informal institutions as separate spheres, the findings here illustrate how communities operate within institutional hybrids—partially recognized structures that combine legal formality with bottom-up governance logics. This offers a more nuanced picture of how economic alternatives take shape in violent contexts: not in opposition to the state, but through negotiated arrangements that blur the lines between autonomy and recognition. By exploring how cooperatives function in these gray zones of governance, this study provides a grounded view of how collective action adapts to, resists, and redefines institutional boundaries.

In sum, this research advances a more situated understanding of how peace is built—not by replicating institutional templates or scaling markets, but by engaging with the lived, organized practices of communities who have been building peace all along.

6.8 Final Reflections

This dissertation began with a question rooted in the everyday realities of Colombia's rural communities: how do local forms of collective organization—specifically agricultural coop-

eratives and peasant associations—contribute to peacebuilding and violence prevention in territories marked by conflict and exclusion? The answers offered here are necessarily partial, shaped by data limitations, methodological boundaries, and the profound complexity of the Colombian countryside. Yet they also reveal something enduring: that in the absence of stable institutions, and under conditions of chronic uncertainty, rural communities continue to imagine, construct, and defend alternative ways of living.

One of the core contributions of this study has been to recenter collective action as a multidimensional process—one that is not limited to resistance or protest, but also encompasses the construction of viable economic alternatives, the preservation of community memory, and the articulation of local governance. Agricultural cooperatives, in particular, emerge from this analysis as more than functional responses to poverty or exclusion. They are spaces of production and protection, where collective labor becomes both a survival strategy and a political statement.

In this sense, the findings affirm and extend the concept of civilian agency as developed by Rubin (Rubin, 2019), Masullo (Masullo, 2021a), and others—showing that civilian action can take the form of economic institution-building, and that these institutions carry weight not just in moments of crisis, but across time as foundations for peace. This agency is constrained, and it is fragile. But it is real, and it is powerful.

At the same time, the study remains attentive to the limits of these forms of organizing. Cooperatives and associations are not insulated from co-optation, violence, or institutional neglect. Their futures depend not only on internal cohesion or external funding, but on a broader political and economic environment that supports autonomy, dignity, and territorial justice. If these conditions are not met, even the most promising models risk collapse.

What this dissertation ultimately affirms is that peace is not something delivered from above, nor is it a linear transition from war to order. It is built, day by day, through collective work, shared risk, and stubborn hope. It is shaped in assembly halls, farming plots, and small acts

of care that hold communities together when everything else falls apart. These practices are not always visible in official statistics or donor reports. But they are there—in the stories, the testimonies, and the quiet persistence of those who organize not only to survive, but to transform the world around them.

In the case of rural Colombia, peace will not come solely through institutional reform, nor through militarized security or economic modernization. It will come through solidarity—through the continued effort of communities to reclaim their place, assert their rights, and build a future rooted in memory, justice, and collective life.

Beyond the Colombian case, this dissertation offers a broader contribution to International Relations and Peace Studies by rethinking where peace is built, who builds it, and how. Dominant approaches often frame peace in terms of institutional reform, security provision, or externally driven statebuilding. In contrast, the practices documented here—rooted in land, labor, and local governance—reveal that peace is also constructed from below, through collective organization and territorial commitment. By centering cooperatives and peasant associations as agents of peace rather than recipients of intervention, this study brings rural and postcolonial perspectives into conversation with debates on civilian agency and post-liberal peace. It invites scholars and practitioners to recognize the political significance of everyday organizing in conflict-affected territories—not as a supplement to formal processes, but as a foundational dimension of what peace actually looks like in practice.

Appendices

Appendix A

First Appendix

A.1 Data available

Variable	Years Available
Victim Rates	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Coca Crops	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021
Homicide Rates	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Insurgent Presence	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Paramilitary Presence	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Criminal Presence	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
FARC Dissident Presence	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Cooperative Membership Rate	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Active Peasant Associations Rate	2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Number of Cooperatives	2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021
Municipality Population	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Municipal Management	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Education Coverage	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Health Coverage	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Public Services Coverage	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Economic Growth (Added Value)	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
Primary Economic Activities	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022

Table A.1: Available Data by Year

Appendix B

Second Appendix

B.1 Model Specifications and Imputation Strategy

The analysis was conducted by estimating separate models for each main independent variable:

- **Agricultural Cooperative Members Rate**: The number of cooperative members per 10,000 inhabitants, representing the degree of individual participation in formal agricultural cooperatives.
- **Peasant Associations Rate**: The number of active peasant associations per 10,000 inhabitants, capturing the presence of grassroots organizations engaged in collective action.

To account for alternative explanations of violence trends, all models include the same set of control variables, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing violence. These control variables capture key aspects of municipal capacity, economic development, and social services, providing a robust framework for analysis. Specifically, the models control for whether a municipality is classified as a *Territorial Approach Development Program* (PDET) area, municipal performance in governance and administration, education and health coverage, access to basic public services, economic activity (added value), and the presence of community councils and indigenous reserves.

Both sets of models were estimated using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and between-

effects (BE) models. Additionally, interaction terms with `PDET_logmembers` were included to assess differential effects in PDET municipalities. By estimating separate models for each independent variable while maintaining consistent control variables, the analysis ensures that the observed effects are not confounded by differences in model specification or omitted variable bias.

B.1.1 Handling Missing Data and Conceptual Intuition

To address missing data, models were estimated using two approaches:

- **Original Variables**: Only cases with observed data were included.
- **Imputed Variables**: Missing values were replaced with zero (`_zero` models).

The following combinations were used systematically in both Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) pooled models and Between-Effects (BE) models (see Table B.1.):

1. **Victims (Original) with Independent Variables (Original)**: This model includes the log-transformed rate of victims as the dependent variable and uses the original (non-imputed) values of cooperative members rate and peasant associations rate as independent variables.
2. **Victims (Zero-Imputed) with Independent Variables (Original)**: This model replaces missing values in the dependent variable (log victims) with zeros while keeping the independent variables (cooperative members rate and peasant associations rate) in their original form.
3. **Victims (Original) with Independent Variables (Zero-Imputed)**: Here, the dependent variable remains in its original form, but missing values in the independent variables (cooperative members rate and peasant associations rate) are replaced with zeros.

4. **Victims (Zero-Imputed) with Independent Variables (Zero-Imputed)**: This model represents the most extensive imputation, where missing values in both the dependent variable (log victims) and the independent variables are replaced with zeros.

Table B.1: Model Specifications

Model Type	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable
OLS Pooled Models		
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_members_rate
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_members_rate_zero
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate_zero
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active_zero
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active_zero
Between-Effects (BE) Models		
BE	log_victims	log_members_rate
BE	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate
BE	log_victims	log_members_rate_zero
BE	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate_zero
BE	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active
BE	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active_zero
BE	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active
BE	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active_zero

The conceptual intuition behind imputing zeros stems from the uncertainty regarding whether missing values result from the actual absence of an organization or victims, or simply from a lack of reporting. Given this ambiguity, we adopt a cautious approach by estimating different models to compare potential differences. By imputing zeros, we account for the

possibility that missing values indicate the true absence of peasant associations or agricultural cooperatives in the case of the independent variable, or the absence of victims rather than a reporting gap. This strategy allows us to assess the robustness of our findings and ensures that any observed effects are not driven by data availability issues.

Each combination of variables provides different insights:

- Original Variables Models: These models serve as the baseline, reflecting only observed data and providing estimates based solely on reported values.
- Zero-Imputed Victims Models: By replacing missing values in the dependent variable with zero, these models assume that non-reported victimization cases indicate the absence of violent incidents in those municipalities, ensuring that all municipalities are accounted for in the analysis.
- Zero-Imputed Independent Variables Models: These models assume that missing values for cooperative members or peasant associations indicate that such organizations are absent in that municipality. This is particularly relevant because the lack of registration or documentation does not necessarily mean that such organizations exist.
- Fully Imputed Models: These models ensure the broadest coverage, considering that both victimization and the presence of organizations may be underreported. By imputing zeros, they provide a conservative estimate of associations between variables.

By systematically applying these different combinations in both OLS and BE models, the analysis ensures that findings are not driven by missing data patterns but rather reflect meaningful relationships between cooperative membership, peasant associations, and violence trends.

B.1.2 Summary of Model Results

Table B.2 summarizes the main models, highlighting key patterns across specifications.

Table B.2: Regression Results: Direction and Significance of Coefficients

Model Type	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Direction	Significance	Interaction
OLS Pooled Models					
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_members_rate	↑	**	-0.286***
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_members_rate_zero	↑	***	-0.171***
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active	↑	No	-0.119**
OLS Pooled	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active_zero	↓	No	-0.082
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate	↓	No	-0.239***
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate_zero	↑	*	-0.233***
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active	↑	No	-0.015
OLS Pooled	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active_zero	↓	No	-0.015
Between-Effects (BE) Models					
BE	log_victims	log_members_rate	↑	No	-0.373***
BE	log_victims	log_members_rate_zero	↑	*	-0.185***
BE	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active	↑	No	-0.154
BE	log_victims	log_rate_pa_active_zero	↑	No	-0.104
BE	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate	↓	No	-0.344***
BE	log_victims_zero	log_members_rate_zero	↑	No	-0.270***
BE	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active	↑	No	-0.032
BE	log_victims_zero	log_rate_pa_active_zero	↓	No	-0.031

Across all model specifications, the interaction term between `PDET` and `log_members_rate` is consistently negative and statistically significant. This indicates that the relationship between cooperative membership and victimization is systematically different in conflict-affected (PDET) municipalities. In most models, the main effect of cooperative membership is positive—suggesting that in non-PDET areas, higher cooperative membership is associated with higher reported victimization. The negative interaction term means that this association is weaker—or even reversed—in PDET municipalities.

In practical terms, this implies that while cooperatives may correlate with increased visibility or vulnerability in more stable municipalities, they appear to play a protective role in conflict-affected areas. The strength and direction of this protective effect, however, depends on model assumptions. Only in one specification—where victimization is zero-imputed and

cooperative membership is based on original (non-imputed) data—is the main effect negative. In that case, the total effect in PDET municipalities is even more strongly negative, reinforcing the idea that cooperatives reduce victimization where state presence is weakest.

Thus, while the interaction is always negative, the net relationship between cooperative membership and victimization in PDET areas ranges from attenuated risk to meaningful protection. These results support the interpretation that agricultural cooperatives contribute to peacebuilding in conflict zones—but also underscore the need to interpret interactions in light of main effects and model design, as mentioned in Chapter 5.

The negative interaction term suggests that the effect of agricultural cooperative membership differs systematically between conflict-affected and non-conflict municipalities:

- In non-PDET municipalities, cooperative membership is generally associated with a positive or neutral relationship with victimization, possibly due to increased visibility, targeting, or resource competition.
- In PDET municipalities, this association is consistently less positive—and in some cases negative—indicating that cooperatives may serve a protective function in conflict-affected areas. The consistently negative and significant interaction supports the interpretation that cooperatives contribute to violence reduction specifically where institutional fragility and exposure to conflict are highest.

The use of multiple model specifications—including those based on original values and those with missing values imputed as zero—allows for assessing the robustness of the results under different assumptions about missing data. The zero-imputation strategy assumes that missing values in cooperative membership and peasant association rates indicate the **true absence** of these organizations in a given municipality, rather than a reporting gap. This approach ensures that municipalities without registered cooperatives or associations are not systematically excluded from the analysis. A similar assumption is applied to victimization

data when missing values are imputed as zero, treating the absence of reported violence as a conservative proxy for non-occurrence.

In the OLS models, the main coefficients for cooperative membership (`log_members_rate` and `log_members_rate_zero`) are statistically significant and positive in most specifications. An exception is observed when the dependent variable is zero-imputed (`log_victims_zero`) and the independent variable is not imputed (`log_members_rate`), where the coefficient becomes negative and not statistically significant. This reversal suggests that imputing zeros for victimization may attenuate the relationship between cooperative membership and violence, potentially underestimating the association in municipalities where underreporting is likely.

In contrast, the between-effects (BE) models yield weaker and less consistent results. The only statistically significant coefficient is observed in the model pairing `log_victims` with `log_members_rate_zero`, which is positive. All other coefficients are not statistically significant. Most are positive, except again for the same imputation combination noted above, which produces a negative but non-significant coefficient. These patterns suggest that the association between cooperative membership and victimization is more likely driven by within-municipality variation over time, rather than between-municipality differences captured by the BE models. Overall, the findings indicate that higher cooperative membership rates are generally associated with higher reported victimization in non-imputed models. However, this relationship weakens—and in one case reverses—under certain imputation assumptions, emphasizing the importance of testing model robustness across multiple specifications and carefully interpreting the results in light of their underlying assumptions.

These results make sense in light of the main finding: the interaction term `PDET` with `log_members_rate` is consistently negative and significant across all models[1]. This sug-

[1]In models where zero imputation is applied, interaction terms are constructed using the zero-imputed version of the variable (e.g., `PDET` × `log_members_rate_zero`). This ensures consistency with the underlying assumption that missing values reflect the true absence of cooperative membership in a municipality. Using the original variable in the interaction while imputing zeros elsewhere would lead to an inconsistent

gests that while higher cooperative membership rates are often associated with increased victimization in non-PDET municipalities, the effect differs notably in conflict-affected municipalities designated as PDET. In these areas, the negative interaction term indicates that the relationship between cooperative membership and victimization is significantly less positive—and in some models, becomes negative. This supports the interpretation that the protective effect of agricultural cooperatives is particularly relevant in contexts of greater institutional fragility and historical exposure to violence, aligning with the broader findings discussed in Chapter 5.

The models using the log-transformed active peasant association rate (`log_rate_pa_active`) and its zero-imputed version (`log_rate_pa_active_zero`) show a high degree of variability across specifications, both in the direction of the coefficients and their statistical significance. This variability suggests that the relationship between peasant association activity and victimization is highly sensitive to model assumptions—particularly those related to how missing data are treated.

In the OLS models, none of the coefficients for peasant association activity are statistically significant, and the direction of association changes across specifications. For example, the relationship between `log_victims` and `log_rate_pa_active` is positive in one model but turns negative when using the zero-imputed version. Similar inconsistencies are observed when the dependent variable is zero-imputed (`log_victims_zero`). In the BE models, all coefficients are also statistically insignificant. Most are positive, except for one specification—where both the dependent and independent variables are zero-imputed—which produces a negative but still non-significant association.

Interaction terms involving peasant association rates also display less stability than those using cooperative membership. While the interaction term `PDET*log_members_rate` is consistently negative and significant across all models, the interactions involving `log_rate_pa_active`

interpretation of the interaction effect. Therefore, each model uses the interaction term corresponding to the specific version of the variable being tested.

are more variable. In the baseline OLS model (with original data), the interaction is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that peasant associations may reduce victimization in PDET municipalities. However, this result does not hold across other specifications. In most models, the direction of the interaction remains negative, but the coefficients lose significance, indicating that the potential protective effect of peasant associations is not robust to changes in data treatment.

These inconsistencies may reflect differences in organizational form, capacity, or visibility between peasant associations and agricultural cooperatives. Cooperatives, which are more likely to be legally registered and institutionally formalized, may have stronger, more measurable effects on violence prevention. In contrast, peasant associations—often more informal or locally embedded—may play a protective role that is harder to capture using municipal-level data. Alternatively, the weaker results may reflect greater underreporting or variation in how peasant associations are documented across municipalities.

Taken together, the analysis reinforces the central finding that agricultural cooperative membership is consistently associated with lower victimization in conflict-affected (PDET) municipalities, as demonstrated by the robust and significant interaction effects. By contrast, the relationship between peasant associations and victimization appears less stable, more sensitive to modeling assumptions, and more context-dependent. These findings highlight the importance of organizational form and local context in shaping the role of rural collective action in peacebuilding and violence prevention.

Appendix C

Third Appendix

C.1 Truth Commission interviews database

The Truth Commission generated a database containing 2,240 anonymized interviews with the following variables:

- **Interview Code (Código de la entrevista)**: A unique identifier for each interview.
- **Number of People Interviewed (Cantidad de personas entrevistadas)**: Indicates the number of participants in each interview.
- **Macroterritory (Macroterritorio donde se realiza la entrevista)**: The broader geographical region where the interview was conducted.
- **Territory (Territorio donde se realiza la entrevista)**: The specific territory of the interview location.
- **Month of Interview (Mes de la entrevista)**: The month when the interview was conducted.
- **Department (Departamento donde se realiza la entrevista)**: The department where the interview took place.
- **Municipality (Municipio donde se realiza la entrevista)**: The municipality of the interview location.

- **Start Year of Events (Hechos, año de inicio)**: The year when the described events began.
- **End Year of Events (Hecho, año de finalización)**: The year when the described events concluded.
- **Sector Identification (Sector con el que se puede identificar las víctimas del relato)**: The sector associated with the victims' narrative.
- **Interview Type (Tipo de entrevista)**: The type of interview conducted (see Table C.1).
- **Transcription Availability (Entrevista transcrita?)**: Indicates if the interview was transcribed.
- **Tagged Interview (Entrevista etiquetada?)**: Indicates if the interview was tagged.
- Variables related to the interest for specific areas, such as:
  - *Clarification (Esclarecimiento)*
  - *Recognition (Reconocimiento)*
  - *Coexistence (Convivencia)*
  - *Non-Repetition (No Repetición)*
  - Gender perspective, psychosocial perspective, life course, and other areas.
- **Mandate Matching (Coincide con el mandato)**: Indicates alignment with specific mandates (e.g., Mandate 12).
- **Anonymized Transcription (Transcripción Anonimizada)**: Indicates if the transcription is anonymized.
- **URL for Transcription (url transcripción anonimizada)**: Link to the anonymized transcription.

Interview Types and Research Nuclei

Table C.1 presents the categories for interview types and research nuclei.

Code	Type	Category	Nucleus Code	Theme
AA	Armed Actors	Individual	Nucleus 1	Democracy and Armed Conflict
CO	Collectives	Collective	Nucleus 2	Responsibilities of the State
DC	Community Diagnostics	Collective	Nucleus 3	Armed Actors and War Dynamics
EE	Ethnic Collective Subject	Collective	Nucleus 4	Economic Dynamics, Displacement, and Conflict
HV	Life Stories	Individual	Nucleus 5	Illicit Economies and Armed Conflict
PR	In-Depth Interviews	Individual	Nucleus 6	Resistance and Transformations for Peace
TC	Civil Third Parties	Individual	Nucleus 7	Impacts on Ethnic Communities
VI	Victims, Families, and Witnesses	Individual	Nucleus 8	International Dimensions and Exile
			Nucleus 9	Society and Culture

Table C.1: Interview Types and Research Nuclei

C.2 Thematic Insights Table

Table C.2: Mapping of Strategic Noncooperation Themes to Relevant Testimonies and Sources

Theme	Description	Relevant Testimonies
Silent Refusal and Spiritual Resistance	Resistance through silence, spiritual conviction, and avoidance of alignment with armed actors.	057-VI-00027..., 088-VI-00014...
Community Rules and Informal Governance	Shared community norms and informal rules to limit presence of armed actors.	647-VI-00037..., 204-CO-00385..., 184-CO-00286...
Protection from Forced Recruitment	Collective efforts to protect youth through relocation, assemblies, and refusal.	150-PR-00189..., 077-VI-00014..., 083-PR-00236...
Grassroots Institutions (JACs)	Function of JACs in organizing resistance, negotiating threats, and setting community rules.	150-PR-00189..., 204-CO-00385...
Cooperatives as Structured Resistance	Tolima cooperatives using traceability to resist armed actors and protect autonomy.	NavarreteCruz2020, Moya2022
Women's Moral Labor	Women's roles in moral care, protection of youth, and symbolic leadership.	Moya2022

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