Learning Exchange Report

Collective Human Rights Protection in Colombia: Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Experiences in the Pacific Region

Mariana Cepeda Villarreal

With a prologue by El Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó

Observatorio de Paz del Foro Interétnico

ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH CENTER

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Cover photo: Participants during the collective protection knowledge meeting held in Cali, Colombia in February 2024.

Photo credit: Mariana Cepeda

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Acknowledgments

About the author

Mariana Cepeda Villarreal is a political scientist from the Universidad de los Andes in Colombia and holds a Master's degree in International Development from the School of International Service (SIS) at American University. Since 2017 she has worked as a researcher for the Accountability Research Center. She has worked in non-governmental organizations and for the Government of Colombia in the formulation and monitoring of public policies on transparency and anti-corruption. She is interested in issues related to transparency and citizen oversight, public sector management, peace building, and ethnic rights.

Summary

In Colombia, social leaders face persistent threats of violence, especially those who represent collective ethnic territories, many of which possess vast natural resources. Threats come in large part from armed actors and from individuals or companies with economic interests (legal and illegal) seeking to occupy the territories.

The Colombian State has legal obligations and public policy commitments to provide collective human rights protection measures, but its actions to implement them are still scarce and insufficient. According to the testimonies of social leaders of ethno-territorial organizations[1] from the Pacific region who participated in the two learnng exchanges that are the subject of this report, the government's protection measures often do not meet the needs of the communities, nor do they fit the context or characteristics of the territories where communities live.

Many ethno-territorial organizations in Colombia have requested collective protection measures from the government via diverse institutional processes that all face similar bureaucratic challenges. They have not seen a coordinated response from the government. The government's approach to providing protection measures involves challenges for the organizations at risk, including a focus on individualized[2] rather than collective initiatives that can protect entire organizations, an emphasis on police/military-style approaches rather than comprehensive protection measures, as well as confusion due to the government's many different and complex bureaucratic processes ("routes") for organizations seeking protection measures. Participants in the learning exchange reported delays and inefficiency in the government's provision of services, as well as a lack of political will to deliver on its commitments.

So far, these ethno-territorial organizations tend to seek governmental protection measures by each following their own routes, without coordinated and sustained joint initiatives to mutually reinforce each other in the face of the same institutional bottlenecks. Among local and national government agencies, there is a widely-held assumption that official protection measures are the exclusive responsibility of just one agency, the National Protection Unit (UNP). In contrast, ethno-territorial organizations call for comprehensive collective protection measures, which would require the intervention of multiple government agencies. The advocacy experience of the Community Council of San Juan (ACADESAN)[3] shows that many other government agencies can indeed commit to providing multiple collective protection measures. However, more than a year after numerous agencies signed commitments, most of their actions have fallen short. This underscores the relevance of ongoing monitoring and advocacy to encourage them to deliver results.

Prologue: Meeting on the humanitarian crisis and institutional measures for collective protection in the department of Chocó

El Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó (FISCH, the Interethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó)

Since the workshops described in this document were held, the humanitarian crisis in Chocó has continued. This crisis involves persistent acts of violence and conflicts over territorial control by illegal armed actors and economic interests, among others. The FISCH team prioritizes creating spaces to talk about lived experiences of the crisis, the dynamics of the conflict and the humanitarian situation, and the ways that these affect the daily life of the communities in the territory. This allows us to also discuss how to strengthen advocacy for the full implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the 2016 Peace Agreement and the Humanitarian Agreement for Chocó Now!

Members of the team at the Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó.

Credit: Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó

In March 2025, thanks to the support of Humanity United, we led a new learning exchange on collective protection, with the participation of senior leaders and representatives of ethnic communities from the five sub-regions of the Department of Chocó, to follow up on the two workshops held during the first quarter of 2024 and reported here.

For more than three decades, together with the ethno-territorial organizations of the department of Chocó, we have been fighting for our rights as ethnic peoples and communities, focusing our work on the protection of our territories and their inhabitants, our autonomy, and the construction of peace. During these years, thanks to our determination and collaborative work, we have obtained important achievements. However, we still have a long way to go.

As FISCH, during this learning exchange, we came to the conclusion that in order to strengthen the government's protection measures we must act collectively as ethnic peoples. This will involve developing coordinated and articulated multilevel advocacy initiatives (local, national, and international) that bring together multiple actors and allies. In addition to making visible the problems and needs of our communities in the territory, we also need to promote concrete actions that generate structural transformations and contribute to the construction of territorial peace.

This implies an effort to strengthen the different grassroots organizing processes through pedagogy, to achieve more impact by building on our past work while adapting to the new dynamics that are emerging in the territory. In this context, it is crucial to strengthen our grassroots leadership and organizing processes, to build respect for the autonomy of ethnic peoples, as well as to preserve our ancestral knowledge and values.

These goals call for a careful review of the different spaces for autonomous dialogue led by the ethno-territorial organizations, as well as their opportunities for dialogue with government agencies at subregional, regional, and national levels which have been created over the years to address violence in the territory. We consider that these spaces for dialogue are not functioning as well as they have in the past. They need to be reactivated and pro-moted, so that they can become operational in addressing the new dynamics and sophistication of the conflict. This discussion at the learning exchange reached a consensus that convening spaces such as the Humanitarian Agreement Now! and the Humanitarian Roundtable of Chocó should continue to be the basis for addressing the humanitarian crisis in Chocó.

Along these lines, this exchange of experiences on collective protection and self-protection measures allowed us to learn from each other about the work carried out by the different ethnic organizations in their territories and how they are facing the crisis. However, we are aware that the experiences presented, such as those of ACADESAN, are not exact models to be replicated. It is more feasible to identify specific elements of each experience, adapting them to the specific needs of each territory.

Another priority that emerged during this exchange was the need to continue working hand in hand with our partners and allies, which include international donor agencies, private foundations, national and international organizations, and the churches, which have been key actors in the construction of peace in our communities. Maintaining and strengthening the support of allied organizations—such as the different agencies of the United Nations system, the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Peace Process (MAPP), and cooperating countries such as Norway—is fundamental to advancing territorial peace.

As several of the participating leaders pointed out, this support in the territory has become even more crucial in view of the current paralysis of international aid, largely caused by the dismantling of USAID, which has left a considerable vacuum in the accompaniment and financing of community organizations in the territory.

Government agencies must go beyond words and follow through on their commitments. For us as convenors and as ethno-territorial organizations, it is important that there is greater state presence and sustained support from national government agencies and oversight bodies. Likewise, it is of utmost importance that mayors take on a more active role in the territories, to comply with their constitutional mandate, and that government agencies coordinate their actions in the territory with each other. On the other hand, although the Colombian government has several policies and programs that support the design and implementation of measures to support collective protection, a comprehensive and differentiated public policy is needed that will put those measures into practice to reach the communities most affected by rights violations and the humanitarian crisis.

From FISCH, we reiterate our commitment to do everything in our power to stop the humanitarian crisis that currently plagues us and to continue contributing to the construction of peace and territorial and ethnic rights in the department of Chocó and in our country. In addition, we reaffirm our commitment to work in coordination with the various social, institutional, and community actors in order to consolidate territorial peace and promote social justice for our communities.

We also make available to all actors involved in the humanitarian crisis the Peace Observatory of the Interethnic Forum, an ongoing collaboration that facilitates dialogue between and for organizations and actors in the territory, as well as monitoring to support efforts to curb the humanitarian crisis and contribute to peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

In Colombia, social leaders face persistent threats of violence, especially those who represent collective ethnic territories, many of which possess vast natural resources. Threats come in large part from armed actors and from individuals or companies with economic interests (legal and illegal) seeking to occupy the territories. Although the Colombian State has the legal mandate and large-scale institutions to provide protection to communities at risk, government agencies continue to operate under a predominantly individualized model—focused on security measures such as bodyguards, armored vehicles, or temporary relocations—rather than the collective protection of affected communities.

A child miner observes the damage caused by illegal gold mining in Mondomo, Cauca, Colombia.

Credit: Josh Rushing, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Historically, the departments of the Colombian Pacific have been highly affected by violence and armed conflict (see Map 1 and Table 1). Despite the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP), the conflict and its effects on the civilian population in the region have increased rather than decreased. The Colombian Pacific region is characterized by its cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as natural resources and biodiversity. It is also the site of territorial disputes between multiple armed actors that have made incursions into collective ethnic territories, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC dissidents, the Gaitanista Army of Colombia, and armed urban organized crime groups, among others.

Map 1. Community councils and indigenous reserves of the Colombian Pacific

COLOMBIA

Pacific
Ocean

Community Councils

Indigenous Reserves

Departments of the
Pacific Region

Main roads

100   0   100   200 km
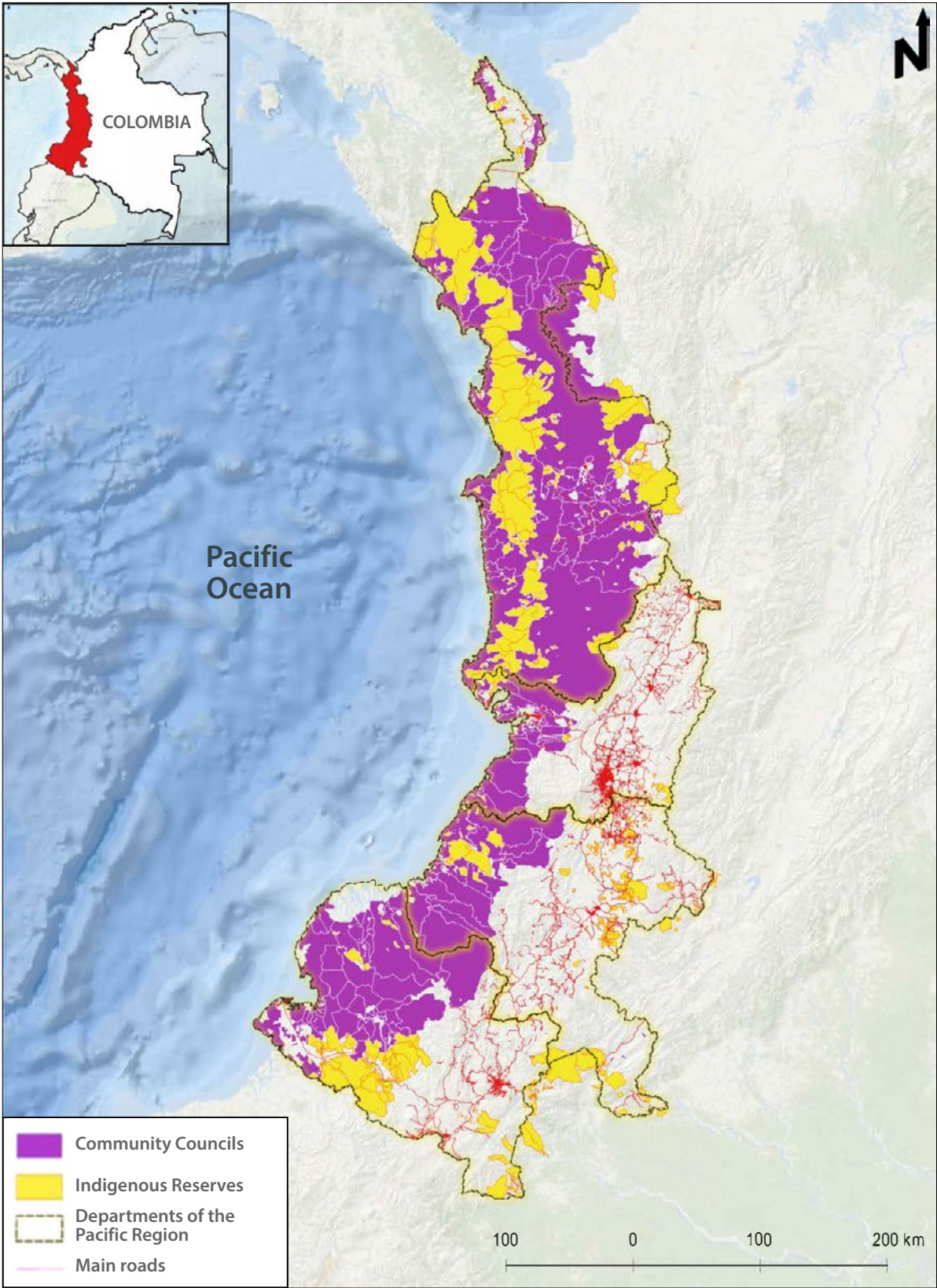
Source: Center for Innovation in Ethnic-Racial, Gender and Environmental Justice (BAOBAB), March 2025.

In response to these challenges, in February and March 2024, two learning exchanges were held in the cities of Cali and Bogotá with the participation of more than 15 ethnic-territorial organizations from the Colombian Pacific (departments of Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca). These participating organizations all have track records both with their own self-protection initiatives[4] and with attempting to engage with government measures to support their collective protection.[5] These learning exchanges were led by FISCH, with technical support from the Accountability Research Center (ARC) of American University and funding from the Ford Foundation and Humanity United. The goal was to create spaces for the organizations to exchange experiences and learning about their different approaches to protecting their territories and communities.

Table 1. Murders of social leaders and human rights defenders and massacres in the Colombian Pacific
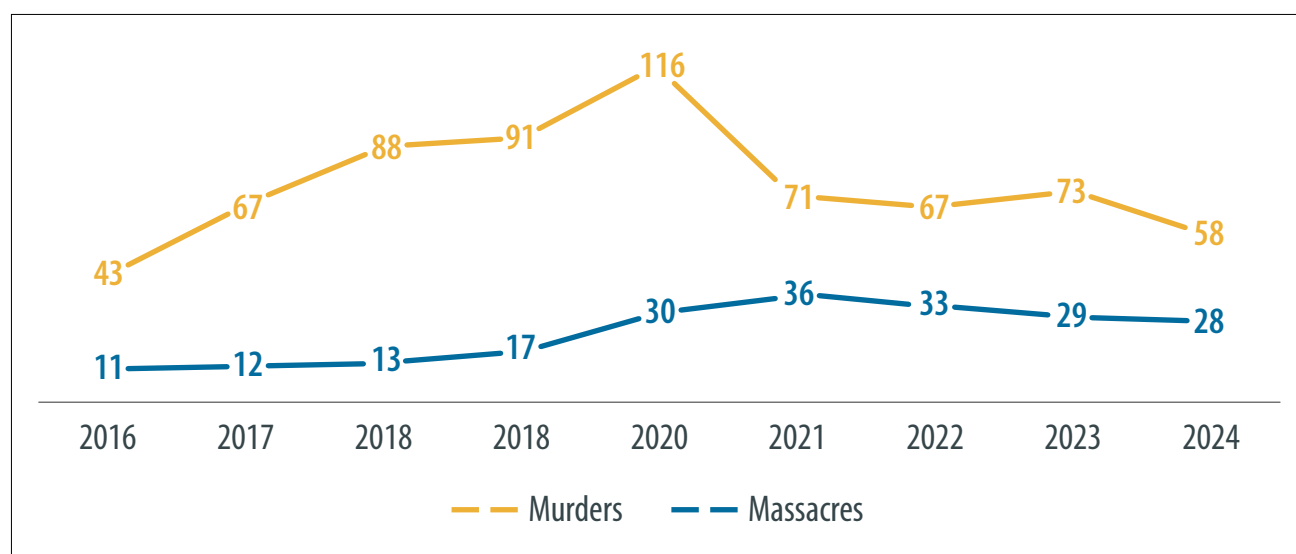
Source: Based on data from the Observatorio de DDHH y conflictividades del Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz-Indepaz, 2023. See: https://indepaz.org.co/observatorio-de-derechos-humanos-y-conflictividades. According to Indepaz, the term massacre is understood as: "the intentional and simultaneous homicide of several people (3 or more) in a state of defenselessness, by the same perpetrator, and in the same circumstances of mode, time, and place."

Note: The departments of the Colombian Pacific region are Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle del Cauca.

It is important to note that of the 1,710 murders of social leaders and human rights defenders that occurred nationally from 2016 to 2024, almost 39% were from the Colombian Pacific (four departments out of 32). Likewise, of the murders of social leaders and human rights defenders in the Colombian Pacific, almost 50% of the victims are indigenous and Afro-descendant people. This demonstrates the level of conflict in the Pacific departments compared to the rest of the country, as well as the impact on ethnic communities.

In terms of forced displacement, according to the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), in 2024 there were 121 events of multiple and mass displacement in Colombia, with at least 49,002 victims nationwide. Of the total number of affected municipalities, 29 belong to the four Colombian Pacific departments. Nariño was the most affected, with 39 events and at least 19,834 victims, corresponding to 32.23% of the national total of events and 40.47% of the national total of victims.

In terms of the number victims of forced displacement, after Nariño, the most affected departments were Cauca (10,043), Chocó (5,700), and Valle del Cauca (4,320).[6] These data show that 81.41% of the number of victims of forced displacement occurred in the four departments of the Colombian Pacific.

On the other hand, in terms of "confinements"[7] (trapped communities), according to CODHES, most of the cases reported in 2024 occurred in the department of Chocó, with 30 events and at least 63,515 victims, which represent 33.33% of the events and 32.49% of the victims in the national total[8]. According to 2024 data from the Peace Observatory of the Interethnic Forum, the causes of confinement in Chocó are: landmines, clashes between the different armed groups, armed attacks, mobility restrictions, and the presence of armed actors. The majority (61%) of these events occurred around the communities of the San Juan river, territory of ACADESAN.

The representatives of the ethno-territorial organizations emphasized the distinction between their own community self-protection practices and the protection measures provided by the government. Government measures have generally been designed for individuals in cities and that do not fit the realities of participants' territories, for example: armored cars (when in reality what is needed are boats); boats not suitable for the rivers characteristic of the region; and bulletproof vests, panic buttons, and bodyguards, among others. In the learning exchanges participants presented a series of proposals that would strengthen the work of national government agencies and improve their current regulations and institutional mechanisms.

This report synthesizes the most relevant points from four days of very rich discussions during these two learning exchanges. It recognizes the valuable work and experience of the different grassroots organizations and seeks to contribute to their national and international advocacy work by informing a broader discussion on self-protection and collective protection at different levels and in different countries. Colombia has a policy framework and important institutional processes to grant collective protection measures, but there have been few opportunities to exchange experiences with their implementation.

The following organizations—most located in the Pacific region—participated in at least one of the two learning exchanges:

- Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC, Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca)—Cauca

- Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC, National Indigenous Organization of Colombia) and Guardia Indígena (Indigneous Guard)—national

- Foro Interétnico Solidaridad por Chocó (FISCH, Interethinc Solidarity Forum for Chocó)—Chocó

- Asociación de Autoridades Indígenas del Bajo Baudó (ASAIBA, Association of Indigenous Authorities of Bajo Baudó)—Chocó

- Coordinación Regional del Pacífico Colombiano (CRPC, Colombian Pacific Regional Coordination)—Pacific Region

- Consejo Comunitario General del San Juan (ACADESAN, Community Council of San Juan)—five municipalities in Chocó and in three in Valle del Cauca

- Consejo Comunitario Cuenca Baja del Río Calima (Community Council of the Lower Calima River Basin)—Valle del Cauca and Chocó

- Consejo Comunitario Renacer Negro (Renacer Negro Community Council)—Cauca

- Consejo Nacional de Paz Afrocolombiano (CONPA, National Afro-Colombian Peace Council)—national

- Consejo Comunitario Yurumanguí (Yurumanguí Community Council)—Valle del Cauca

- Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (COCOMACIA, Senior Community Council of the Atrato Farmers' Organzation)—124 community councils in Chocó and Antioquia

- Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Organización Campesina y Popular del Alto Atrato (COCOMOPOCA, Senior Community Council of the Farmers' and Popular Organzation of Alto Atrato)—four municipalities of Chocó

- Resguardo Musipuru (OREWA, Musipuru Reserve)—Nariño

- Unidad Indígena del Pueblo Awá (UNIPA, Indigenous Unity of the Awá People)—Nariño

- Guardianes del Río Atrato (Guardians of the Atrato River)—Chocó

- Red de Consejos Comunitarios del Pacífico Sur (RECOMPAS, Network of Community Councils of the South Pacific)—Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, and Valle de Cauca

- Consejo Comunitario del Alto Mira y Frontera (Alto Mira and Frontera Community Council)—Nariño

In addition, other allied organizations and entities participated:

- Accountability Research Center

- Ford Foundation

- Norwegian Human Rights Fund

- Norwegian Refugee Council

- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN-OHCHR)

- United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

- Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES, Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement)

- Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos (NOMADESC, Intercultural University of the Peoples)

- Constitutional Court of Colombia

- Vice-Presidency of the Republic of Colombia

During the months prior to the learning exchanges, the FISCH and ARC technical teams held a series of meetings in order to identify the participants to be invited, both grassroots organizations and their allies, taking into account a series of criteria such as background, location, representativeness, affinity, and trust between the social organizations, and whether they had experience with official collective protection measures. They also jointly designed a methodology for the learning exchange which allowed for in-depth conversations, while being careful to avoid sensitive details that could generate additional risks for the participants.

During these learning exchanges it was possible to present the innovative experience of ACADESAN,[9] a grassroots organization that in 2023 managed to reach an agreement with the national government on 50 comprehensive collective protection measures, involving 23 different agencies (culture, health, education, the environment, agriculture, trade, energy, and ICTs, among others). However, despite achieving this comprehensive package of commitments to collective protection measures, ACADESAN faces the challenge of getting the government to deliver on the commitments.

Other ethno-territorial organizations also have important track records in terms of self-protection and have received collective protection measures through different legal and administrative mechanisms. These multiple, disparate "protection routes"[10] are bureaucratically complex and sometimes contradictory. The opportunity for these organizations to share their experiences with self-protection and collective protection informed additional discussions on how to interact with the government and what type of protection measures are possible within the institutional framework.

Box 1. Resources on Collective Human Rights Protection and Advocacy in Colombia

Contraloría General de la República (2024) *Análisis de la implementación de la ruta de protección a grupos y comunidades en riesgo*, Estudio Sectorial

Accountability Research Center (2024) *Tejiendo vínculos entre autoprotección y protección colectiva: la experiencia de ACADESAN en Colombia*.

Amnesty International (2023) *Esperanza bajo riesgo: La falta de un espacio seguro para defender derechos humanos en colombia conntinúa*.

Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (2022) *Garantías de papel: Un análisis sobre las oportunidades de mejora de los mecanismos de prevención y protección en Colombia*.

Pensamiento y Acción Social (2020) *Proteger a los defensores colectivos de derechos humanos, un desafío para las políticas públicas en Colombia*.

Pensamiento y Acción Social (2020) *Un paso adelante en la protección colectiva en Colombia*.

Pensamiento y Acción Social and Protection International (2019) *Política pública de protección para defensores colectivos de la tierra y el territorio: Límites y posibilidades en el posacuerdo*.

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2. Opportunities, strategies, and challenges facing organizations that protect communities and territory

2.1 Opportunities for protecting community and territory

During the learning exchange, participants discussed the opportunities that the different grassroots organizations have had to advance both their own self-protection efforts and the protection measures that government agencies have agreed to provide. The social organizations' capacity to protect themselves draws from their roots in the people, their shared ancestry, and their territory. Participants mentioned some of the following elements:

Collectivity. All of the grassroots leaders affirmed their practice of always acting collectively, grounded in their communities. The stronger the organization, the greater capacity for self-protection.

Leadership. A key element for legitimate leadership is that leaders act in a transparent way towards the communities they represent and communicate the work they carry out beyond the territory. They also stressed that it is important that leadership does not rely on a single person; diversification and the existence of several people with the capacity to exercise leadership within a community is a key self-protection measure for the organization. The presence of women as community leaders—though varied in practice—was also mentioned as a key contribution.

Participants in the Cali learning exchange on self-protection and collective protection.

Credit: Jonathan Fox

Although the role of women has been diverse, it is evident that their defense of life and care has been the basis for the survival of ethnic peoples, their culture, and their sense of belonging. In the case of the Yurumanguí Community Council, for example, women exercise an especially strong, distinctive leadership role, directly facing and dialoguing with armed groups in the territory to protect their communities. Women's dialogue with these armed groups is seen as making negotiations less confrontational, protecting the well-being of the community.

Community spokespersons who engage in dialogue with armed groups do so guided by community principles, acting in defense of those principles and under very clear terms of engagement, with practices that reflect their own organizational approaches which strengthen the autonomy and security of their communities.

Territory. "*One should act in accordance with the idea that the protection of human life cannot be dissociated from the protection of the territory.*" This premise is enshrined in the origin stories of the communities and in the cosmovision of the ethnic peoples. "*We are a people to the extent that we are part of the territory. Without the territory we run the risk of ceasing to be. We are not a people outside the territory.*" Protection and self-protection are understood to be grounded in the territory, where the community's strengths are. That is where the strategies are rooted, and the territory protects them.

"One should act in accordance with the idea that the protection of human life cannot be dissociated from the protection of the territory."
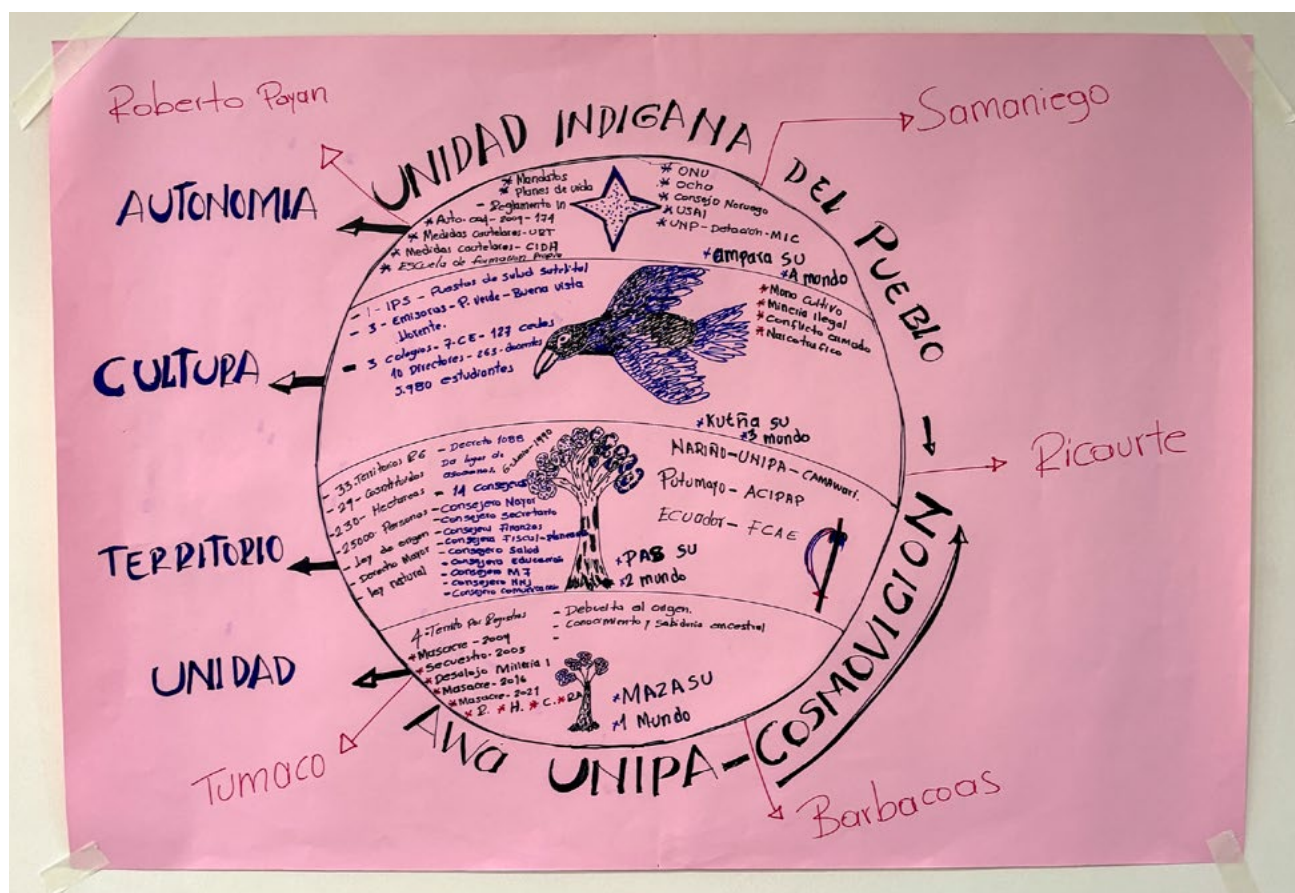
During the learning exchange, participants created wall posters to share their visions, goals, and activities. This poster was created by representatives of the Indigenous Unity of the Awá People.

Credit: Jonathan Fox

Collective self-protection systems. In terms of their own systems, in which traditional medicine and doctors play a fundamental role, spirituality is seen as the basis for resistance and self-protection. Participants stressed the importance of their Life Plans and Ethno-Development Plans, consensual community visions that are key instruments for remaining in the territory since they embody their community visions of development, and their priorities, needs, and aspirations. These plans are management instruments developed by the communities themselves, in order to strengthen their autonomy and cultural identity by addressing issues such as governance, economy, education, health, and territory, among others. Finally, the communities' own legal systems and mechanisms (internal regulations for their own justice) for the self-governance of the territory have protected the organizations and their leaders, serving as the basis for their autonomy.

2.2   Tools for organizers

Indigenous leader addresses the Cali learning exchange on self-protection and collective protection.

Credit: Mariana Cepeda

Historically, grassroots organizers in the Colombian Pacific have used various strategies for the self-protection of their communities and territories. These strategies range from campaigns for visibility and advocacy in response to the armed conflict and humanitarian crisis, to the generation and use of agreed symbols to alert each other to danger. Their strategies respond to the absence or weakness of the State, or complement dispersed government actions measures that do not necessarily correspond to the realities of the territory. One example is the government's distribution of bulletproof vests—one of the main measures UNP uses to provide "protection" to individuals. The vests draw attention to those who wear them, putting them at additional risk. Likewise, the UNP provides leaders with bodyguards, who are sometimes unreliable. In one case mentioned, a bodyguard had left the man needing protection alone and exposed in an urban center far from his community, because their shift was over.

The following are some of the collective self-protection strategies mentioned by participants in the learning exchanges:

- Design and implement "protection routes" (bureaucratic channels for seeking government support) for risks identified in the territory, establishing specific plans on how to act in each of the cases or risks identified.

- To move temporarily in or out of the territory, even though moving out of the territory implies the possibility of losing everything, including the territory itself.

- To bring violence to public attention and try to stop the humanitarian crisis. As an expression of resistance to violence and armed conflict, members of the communities have organized high-profile humanitarian caravans along the Atrato, Baudó, and San Juan rivers, among others.[11]

- Development of riverboat tent caravans to reach communities trapped by conflict with food and basic supplies.

- Use of symbols, such as flags, to enable entry to communities facing serious threats.

- Conduct humanitarian dialogues with armed actors in the territory to save lives.

- Homegrown alert systems, early warnings, and contingency plans to activate urgent protection.

- WhatsApp groups and messages to communicate with community members and alert them about serious situations.

- Indigenous and Maroon Guards.[12] These community protection units are an instrument of ethnic territorial leadership, rather than independent of it. Neither the Maroon Guards nor the Indigenous Guards are *confrontational* bodies. As one indigenous leader explained, "*any type of guard has the common function of caring for human and natural life by peaceful means, within the framework of ancestral knowledge systems and respect for the decisions or mandates of their authorities.*" Although the Indigenous Guard is seen by many as an unarmed community police force, it has incorporated different aspects of territorial defense into its activities, including care for the environment, intergenerational education, culture and spirituality, food and economic autonomy, justice, and catalyzing community networks. The Maroon Guards also allow for collective and organized action in the face of adversity, which strengthens Afro-descendant organizations.

- Community radio stations. In addition to promoting culture and collective identity, community radio stations also disseminate news of what is happening in the territory. They are most important in rural areas where there is little or no phone or internet connectivity. Radio stations are also a fundamental tool that facilitates communication between communities in different territories and contributes to their organizational strengthening.

- Operation of so-called "life centers" that are places or shelters where people can go in the event of death threats, without having to leave their territory.

2.3   Challenges for protecting community and territory

During the learning exchanges in Cali and Bogotá, social leaders discussed challenges that have hindered existing self-protection mechanisms and strategies. These challenges have led to adaptation, but they also show the need for comprehensive collective protection measures that respond to the realities and needs of communities. Comprehensive collective protection measures should support different dimensions of community life (such as culture, education, health, and economic opportunities) in order to prevent and mitigate factors that worsen the conflict and increase the risk that the human rights of community members will continue to be violated.

Some of the difficulties mentioned were:

- Armed groups have strengthened their capacities and innovated their recruitment practices, as well as seeking some level of acceptance from parts of the population. They have increased their offers of money and goods, especially to young people, as a strategy to obtain more followers. In this context, collective protection measures should include strategies that offer young people new opportunities and a vision of the future, as well as strengthening their sense of belonging to the community.

- There has been a weakening of interethnic work in some territories. One participating social leader remarked that: "*sixty years ago we were all brothers in the community with the Afros, now we are not. Today we treat each other as enemies, with suspicion*." The reconfiguration of the armed conflict has led to ruptures in the social fabric, generating high levels of distrust, even within the same families. It is no longer known who belongs to which group or what interests they represent.

An indigenous leader of the Awá people during the Cali learning exchange.

Credit: Mariana Cepeda

- The dynamics of the war and the malfunctioning of the State have led to a weakening of some community organizations, as well as of the productive capacities of some communities—while illegal economies gain ground.

- Removing children and adolescents from the territory to avoid recruitment has meant that the ties between younger generations and the territory are broken.

- Forced displacement to save lives has left territories unprotected.

- Community radio stations have lacked support from the State, despite their importance for isolated communities.

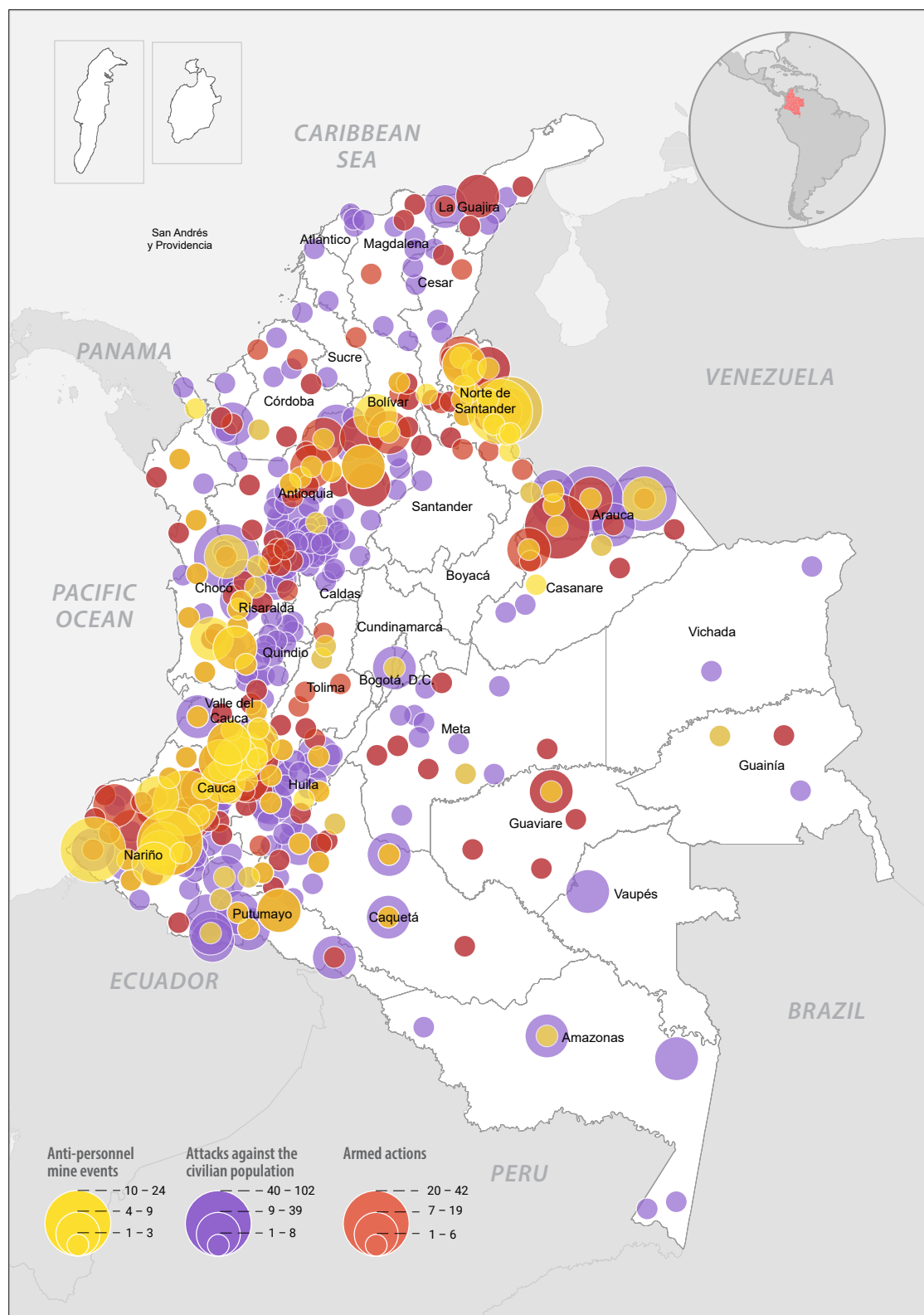**Map 2.** Victims of mass displacement, confinement, and natural disasters.
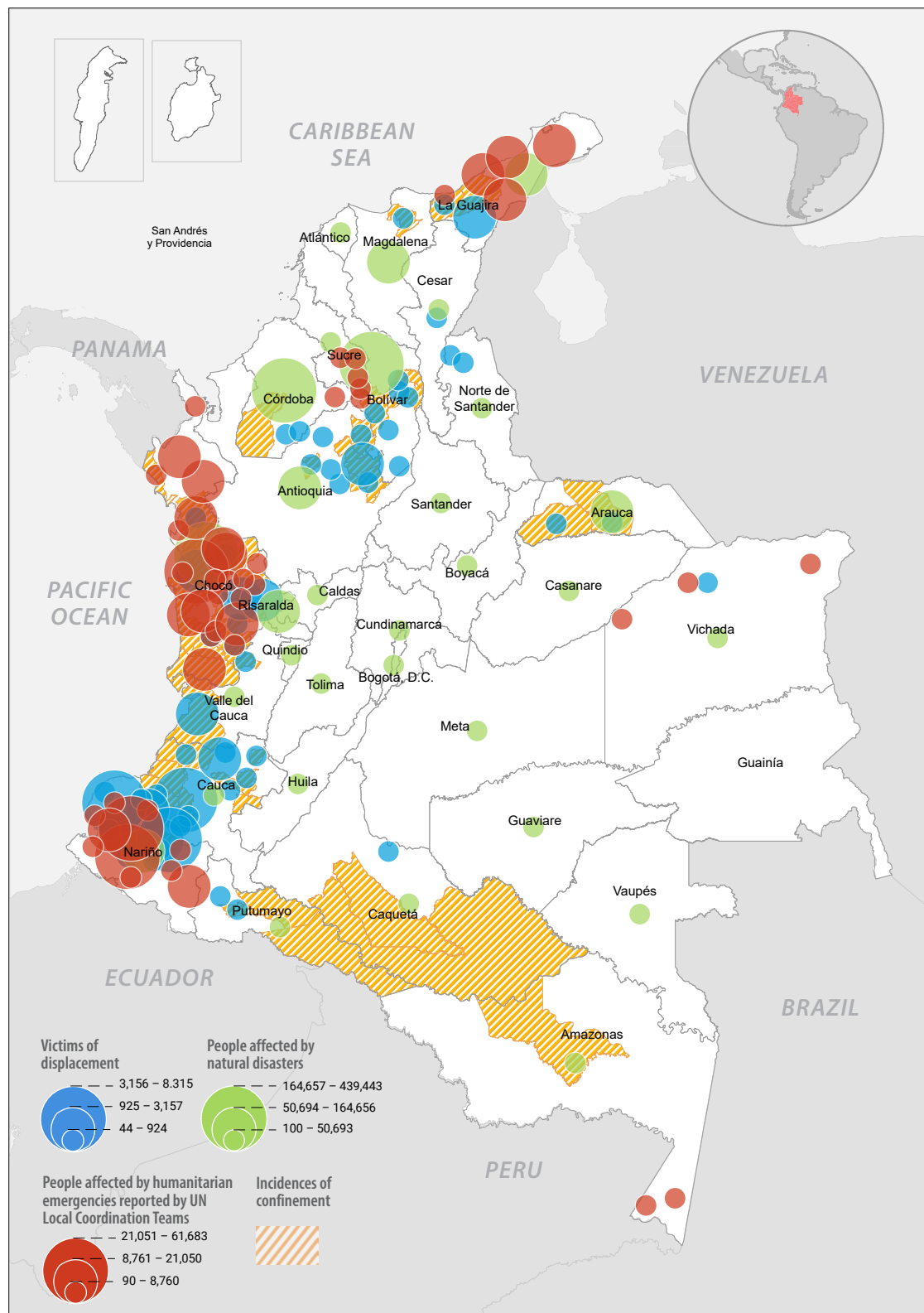
Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2025 (used with permission)

Map 3. Antipersonnel mine events, attacks against the civilian population, and armed actions.

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2025 (used with permission)

3. Main achievements and challenges of the government response

3.1 Achievements

Among their main achievements from following bureaucratic routes to seek collective protection, community leaders cited the delivery of boats to river communities to facilitate transportation and sometimes to escape from situations of imminent risk. The delivery of boats breaks with traditional protection measures provided by the UNP, such as armored cars, which are not useful in riverine communities without passable land routes. However, some participants mentioned that the boats provided were not suitable for the particularities of the rivers—for example, boats designed to navigate calm rivers were given to communities whose rivers are fast-flowing, and vice versa. The biggest problem associated with boats continues to be that in most cases, the government does not guarantee fuel supply or engine maintenance, which severely limits the impact of the measure in communities with high levels of economic vulnerability.

Community leaders also cited another achievement: government funding for the creation of autonomous spaces for decision-making and discussion. They also mentioned that key State institutions, such as the Ombudsman's Office and the Attorney General's Office, have been able to reach the territory. However, they also mentioned that sometimes the institutional presence of military forces, instead of resolving violence or the operation of illegal armed groups as intended, has only increased the conflict, putting communities at risk.

Some participants mentioned the implementation of productive projects intended to replace illicit crops as an achievement of the government's response.

It was also mentioned that government agencies have provided training in the territory on institutional protection routes and care protocols (guidelines designed to safeguard the well-being of at-risk communities), which have been useful for local leaders. However, they mentioned that permanent technical assistance would be more helpful than isolated trainings.

Finally, one of the most significant achievements mentioned, which is not directly related to government agencies, is the presence and support of international organizations in the territory. The communities see these organizations as key allies for collective protection.

3.2 Challenges of government responses

The following challenges in government responses have important implications for institutional arrangements:

- Some participants submitted requests for protection to the UNP that met with no response. This unresponsiveness obliged communities to resort to other measures, such as judicial action, seeking interventions by the Constitutional Court, or approaching other institutions in order to have their request heard. This not only increased the bureaucratic burden for affected communities, but—more seriously—delayed the implementation of urgent protection measures. As a consequence, the vulnerability of the communities at risk was aggravated, leaving them exposed to threats and possible aggressions while their request was being resolved.

Discussion about government collective protection measures during the Cali learning exchange.

Credit: Mariana Cepeda

- Some leaders mentioned that the UNP did not consult with them regarding the protection measures provided. They reported that the UNP staff attempted to impose their conventional measures, without knowing the realities of the territory, the violent context that caused the requests, and without ever having visited the communities. In the words of one representative, "*The UNP seeks to deliver material that it has stored in its warehouses and tends to deny measures that are perfectly functional for the community, such as appropriate boats with fuel and without distinctive signage that generates additional risk.*"

- The UNP interprets collective protection to refer to multiple individual protection measures, without considering whether they are useful or harmful in the territories. Many of the achievements noted by participants have been the result of pressure, legal action, and national and international accompaniment. The UNP has not been able to understand, appropriate, or implement either a differential approach or a rights-based approach.[13] According to a social leader, *"the UNP can only see the physical and the material. They cannot see the cultural and spiritual impacts. The communities have prevention and protection mechanisms with healing rituals for the territory and for conflicts and disharmony. The territory has life and spirit."*

"The UNP can only see the physical and the material. They cannot see the cultural and spiritual impacts."

- Some measures come too late, after people have been killed or have had to leave the territory.

- Some participants alleged corruption in what is done in the name of protection, including UNP contractors (service providers) overcharging for the cost of inputs.

- Some leaders reported that the measures offered by the UNP are not suitable for the conditions and leadership of the territory, including insufficient resources, vests that are the wrong size, cell phones and panic buttons that do not work, and lack of money for fuel. They also mentioned that the UNP's standard measures are not appropriate for rural areas: "*They send or offer them cars when they are river communitie*s." Likewise, bulletproof vests in these communities do not work, they only attract the attention of criminals; radio telephones and panic buttons in rural areas seldom work due to lack of coverage, but when they do, response never arrives because they are in remote areas far from government agencies; armored cars do not work in areas where there are few roads and communities move mainly by rivers; boats without gasoline do not work; bodyguards rarely carry out their mission of protection and sometimes put the people of the communities even more at risk by drawing attention to them, among many other issues.

- Government agencies with protection responsibilities say that the measures requested are not their responsibility. This obliges the applicants to go through the "walk of death," where they have to deal with each agency separately. In the paperwork, the process is delayed: while the measures are in the pipeline, there is often a change in the risk scenario, which implies changes in the measures to be taken.

- According to a delegate of the Guardia Indígena, "*in some resguardos (reserves) they have made progress, but the UNP delegates say for example: 'the training of guards is the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior.' They throw the responsibility between the institutions, and in the end they say that they have no budget. The only thing they do is finance batons, vests, and motors.*"

- Another leader mentioned during one of the meetings that: "*the other thing is the CERREM (a committee in charge of evaluating and recommending protection measures for people at extreme risk) agreement. The people propose things, but the institutions say that this cannot be financed. This model is failing.*"

> *"The people propose things, but the institutions say that this cannot be financed. This model is failing."*

- CERREM includes several government agencies and human rights organizations, but not the effective participation of communities.

- There are failures within the Ministry of the Interior insofar as it does not comply with the function of monitoring and updating risk scenarios for which it is responsible.

- Some participants reported that the mayors' offices do not contribute to the protection of the communities.

- Some leaders reported that there have been cases of sensitive information leaking into the hands of armed actors. For this reason, there is a lack of trust in government agencies providing collective protection, and information is not reported for fear that it will reach the wrong actors.

4. Proposals to strengthen collective and individual protection measures

During the learning exchange, important proposals emerged for key aspects of self-protection and collective protection. During the last day of the second learning exchange, in Bogotá, these proposals were presented to the Vice-Presidency of the Republic, the Ministry of the Interior, the Unit for the Attention and Comprehensive Reparation of Victims, and the National Protection Unit (UNP). Unfortunately, none of these agencies were represented by senior officials, only by advisors without decision-making power.

These proposals go far beyond the traditional policing approach on which the Colombian State has focused for decades. They emphasize the need to see collective protection as something comprehensive, requiring coordinated contributions, actions, and concrete commitments from different government agencies, involving education, health, agriculture, environment, culture, and sports and recreation.

Working group with Afro-descendant and indigenous leaders during the Bogotá learning exchange.

Photo courtesy of FISCH

Some of the proposals put forward were:

a. Move from words to action

The institutions responsible for leading and executing public policies and prevention and protection routes should stop limiting themselves to verbal commitments and focus on effective and appropriate implementation of protection measures. The participants pointed out that commitments to institutional frameworks were only words. Beyond that, there were few actions by the government to implement the commitments. This undermines the trust of the communities, who end up assuming the protection of their territories on their own.

b. Incorporate the following principles in comprehensive collective protection policies:

    iii. Strengthen self-protection systems.

    iv. Focus measures on the territory and on counteracting actions that put communities at risk.

    v. Ensure a comprehensive, urgent, and coordinated response by all national government institutions.

c. **Strengthen self-protection systems**

    i.   Stronger community shelters (construction, adaptation, and operation).

    ii. Promoting food sovereignty and income generation as key preventive measures.

    iii. Allocating direct resources for the creation and sustainability of community radio stations.

    iv. Strengthening the organizational capacity of the communities.

d. **Implement urgent actions to achieve a comprehensive and coordinated response by the State with an ethnic and territorial approach**

    i.   Strengthen ethnic education.[14]

    ii. Recognize and include traditional medicine in public health policies, allocating resources for this purpose.

    iii. Promote cultural actions that keep the territorial identity alive.

    iv. Offer collective protection measures that are consistent with the local context.

    v. Promote sports, especially among young people, as a strategy to prevent illegal activities. This action, as well as the previous ones, contributes to removing members of the communities from illegal activities and helps prevent young people from entering illegal activities.

    vi. Address the structural causes of risk, such as the impacts of industrial mining and mega-projects, to resolve their conflicts with communities and the environment.

These last points are especially important because if the root cause of the problem is not solved and the causes of the risks are not addressed, no protection measure will work on a sustained basis.

e. **Strengthen community councils and indigenous councils**

    i.   Finance the development of technical and operational capabilities of the organizations.

    ii. Support the creation of community leadership schools.

    iii. Allocate resources to forest conservation to curb mining and logging.

    iv. Allocate resources to councils to finance their own initiatives to strengthen the social fabric affected by the conflict.

    v. Support the updating of internal regulations, management plans, and self-justice systems.

f. **Guarantee sufficient and sustainable resources for the future**

Ensure adequate funding in state budgets from 2025 for prevention and collective protection measures.

g. Promote effective community participation

Communities must be protagonists in all stages of the design and execution of public policies, without impositions by institutions, so that government actions reflect their needs and actually reach the territory.

h. Take advantage of Safeguard Plans and Specific Protection Plans[15]

    i. Urgently implement prioritized actions.

    ii. Finance the construction, updating, and implementation of the Life and Ethno-Development Plans.

    iii. Review, in conjunction with the national government, the general methodological route for the Safeguarding Plans.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Working group during the Bogotá learning exchange.

Credit: Mariana Cepeda.

Undoubtedly, Colombia has made greater policy advances in terms of prevention and protection than most other countries. However, in practice it faces multiple challenges for appropriate implementation, which seriously affects ethnic communities. The policies and measures that the government has historically been able to implement are individualized and urban-oriented, and therefore seldom meet the needs of rural ethnic communities. Government approaches to the provision of prevention and protection services should change to a comprehensive approach, involving multiple agencies and aiming to mitigate risks in a sustainable and coordinated manner, while also carrying out immediate actions for effective protection. Likewise, the social leaders who participated in the learning exchanges stressed that international aid and human rights organizations have been key actors contributing to the trajectory and achievements reached in terms of self-protection and collective protection, and that their continued support is essential.

One of the greatest challenges facing Colombian government institutions in terms of prevention and protection is to ensure that public policy incorporates a comprehensive, differentiated, and rights-based approach to the

protection of ethnic communities. The case of ACADESAN and other experiences demonstrate that government support for comprehensive collective protection is possible. The organizations that have succeeded in engaging the government now face the great challenge of monitoring compliance with these commitments and advocating to ensure their implementation.

The ethno-territorial organizations of the Colombian Pacific that participated in the learning exchange have an admirable track record in the implementation of collective self-protection measures and in advocacy for the protection of the human rights of their communities. Continued support for spaces for the exchange of experiences and knowledge about self-protection and collective protection will enrich the initiatives of each organization. Participants agreed that more learning exchanges were needed and expressed the will to design a joint roadmap for advocacy with government agencies. From ARC, we are seeking ways to allow these expressions of intent and resilience to become a reality.

Notes

1   Ethno-territorial organizations are grounded in shared collective identities. They claim or exercise the collective right to govern specific territories that they consider to be their historical legacy. Indigenous and Afrocolombian organizations hold collective titles to extensive territories. Collective territories in the hands of Afrocolombian organizations, indigenous communities, and peasant reserves make up 33.6% of Colombia's land (Instituto Humboldt, 2015. https://reporte.humboldt.org.co/biodiversidad/2015/cap4/406/#seccion4).

2   Individual protection is understood as those state measures to safeguard individuals, as in the case of human rights defenders who face threats due to their activities.

3   See: Mauricio Parra Bayona, 2024, "Tejiendo vínculos entre autoprotección y protección colectiva: la experiencia de ACADESAN en Colombia," Accountability Working Paper No. 13. For a detailed list of Government agency commitments to ACADESAN, see: https://accountabilityresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Anexo-6_04_2024.pdf.

4   Self-protection initiatives are understood as those measures taken by communities and organizations to protect their lives, freedom and integrity, as well as their territories (Parra Bayona 2024, pg. 15).

5   Collective protection are state measures aimed at "reducing or mitigating serious risks to the life, liberty and integrity of collective subjects, which may be communities, groups and organizations of various kinds" (Parra 2024, pg. 17). Collective protection implies the recognition of the relationship between the protection of life, the defense of the territory, and the preservation of the environment through comprehensive strategies such as boats for community transportation, artistic and cultural strengthening, public recognition of the organization, guarantee of basic rights, access to internet and mobile telephony, among others (Parra 2024, pg. 14).

6   INDEPAZ, 2023, "Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Conflictividades de INDEPAZ". https://indepaz.org.co/observatorio-de-derechos-humanos-y-conflictividades/.

7   Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement, 2023, "Report on the Humanitarian Situation in Colombia: 2023". https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hMaSMuy2jqmGWwCA0pGNdaxltjeF3PSe/view.

8   Confinement is understood as: "a situation of violation of fundamental rights, in which communities, despite remaining in a part of their territory, lose mobility as a result of the presence and actions of illegal armed groups. This restriction implies the impossibility of accessing indispensable goods for survival derived from the military, economic, political, cultural, and social control exercised by illegal armed groups in the framework of the internal armed conflict" (Resolution 171 of 2016). See: https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/resolucion00171de24febrero2016.pdf.

9   See: Parra Bayona (2024).

10   Protection routes in Colombia are legal and administrative mechanisms established by the Colombian State to guarantee the security and rights of people who are at risk or vulnerable. There are different routes for different population groups and types of vulnerability.

11   The names of these public awareness campaigns—Atratatiando, Baudosiando, and Sanjuaniando—turn each river's name into a verb.

12   These are local civilian protection units in Colombia that defend indigenous and Afro-descendant communities (*guardias cimarronas*) in response to the need to protect their rights, territories, and culture.

13   The differential approach in Colombia refers to the need for and importance of taking into account the characteristics of particular situations of certain population groups when designing and implementing public policies, programs or initiatives (e.g., taking into account gender or ethnic difference). The rights-based approach is based on respecting and guaranteeing the human rights of the various population groups, according to their specific needs and characteristics.

14   Ethnic education is education offered to groups or communities that form part of the nation and have their own culture, language, traditions, and customs. This education must be linked to the environment, the productive process, and the social and cultural process, with due respect for their beliefs and traditions.

15   Safeguard Plans and Specific Protection Plans are planning and protection instruments that seek to guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero communities. Their purpose is to safeguard the existence, integrity, and rights of ethnic communities affected by forced displacement and at risk of displacement.

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