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Breaking the Cycle: Food Insecurity, Protection and Armed Conflict in Colombia

Introduction

Conflict. Hunger. Protection risks. In Colombia, these three phenomena have been interconnected in a reinforcing cycle for decades. Efforts to address each component of this negative cycle are vital, but approaches are often disconnected, leading to short-term or incomplete solutions. As a result, communities struggle against growing odds to build resilience or stability.

Using participatory methods, a research team led by CARE, the World Food Programme (WFP), and InterAction interviewed 16 focus groups in 2 departments of Colombia to learn directly from diverse perspectives what threats, vulnerabilities, capacities, and risks¹ affected people faced. Though the negative cycle effect was widespread, differences between and within communities meant that often **people experienced armed conflict, hunger, and protection risks in vastly different ways**, indicating that one-size-fits-all solutions won't be enough to bring lasting positive change.

Despite the differences in personal and communal experience of risk, two categories of variables emerged that defined how individuals were affected by conflict, hunger, and protection risks: context-specific conflict dynamics and institutionalized discrimination.

Background

Colombia continues to face challenges stemming from the internal armed conflict that has affected its population for over 60 years and left deep scars in the social fabric of the country. While an official peace deal between the national government and one of the primary armed groups, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), was signed in 2016, demobilization of the FARC and implementation of the deal has been uneven, meanwhile, other armed groups have remained active. Armed groups vary in scope and size, and may exist for political motives, criminal enterprise, or a mix of both. A robust taxonomy of terms has emerged to describe the diverse entities: grupos al margen de la ley, grupos armados, bandas criminales, paramilitarios, clanes. Although the precise number of active groups is difficult to ascertain, recent analysis suggests that there may be as many as 17,600 people who are active members of an armed

group in Colombia.ⁱⁱ

However armed civil conflict is just one of the many complex factors that have fueled humanitarian needs in Colombia, including long-standing socioeconomic inequality, uneven recovery from COVID-19, and the massive mixed migration movements prompted by the crisis in Venezuela. In 2023, WFP estimated that 15.5 million people in the country (30% of the population) are food insecure, of whom 2.1 million are severely food insecure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regional Background

The study was guided by community engagement, using participatory methods to allow respondents the possibility to guide the pathways of investigation and suggest their own solutions. Tibú and Quibdó were chosen for research areas due to their relevance to the research subject, accessibility, and researchers' relationships with communities.

Quibdó: Located near Colombia's Pacific coast, Quibdó is the urban capital of the Chocó department. The city is demographically unique for Colombia, as nearly 90% of Quibdó's 129,000 inhabitants are Afro-Colombian, and about 2.3% are indigenous.^{iv} As a department, Chocó ranks among the lowest in Colombia in terms of human development^v and has historically had a very light state presence: paved roads, hospitals, and schools can be few and far between. WFP estimated in 2023 that about 45% of the region was food insecure.^{vi} Multiple armed groups are active in the rural and urban areas of the region, asserting territorial and economic control through coca production and trafficking, illegal mining, and other illicit activity. In rural areas of Chocó, approximately 5,825 families have reported experiencing "forced confinement"^{vii} – a movement restriction on civilians imposed by armed groups through threat or force.^{viii} In Quibdó, the research group convened focus groups of men, women, adolescent boys, and adolescent girls from Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.



Tibú: Due to Tibú's position on the border, the municipality has increasingly been a crossroads for migrants and refugees from Venezuela, and a strategic operating ground for the various armed groups that have been jockeying for control of the Catatumbo region since the demobilization of the FARC.^{ix} The region has been a coca-growing powerhouse, the UN Office on Drugs and Organized Crimes estimates that there are 42,035 hectares of coca presently under cultivation.^x While Tibú has lower levels of multidimensional poverty than Quibdó (about 18.5% at the regional level)^{xi}, the high levels of food insecurity (40%)^{xii} and the prominence of informal employment in the surrounding region (about 60%)^{xiii} underscores the extreme precarity of communities. The research group worked with focus groups of women, men, and adolescent boys from Tibú, Venezuelan women, and indigenous women and adolescent girls.

Impacts to Food and Protection Depend on Armed Groups' Tactics

While the purpose of the research was not to investigate deeply the capacities or characteristics of armed actors, it was evident that the nature of their tactics and objectives directly shaped experiences and humanitarian needs. The practices of armed groups generally served to limit communities' access – especially marginalized communities like Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups – to the resources necessary for their subsistence. What emerged from participants' accounts, however, was that the implementation of armed groups' practices like extortion, intimidation, and forced recruitment took diverse forms depending on the broader conflict context in their area and therefore led to diverging experiences of food insecurity and protection risks. Understanding this points to the need for all actors working in conflict-affected areas to have a localized, current, and nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics.

For example, in both Tibú and Quibdó, extortion payments (*vacunas*) were noted as a protection risk impacting food security. However, how extortion was levied by armed groups varied and would require vastly different approaches to mitigate (see Spotlight 1). In other words, while we can generalize that there is a negative cycle between conflict, protection, and food insecurity, *addressing* the negative cycle requires persistent analysis of how conflict is being carried out, and its downstream impacts.

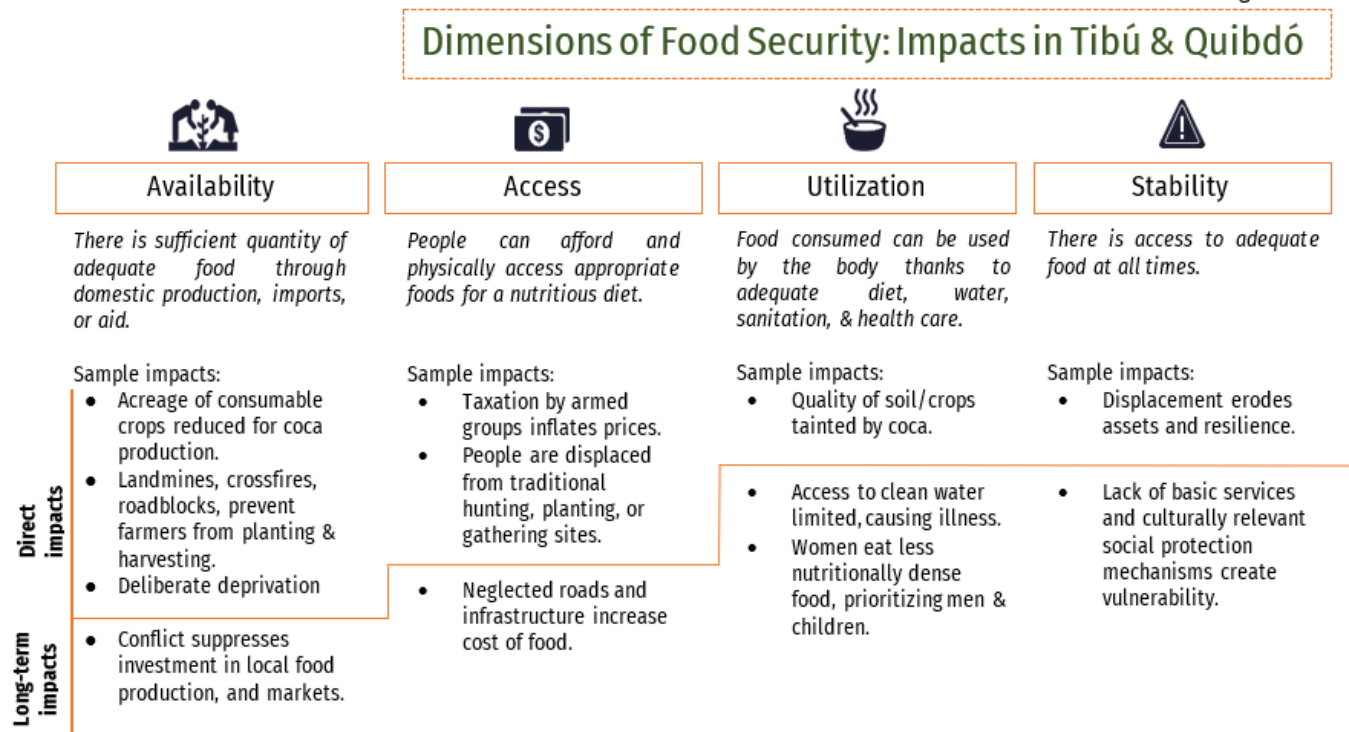
Spotlight 1: Vacunas in Tibu and Quibdo

While “vacunas” (extortion charges) were noted as a risk by participants in both Tibu and Quibdo, it was evident that the armed groups in Tibú and Quibdó took different strategies. In Tibu, *vacunas* would primarily be charged to large businesses and entities which could provide large payoffs to armed groups. In Quibdó, participants described that even the smallest of home businesses or households with visible assets (i.e. motorbikes) might be charged a *vacuna*. In terms of humanitarian impact, the effect of *vacunas* in Tibú was primarily price inflation which participants noted led to more food insecurity and subsequently negative coping mechanisms. In contrast, in Quibdó the levying of *vacunas*, and the implications of not paying, was considered direct protection threat to anyone with a “taxable” resource. One key informant interviewee hypothesized that this differentiation was due to the fact that there was currently more competition for control amongst armed groups in Quibdó which pressured armed groups to demonstrate their power directly to the people.

Breaking the Cycle: Direct and Indirect Impacts of Conflict Dynamics

The stories of participants revealed many direct and indirect ways that conflict shaped humanitarian needs and altered social and cultural dynamics in Quibdó and Tibú. Consistently, respondents shared how conflict’s disruption of agricultural livelihoods and food systems caused reinforcing food insecurity and protection risks. Armed groups’ actions had intentionally and indirectly restricted communities – especially marginalized Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups – access to farmland, fishing areas, and other natural resources essential to the survival of their communities. In addition, the constant fear of violence limited people’s ability to engage in normal economic and cultural activities. In Quibdó a participant described that the high costs of doing business (in part due to extortion taxes by armed groups) were causing more and more food sellers to close shop. As a consequence, there were now fewer people employed, and fewer varieties of food available. In other cases, the influence of conflict was more diffuse, but the impact was nonetheless an inextricable part of participants’ experiences and troubles. In Tibú, participants shared that the prevalence of coca was so common, that coca leaf had become a *de facto* form of currency that people could use to make everyday purchases. However, they shared, that the value of coca had recently depreciated and consequently, it was more difficult for households to afford food.

Figure 1:



Respondents noted impacts of conflict on food insecurity that correspond to each of the four dimensions of food security (see Figure 1). Often the more direct impacts of conflict on food insecurity were also those that carry the most direct protection risks (i.e. landmines versus chronic state absence). Also notable, the most direct impacts typically disrupted the supply side of food systems by reducing availability and increasing costs of food. Examples of direct impacts shared by respondents include:

- Forcibly confining or expelling farmers and community members from their land;
- Intentionally prohibiting access to fields or food gathering sites (deliberate deprivation);
- Crossfires that block access to fields or food gathering sites;
- Laying mines in, near, or on the way to fields or food gathering sites;
- Using coercion or economic pressure to cultivate illicit monocultures (coca, palm);
- Taxing food sellers

Respondents suggested that these actions depressed the quantity and quality of food production in their areas, while also disturbing livelihoods of urban and rural food system workers alike. Indigenous women in Tibú described that the pressure to grow coca not only means there is less cultivable space for legitimate agriculture, but even if coca bushes are replaced, the plant taints the soil for edible crops, spoiling their yield and flavor. In Quibdó, an Afro-Colombian woman remarked that due to mounting conflict-related challenges growers in Chocó have reduced their production, *“Today because of violence, people no longer want to farm.”*

Understanding Threats to Tailor Solutions

Understanding conflict dynamics and threat actors is critical to designing contextually relevant solutions and managing protection risks in conflict settings. While respondents suggested to us that supporting community groups should be a strategy to address protection and food insecurity issues, they also noted that community leaders in both Tibú and Quibdó face extremely high risks of violence by armed actors. In some cases, threats against leaders can arise even when they are engaging in issues that are seemingly unrelated to conflict. One interviewee noted incidents where female community leaders have been threatened or attacked by armed groups because they supported women who had survived intimate partner violence. In these cases, a survivor’s partner or husband had encouraged the armed group to take action against the community leader as a punishment for interfering. Despite these threats, community organizers persist, relying on sophisticated analysis of conflict dynamics and threat actors in their context to continue their work.

Displacement is Both a Coping Strategy and a Catalyst for Food & Protection Needs

If any one factor could be called a common denominator in participants’ experiences, it was the fact that the crisis had displaced people from their past livelihoods, fields, and traditional food sources, forcing them to rely on markets they were not prepared to earn in, and/or that were ill-suited to absorb them. This commonality among participants is part of a larger trend – there are over 6.8 million internally displaced people and 3 million migrants with the intention to settle in Colombia^{xiv} – but it is also a consequence of the fact that protection risks made it difficult for researchers to safely reach and engage populations in the most conflict-affected areas. For the participants spoken to in this research, the conflict created physical and psychological trauma, eroded participants’ assets and coping abilities, and ultimately forced them from home into perilous conditions of displacement.

Those who were displaced from rural settings to urban areas expressed strong anxiety that they were now forced to purchase all food items whereas in the past they could farm, gather, or hunt at least some of their diet. However, they had no training or experience to help them secure jobs in the city and therefore felt they had few livelihood prospects. For indigenous people, the effects of displacement were noted as particularly dire. Participants explained that conflict-induced displacement from their ancestral lands and livelihoods entailed great, even generational trauma. In new urban environments, there were countless struggles to adapt which ranged from the quotidian – such as not recognizing or knowing how to prepare the food offered in stores – to the existential such as having no access to services in their language. Furthermore, key informant interviewees estimated that indigenous communities' strong attachment to their ancestral lands meant that they were more likely to resist displacement and would consequently weather more extreme forms of deprivation or risk. This implies that indigenous people who are displaced have even fewer remaining assets and positive coping strategies available to them.

Spotlight 2: Labor Exploitation in Quibdo

Indigenous women in Quibdo described that one of the biggest risks their community faced in the city was labor exploitation. Men would take on dangerous jobs with poor conditions – in these cases the situation was so severe that men could be killed or disappeared, never to be heard from again. This loss would cause women to have to adopt a range of high-risk coping strategies in order to continue feeding herself and her family.

In our analysis with participants, they identified that one of the core causes of labor exploitation was the fact that conflict had displaced families from their homes and their agricultural livelihoods. In the cities, there were few attainable prospects for livelihoods or education, especially since pervasive discrimination further limited opportunities for indigenous people. It was the confluence of these factors – conflict, displacement, discrimination and lack of opportunities – that were the root causes exposing indigenous men to protection risks associated with labor exploitation.

However, there were also those who had been displaced from urban areas, such as Venezuelan women. In their cases, they noted that although they had jobs and training in Venezuela, in Colombia it was difficult to secure formal employment or to obtain credit to open their own businesses. This difficulty was further amplified if they didn't have a regular migration status. Moreover, years of living through economic collapse in Venezuela had exhausted their assets. This forced some to rely on predatory creditors, a coping strategy that could temporarily improve access to food but also represented a potential protection risk as well.

Structural Discrimination Leads to Inequal Impacts, Especially Post-Displacement

Although conflict-induced food insecurity affected everyone contacted in this study, gender, ethnicity, and age significantly impacted the nature of protection risks that people faced, the coping strategies available to them, and their food insecurity situation. While conflict had the most salient and direct impact on food availability (and to some degree access), identity factors – or namely the discrimination and inequality prejudiced on certain identity factors – appear to be the most prominent factors shaping participants' access to food or livelihood sources post-displacement. The tables below map the protection risks that were directly referenced by research participants, and who they identified as vulnerable to each category of risk. While at times respondents noted unique impacts on men and boys, they more frequently recognized the differential impacts faced by women and girls of all ethnicities and nationalities. They drew connections between women's child-care role, the dire food insecurity situation, and women's disproportionate vulnerability to gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

Figure 2:

Protection Risks & Affected Groups, According to Respondents

In groups, respondents identified different protection risks that people in their community faced. In some cases, these risks were experienced directly by a respondent, in other cases they were observed or supposed.

Quibdó								
Protection risks	Indigenous Communities				Afrocolombian Communities			
	Adolescent boys	Adult Men	Adolescent Girls	Adult Women	Adolescent Boys	Adult Men	Adolescent Girls	Adult Women
Abusive/deadly labor exploitation	X	X						
Threats by armed groups	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sexual Violence			X	X			X	X
Forced Recruitment		X			X		X	
Crossfires					X		X	
Extortion						X		X
Intimate partner violence			X	X			X	X

Tibú						
Protection Risks	Adolescent migrant girls	Adolescent boys	Adult migrant women	Adult Men	Adolescent indigenous girls	Adult Indigenous Women
Abusive/deadly labor exploitation	X		X			X
Murder or threats to community leaders	X		X	X	X	X
Threats by armed groups	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sexual Violence	X		X		X	X
Sex for Survival	X				X	
Forced Recruitment		X		X		

Respondents explained that a culture of inequality and discrimination perpetuated the differential impacts. Often this discrimination takes place based on an individual’s identity characteristics like gender, nationality, class, or ethnicity. Venezuelan women noted that they would be paid less than Colombians for the same work. However, participants also noted the structural power of discrimination to affect food security and protection impacts beyond individual characteristics. Adolescents in Quibdó assessed that prejudice against the ethnic, class, and social make-up of the Chocó region resulted in fewer investments in employment, education, or development for their area. They explained that since conflict and corruption suppress local production, food must be shipped to Quibdó from elsewhere in Colombia, and due to poor regional infrastructure when food arrives it is expensive and spoiled.

Spotlight: Vulnerability in Family Settings

Several protection risks were described by respondents as primarily affecting men and boys such as deadly labor exploitation or forced recruitment. However, when these protection risks harmed men, it also impacted their family’s vulnerability, often because it reduced the income potential of a crisis-affected household. For some widowed, abandoned, or single women, they described that the pressure and difficulty to provide food for their children was so dire that they considered suicide. In this context, it is no surprise that respondents drew a connection between single motherhood and high-risk coping strategies like informal employment, sex work, or begging. Women’s strategies in turn created vulnerabilities for children: the lack of safe childcare options in Tibú and Quibdó meant that mothers had to leave their children home alone while they left to take on the dangerous work.

Even where individual characteristics like age or gender were the determinant of protection risks, these vulnerabilities and effects did not stay contained to one person. Rather they were interrelated, especially in family systems, where identity-based risks that initially only affected men could in turn impact the protection or food insecurity needs of women, and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

In Quibdó and Tibú, people shared with us their individual stories, instructing us on the unique ways that armed conflict, food insecurity, and protection risks have shaped their lives. While no two experiences were alike, what emerged was a consistent picture of a negative cycle that had trapped individuals, families, and communities. While these respondents lived in areas that have historically received aid and peacebuilding support, the scale of the cycle is continually diminishing the impact of individual interventions.

Two categories of variables, conflict dynamics, and structural discrimination, consistently influenced how the negative cycle played out in respondents' lives. Combined, they imparted a range of vulnerabilities, capacities, and risks that affected or aided participants at various periods in time, most notably compelling their displacement and shaping their access to resources and support once displaced. Our sessions with respondents underscore the ability of communities to analyze their own situation and propose constructive solutions – often solutions different than the business-as-usual approaches that dominate the aid sector. People in Quibdó and Tibú emphasized approaches that focused on institutional changes and long-term resilience, such as promoting urban gardening or improving access to equitable education opportunities for ethnic minorities. Communities predicted that the measures below could help alleviate the protection risks, including the risks associated with food insecurity, that they presently face. Such ideas provide entry points for actors across the triple nexus to work with affected people - including with community members who have been marginalized due to gender ethnicity, displacement status or other characteristics – on transformational and equity-based solutions.

Strategies and suggestions for addressing protection risks	
Category	Sample actions proposed by communities
Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide support and inputs for collective home gardens and other agricultural activities. - Promote microenterprises for planting. - Support for the provision of supplies and support for urban gardens (such as fences). - Promote beekeeping.
Livelihood Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving access and availability of quality and affordable childcare facilities - Access to courses to develop income-generating skills - Furnish supplies to help people start small businesses - Improve access to credit - Regulation of informal work and access to workers' rights
Safety and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating/strengthening community networks. - Support capacity building and self-esteem of the leaders of community groups. - Chat groups - Block-by-block community surveillance.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment in culturally-relevant education for ethnic communities - Increase equitable access to higher education centers.

Recognizing and integrating context-specific conflict and structural discrimination analysis is an essential task for any actor in Colombia trying to reduce the impacts of conflict on food insecurity and protection. Moreover, these categories imply the importance of coordination between diverse actors as they deal with issues along the entire spectrum of the triple nexus from real-time conflict impacts to the equitable enrichment of key institutions. Stronger information sharing and joint action between state entities, community leaders, peacebuilders, humanitarians, and development actors will be vital to breaking down the negative cycle.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ World Food Programme. 2023. “Food Security Assessment for the Colombian Population.” <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/food-security-assessment-colombian-population-colombia-may-2023>.
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- ^v Global Data Lab. “Colombia Subnational HDI.” <https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/table/shdi/COL/?levels=1+4&years=2021&extrapolation=0> (December 11, 2023).
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