MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

MEAC FINDINGS REPORT 50

Persistent Insecurity Challenges Impacting Defection Pathways Out of Armed and Criminal Groups in Colombia

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This report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); UNICEF; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations (DPPA-DPO); the World Bank; the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience in the Lake Chad Basin; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the United Nations and its partners.

About this Report

In light of persistent insecurity in Colombia, this report analyses the security challenges faced by ex-members of dissident and criminal groups participating in the Differential Assistance Process who have defected and are working to transition to civilian life and examines how these challenges impact their progress. Based on MEAC surveys conducted with this population and on complementary sources, the report highlights that differential assistance participants continue to face direct security threats, placing their physical safety at risk while simultaneously exacerbating their economic vulnerability. Additionally, participants have a lack of certainty about their legal benefits and obligations, which can heighten the risk of being detected by

armed and criminal groups. These overlapping challenges complicate participants' willingness to abandon illegal activities and surrender to the law under the criminal justice system, and in some cases, it may even increase the risk of them abandoning the Differential Assistance process altogether.

The original research featured in this report was made possible by the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ARN by its Spanish acronym) in Colombia. The partnership between the MEAC project and the ARN was born out of a shared desire to identify areas where existing programming could be strengthened to better support sustained and successful transitions to civilian life. This was not designed to be an assessment of the processes managed by the ARN, but rather a study of the lived experiences of ex-members of armed and organized criminal groups who are now participating in the Differential Assistance process managed by the ARN.

To build on the successes and address the challenges faced by those trying to transition to civilian life identified herein, the report offers suggestions to strengthen support mechanisms and reduce cycles of recurring violence and criminality. The findings provide valuable insights for practitioners designing and implementing DDR-like approaches for former members of armed and organized criminal groups both in Colombia and in other contexts where criminal activity and armed conflict are deeply intertwined.

Context

Criminal Groups and their Threat to Peacebuilding in Colombia

There are two types of criminal groups[1] recognized by the Colombian government: Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) and Organized Criminal Groups (GDOs).[2] These categorizations acknowledge differences in these groups' structure, strategies, and level of violence. Organized Criminal Groups (GDOs) generally consist of smaller, lower-capability structures with limited territorial and operational reach and fall primarily under the responsibility of the National Police. In contrast, Organized Armed Groups (GAOs) exert greater territorial control, possess higher levels of military capacity, and are confronted by the Armed Forces. This report

[1] According to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), an organized criminal group is "a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit".
[2] This classification was established by the Colombian Ministry of Defence in 2016.

mainly focuses on GAOs, as they are generally bigger, exert control over significant portions of territory, and constitute major spoilers to peace.

After the demobilization of 31,671 combatants from the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), the largest paramilitary coalition in the country's history, in the 2000s, a series of GAOs emerged.[3] Some former leaders of the AUC re-organized into new groups after demobilizing in order to seize control of illicit economies, which sparked a new wave of insecurity and violence.[4] Among the most notable groups formed during this period are the "Pelusos," the "Caparros," and the "(a)Ejército o Autodefensas Gaitanista de Colombia" (EGC).[5]

Other GAOs[6] emerged as a result of the 2016 Peace Agreement with the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP), which led to the demobilization of the guerrilla group after nearly 60 years of conflict. Elements of the FARC-EP disagreed with the Agreement and vowed to continue fighting, leading to a reconfiguration of the internal conflict. The Estado Mayor Central (EMC) is the largest and most influential FARC dissident group,[7] even after it fragmented into different factions in 2025.[8] In 2019, an ex-commander of the former FARC-EP known as Iván Márquez announced the creation of another dissident group known as the Second Marquetalia.[9] The EMC and the Second Marquetalia quickly became enemies, fighting over territory and illegal economies.[10]

In some cases, groups that were initially recognized as armed insurgent groups have, at different moments, been recategorized as criminal. For instance, the National Liberation Army (ELN), a left-wing guerrilla group formed in the 1960s whose goal is to install a new State model based on Marxist-Leninist ideals,[11] was long considered an armed insurgent organisation rather than a criminal group, due to its political discourse, territorial control, and participation in multiple attempts at peace negotiations with the Colombian Government. However, in 2019, following a car bomb attack on the General Santander Police Academy, former President Iván Duque reclassified the ELN as a criminal organisation, marking a deliberate shift in the state's

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[3] BBC News, "Los grupos armados que están ocupando los territorios abandonados por las FARC en Colombia", 20 July 2017.
[4] Alta Consejería Presidencial para la Reincorporación, "Proceso de paz con las autodefensas", n.d; BBC Mundo, "Denuncian rearme paramilitar", 5 February 2007.
[5] Also known as Clan del Golfo.
[6] Note that the Colombian Ministry of Defence formally refers to these groups as GAO-R (Organized Armed Groups - Residuals).
[7] Kyle Johnson, Angela Gómez, Angela Aguirre and Daniel Albarracin, "Disidencias de las FARC-EP: Dos caminos de una guerra en construcción - Parte 1" (Bogotá, Conflict Responses, 2024).
[8] This fragmentation has intensified violence and confrontations between rival factions for the control of land linked to drug trafficking, illegal mining, and other illicit economies.
[9] Javier Cárdenas, Cristal Downing, Kyle Jonhson, Angela Olaya, and Juanita Vélez, "Perceptions of FARC Dissident Groups in Colombia: Implications for Future Peace" (New York, United Nations University, 2022).
[10] Johnson et al., "Disidencias de las FARC-EP: Dos caminos de una guerra en construcción - Parte 1".
[11] The group is known for its anti-imperialist stance and its requests for radical State reforms.

military and legal strategy.[12] This reclassification was intended to delegitimize the ELN as a political actor and emphasise the group's engagement in drug trafficking and other illicit economic activities, thereby justifying its treatment under criminal legislation rather than conflict-resolution approaches (and thus ending peace talks).Today, the group has once again been recognized as an armed political organisation with the goal to resume peace negotiations. Nevertheless, the military continues to designate the ELN as a GAO so that it can take concrete military measures to combat and weaken the group.[13]

In recent years, GAOs have been shaped by internal divisions and fragmentations, as well as shifts in their illegal economies, their relationship with the armed conflict, and the State. GAOs are often composed of many individuals, are organized in some kind of hierarchical way, and are engaged in the permanent or continued execution of punishable conduct.[14] Although GAOs are not as ideologically driven as previous armed groups such as the FARC-EP, they still display political characteristics, including exercising governance over parts of the territory. GAOs are mainly focused on territorial control and illicit economies that range from drug trafficking to illegal deforestation,[15] mining, and possibly even the traffic of persons.[16] They often commit violence against the civilian population, the government, and its armed forces, which include homicides, kidnappings, extortion, and the forced recruitment of children and youth.[17] Currently, they operate in most of the national territory and some even have presence in neighbouring countries, such as Venezuela.[18]

The Colombian experience with hybrid groups, and its efforts to address them through classification, conflict resolution and military strategies, and defector programming highlights the complexity of adapting responses to address the nuances of violent groups that are entrenched in conflict-related economies. The urgency in addressing the presence of these groups is evidenced in Colombia, given that they continue to undermine the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement, as well as security and peacebuilding efforts more broadly. Given the interconnectedness between crime and conflict,[19] any strategy must therefore be grounded in a clear understanding of this crime–conflict nexus to ensure the effectiveness and

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[12] BBC News, "Qué se sabe del ataque contra una base militar y el derribo de un helicóptero de la policía que dejaron al menos 19 muertos y decenas de heridos en Colombia", 22 August 2025.
[13] Consejería Comisionada de Paz, "Comunicado N°5", Statement made on the 25th of February 2023.
[14] Colombia, LEY 2272 (2022).
[15] Juanita Vélez, Ángela Aguirre, Sofia Rivas, Siobhan O'Neil, "Armed Group Responses to Climate Shocks: A Study of FARC-EP Dissident Activities in the Colombian Amazon During an El Niño Year," Findings Report 43, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2025.
[16] BBC, "Los grupos armados que están ocupando los territorios abandonados por las FARC en Colombia".
[17] Ibid.
[18] Diario las Américas, "Denuncian presencia de grupo armado colombiano en Venezuela", 29 Junio 2021.
[19] Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), DDR and Organized Crime, 2021.

sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives.[20] Any lessons drawn from this context may therefore offer valuable lessons for practitioners operating in comparable environments.

The Differential Assistance Process for Criminal Groups

Colombia has sought to confront the threat posed by organized criminal groups through various strategies, including various DDR-like initiatives that provide individuals with a pathway to exit these organizations, some of which are still fighting. In 2020, Decree 965[21] established measures to encourage individuals to defect from criminal groups. It established the Differential Assistance process, which consists of two phases: the first involves the formal submission to the Colombian State, - surrendering, being assessed for criminal responsibility, and demonstrating their willingness to abandon illegal activities - and the second focuses on supporting defectors in their transition to civilian life. The second phase is managed by the Colombian Agency for Normalization and Reincorporation (ARN),[22] the government institution responsible for Reintegration (AUC, other groups) and Reincorporation (FARC-EP) processes. The process seeks to support defectors' "transition to legality through a process of submission to the law"[23] by providing support that can last for up to seven and a half years.[24] Each programme participant is assigned an ARN professional that will manage their case and provide socioeconomic, psychosocial, educational, and other forms of assistance[25] to support them in their transition back into Colombian society. Some types of support are managed directly by the ARN (e.g., cash transfers) while others are implemented by referred providers (e.g. health care). According to the Ministry of Defence, approximately 2,245 individuals have officially defected from criminal groups,[26] out of which 1399 are currently active in the ARN process.[27]

Broadly speaking, the Differential Assistance process differs significantly from previous demobilization and reintegration processes implemented in Colombia. The earliest of these processes—commonly referred to as Reintegration—was designed to receive former members of a range of armed groups, including the ELN, defectors of the FARC-EP (prior to

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[20] Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), DDR and Organized Crime, 2021.
[21] Presidencia de la República, "Decreto 965 de 2020", (Colombia, Julio 2020).
[22] See: ARN page.
[23] Ibid.
[24] ARN,"¿Qué es la atención diferencial?", n.d.
[25] La Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación Internacional de Colombia, "Fortalecimiento de capacidades institucionales y personales en procesos de reintegración de excombatientes a la vida", 2021.
[26] Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, "Datos y Cifras" (Colombia, September 2025).
[27] Information gathered directly from the ARN in December 2025.

the 2016 Peace Agreement), and the AUC. A more recent process, known as Reincorporation, was launched in 2017 and is specifically aimed at former members of the FARC-EP who demobilised under the 2016 Peace Agreement. This collective process of laying down weapons is grounded in transitional justice mechanisms and aims to promote long-term socioeconomic and political inclusion. Taken together, these approaches illustrate Colombia's differentiated responses to armed actors, which distinguishes between individual and collective pathways out of armed groups.[28]

Total Peace: Opportunities and Challenges

The Differential Assistance process gained renewed public relevance with the launch of the Government's Total Peace policy in 2022.[29] Total Peace opened the door to different kinds of talks between the state and GAOs. Ultimately, these Total Peace dialogues may pave the way for collective submission processes.

The government has established two pathways for conducting these talks: formal negotiations with GAOs recognized as having political orientations, and sociolegal dialogues with those identified as more criminally oriented and operating mainly in urban areas. Negotiations have taken place with different GAOs, including a faction of the EMC, the General Staff of Blocks and Front (Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frente EMBF), the Coordinadora Nacional Ejército Bolivarianos CN-EB (a faction of the Segunda Marquetalia), Comuneros del Sur (a dissident group of the ELN), and the ELN.[30] These negotiations are currently at different stages. On the other hand, five sociolegal dialogues have been established with more criminally oriented GAOs, such as the EGC (or Clan del Golfo), the ACSN (Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada), and with different criminal urban groups in Medellín, Buenaventura, and Quibdó. Finally, the government is also exploring the viability of opening new sociolegal dialogues in Barranquilla, Tuluá, and Barrancabermeja.[31] Since the start of the negotiations in 2022, several groups have withdrawn from these talks (although some have later returned).[32]

Although Total Peace is regarded as ambitious and innovative for offering GAOs the possibility to demobilize through peace talks — thereby challenging the false dichotomy between what is considered "political" and "criminal"— it has also faced widespread criticism. It has been criticized for its weak legal framework and the lack of transparency surrounding its objectives

[28] Cristal Downing, Javier Cárdenas, Kyle Johnson, Angela Olaya, Juanita Vélez and Sofia Rivas, "The Evolution of Inclusion: Three Decades of Policies and Programmes to Manage Exits from Armed Groups in Colombia" (New York: United Nations University, 2021).
[29] Total Peace converted the search for peace into a State policy to ensure its sustainability over time.
[30] Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, "Peace Dialogues", 2025
[31] Knowledge stems from CORE's analyses and work.
[32] Insight Crime, "Estado Mayor Central – Disidencias de las FARC", 14 June 2024.

and the progress being made with talks.[33] Armed groups involved in the process have also been accused of exploiting the talks—particularly ceasefire arrangements—to consolidate territorial control and strengthen their operational capacity.[34] Total Peace has also been criticized for rewarding actors who rejected earlier peace agreements, thereby undermining those agreements and potentially incentivising continued criminality.[35]

The Differential Assistance process and Total Peace represent complementary tools that aim to tackle criminality and reduce violence. In their respective goals, both have faced challenges in implementation due to ongoing insecurity.[36] The issue of how to effectively handle GAOs and GDOs will likely be a key issue in the presidential elections in 2026. In light of potential new policies and other adjustments the upcoming government may adopt to face criminal groups, it is important to examine current practices that have been employed to manage these groups. To that end, this report examines the Differential Assistance process and a range of challenges—particularly those related to security—that hinder the successful transit to civilian life of former GAO members. A clear understanding of these challenges is essential for addressing them effectively and bolstering the impact of DDR-like approaches and peacebuilding strategies in Colombia as they are applied to different types of hybrid armed actors. It is important to acknowledge that irrespective of insecurity, making the shift to civilian society after being involved with an armed or criminal group is difficult for many ex-combatants. Their education or work experience, relationships and social networks, and their physical and mental health were all affected by their time with an armed actor. Thus, medical care, housing access, and education and skills training are all important areas of support in and of themselves, but ex-combatant needs in these areas are exacerbated by insecurity. For example, security threats directly impact participants' mental health and physical safety, and their efforts to protect themselves force them to move around or avoid going out, undermining their ability to maintain a stable home and/or a reliable source of income. As such, support in these spaces requires further prioritization and possibly adaptation to address the compounded needs of ex-combatants who are being threatened with violence or targeted for re-recruitment.

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[33] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, "DDR and Organized Crime: Standards for peace operations in organized crime–conflict contexts", 22 February 2021; Johnson et al., "Disidencias de las FARC-EP: Dos caminos de una guerra en construcción - Parte 1".
[34] Vélez et al., "Armed Group Responses to Climate Shocks".
[35] CNN Colombia, "¿Qué es la "paz total" que propone Petro y qué grupos armados han mostrado interés en acogerse?", 27 October 2022.
[36] Global Initiative, "DDR and Organized Crime".

Methodology

The findings presented in this report draw on multiple sources, including extensive desk research, primary data collected through two rounds of surveys conducted with participants in the Differential Assistance process (conducted with the Conflict Responses Foundation, CORE), as well as observations made by the research team during the fieldwork process.[37] The first round of surveys took place in 2022,[38] shortly after the launch of the process, and included 50 participants—representing nearly the entire differential assistance population at the time—across three locations: Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali.[39] The second round of surveys was carried out in 2025, by which point the Differential Assistance process had expanded in both size and scope. In 2025, there was a total of 1,399 active participants in the process, of which the MEAC team surveyed 102 participants[40] across four locations: Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Cundinamarca.[41] This sample[42] is composed of 79 per cent men, and 20 per cent women, generally reflecting the uneven gender distribution of the Differential Assistance process.[43] The average age of survey respondents was 29 years old.[44] Most respondents resided in an urban (87 per cent) rather than a rural area (12 per cent). The findings presented in the following sections are derived from the analysis of summary statistics produced after cleaning and analysing the data. It has to be noted that this analysis is based on a limited sample size, and that the randomized recruitment of survey respondents faced challenges due to the accessibility and security concerns of this population. For example, participants facing ongoing security threats frequently change their phone numbers and places of residence, making them difficult to locate and contact. In addition, given ongoing security threats, many declined to participate because they felt unsafe and/or uncomfortable speaking about their experiences with individuals outside the ARN. Participants in the process often limit contact with external actors and reduce their mobility in an effort to minimize exposure to potential threats, ultimately

[37] Respondents always have the option to refuse to answer (i.e. skip) a survey question, which could happen for various reasons (e.g. lack of knowledge or not wanting to answer). In this report, unless explicitly mentioned, 'refused to answer' rates below 5 per cent are excluded from the calculation and analysis of summary statistics. All statistics reported are rounded to the nearest whole number. Disaggregations by percentage thus do not always add up to 100 per cent.
[38] The statistics presented from this round of surveys were taken from previous MEAC reports.
[39] These were the three main locations where differential assistance participants were located at the time.
[40] Most of these surveys were conducted in person by members of the Conflict Responses Foundation (CORE). Additional phone surveys were conducted to increase the size of the sample.
[41] To safeguard participants' anonymity and security, all surveys were held in private and safe spaces provided by the ARN.
[42] MEAC strives to conduct gender-sensitive and gender-responsive research and assessments in line with evolving best practice. MEAC collects data that can be disaggregated by gender (amongst other demographic features) to compare the experiences of men, boys, women, and girls. MEAC also uses targeted and responsive questions to examine the experiences of certain groups. Local variation requires that MEAC adapt its approach to gender to each of the local contexts where it works. In Colombia, respondents are asked to self-identify their gender as "man", "woman", or "other gender identity" to ensure inclusivity and better reflect the lived realities of non-binary or gender-fluid identities.
[43] 1% of survey respondents identified with another gender identity.
[44] The youngest participant in the sample was 19 and the oldest was 54 years old.

impacting the recruitment process. The resulting sample is sufficient for drawing general conclusions about the participants from the Differential Assistance process, but too small to disaggregate reliably to understand the experiences of important sub-groups (e.g., women, rural populations) or to run statistical models. These limitations have been taken into account in the data analysis and interpretation, and its implications are noted throughout the findings.

Findings

Challenges Hindering the Effectiveness of the Differential Assistance Process

The Differential Assistance process operates under difficult conditions. Inherent with its design, it is a defector process for people exiting active armed and criminal groups. In most cases, these groups have not agreed to disarm and see such defections - and efforts to promote them - as undermining their survival. Beyond the threats posed to individual participants and the process by specific groups, the general threat environment has worsened in recent years, deeply affecting communities across the country. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the post-2016 period has been marked by the fragmentation of the armed conflict, resulting in at least eight different armed conflicts across Colombia.[45] Current criminal groups operate differently in comparison to former armed groups - such as the FARC-EP - which had thousands of members and nationwide reach. Today's groups are generally more fragmented, territorially bounded, and embedded in local illicit economies, but their ranks and reach have widespread impacts on the lives of communities across Colombia. According to military intelligence sources, the Gaitanista Colombian Army (EGC in Spanish) currently has more than 7,000 members, dissident groups may add to more than 5,000 people, and the ELN has more than 6,000 members, highlighting further the relevance of the Differential Assistance process.[46]

While the Total Peace negotiations pursue collective exits with GAO groups, it is key to provide members looking to exit those groups with incentives and support to leave now as doing so will ultimately weaken the criminal groups in question and pressure them to enter negotiations. The Differential Assistance process represents an opportunity to ensure that those wishing to defect from active armed and criminal groups today and submit to the law can leave individually while receiving support in their transition to civilian life.

[45] Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja (CICR), "Classification of armed conflicts in Colombia", 23 May 2025.
[46] Knowledge stems from CORE's analyses and work.

Although the Differential Assistance process provides holistic support over a number of years (far more comprehensive and for longer than most processes) to assist former members of GAOs in their transition to civilian life, participants identify gaps in its implementation and, in some cases, are even unaware of the existence of certain types of support that they could access. Some of these challenges are inherent to running a defector process while the armed groups in question are still active, but the research highlights the need to further innovate to creatively adapt implementation to mitigate the impact of insecurity on participant progress. Other challenges are more programmatic in nature and can be addressed with adjustments to support structure (e.g., socioeconomic difficulties and lack of legal clarity within the process). It is key to explore these challenges in detail as they pose serious obstacles to active participation in the Differential Assistance process and jeopardize individual transitions and broader peacebuilding efforts in Colombia.

Insecurity

Security risks directly affect differential assistance participants, as armed groups often target those who defect. Some level of security is a fundamental condition for the success of DDR-like initiatives: when threats persist, they disincentivize participation and limit the mobility and economic options of those transitioning to civilian life.[47]

The intensification of the armed conflict in past years has had a direct impact on the security condition of differential assistance participants. The situation is particularly challenging in areas influenced by armed actors such as FARC dissidents, the ELN and the EGC (also known as Clan del Golfo). In these areas, conditions have deteriorated substantively due to an increase in forced displacement, confinement, and forced recruitment, among other threats.[48]

Especially for those exiting criminal groups, the threat of physical violence is one of their greatest concerns. Informal conversations with survey participants both in 2022 and 2025 confirmed that individuals who leave criminal groups are threatened by members of the very groups they left. These insights are concerning given the increased insecurity across the country. In the past year, homicides increased considerably in Colombia,[49] with 11,327

[47] James Meernik, Juan Gaviria Henao and Laura Baron-Mendoza, "Insecurity and the reintegration of former armed non-state actors in Colombia", *European Political Science Review* , Volume 13 , Issue 4 (November 2021).
[48] CICR, "2025, camino a ser el peor año de la última década en cuanto a consecuencias humanitarias", Infographic, May 2025.
[49] Homicides have increased in cities where former members of armed groups are located, such as Medellín, where the homicide rate increased by 4.9 per cent compared to 2024, and Cali, where it increased by 8.6 per cent.

recorded between January and October 2025, compared to 10,952 cases in 2024, representing an increase of 3.4 per cent.[50]

These security concerns were directly reflected in MEAC's data. MEAC's surveys from 2022 found that 60 per cent of participants (30 out of 50) reported having received threats since entering the Differential Assistance process. Furthermore, almost all these individuals indicated that the threat came from the same armed group they had previously left.[51] Such threats are typically used by armed groups to deter participants from sharing information with state authorities—such as the police, the military, or the National Protection Unit—that could compromise the group's operations or leadership.

Today, security remains a key challenge in participant reintegration trajectories. The survey conducted by MEAC in 2025 found that 44 per cent of the sample reported receiving threats since entering the process.[52] Most of these threats came from the same group participants were part of, including the Clan del Golfo (32 per cent), followed by the Mordisco faction of the EMC (30 per cent), and the Second Marquetalia (14 per cent).[53] In addition, security was reported by 29 per cent of participants in the study as one of the most pressing needs in their lives today, after economic support, education and housing.[54]

The impact of insecurity on participants' lives was not only clear from MEAC's survey data, but also from the research process itself. Many individuals currently participating in the Differential Assistance process refused to participate in the MEAC study because they reported not feeling safe talking to people outside the ARN. Some participants reported distrusting even their peers within the Differential Assistance process, as they cannot be certain who may still be affiliated with armed groups or who might pose a risk to their safety. In addition, the ARN staff stated that differential assistance participants are often difficult to locate as they frequently change their telephone numbers and cities of residence as protection measures. Many participants had also abandoned the Differential Assistance process between the time frames of the first and second survey due to security concerns, which made it impossible to follow up with them to explore

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[50] Data was taken from the Ministry of Defence and National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE).
[51] 28 out of the 30 participants who reported threats in 2022 said they came from the same group they were part of. See: Cárdenas et al., "Security Threats Affecting Individuals Leaving Criminal Groups in Colombia".
[52] "Since you entered the Differential Assistance process, have you been threatened by an armed actor?".
[53] N = 44 "Who do you think was responsible?". Answer options: ELN (9%), EPL/Pelusos (0%), Clan del Golfo/AGC/Urabeños (32%), Caparros (2%), The Second Marquetalia (14%), The Estado Mayor Central - EMC (pre-division) (14%), EMC of Mordisco (30%), EMC of Calarcá (5%), State Armed Forces (2%), Other (2%), Unknown FARC dissident group (0%), Unknown EMC division (0%), Doesn't know (2%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.
[54] "What are the three most pressing needs in your life right now? Please select the three options that apply." Answer options: Economic support (78%), Education (53%), Housing (42%), Security (29%), Medical support (24%), Psychosocial support (11%), You don't have any needs at the moment (4%).

how their experiences had changed since 2022.[55] These trends raise important concerns about participant safety. The team was even informed by the ARN that one of the participants surveyed in 2022 was assassinated.[56]

Many participants are unable to return to their communities of origin as these are often occupied by armed groups. Only 31 per cent of survey respondents in 2025 reported having returned to their community of origin since they left their group.[57] A survey respondent highlighted that they have not been able to return to their community of origin "because I could get assassinated by people with whom I used to work. I can't trust anyone there".[58] Instead, upon entering the process, it is common for participants to move to cities such as Bogotá, Medellín or Cali, three of the cities where the MEAC surveys were implemented. While security concerns in the home communities likely compelled their relocation, it is also possible that the economic opportunities of bigger cities - plus the anonymity they provide – were also factors that motivated them to move to these urban areas.

Unfortunately, relocating outside your home community is not sufficient for ex-combatants in the Differential Assistance process to avoid security threats. Armed groups are able to find ex-combatants even when they have relocated. For instance, participants reported receiving threats by phone, warnings from third parties, or visits from people who come to their homes or workplaces - even in locations far from GAO strongholds.[59]

Participants are often forced to take measures to protect themselves and their families from security threats, even though this may interfere with their participation in the Differential Assistance process. Out of those reporting threats in 2025, the majority said they had to adopt protection strategies to deal with these threats.[60] Nearly half of the sample (42 per cent) reported moving residences as a result of security threats.[61] These findings mirror those obtained in 2022, where participants were already changing residences as a means of protection against threats.[62] Beyond moving places of residence, participants also mentioned other self-protection measures they adopt, such as frequently changing their telephone

[55] Only 7 of the 50 participants from the 2022 cohort participated in the 2025 follow-up study. Many of the originally surveyed sample cohort had either changed their phone number and could not be reached, were afraid and refused to speak to external actors, or in some cases, according to the ARN, some had even abandoned the process after the initial data collection phase.
[56] Informal conversation with an ARN professional during 2025 data collection.
[57] "Since you left the group, have you returned to your community of origin?"
[58] Answers to open-ended question: "Why have you not returned to your community?" Posed only to those who said they had not returned to their community (2025 survey).
[59] Informal conversation with a participant during 2025 data collection.
[60] N = 45 "Have you taken protection measures to deal with these threats?". Answer options: Most times (58%), Sometimes (20%), Never (16%). Seven per cent of respondents refused to answer the question. Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.
[61] "Since you entered the Differential Assistance process, have you had to change your place of residence due to security issues, for example threats?".
[62] 60 % (18 out of 30 people) of those who reported receiving threats said they had moved residences due to security concerns. See: Cárdenas et al., "Security Threats Affecting Individuals Leaving Criminal Groups in Colombia".

number, as well as avoiding social media.[63] Many also said they "solicited the support of the National protection Unit",[64] however, in numerous cases, they indicated that the assistance received was insufficient to effectively address the threats they face. They also try to maintain anonymity regarding their former membership in an armed group. For example, during informal conversations held by MEAC researchers with participants, some stated that they preferred not to tell anyone at work or in their neighbourhood about their past involvement in the conflict for safety reasons and to avoid stigmatisation and social exclusion.[65]

Complicating participant response to threats is the deep distrust that participants in the Differential Assistance process feel towards the institutions that are meant to protect them. This dynamic is particularly acute given that many differential assistance participants were recruited as minors or at a young age and had limited awareness of government-related services and their rights as citizens prior to joining armed groups. As such, as they begin their transition to civilian life, they often lack familiarity with—or feel apprehensive toward—government institutions.[66] This is not only due to their age and lack of interaction with state institutions, but also comes from the deep antipathy armed and criminal groups foster against the state. All institutions involved in supporting differential assistance participants—including the ARN,[67] the National Protection Unit, and state security forces—should strengthen their efforts to build trust with participants, as trust is essential to ensuring their sustained engagement and continuity in the process. There are many different ways this could be addressed but given the particular issues raised by respondents, more could be done to clarify their legal benefits, streamline communications around responsibilities vis a vis the justice system, and manage expectations - efforts that would need to be closely coordinated across the various government entities involved in the process (see more detailed recommendations in the last section).

Security threats have had a wide range of impacts on participants' lives. Among those who reported receiving threats, one of the most frequently reported impacts was a reduced ability to leave their homes (mentioned by almost two-thirds).[68] As illustrated by the following testimonies, some participants reported limiting their mobility and social activities in response

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[63] MEAC, Survey with participants from the Differential Assistance process (2022 and 2025).
[64] Answers to open-ended question: "What protection measures have you taken to deal with these threats?" Posed only to those who said they had received threats (2025 survey).
[65] This may backfire, as research from other contexts has found that stigmatization can contribute to job loss, social exclusion and difficulty accessing state rights and services. Sabine Schmitt, Katy Robjant and Anke Koebach, "When reintegration fails: Stigmatization drives the ongoing violence of ex-combatants in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo", *Brain and Behaviour*, Volume 11, Issue 6 (May 2021).
[66] CORE's observation during the implementation of MEAC surveys.
[67] The ARN is currently working on improving differential assistance participants' trust in relevant institutions through the "judicial and legal" area and the "culture of legality" area of the process.
[68] N = 44: "Have these threats affected your ability to leave the house?". Answer options: Most times (27%), Sometimes (36%), Never (36%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

to security threats: “We have to be careful, stop using public transport and stop going out for a walk,” and “I don’t go out. I don’t go to nightclubs. I don’t drink. I try to take care of myself—otherwise, who will?.”[69] Restrictions on mobility limit opportunities to build meaningful social relationships and to secure sustainable livelihoods, raising serious concerns about their social and economic reintegration. A substantive number of study participants experiencing threats also reported related impacts on their personal relationships, their mental health, and on their economic stability.[70] Although reported by a smaller proportion, some participants also indicated that security threats affected their participation in the Differential Assistance process, including their ability to meet obligations within the process.[71]

Related Socioeconomic Challenges

The protection measures that differential assistance participants adopt against security threats (e.g., such as moving residences, changing telephone numbers and/or avoiding certain places or jobs) often require substantial financial resources, time, and effort. Because many ex-combatants are already facing economic hardship, these additional burdens further constrain their ability to earn a livelihood and cover their basic needs. In turn, the difficult economic conditions in which participants live - characterized by informal employment and insufficient income to meet their own basic needs and those of their families - make it hard to earn enough money to adopt necessary measures to protect themselves from security threats.[72] Caught in between these forces, ex-combatants struggle to stay engaged in the Differential Assistance process, which ultimately weakens their broader transit to civilian life. This section examines the ways in which insecurity and economic instability interact and mutually reinforce one another in shaping participants’ precarious conditions.

When insecurity undermines participation in the Differential Assistance process, it can further undermine economic outcomes because economic support is conditional on meeting certain

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[69] Answers to open ended question: “What protection measures have you taken to deal with these threats?” Posed only to those who said they had received threats (2025 survey).

[70] N = 43: “Have these threats affected your personal relationships with your social network?”. Answer options: Most times (37%), Sometimes (21%), Never (42%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

N = 44: “Have these threats had an impact on your mental health?”. Answer options: Most times (32%), Sometimes (23%), Never (45%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

N = 45: “Have these threats affected your economic stability?”. Answer options: Most times (27%), Sometimes (27%), Never (47%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

[71] N = 45: “Have these threats affected your participation in the Differential Assistance process?”. Answer options: Most times (9%), Sometimes (27%), Never (64%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

N = 44: “Have these threats distracted you from your obligations with the Differential Assistance process?”. Answer options: Most times (5%), Sometimes (23%), Never (73%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

[72] 75% of respondents said that they are currently doing an activity that is getting them money. Out of this group, 67% said that their income allows them to cover their basic needs.

metrics. Under the Differential Assistance process, participants are eligible for monthly financial assistance from the ARN. However, whether participants can receive this monthly allowance is conditional on several factors, such as attending all activities agreed upon monthly (e.g., including regular meetings with ARN professionals to discuss their life plans and assess their socioeconomic situation) with the ARN during the first year. Then, they must complete their formal education in order to receive the monthly allowance for up to three years. Complying with these requirements can be, however, difficult in light of the sustained security and economic challenges outlined throughout this report. In some extraordinary cases,[73] the ARN may continue providing the monthly financial support even when a person stops attending differential assistance activities due to threats.[74] However, participants from the study did not reference the option of accessing this exceptional support when they talked about the economic and security challenges they face or the strategies they employ to cope with them, suggesting this option may not be well known amongst differential assistance participants. As such, bolstering efforts to communicate the options available could help improve awareness among the differential assistance population.

Despite the opportunity to receive monthly financial assistance and other livelihood support, participants continue to face important economic challenges. When participants from 2025 were asked what their most urgent needs in life are, the overwhelming majority (78 per cent) highlighted that they are in need of economic support.[75] Meeting their obligations allows participants to access financial support, but the monthly allowance of $480,000 (USD 128) per month, which is equivalent to 34 per cent of Colombia's minimum wage for 2025 (COP 1,423,500 / USD 381),[76] is not sufficient to cover most of their needs and/or that of their families.[77] It is difficult for participants to find sufficient employment to augment and eventually replace the stipend. Indeed, many struggle to enter the job market due to the lack of education and professional experience. As a result, many are forced to do informal and precarious work to earn a living, which, even in combination with the financial assistance offered by the ARN, is not enough to cover their basic needs. In 2022, 72 per cent of participants surveyed said they had a way of earning a living, while 26 per cent said they were unemployed.[78] Although this is

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[73] Whenever there is a security risk, the ARN Territorial Group handles the case, the national police conducts a risk assessment, and if it is extraordinary, the participant is always given additional financial support to be able to move to a safer location.
[74] Under Resolution 0452 de 2022, numeral 5, article 2.
[75] "What are the three most pressing needs in your life right now? Please select the three options that apply." Answer options: Economic support (78%), Education (53%), Housing (42%), Security (29%), Medical support (24%), Psychosocial support (11%), You don't have any needs at the moment (4%).
[76] The MEAC project has received information about the intention to increase the monthly allowance provided in the Differential Assistance process in 2026.
[77] Presidency of Colombia, "Decree 965 2020", 7 July 2020.
[78] Cristal Downing, Kyle Johnson, Ángela Olaya, and Sofia Rivas, "Recidivism Risks in the "Differential Assistance" Process for People Exiting Criminal Groups in Colombia," MEAC Findings Report 25 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

an encouraging number, most of the participants earning money said they worked in the informal sector.[79]

The situation in 2025 remains difficult for participants. Similar to the data obtained in 2022, approximately 75 per cent reported possessing a source of income, although this income often comes from informal employment, which tends to be more precarious and less lucrative than formal employment.[80] While most participants indicated that their earnings allow them to meet their basic needs, around one third reported difficulties doing so, which has implications for other aspects of their integration into civilian life.[81] For example, some participants mentioned not earning enough to feed their families or pay for public transport to attend their obligatory Differential Assistance activities.[82] Half of the respondents who reported earning money said they made less than the Colombian minimum salary (which is COP 1,423,500/ USD 381) and roughly a quarter reported receiving a salary equal or slightly higher than the minimum salary.[83] Income at or below the minimum wage is often insufficient to cover the growing costs of living in cities like Bogotá, where rent alone can cost between $600,000 and $700,000 Colombian pesos (US$160-US$187) in regular neighbourhoods.[84]

In light of this precarious economic landscape, some participants stated that they adopt mechanisms to mitigate economic hardship. For example, in informal conversations with MEAC researchers, some participants stated that they live with other differential assistance peers to share rental costs.[85] However, this strategy can also pose substantial security risks since it may make former members of criminal groups more visible and easier to identify, particularly in neighbourhoods where armed groups, criminal networks, or local informants monitor residents' movements. Other participants reported that they often have to rely on acquaintances or family members to find daily work, as their proximity makes it easier to access opportunities.[86]

Their lack of economic stability and the security threats participants face undermine continued engagement in the Differential Assistance process and the ability of participants to meet agreed metrics. This has implications not only for individuals, but for conflict resolution and peacebuilding more broadly. Studies show that access to employment and education are key

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[79] Some examples of informal jobs include work in construction, manufacturing, and carpentry.
[80] "Are you currently doing an activity to get money?".
[81] 33% of respondents said 'No' to "Does your income allow you to cover your basic needs?". Posed only to those who said they were doing something to get money.
[82] Informal conversation with a participant during 2022 data collection.
[83] N = 76 "How much did you earn last month?". Answer options: 0 - $99,000 (5%), $100,000 and $349,000 (5%), $350,000 - $699,000 (5%), $700,000 - $999,000 (14%), $1,000,000 - $1,399,000 (21%), $1,400,000 - $1,999,000 (26%), $2,000,000 - $2,999,000 (16%), $3,000,000 - $3,999,000 (1%). 5 per cent of respondents refused to answer the question. Posed only to those who said they were doing something to get money.
[84] Paula Galeano Balaguera, "What is the average rent in Bogotá?", Portafolio, May 2024.
[85] Informal conversation with a participant during 2025 data collection.
[86] Ibid.

to the success of DDR-like processes.[87] Those ex-combatants who completed formal education or obtained work post exit are more likely to remain in or complete the process.[88] These factors are key for participants to find some stability and ensure the success of their reintegration trajectories.[89]

This vulnerability to dropping out of their Differential Assistance process, and even potentially succumbing to the threats (or entreaties) from armed groups is reflected in the 2025 MEAC study. A lot of differential assistance participants reported receiving invitations to return to armed groups since entering the process,[90] raising important concerns regarding their potential return to armed/criminal activity in search for protection and/or better opportunities.[91] It is these intertwined issues - physical and economic security - that appear to be at the centre of the risk for re-recruitment. Indeed, nearly half of participants said their situation was better in the armed group than outside of it, raising additional concerns about recidivism.[92]

Related Legal Challenges

The insecurity felt by participants in the Differential Assistance process does not come from armed groups or economic conditions alone, it also comes from the defector process itself. Since MEAC's first study in 2022, a range of legal challenges have also been identified by participants in the Differential Assistance process that undermine the feasibility of the individual exit pathway as a credible and sustainable option for members of armed and criminal groups.

Individuals defecting from criminal groups must first voluntarily present themselves and formally express their willingness to surrender to the rule of law to the military, police, or judicial authorities—or do the same after they are captured in combat. They are then transferred to the Ministry of Defence, where a formal record is created which includes personal information such as name (or alias), identity number, and the name of the GAO to which they belonged, among other details. During this phase, authorities may request information or cooperation, such as support for security operations to dismantle their former armed group, in exchange for certain benefits. Benefits for "effective collaboration" (i.e., information-sharing) depend on the type and amount of information provided and can include financial stipends, lodging, food, clothing, transportation, healthcare, delayed prosecution, and entry into the victim and witness

[87] Meernik et al., "Insecurity and the reintegration of former armed non-state actors in Colombia".
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] 61 per cent of respondents answered 'Yes' to "Since you left the group, have you been invited to return to an armed group?".
[91] Downing et al., "Recidivism Risks in the "Differential Assistance" Process".
[92] 'When you were in the group, was your economic situation better, the same, or worse than it is today?', Answer options: Better (48%), Same (11%), Worse (41%).

protection programme.[93] The Ministry of Defence forwards this information to the Attorney General's Office, which assesses the legal benefits of collaboration according to the law. Unlike previous processes in Colombia—such as the demobilization of the FARC-EP under transitional justice mechanisms in which ex-combatants who did not commit war crimes could obtain amnesty —defectors from criminal groups are only eligible for benefits under the ordinary Criminal Code, which include prosecutorial discretion (principle of opportunity) or plea agreements. Once this initial submission phase is complete, participants can access the support mechanisms offered by the ARN.

Participants from the study frequently lacked knowledge on the legal framework governing the process and do not have sufficient guidance or financial resources to navigate criminal justice proceedings effectively.[94] Although the ARN reported providing guidance on the legal benefits participants can receive at the beginning of the Differential Assistance process, according to participants, it is common for them to feel confused about the status of their cases or how to access a public defender.[95] This is partly due to inconsistent interpretations and contradictory messaging among the different institutions involved in their process regarding participant obligations and legal benefits and the scope of support they can expect.[96] Those unable to afford private legal representation must rely on public defenders, which often leads to delays (beyond those created by the time lost in getting support) and a disconnect between judicial proceedings and participants' progression within the Differential Assistance process.

MEAC's research with differential assistance participants from 2022 to 2025 has highlighted the challenges legal uncertainty creates for them. As early as 2022, it was evident that institutions (e.g., like the military, the police, and/or other competent authorities) that should be involved in the process were unclear about their roles and had limited knowledge of the Decree 965 (which governs the Differential Assistance process).[97] Three years later, the 2025 survey data highlight that these challenges remain. Most participants from the study are unaware of the specific legal benefits associated with the Differential Assistance process.[98] Participants frequently report receiving confusing or contradictory information from state authorities,

[93] Juanita Vélez, "Gobierno vuelve a idea uribista de desarticular grupos sin verdad a víctimas", La Silla Vacía, 28 May 2020.

[94] According to the decree, the authorities must draw up a submission record, which must at a minimum include: the individual's full name and surname(s), akas, identity document, GAO structure, area of influence, modus operandi, items surrendered, the circumstances of the individual's presentation, and an express, free, voluntary, and duly informed declaration of submission to justice, of the commitment not to reoffend, and of good conduct guarantees, as well as signature and fingerprint. In addition, a medical examination shall be conducted to determine the individual's general condition at the time of presentation

[95] Original qualitative research conducted in 2022, which included several key informant interviews and focus groups with differential assistance participants and practitioners involved in the implementation of the differential assistance process, to examine the legal uncertainty affecting people exiting organized criminal groups in Colombia.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

[98] "What legal benefits do you receive for being part of the Differential Assistance process? Please select all that apply". Answer options: Doesn't know (55%), None (10%), No prosecution in exchange for information (6%), Deferred prosecution (2%), Other (7%). 21 per cent of respondents refused to answer the question.

creating expectations that do not match the actual benefits provided by the process.[99] For instance, members of the military often make promises about benefits that participants will receive in exchange for valuable information to support efforts to dismantle armed and criminal groups. As one ARN professional noted in 2022, "some people state that the army promises them economic compensation in exchange for the information provided, which in the end they never receive."[100] Another recurring misconception is that participation automatically grants legal benefits comparable to those provided under negotiated peace agreements, such as the 2016 FARC-EP Peace Agreement. Many participants also believe that sharing information with security forces or the Attorney General's Office could lead to outcomes like expungement of their criminal records.[101] These misunderstandings persist because neither military units nor investigative authorities correct these errors amongst defectors. Taken together, limited institutional clarity, weak communication, and difficulties accessing legal assistance contribute to frustration and disappointment among participants in the Differential Assistance Process, which may ultimately discourage continued engagement and completion of the process.

Additionally, while cooperation with the justice system is a formal requirement of this process, these practices - such as sharing information with relevant authorities - can place participants at heightened risk by exposing their collaboration with the state. This, in turn, may intensify threats against them and their families from the armed groups they left behind. Participants report a lack of clarity regarding the duration and limits of such cooperation, including when they may stop providing information without jeopardising their continued participation in the Differential Assistance process. Persistent legal ambiguity of this kind undermines trust in state institutions and increases the risk that participants abandon the process and return to armed or criminal activity.[102]

Participants in the Differential Assistance process thus face threats from multiple sides. Their participation in the process is under physical threat by their former armed or criminal group, or other ones. For many participants their continued participation is also in question because of legal ambiguity and the related security risks that come from continued, public facing engagement with the criminal justice system. The challenging economic environment that ex-combatants are attempting to reintegrate into makes it hard for many to make appropriate safety considerations and leaves some participants thinking they would be safer and better off if they went back to their former (or another) armed or criminal groups. Clear legal pathways,

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[99] Original qualitative research conducted in 2022, which included several key informant interviews and focus groups with differential assistance participants and practitioners involved in the implementation of the differential assistance process, to examine the legal uncertainty affecting people exiting organized criminal groups in Colombia.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.

effective protection measures, and access to sustainable livelihoods are essential to sustaining participation in the process and preventing disengagement or recidivism.

Recommendations

This report examines the security challenges faced by differential assistance participants in Colombia, as well as the interconnected legal and socioeconomic obstacles that impact their transition to civilian life and affect broader peacebuilding efforts. MEAC's survey research and complementary sources show that participants continue to face direct threats from armed and criminal groups after they have exited, placing their physical safety at risk while simultaneously exacerbating economic vulnerability. Additionally, participants have a lack of certainty about their legal benefits and obligations, the latter of which can put them at risk of discovery by armed and criminal groups. These overlapping challenges complicate transitions to civilian life and increase the risk of disengagement from the Differential Assistance process. Based on these insights, this section outlines a series of actions that could enhance protection and support for participants and contribute to the dismantling of criminal structures and sustainable reintegration outcomes more broadly.

Addressing insecurity must remain an urgent priority, given its direct impact on differential assistance participants' ability to protect themselves and secure stable livelihoods. In coordination with the National Protection Unit, the police, and other relevant authorities, the ARN should adopt a stronger preventive approach to security risks. This includes the systematic identification of threats, timely risk assessments, and clear communication about risks to participants. Existing guidance on personal safety should be reinforced to provide participants with strategies to better prevent and mitigate the daily security risks they face. When threats emerge, authorities must ensure access to safe, confidential, and effective reporting mechanisms, accompanied by safeguards to protect participants from retaliation by armed groups. Given that a notable number of survey respondents indicate that insecurity has an impact on their mental health,[103] it is worth exploring whether the psychosocial support facilitated by the Differential Assistance process should be further tailored to meet the needs of threatened participants and logistically adapted to mitigate security threats. Likewise, considering that the families of participants are often also the target of threats, they should be explicitly incorporated into any protection strategies adopted and considered for psychosocial support.

[103] Out of 44 participants that reported being threatened, 22 reported negative impacts on their mental health: "Have these threats had an impact on your mental health?". Answer options: Most times (32%), Sometimes (23%), Never (45%). Posed only to those who said they were threatened since entering the Differential Assistance process.

Security threats directly affect participants' transition to civilian life by limiting their ability to work, move around, socialize, and participate in the process or access support. It is essential to rethink how the process can assist participants who find themselves under threat, possibly by providing relocation support or access to short-term safe accommodation. Doing so will help keep participants safe and allow them to continue to access other essential forms of support and encourage them to stay in the process when threats arise.

Given that security risks can impede mobility, it is key to continue offering secure digital reporting options to allow participants to engage with their ARN professional and attend important differential assistance activities even when they are not able to leave their residence. It is also key to improve communication around these digital options to make sure participants are aware of their existence and that they understand how to access and use them effectively. This allows participants to engage in at least some support services without exposing themselves to additional risks through in-person attendance. Virtual participation (where possible and when sufficiently monitored) also allows participants to remain in good standing in the process while moving to take advantage of economic opportunities or benefit from their familial or social networks.

In addition to adapting participation modalities and helping participants access safe housing, sustained economic support is essential to reduce participants' vulnerability and enable them to protect themselves amid persistent insecurity. To address both the economic challenges reported by participants and allow them to employ short-term protection strategies, the Differential Assistance process could increase their monthly allowance. This increase in cash transfers would not only provide direct support to the participants themselves, but also to enable them to more effectively support the families that often rely on them.

In parallel, given that differential assistance participants tend to possess unstable income working within the informal sector, it is key to strengthen educational and vocational training to provide them with better opportunities in the long run. While much is being done already in this area, it would be useful to consider ways to further expand access to education and vocational training (e.g., enhance coordination with the National Learning Service (SENA) and regional universities, invest more in literacy programming, expand the types of technical training available, and foster partnerships with private sector actors and civil society).

Finally, greater legal clarity and institutional coordination are critical to sustaining participants' engagement in the Differential Assistance process. Sensitization efforts should be reinforced to manage participants' expectations in the process and ensure that they fully understand their legal rights, obligations, and programmatic requirements. Although the ARN provides initial guidance at the beginning of the process, many respondents in the study reported remaining

unaware of their rights and responsibilities. This highlights the need to reassess not only what information is communicated, but also how it is delivered, in order to ensure it reaches participants effectively and is fully understood.

Access to legal assistance should also be further facilitated throughout the Differential Assistance process and said support must be adapted to participants' ongoing security and economic vulnerabilities. At the institutional level, enhanced information campaigns would help ensure that participants know the rights, responsibilities, and the legal process they are to expect through the Differential Assistance process. Communication channels among key actors—including the ARN, the Attorney General's Office, the security services, and other relevant authorities— could also be strengthened to clarify roles, ensure coherent messaging, and build trust amongst differential assistance participants at each stage of the process. Improving these communications channels could also ensure that sufficient protection measures are put in place to respond to possible threats from armed groups retaliating against former members who are known or perceived to have collaborated with state forces.

Insecurity complicates multiple aspects of participants' lives. While measures should be taken to mitigate these risks, addressing insecurity often lies beyond the differential assistance mandate or capacities. While the ARN manages the Differential Assistance process, its successful implementation relies on the work of all the agencies involved and those responsible for establishing stability and the rule of law in Colombia.

What becomes clear in examining the lives of individuals going through the Differential Assistance process is the symbiotic relationship between the process and peacebuilding in Colombia more broadly. The peace dividends of the Peace Agreement make this process - and the others run by the ARN for different populations (e.g., Reincorporation for the ex-FARC EP-combatants) - possible, and in turn this process contributes to those peace dividends. But that relationship also works in the opposite direction: when insecurity reigns, those aspiring to defect from armed and criminal armed groups may be discouraged from doing so, and current participants in the Differential Assistance process may leave or be persuaded to (re)join illegal groups for protection. Ultimately, this can strengthen armed and organized criminal groups and undermine the fragile peace in Colombia. At this critical moment, it is necessary to build on the ARN's experience, bring together the agencies involved across the Differential Assistance process, and listen to participant perspectives to recommit, invest in, and further tailor support to sustain transitions to civilian life - not only for the benefit of individual participants, but for that of peace.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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