



Wilton Park



Image: Peter Ptassek

Report

## Colombian and international stabilisation experience: sharing lessons and shaping the way ahead

Wednesday 19 – Friday 21 June 2019 | WP1704

In association with:





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# Colombian and international stabilisation experience: sharing lessons and shaping the way ahead

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In partnership with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, United Nations Colombia and with support from the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin

### Executive summary

- Colombia has provided a model to the international community of how counter-insurgency, and peace negotiations can be conducted and now has the opportunity to provide a similar exemplar on how stabilisation can consolidate peace, improve stability, reduce violence, and pave the way to development. The international community remains very interested in supporting Colombia as it moves to the next phase of stabilisation and implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement but Colombia now faces the challenge of delivery on the ground. This conference provided a forum in which Colombians, international partners, and experts could discuss the lessons learned from stabilisation around the world and consider the next steps for Colombia.
- The Colombian government, which is committed to the peace agreement but disagrees with aspects of the transitional justice process, and is under pressure from the US to deal more aggressively with a growing narcotics problem, has 3.5 years in which it needs to deliver tangible progress on stabilising large areas of the country. An effective and accountable state must be brought to an area the size of the United Kingdom, in the face of very difficult terrain, limited government capacity, and active criminal and political violence. The Colombian government has made a good start building on its past experiences and drafting national plans but there remain serious concerns about how the plans will be delivered on the ground.
- As the conference observed, the experience from the international community is that “winning the peace” can be as hard as “winning the war.” Colombia now needs to move rapidly to finalise and communicate integrated, measurable stabilisation plans rooted in deep contextual knowledge, and to ensure these are delivered through integrated civil-military operations across the priority territories. The stabilisation plans need to focus on targeted priorities, rather than seek to do everything; urgently address the security needs of local communities; bring legitimate governance and public services to the population; and ensure that aggressive counter-narcotics measures do not destabilise local support for the peace process.

## Introduction

1. Wilton Park organised a three-day closed conference in partnership with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, United Nations Colombia and with support from the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin, with the intention of sharing lessons to assist the Colombian government in taking forward its stabilisation planning.
2. The intention of the Wilton Park meeting was to enable the sharing lessons of from Colombia's Democratic Security Policy during the 2000s, stabilisation operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and other contexts, and to help inform the stabilisation plans being drawn up by the Colombian government. Participants examined how Colombia's new stabilisation plan can help achieve progress towards the threefold objective of implementing peace, combating armed groups and expanding state authority; how the Colombian government and armed forces can meet the challenges of coordination in combined civil-military missions; and what role the UN and other donors can usefully play in assisting Colombia with its stabilisation goals. The meeting was also an opportunity to learn from Colombia's particular and complex experience and extract lessons on state building for political processes in other contexts.
3. Some 50 Colombian and international experts participated in the discussions including representatives from the Colombian government, international partners, Colombian civil society members and academics, and international specialists on Colombia and on stabilisation.
4. The first part (I) of the report provides a general overview of the Colombian situation and broad lessons from other stabilisation experiences. The second part (II) summarises observations on particular aspects of stabilisation that Colombia will need to take into account. The third part (III) provides recommendations that Colombia and its international partners can take up to successfully progress stabilisation in the coming period.

### I. Context and international experiences

5. Colombia represents an unusual case in the litany of modern counterinsurgency and stabilisation experiences, which have mainly occurred in weak states. Colombia has a developed state and vibrant economy, recently became a member of the OECD and is a NATO associated country. Yet, an extensive area of the country has only a weak or no presence of the State, which competes with an array of armed groups (criminal and political) for control of the population, resources and illicit economies including coca crops, mining and deforestation. The government of President Iván Duque is developing a stabilisation plan for these insecure regions, establishing priorities amongst them. The Colombian government will carry out its stabilisation plan without the support of foreign troops and in parallel with implementation of some aspects of the landmark 2016 peace agreement with the FARC, another particular circumstance compared to other stabilisation missions.
6. Colombia's stabilisation planners face a challenging context in which to finalise and deliver the plans on which they are currently working:
  - Political violence, in the form of assassinations of community and civil society leaders, and former FARC combatants, has continued to increase. Active insurgent groups, notably including the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), have been able to exploit the peace agreement by extending control into some former FARC areas.
  - Coca production and exports have increased in the last years and this has exacerbated pressures from the United States, Colombia's traditional international partner, for rapid action, particularly using chemical fumigation, to stem the growth in the narcotics trade. The US has also pressured Colombia to extradite alleged traffickers.

- The Duque government's desire to adjust aspects of the transitional justice component of the FARC peace accord has led some to question the viability of the overall peace process.
  - Difficult geography and limited capacity of local state institutions continue to hamper efforts to roll out an effective state presence in many localities.
7. However, it is important to remember that many of these challenges are not new and Colombia has decades of experience to draw upon in relation to how to best deliver stability and governance in more remote areas. Indeed, many of the techniques of civil-military coordination and establishment of local governance in former rebel-held areas, are well known to Colombian military and civil officials.
  8. Colombia has also benefited from lessons learned by its allies. Conference participants, who drew on personal experiences of contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular pointed to some key lessons for Colombia:
    - Sustaining a peace even after a successful stabilisation campaign requires just as much effort as winning the peace. In Iraq, by 2008, the US finally got together the strategies, leaders, and tools to deliver effective stabilisation but after 2010 the Maliki government threw away the progress that had been made and lost the peace, leading to the resurgence of a Sunni Islamist insurgency that plunged Iraq back into civil war.
    - Military victories can be squandered without adequate development or government follow-up. In Afghanistan, NATO/ISAF successes against the Taliban after 2009 were often lost because the Afghan government and its development partners were unable to put in place an effective and trusted state presence at the local level.
    - Local peace deals are not enough without a broader peace process. In Iraq, this was forged in the 2007-10 period but lost thereafter; in Afghanistan, local deals never graduated to a nation-wide peace process, which is only starting today. Colombia's major advantage is the FARC peace deal.
    - Local service delivery alone is not enough without local security and a local political process to build trust with a community; simply providing social services alone (i.e. a traditional development response) does not suffice.
  9. In sum, Colombia has far more opportunity for success than some of the canonical stabilisation missions of recent years, but the scale of the challenge should not be underestimated. Colombia's democratic cycle means that this government has only three and a half years to demonstrate progress. The focused areas where state presence needs to be brought cover some 7m people and an area the geographic size of the UK, with difficult terrain, poor infrastructure, high levels of inequality and limited state capacity.

## **II. Aspects of stabilisation**

10. The international community has evolved best practice approaches to stabilisation that have been captured in doctrine, such as the UK's Stabilisation guidance, and implemented in live operations. These best practices involve key success factors such as: detailed context, political, and conflict analyses; interagency and civil-military coordination; a focus on protecting the population and filling the security and justice vacuum once insurgent groups withdraw; ensuring that accountable and capable local government and central government services are provided; communicating effectively; and monitoring progress to allow for rapid adjustments in approach. Conference participants reflected on these lessons and how they applied to the Colombian experience. In particular, the conference focused upon: Civilian-Military Coordination; Moving into the Territories (including Security and Justice provision); and, Stabilisation Planning and Measuring.

## **Civilian-military coordination**

11. International lessons: Civil-military coordination is fundamental to the success of any stabilisation mission but it is important to be aware of the nuances since civilian and military organisations are, by their nature, different. It is key to have a clear, shared understanding of the mission and the context; clarity on lines of responsibility, and a clear understanding that development requires security to deliver but also that long-term security also requires development activities. At the same time, it is important to remember that civil-military is not a binary relationship; there are aspects of the military that will be more civilian in nature, and coordination between civilian agencies can also be a challenge. In addition, some civilian actors, e.g. humanitarian agencies will, quite rightly, not be part of the integrated civ-mil mission.
12. Colombian experience and challenges: Colombia has good past experiences of coordination. Under the Democratic Security Policy implemented in the 2000s, actors worked together to bring security to the territories and to build trust. Mechanisms such as the Centro de Coordinación de Acción Integral (CCAI) ensured good integration and, in a number of successful operations, civ-mil plans effectively integrated the pillars of security, rule of law, and governance in cleared areas. However, with successive changes in government, many of the good practices and lessons have been lost. In addition, for the Colombian military who were effective at fighting FARC, the challenge is often now to shift to more of a policing role to support stabilisation.
13. Participants identified the following current challenges in ensuring interagency coordination that are undermining delivery of stabilisation in the territories:
  - Lack of capacity to lead and coordinate among civilian agencies and confused or overlapping mandates. It is vital that stabilisation is civilian led but from the presidency down to local level, civilian agencies often lack the ability to take a sustained leadership role. In addition, changes in personnel between governments mean regular losses of capacity and of institutional memory within civilian institutions.
  - Police-government relationships at the local level are often sub-optimal since the police fall under the defence ministry and officers rotate rapidly between regions. This makes long-term joint planning and management between local elected officials, civilian agencies, and police quite challenging.
14. Lessons for current stabilisation planning: Ensure clarity on who is leading; institutionalise integrated coordination mechanisms between civilian and military actors; ensure that military support local policing and rule of law so as to counter political and criminal violence. A particular initiative that could help foster integration would be to create specialist teams of stabilisation planners and experts able to support both national and local government in integrating all agencies towards common goals.

## **Moving into the territories**

15. International lessons: Bringing capable, accountable, and legitimate state presence to communities previously dominated by insurgent groups is at the core of stabilisation. When done effectively, this process can provide a bridge to longer-term sustainable development and peacebuilding. However, there are numerous international examples where the process has failed. Sometimes state presence and services have disappointed local communities; at other times, things have actually got worse since state agencies have exploited or abused the population, or conflict dynamics have worsened due to perceived inequalities.

16. Colombian experience and challenges: Colombia has had many years experience of trying to bring governance to its territories. For instance, the consolidation efforts in Macarena and Montes de María provide a rich variety of useful lessons, both positive and negative. “Territorial Peace” was a key concept in the 2016 peace agreement and some of the key challenges now include:

- A need to ensure that the agency of local communities is recognised rather than seeking to impose top-down rule.
- A need to really understand local conflict dynamics and drivers so that context-specific interventions can be designed. It is vital to understand what matters to the people, who has power, and how people make their living.
- A recognition that many communities saw the peace agreement as a sign of commitment by the state but are now disappointed at the slow pace of delivery while some see that extractive industries have been allowed to move in much faster.
- The tension between pressure to rapidly eradicate coca crops and the need to prepare properly for alternative livelihood programmes. It is vital to understand, in this context, just why farmers grow illicit crops.
- A need to ensure protection of minorities and marginalised groups and to ensure environmental protection.
- A need to combat corruption. This is linked to local drivers of violence but tackling corruption will be vital to ensure trust in government.

17. Lessons for current stabilisation planning:

- Make conscious decisions on geographic prioritisation. Colombia has long-term plans for 170 municipalities that are incorporated into 16 PDETs (Territorially Focused Development Programmes). It will however be important to communicate clearly which areas are being prioritised, and why. Some participants proposed the creation of connected “corridors” of stability rather than “islands.”
- Foster integration by co-locating agencies working on stabilisation in the same building and do not label stabilisation “pillars” by institution but instead by function, creating more of a sense of team.
- Address land rights issues. The Presidency is working hard to address issues of land title, through cadaster updating, but participants pointed to the importance of addressing land restitution and agrarian reform as underlying drivers of conflict.

### **Security and justice in the territories**

18. International lessons: Beyond the military defeat or removal of insurgent groups, security for the population and provision of effective justice are always priority challenges for states delivering stabilisation. Common stabilisation challenges include: addressing murder and intimidation campaigns; dealing with irreconcilable insurgent and criminal groups; building demilitarised police forces; providing swift and fair justice to build public trust. Even if local police and justice personnel are deployed in “liberated” territories, these are not usually enough to achieve effective security and justice.

19. Colombian experience and challenges: State security and justice provision in the priority territories remains weak and has led to disappointments among the population. Concern was expressed about numbers of assassinations of social leaders, other insurgent groups like ELN and also criminal groups have moved into some of the areas vacated by FARC, and provision of justice services has been disappointing. There has been a tendency to “securitise” security and justice in the past, which risks undermining a focus on citizen-focused justice provision.

20. Lessons for current stabilisation planning:

- Take a broad definition of security for local populations, including wider human and food security.
- Ensure that security and justice interventions are grounded in detailed context analysis so that they address local needs and are informed by citizen perceptions.
- Put reconciliation at the heart of stabilisation by making victims central to the process of building trust in governance.
- Visibly address and reduce attacks on community leaders and former FARC combatants.
- Restructure policing to make it more focused on citizen service. Ensure, where necessary, the military take more of a policing approach.
- Ensure focus on capacity building of justice and police forces in the priority territories. Ensure that a range of justice mechanisms are reinforced, and use alternative dispute resolution and tools such as indigenous justice mechanisms, conciliadores en equidad and jueces de paz.
- At the same time as a focus on the territories, initiate nation-wide work on security sector reform. As Colombia transitions from the fight against the FARC, state security forces also need to be downsized and transitioned to more of a peacetime role.

**Stabilisation strategy and measuring**

21. International lessons: Stabilisation plans are extremely complex to both design and deliver. There is always a tendency to set over-ambitious goals, a bias towards reporting success rather than reality, and great difficulty in agreeing trade-offs across government agencies that have their own priorities. A general lesson is also that stabilisation planners are over-optimistic about the pace at which interventions can be delivered in the field. A further challenge, which undermined many stabilisation plans in Iraq and Afghanistan, was a failure to address the impact of foreign sanctuaries for rebel groups; just as Colombia faces with the ELN in Venezuela.
22. Colombian experience and challenges: Colombia has a history of producing ambitious and well-constructed plans but struggling to deliver these on the ground, leading to disappointment. The current government is drawing up an ambitious and well-organised set of stabilisation plans at the present time, for presidential approval this summer. For instance, the plans for *zonas priorizadas* envisage logical sequences of activity covering: security, public services, coca removal, alternative crops, land title reform, introduction of the private sector. The draft stabilisation plans being developed are being populated with comprehensive metrics and indicators.
23. Lessons for current stabilisation planning: To help the Colombian government to finalise and deliver its plans, some useful lessons include the following:
- Use the planning process to bring together key stakeholders inside and outside government to really explore conflict dynamics and analyse Theories of Change so that the plans are based on detailed analysis rather than assumptions.
  - Ensure that strategic communications are a central part of the plans and how they are delivered.
  - Ensure that reporting is not overwhelmed by large numbers of measures, instead focus on a few critical measures that can be reported over time to show change and to understand conflict dynamics. Use both positive and negative peace indicators; ensure use of revealed as well as expressed preferences.

- Put in place mechanisms for external, independent reporting and verification to hold government to account. These can use the legislature, community fora, NGOs, and international partners but they must ensure it is not just the government reporting on itself.
- Using local governance mechanisms such as the Juntas de Acción Comunal (community action boards) that have been effective linking locals with state action.

### **III. Recommendations for stabilisation planning**

24. The Government of Colombia is in a race against time to deliver on the promises of the peace agreement and its stabilisation plans. It is doing so in a context of domestic political disagreements over the peace agreement and the transitional justice arrangements in particular; regional instability linked to the crisis in Venezuela; and intense pressures from international partners, with the US heavily focused on counter-narcotics and European donors heavily focused on implementing the peace agreement. In order to succeed, the Colombian government needs to ensure it is building on lessons from both its own stabilisation experiences and those of its international partners, and avoiding past mistakes such as articulating Bogota-centric plans that bear little relation to government ability to deliver across the country. It must also move rapidly to address the serious security and justice needs of communities and ensure that it gets onto the front foot with a comprehensive strategic communications campaign.
25. Colombia is seen as a model by the international community of how to deal with a serious domestic insurgency, and has been admired for how it negotiated a peace agreement and developed integrated civil-military plans to bring the state to the people. Although there are significant challenges to sustaining the peace and delivering stabilisation that will allow for development and transformation, Colombia has the potential to continue to serve as an exemplar. A key step will be for Colombia to overcome the current political polarization and generate a national consensus around how to implement the peace accord and the stabilisation strategy.

#### **Recommendations for government of Colombia**

26. Explicitly clarify the relationship between stabilisation plans, the peace agreement implementation, and longer-term development and transformation plans. Explicitly state that stabilisation is a shorter period (3-5 years), aimed at supporting the peace agreement and setting the conditions for longer-term development and state building in the excluded territories.
27. Do not take state legitimacy for granted. Use the stabilisation process to actively build state legitimacy not just through service delivery but through active inclusive dialogue with citizens and the provision of justice. Use dialogue to address tensions and trade-offs that will underpin long-term state legitimacy; do not apply a top down template in all areas. This will be helped by ensuring that stabilisation plans are informed by detailed local conflict analyses; ideally conducted in a participatory manner.
28. Set achievable, measurable goals for the stabilisation plan; do not try to do everything or to set too many priorities. Put in place a rigorous process of monitoring, evaluation, and learning so that the plans can be adjusted. Ensure trusted, independent oversight of progress.
29. Communicate the stabilisation plans and use two-way communications with all stakeholders to ensure buy-in from the wider public, local communities, and international partners.



30. As a priority within the stabilisation plan, focus on security and justice for local communities, with a special focus on addressing murders of civil leaders and filling the security and justice void so that other insurgent or criminal groups do not gain a lasting foothold. Adjust police and military activities to focus on population protection and community security.
31. Consciously consider and analyse trade-offs between policy priorities and take a realistic view of the pace of delivery. For instance, can rural development interventions move fast enough to support crop substitution or should eradication efforts be delayed in line with the roll-out of alternative livelihoods projects?

### **Recommendations for international partners**

32. Unlike some other stabilisation contexts, Colombia is a high-capacity, functional, and democratic state, meaning that dialogue over these issues needs to be between peers. This does not of course preclude differences of opinion or mature criticism from any side of the other's approaches or priorities.
33. Partners should work with the Colombian government and one another to reach consensus on the links between territorial stabilisation, implementation of the peace agreement, and longer-term development. Where donors have differing interests (e.g. on counter-narcotics, human-rights, development, gender or environmental issues), they should ensure an open dialogue and seek to support relevant Colombian initiatives.
34. Partners should assist Colombian plans, with expertise, funding, and diplomatic support. At the same time, partners can remind Colombia of its international commitments, e.g. on human rights, gender, migration, environment, and help Colombia adhere to these commitments.
35. Although donors will have competing priorities across the globe, it will be important that donors provide long-term, stable commitments to support Colombia since the stabilisation process will not be short-term.

### **Andrew Rathmell**

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