

People's Perceptions of Peace Accord Implementation in Colombia

Comparing attitudes among the conflict-affected population

November 2021 marks the fifth year of the 15-year implementation period of the Colombian peace accord. The ambitious accord aims to end violence, reduce poverty, and increase the well-being of the rural population through the establishment of 16 regions targeted for peace accord implementation (*Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial*, PDETs). To succeed, peacebuilding in Colombia must bring tangible benefits to the people in the PDETs and ensure their continued support. This policy brief presents preliminary results from two survey waves of 12,000 respondents in the PDETs, examining whether the most conflict-affected populations think the implementation of the accord is achieving its aims.

Brief Points

- People in the PDETs are more satisfied with peace accord implementation in 2021 than they were in 2019, though the average level of satisfaction is still low.
- Since 2019, the security situation has deteriorated in most communities.
- People rate public services as bad or neither bad nor good in 2021; however, since 2019, while people's assessment of the quality of education has decreased, satisfaction with the quality of health services has increased.
- The situation in the PDETs is uneven. Some experience improvements in peace accord implementation, security, and public service delivery; however, in most PDETs, people on average report deterioration.

The 2016 Colombian Peace Accord

The peace accord signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP in November 2016 was a major achievement for a country that had seen nearly sixty years of continuous armed conflict. The accord, with a progressive approach to victims and transitional justice, as well as a strong commitment to addressing the historical roots of the conflict through rural development and reducing inequality, is one of the most ambitious peace agreements to date.

The success of the deal, however, depends on people’s perceptions of and experiences with the accord and its implementation, as well as the actors tasked with implementing it. These perceptions are crucial for sustaining post-conflict peace for at least three reasons: First, people’s support for peacebuilding correlates with their support for government, ultimately affecting their trust in the state. Second, knowing people’s perceptions about peacebuilding enables policy-makers to implement policies more responsive to people’s concerns. Third, the perceptions of these conflict-affected communities are important for understanding whether or not peacebuilding efforts are felt among the population. Should ordinary people fail to see tangible benefits of peace, sustaining post-conflict peace will be considerably more difficult, if not impossible.

In 2018, Iván Duque was elected to the presidency on a platform that questioned the peace

agreement framework and the need to implement it. His administration has challenged components of the accord in the courts and has not prioritized its implementation. Presidential elections will be held in spring 2022 and may either bring renewed dedication to the peace agreement or continued roadblocks.

The MAPS Survey

Together with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Colombia and researchers from Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá and the University of Amsterdam, PRIO has developed a systematic survey instrument for measuring perceptions about the peace accord and its implementation. The survey has so far been carried out in two waves in the 16 regions targeted for peace agreement implementation (PDET – Program for Development with a Territorial Focus), in 2019 and 2021. The survey covers 12,000 respondents and was conducted by SEI and Proyectamos, two Colombian survey firms with experience in conflict-affected areas.

Most post-conflict surveys tend to be nationally representative, although armed conflict tends to be geographically localized. Unfortunately, such surveys are often not representative of the areas where conflict occurred, or of the local communities that experienced conflict firsthand. In contrast, the MAPS survey is representative at the level of each PDET, which allows for comparison across the most conflict-affected areas in Colombia as well as across time.

Colombia has a population of 50 million and stretches across 1.143 million square kilometers, encompassing rainforests and grasslands, mountains and beaches, big cities, and large sparsely populated areas. Historically, the state has not been able to reach the most remote areas of the country. Therefore, the 2016 peace accord established the 16 PDETs as a tool for implementing rural development processes aiming to transform the most conflict-affected municipalities. The 16 PDETs cover 170 municipalities with a total population of 6.6 million. The MAPS survey randomly sampled 73 of these municipalities.

Assessment of Peace Accord Implementation

How do residents of PDETs perceive the implementation of the peace accord five years after its signing?

Figure 1 shows the average level of satisfaction with implementation for each of the 16 PDETs in 2019 and 2021. The scale ranges from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied). Overall, there has been a slight increase in approval, from an average of 1.5 in 2019 to 1.7 in 2021. This increase may invoke cautious optimism, as it could indicate that people in the conflict-affected areas of Colombia see some improvements, and that despite the administration’s indifference, efforts are made to implement the policies laid out in the ambitious peace accord. However, three PDETs stand out with negative changes in

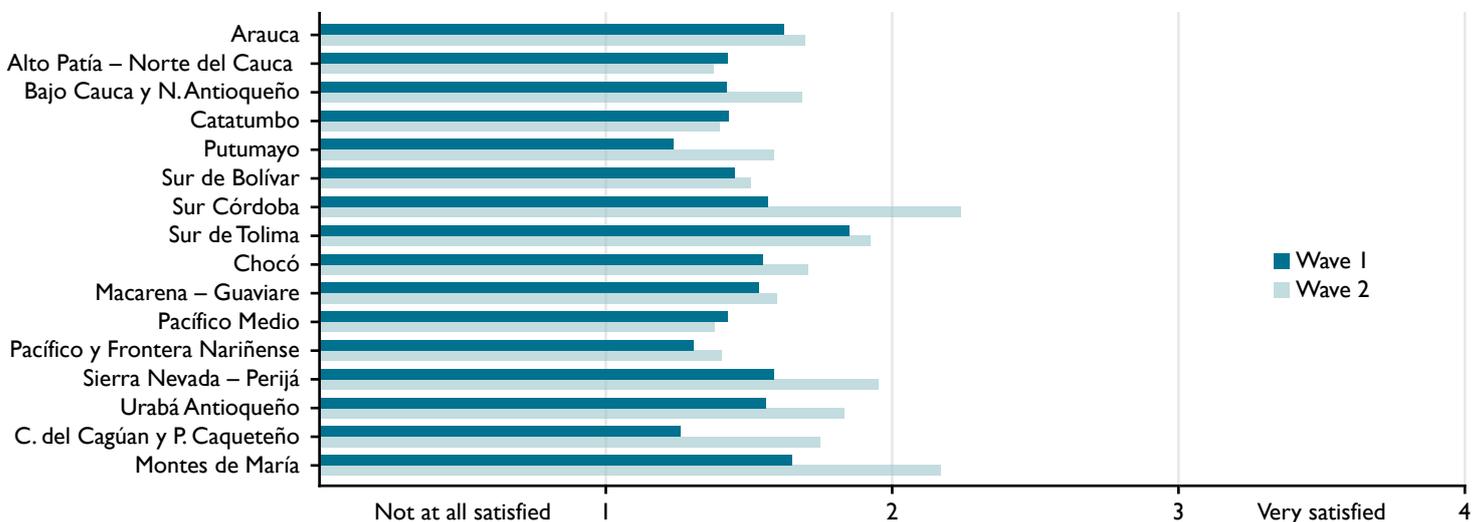


Figure 1: Average satisfaction with peace agreement implementation in 2019 and 2021 in each PDET

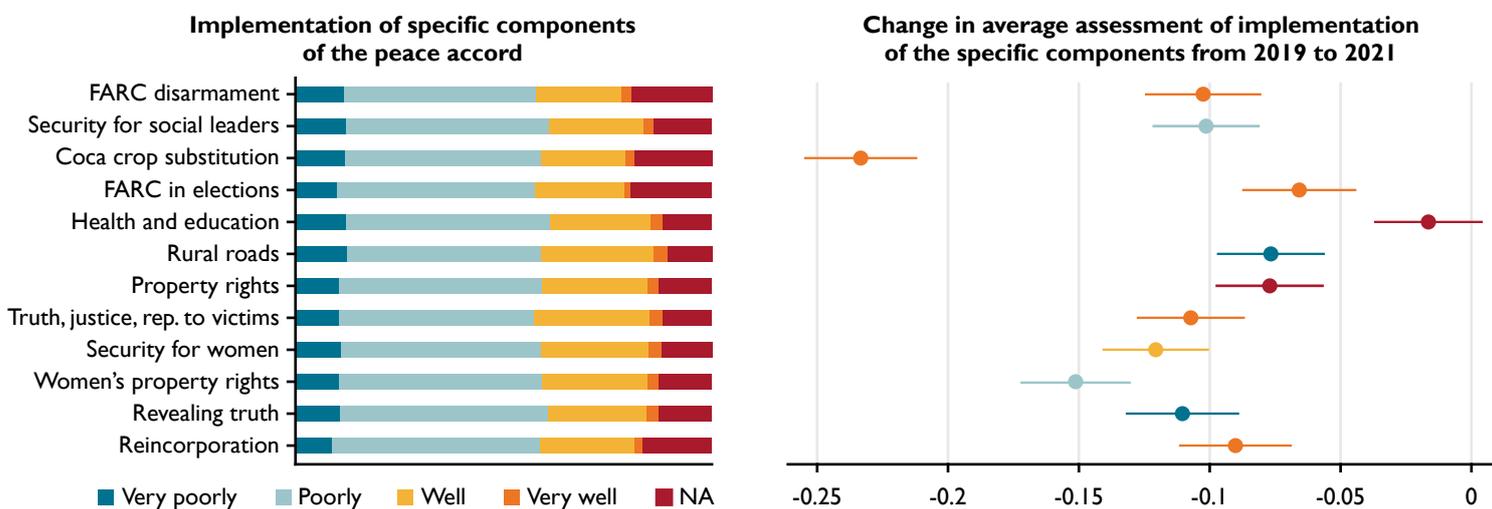


Figure 2: Assessment of implementation of specific components in the peace agreement in 2021 (left panel) and change in average assessment from 2019 to 2021 (right panel)

average satisfaction with implementation: Alto Patía - Norte del Cauca, Catatumbo, and Pacífico Medio.

Additionally, satisfaction with peace accord implementation is still low. In 2021, only two PDETs have average satisfaction levels above 2, Sur de Cordoba and Montes de Maria, corresponding to an average response of “somewhat satisfied”. In 11 of the 16 PDETs, the largest group of respondents are in the “not at all satisfied” category, while almost no respondents in any of the PDETs express being very satisfied with the implementation of the peace accord.

The Colombian peace agreement consists of six pillars: rural reform; political participation; reincorporation of former combatants; illicit economy reform; victims’ reparations; and implementation and verification. The MAPS survey asks for people’s opinions about 12 specific components selected from these pillars (see Figure 2). Even though overall satisfaction with peace accord implementation has increased (Figure 1), most people believe that the specific components in the accord are poorly or very poorly implemented in their community (Figure 2), and for most components the assessment is poorer in 2021 than in 2019. This is particularly true for coca crop

substitution, which is assessed as significantly poorer in 2021 than in 2019. The components related to women, aiming to strengthen their security and property rights, also score more poorly in the second wave than the first. Health and education is the only component of the peace accord that has not seen a significant change in people’s average assessment since 2019.

The Current Situation in the Communities

A core concern in any post-conflict situation is security. In the MAPS survey, we ask people to

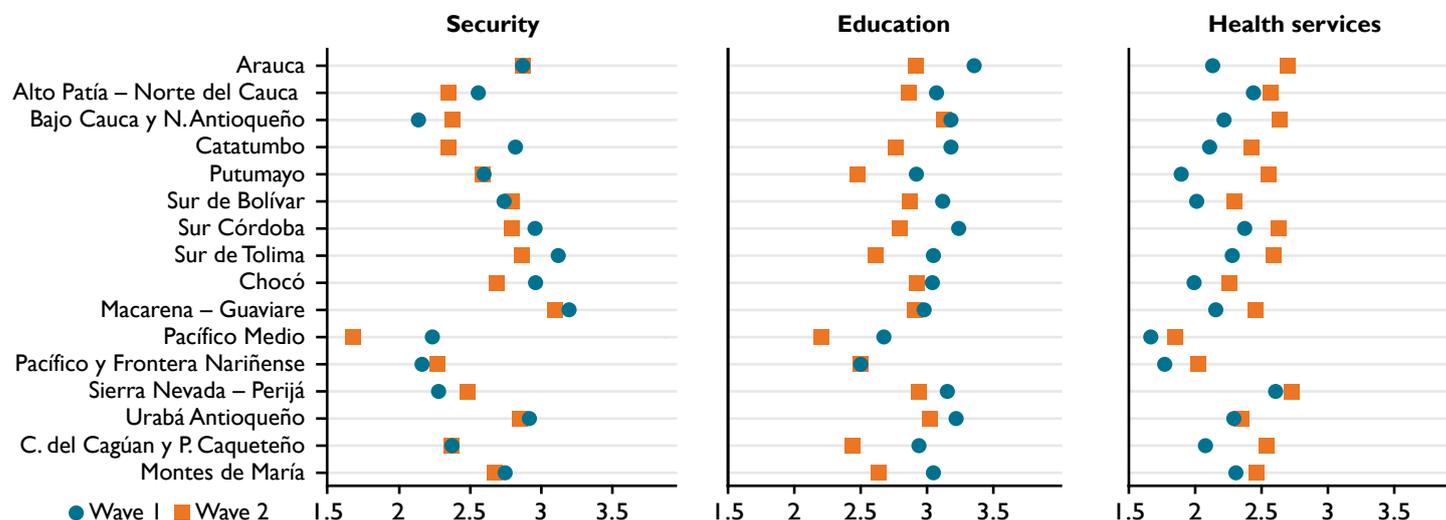


Figure 3: Average assessment of security, education, and health services in 2019 and 2021 in each PDET, on a scale of 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good)

assess the level of security in their PDET and to indicate whether they believe that armed conflict could return to their community in the future. Whereas the 2019 responses gave some room for optimism, the 2021 responses suggest a gloomier outlook. In three PDETs – Bajo Cauca y Nordeste Antioqueño, Pacífico y Frontera Nariñense, and Sierra Nevada - Perijá – the security level is rated significantly higher in 2021 than in 2019. In the remaining PDETs, however, people rate security as the same as or lower than in 2019 (Figure 3, panel 1). Similarly, the share of respondents who claim that the armed conflict is still present in their community has doubled from 17% in 2019 to 35% in 2021.

The MAPS survey also measures preferences and perceptions about public services beyond security. When we ask how residents of the PDETs themselves would prioritize public spending, they highlight three policy areas: build and improve health services (50%), improve education (27%), and build and improve roads (18%). These priorities have not changed from the 2019 to the 2021 survey, but – as seen in Figure 2 – they are not reflected in the efforts to implement the peace accord. Figure 3 (panels 2 and 3) shows people's average assessment of the quality of public goods provision in each of the 16 PDETs in 2019 and 2021.

The differences in people's assessments of quality of education and health services are striking. In all PDETs, people rate education lower in 2021, with an average of 2.8 on a 1–5 scale – where 1 is very bad and 5 is very good – compared to the average of 3 in 2019. People's assessment of health services, on the other hand, has increased from an average of 2.2 in 2019 to 2.4 in 2021. This may reflect the Colombian government's endeavors to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating that these efforts have reached the rural population despite security challenges.

The peace accord outlines a 15-year period for achieving its aims to increase the well-being of the rural population and to reduce poverty. However, as one-third of that period has reached its end, most people in the PDETs have yet to feel the tangible benefits of peace implementation in their communities. It is important to note that the situation is uneven across the PDETs. In Pacífico Medio, for example, located on the Pacific coast and populated primarily by Afro-Colombian and indigenous residents, people's fears in 2019 became a reality in 2021: In 2019, 54% thought the armed conflict could return at the time of the first survey wave, and in 2021, 52% confirm that it has. The negative security situation correlates with low assessment of public services and low satisfaction with peace accord implementation.

In contrast, people in Bajo Cauca y Nordeste Antioqueño and Sierra Nevada - Perijá express more positive developments from 2019 to 2021. In both PDETs, people's rating of health services and security has improved, satisfaction with peace accord implementation has increased, and assessment of education is still relatively high, even though it is now lower than in 2019. The armed conflict is unfortunately still very much present in Bajo Cauca y Nordeste Antioqueño. This was the most conflict-affected PDET according to the 2019 survey and remains among the most affected in 2021. Sierra Nevada - Perijá is at the other end of the spectrum, with less than 6% claiming the armed conflict was active in 2019, and about 3% claiming the same in 2021. Additionally, 50% believe the conflict could not return.

Conclusion

This policy brief has provided preliminary results from two waves of a public opinion survey of 12,000 respondents in the 16 most conflict-affected regions in Colombia. A full

report, written by UNDP Colombia in collaboration with PRIO, is forthcoming. The full report will elaborate on people's perceptions of the peace accord implementation, reincorporation of former combatants, transitional justice, rural reform, and trust in institutions. The report will also describe how people's perceptions and experiences have changed from the 2019 MAPS survey wave to the 2021 wave, providing crucial knowledge for the people tasked with implementing the peace accord.

The success of peacebuilding in Colombia depends on people's perceptions of and experience with the peace accord and its implementation in the most conflict-affected areas. These perceptions and experiences are formed by the decisions of the government agencies responsible for implementing the peace accord and the level of political will to do so. Failing to measure people's perceptions, however, leaves decision-makers in the dark about how policy interventions and peace accord implementation are perceived on the ground, and how such interventions – or lack thereof – correspond with people's priorities and shape crucial public support for the peace process.

As illustrated by the examples from Pacífico Medio, Bajo Cauca y Nordeste Antioqueño, and Sierra Nevada - Perijá above, the MAPS survey demonstrates strong relationships between the policies implemented – or not – and people's satisfaction and views about the future. The way forward for Colombia is to continue to implement the peace accord and to focus on the policies that matter the most for the people living in conflict-affected areas: health services, education, infrastructure, and security. ■

THE AUTHOR

Helga Malmin Binningsbø is a Senior Researcher at PRIO. Her research focuses on the use and consequences of conflict-related justice processes as well as people's opinions about peacebuilding strategies.

THE PROJECT

This policy brief is an output from the 'Monitoring Attitudes, Perceptions, and Support of the Peace Process in Colombia' (MAPS) project. MAPS is a collaboration between PRIO, Universidad de los Andes, and the UNDP Country Office in Colombia and is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Sustaining Peace in Colombia, and Uppsala University.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.