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Fighting
corruption in the
security sector for
sustainable peace

"Armed State Actors and
Transitional Justice" Working
Group, Willy Brandt School



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Summary

Following the 2016 peace agreement, which did not include a security sector reform, Colombia has experienced an increase in violence and threats, and various armed groups have proliferated in rural areas, due to the absence or ineffectiveness of state security forces. In this paper, we discuss the importance of security sector reform in a post-conflict context and the challenges of implementing it and of improving trust between civilians and the military. In particular, we analyze the problem of corruption in this sector, which seriously compromises the legitimacy of the State, its resources, and its capacity to protect the population. Several public policy options are put forward and recommendations are made in this regard. These include, to establish a meritocratic promotion system, involve civil society in the design of the reform, strengthen civilian and democratic oversight of the sector, and link more with communities and their needs.

Keywords

Armed forces; corruption; human security; peacebuilding

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The 2016 peace agreement fostered a sense of hopeful anticipation for sustainable peace among Colombians. However, seven years on, Colombians, especially those living in the country's peripheries, are still subject to violence, as many social leaders are to assassination (Albarracín et al., 2022). According to the Ombudsman, in 2022, the killings of social leaders and human rights activists reached a record high of 215 people (Reuters, 2023). This bloodshed marks a setback in Colombia's peacebuilding agenda. Gustavo Petro's electoral victory in 2022 brought optimism and, more specifically, raised expectations for tangible actions to accomplish "total peace". The agenda to establish a 6-month ceasefire with several armed groups in Colombia might yield positive results (Al Jazeera, 2023; Velásquez, 2023). Nonetheless, securing long-term peace in a post-conflict context requires a much broader agenda than mere financial investment in the security sector or simply refraining from shooting each other.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is designed to prepare state security actors to work within a democratic framework and comply with human and civil rights, and is, as such, a significant factor in ending prolonged violent conflicts (Nilsson & Jonsson, 2022). One of the cornerstones of effective SSR consists in building trust between the citizens and state security sector representatives, and, more specifically, the providers of state security. Citizens' trust in the security sector hinges on its reputation and citizens' past security-related experiences in their everyday lives. Insufficient credibility and trust in the military and police, provides shallow ground for the emergence of alternative security providers, i.e., rebel groups (Isser, 2011). Such a

context creates an environment where informal rules compete with state legitimacy.

A major factor that can undermine the public's faith in the state is corruption. It can erode trust in public institutions, including the military and police. A perception of ongoing corruption by public officials hinders the state's efforts to rebuild the public's confidence in the government in this post-conflict context. As shown in the study for Mexico, corruption in the defence sector not only undermines trust but also discourages people from approaching the police when necessary (Baek et al., 2022). Research indicates that citizens, especially victims of violence perpetrated by the state, will only re-evaluate their perceptions (that state forces are corrupt) when they witness the results of reform directly, by regularly interacting with newly reformed police officers face to face (Blair & Morse, 2021). Thus, corruption in the security sector needs to be effectively tackled if sustainable peace in Colombia is to be established.

Public perception of corruption in the armed forces

The issue of corruption in the military came to public knowledge long before the peace agreement was signed. A report in *Semana* magazine (2014) highlighted widespread corruption in the military, mentioning the involvement of several army generals, lieutenant colonels, and colonels. Corruption manifested in various forms, from the awarding of multimillion-dollar contracts to the misuse of military funding initially allocated for military garrisons and vehicles, among others. Following President Iván Duque's reorganisation of the military in December 2018, corruption levels increased even further, and



corruption scandals have severely compromised the military's popularity rating (Alsema, 2021).

As shown in Figure 1, public opinion of the armed forces remained unstable during the 2018-2021 period. Corruption in the military is not the only variable that shapes public perception. Excessive use of force and human rights abuses have contributed to tainting the military's relationship with civilians, and these practices have impacted public opinion of the military.

The 2020 *Latinobarómetro* survey showed low levels of trust towards three main state institutions in Colombia. Specifically, 29.8% of civilians do not trust the armed forces, 38.9% do not trust the police, and 38.2% the government.

Corruption is an ongoing issue in the military. Armed and criminal groups recruit members of the security forces to spy on one another and collaborate or even take part in illegal activity using their financial clout. Reports of collaboration erode public trust in the military, especially in regions where various groups compete for land control. Community members in regions with a high concentration of armed groups report that armed forces often treat them as an integrated part of such groups. This attitude may take the form of verbal abuse or even physical harm. Communities express much concern about the motivations guiding military response measures to officers' inappropriate behaviour.

Meanwhile, the public's perception of the military as a protector of civilian safety has been undermined by high-level military corruption scandals (International Crisis Group, 2022). Additionally,

the use of excessive force in the past and instances of military abuse continue to hinder the healing of relationships with rural populations. The military is yet to fully address its disgraceful past behavior, and it is imperative for them to acknowledge institutional culpability, even in the face of ongoing legal processes and investigations into crimes committed by armed forces personnel.

High levels of corruption also distort morale and reputation within the military between high- and lower ranking officials, the latter being coerced into depositing unlawful money in their supervisors' accounts (*Semana*, February 15, 2014). The lower ranks' promotion system, currently based on financial ability instead of merit, is another source of friction. Successive Colombian administrations have dedicated significant efforts to atone for the legacy of corruption within the security sector. Whether through progressive results or lessons learned, each has contributed to the gains the current administration aims to consolidate.

Why corruption in the security sector matters?

Corruption and state legitimacy

Corruption undermines state legitimacy and credibility, creates mistrust in state institutions, and exacerbates the inequalities especially in the post-conflict contexts with fragile institutions. Corruption among officials and state administration can have detrimental effects on the post-war

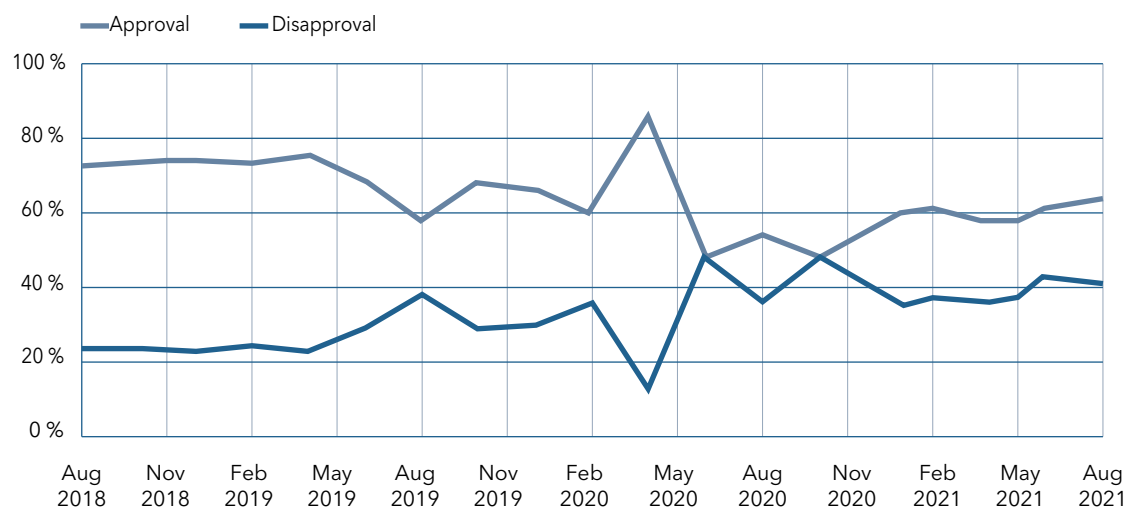


Figure 1. Armed Forces Approval rating (Aug 2018-Aug 2021).

Source: Gallup.

armed forces' efficiency. It can divert resources away from necessary reconstruction and development projects, leading to inadequate or insufficient progress (Lindberg & Orjuela, 2014). Corruption in Colombia's public sector has long been a major concern that adversely impacts state legitimacy. The country ranked 87th out of 180 countries in the 2021 Corruption Perception Index, indicating a high level of perceived corruption within the country (Transparency International, 2021).

Much of the corruption in the security system occurs within the police force. According to a report by Gan Integrity (2020), many Colombians ascribe a high level of corruption to the police force. Specifically, the report states that 40% of Colombians believe that most or all police officers are corrupt. It also highlights –despite some progress in the investigation and prosecution of police abuse– the issue of ongoing police impunity in the country (Gan Integrity, 2020). A comprehensive analysis of government entities between 2016 and 2020 revealed that among all such entities, the security forces faced the greatest number of corruption allegations (Isacson & Jiménez, 2022). Not only does this undermine the integrity of the security forces, but it also damages their relationship with the community they are supposed to serve. Lack of trust can also hinder crime prevention and negatively impact economic performance and social well-being (Abril et al., 2022).

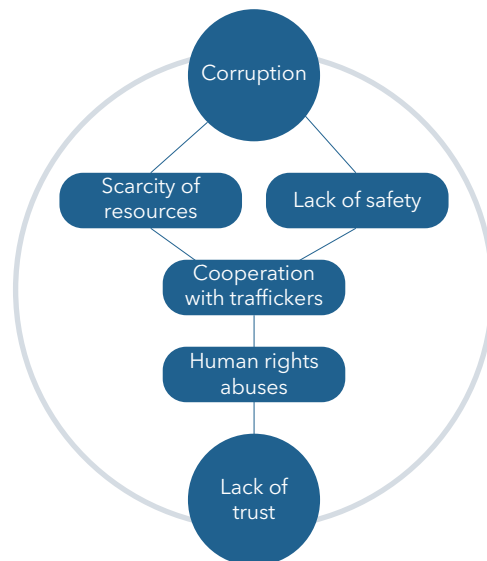


Figure 2. The undermining of trust by corruption: a visual representation.

Source: Authors.

Corruption in the security system further exacerbates the country's ongoing armed conflict, with illegal armed groups such as guerrilla and paramilitary groups infiltrating the security forces and using their positions to further their criminal activities (International Crisis Group, 2022). These acts negatively impact the public image of the military's effectiveness and legitimacy. A study conducted in Indonesia has analytically demonstrated that corruption is statistically significantly correlated with political legitimacy, thereby suggesting that corruption serves as a detrimental factor in eroding citizens' trust in the rule of law, democracy, political actors, and institutions (Tambunan, 2022) (Figure 2).

Corruption and the state's capacity to provide protection and services (human security)

Providing public goods is considered a means by which to measure the ability of the state to provide for its citizens (Suryanarayan, 2021). The Colombian legal framework makes the state responsible for guaranteeing access to health, education, and other social services (Arévalo, 2016). Nevertheless, corruption has hindered the Colombian government's efforts to provide equal access to social services for all citizens, and civilians living in rural areas, where armed groups continue to expand their operations, posing a threat to their security, carry the heaviest burden. Of utmost concern is the fact that armed groups continue to target citizens as potential recruits. It is mainly youths that are incentivised to join, and many do so, not because they consider it attractive, but because it is the only way for them to make a living (International Crisis Group, 2022). Like citizens, security forces operating in these regions are more susceptible to threats from armed groups and traffickers if they refuse to cooperate or are corrupted if they agree to cooperate. Aside from the misuse of funds, the scarcity of resources and lack of safety for military troops fuel corruption in the same way (Stone, 2019). Furthermore, cooperation with traffickers leads to human rights violations, particularly in remote areas. Thus, research calls for greater transparency and accountability in remote regions where military units are more vulnerable and human rights abuses are seemingly more significant.

Corruption and the drain on the national budget

According to some estimates, corruption costs the Colombian government an estimated COP \$7.5 billion annually, which was almost 10% of the

government's 2017 budget (Alsema, 2016). This staggering amount of money lost to corruption also has a significant impact on the country's citizens, as every Colombian is forced to bear the cost, amounting to approximately COP \$165 per person per year. This amount is equivalent to three-quarters of the monthly minimum wage, a significant sum for many citizens.

To make up for the funds lost to corruption, the Colombian government has been forced to implement various measures, including raising taxes, which, it estimates, would generate an annual revenue of \$2.4 billion, approximately one third of the funds estimated to be lost to corruption every year (Alsema, 2016). This implies an additional burden for citizens made to have to recover the loss of financial resources which could be used for socio-economic development projects instead. It also leads to a sense of resentment and frustration among citizens, which can erode their trust in the government's ability to manage public resources effectively and may raise questions about the government's commitment to transparency and accountability.

Policy options

A long-term perspective should be considered for the security sector reform. These solutions should enable and ensure the state's capacity; increase its legitimacy and credibility by providing protection, services, and access to justice for its civilians; and in the process, improve the reputation of security sector institutions. Below are a set of policy options framed around the potential security sector trust building mechanisms. The policy options provide a means for democratic oversight of the security sector, possible solutions for better access to services and justice, and changes in the institutional design advocating for the promotion of equal opportunities within the system.

Trust building as the cornerstone of state legitimacy and capacity

Restoring public trust in state institutions is one of the main challenges in the post-peace agreement era. Certain steps have been identified as a pathway to building trust and enhancing state legitimacy. The military personnel's perception of their own role and the relationship among cultural beliefs, ideologies, and human rights providing either resistance to human rights or support, has been identified as important (Wahl, 2013). It is equally

crucial that officers at all levels are held accountable for any misconduct, not only lower-ranking members, as both the police and armed forces ultimately represent the state as an institution.

In Colombia, there have been instances where communities, due to the state's inability to fulfill their needs, have showcased their inherent ability to supplement state services organically. For instance, in Putumayo, the government refuses to repair or maintain a community-built road because its construction violates environmental norms, but accessing these permits is impossible for remote communities (Acero & Thompson, 2022). Putumayans argue that if the government met its obligation regarding infrastructure, the community would not have to build the road. On the other hand, multinational corporations that cut down trees and build roads without the proper environmental permits suffer none of the repercussions. Given Colombia's post-conflict state, the country may benefit from the hybrid state approach wherein state and nonstate actors share "legitimacy, authority, and capacity", as described by Baker (2010, p. 212), at least sub-nationally.

In many post-conflict situations, there is an evident lack of credibility and trust in the authorities, especially those engaged in past atrocities. Governments encounter challenges in realising their reform agendas, including restoring public trust in state institutions. Engaging all possible social strata in dialogues on the reform agenda, especially democratising, and rebuilding a security sector with substantiated links to wartime atrocities, becomes vital.

Governments that refrain from acknowledging and incorporating local needs in the design and implementation of a security sector reform, will be faced with a population that does not trust or support it, a telling measure of policy success. It might even lead to a recurrence of armed conflict or resistance and inertia by locals. It is especially important to include vulnerable and marginalised segments of society –women, children, people with disabilities, and people from all social strata, ethnic and religious minorities– in the process, as it is they that are the most severely affected by the armed conflict (Gordon, 2014).

Civilian control and democratic oversight over the security sector

The SSR agenda is particularly challenging in post-conflict environments because of already established political, economic, and social power



relations and how these can change the established status-quo. Further, there is always tension among powerbrokers, concerning who should be involved in the reform process, as it relates to certain expertise that civilians lack. In Colombia, different perceptions have been identified among members of the military and government concerning civilians and communities: those close to the establishment, benefiting from the post-conflict status quo and those depicted as more rebellious and challenging of the institutionalism (Ortiz-Ayala, 2019, p. 3). These power relations constitute the military's core ideological base on the question of who should and who should not be provided protection. This results in an institutional reluctance by the Armed Forces to provide access to "outsiders" to the internal processes and structures of the security sector.

Where wartime atrocities have been committed, there are even greater difficulties in overcoming conflict and democratizing institutions, particularly in the security and justice sectors. More complex challenges arise for civilian oversight and—in a more institutional sense—parliamentary oversight of the security sector, which may stem from a certain disconnect between the political and military spheres. The military can be prohibited from participating in politics in exchange for 'no civil interference' in the management of security issues (Ortiz-Ayala, 2019, pp. 3-4).

Security actors' accountability, through elected civilian officials, and legislative and executive bodies is another key aspect of trust building and tackling the issues of corruption in the security sector. The strained relationship between security sector actors and civilian authority, prompted the former to make little effort to mask its challenging of the latter (Ortiz-Ayala, 2019). These frictions can be addressed by enforcing the hierarchy that subordinates security actors to politicians in their capacity as the constitutionally appointed civilian authority, as outlined in the Colombian constitution, through mechanisms such as the national budget and the judiciary (when military courts fail to take appropriate action). Doing so serves to build public trust in the state, and provides added leverage to fight against and dismantle the corruption mechanisms distorting the security sector's image among civilians.

Rethinking the relationship between civilians and the military

The signing of peace agreements and the end of the conflict do not bring peace to civilians, whose

needs are still pressing. The paradigm shifts of military soldiers to change roles and focus on the needs of civilians remain critical. Shifting responsibilities to provide humanitarian assistance to civilians has proven to strengthen relationships between civilians and the military. With the signing of the peace agreement between Ecuador and Peru in 1995, soldiers become "flexible military", adapting to the new situation (Cruz et al., 2021, p. 476). Their activities, including providing humanitarian support, managing risk, and collaborating with the National Police to combat organised crime, played a vital role in strengthening their relationship with civilians. An indicator of this was the large number of people interested in joining the military. The Ecuadorian Armed Forces have taken further steps to enhance their commitment to society by integrating ethical and moral values in their legal mechanisms.

The Colombian government's anti-drug policy has weakened state legitimacy, particularly in coca-producing regions, and increased support for rebel organisations. A crucial point has been repeatedly made over the years by activists, researchers, and drug crop growers themselves: small farmers engage in the illegal drug trade because there are no other viable employment options in their communities. State policy must take this into account (Acero & Thomson, 2022).

In a nutshell, the effects and the outcome of corruption

Figure 3 provides an illustrative overview of the effects and the outcome of corruption in the Colombian context, based on the problem analysis and outcomes discussed above. Specifically, the distortion of legitimacy, damaged morale within the army, lack of trust, and inefficient distribution of resources creates an environment where civilians feel unprotected by the state. This, in turn, hinders their full access to justice and other basic services. As a result, they may be incentivised to join armed groups and have less effective or no developmental projects in local communities, impeding their economic performance and well-being.

Corruption leads to irreversible damage being done to civilians and the state, when civilians seek alternative sources of protection and join armed groups, hindering a sustainable peacebuilding process and weakening state institutions. Rebuilding civilians' trust in the state and the military therefore remains at the heart of the solution.



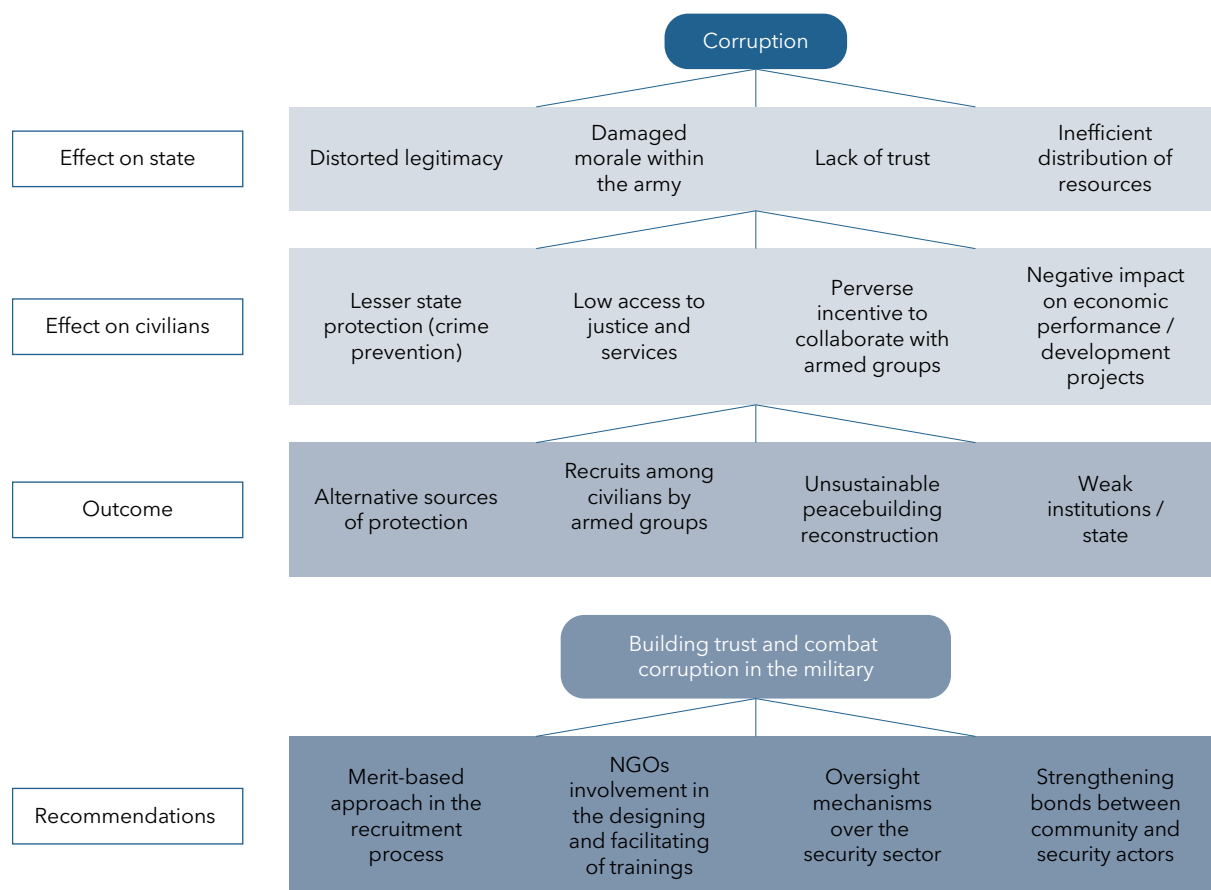


Figure 3. Illustration of the problem and recommendations to combat corruption and build trust.

Source: Authors.

Recommendations

Considering current needs, we propose the following recommendations to Colombia's Ministry of National Defence in combating corruption and building trust between civilians and the military.

1. Revise the appointments of the military staff and introduce a meritocratic system

Merit-based ascensions, merit-based promotions, and selection for specialised training and education is an underutilised economic policy tool that allows members of a society to compete through talent instead of relationships, socioeconomic standing, or any other corrosive means. Pivoting from the pay-for-play system to one that is merit-based, in which candidates are selected for promotion, training, and key billets, based on merit and impartial selection, harvests talent across the entire force, opening inclusion beyond those who are willing

and able to pay. Such a system curbs perceptions of corruption, fosters competition and raises the calibre of the force, boosts morale, and raises the institution's image across all strata of Colombian society who may see themselves represented in those holding senior positions.

2. Involve NGOs in designing and facilitating effective training in human rights

Without undermining the importance of technical aspects, there are no technical solutions to political problems. SSR is a long-term political process, and there is a clear need for a national conversation on the role and mandate of the security institutions in the face of public security challenges. This conversation cannot be limited to political parties and institutions. It must include groups from all classes and backgrounds to spur transformative dialogue (Piché, 2017). That is why, NGOs working

on the ground with people in rural areas could be involved in designing and providing training for military troops and police officers. Their contribution in providing examples of how military violence affects civilian lives and well-being may help them better understand civilians' realities. As a result, it would help shift the idea from the state having a monopoly on the use of force to focusing on how to address the security demands of the people.

3. Establish mechanisms for democratic and civilian oversight of the security sector

To achieve effective democratic oversight of the security sector in post-conflict countries like Colombia, multiple actors need to be involved, including the executive, legislative, judiciary, and civil society. The establishment of a special Joint Committee on security and defence within the Congress and an independent Public Council, composed of citizens and civil society, can enhance transparency, accountability, and representation in the security sector. The Joint Committee will be responsible for reviewing and approving laws and budgets related to the defence and security sector, including the military, police, intelligence agencies, border control, and other security forces. It may also conduct investigations into abuses of power or violations of human rights. Public council will be responsible for monitoring the activities of the security sector agencies and providing periodic recommendations to the Committee. This would foster transparency and accountability and help build trust among different actors.

4. Strengthen bonds between communities and security actors

The mission and composition of security forces posted in remote areas with limited additional state presence must reflect the needs of local communities. Outfitting these units with capabilities, other than the ability to respond to the national security threats, can help to reinforce communities' perception of the central government's commitment to serve all Colombians. Prior unit deployments for pre-assessment of needs allow for the preparation and supply of specialized units and materials. For example, medical units attached to security-oriented outfits, arrive prepared to conduct outreach programmes such as medical civic outreach, which deliver medical services to underserved communities. Engineer units' civic outreach may involve them repairing or building local infrastructure, like roads, bridges, and buildings. These deployments

may also deliver expertise related to areas other than security, such as government aid programmes.

The benefits of diversifying the employment of the armed forces go beyond improving the state's image in the eyes of communities. Units improve through practical experience. By engaging with the public in various ways, such as collaboration, negotiation, and trust-building, they enhance their skills and effectiveness. These interactions, along with other advantages, significantly contribute to national security.

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Policy Briefs for the project “Stabilisation of the peace process in Colombia through justice, truth, and the protection of human rights”

The main objective of this initiative is to support the consolidation of the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition, based on Colombian-German academic cooperation and in collaboration with the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) and the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth (CEV). The project also is intended to contribute to the debate on the role of State security forces in the prevention of human rights violations in the context of the post-agreement period, to promote a real, comprehensive and lasting peace. This project is led by CAPAZ Institute. These Policy Briefs are designed to disseminate knowledge on issues of relevance to the mandate of the institutions that make up the Integral System among non-experts in the field of transitional justice.

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