EXPLORATORY STUDY

COMMUNITY- AND CITIZEN-LED RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS(ES) IN COLOMBIA

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Cover Photo: Courtesy of Organización Comunitaria Semillas de Paz-Adrian Flor-La Pedregosa Cajibio

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1. Introduction: about survivor- and community-led crisis response

Survivor- and community-led crisis response (sclr) is a way of supporting, resourcing, and strengthening the ability of individuals and communities responding to a humanitarian crisis, whether sudden or protracted. The approach grew out of research on how people respond to crises of various kinds, recognising that they are always the first and last responders in any context.

Within the wide range of "locally-led" responses, it has been necessary to find a term to distinguish those that

are specifically led and managed by survivors and communities from the crisis-affected populations themselves. Local2Global Protection (L2GP), and the NGOs who work with them, use the acronym "sclr" (survivor- and community-led crisis response") for this purpose. For more on sclr and how it works in a multitude of crisis settings across the world please refer to the **Local to Global website**.[1]

2. Study and methodology

This study explores some of the existing responses by the organisations participating in this study (ACT Church of Sweden (ACT CoS), Christian Aid (CA), Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe (DKH), their national and local NGOs and community partner organisations) to the recurrent crises that are experienced in Colombia. From this first step, the research identifies opportunities and possible entry points for the future engagement of L2GP and sclr responses with national, local, and other relevant partners in Colombia.

The specific objectives of the research are:

1. To develop a brief description and analysis of the relevant ongoing debates on "localisation" in Colombia. The focus will be on the Colombia Localisation Dialogue promoted by the 2016 Grand Bargain Localisation work stream. What can we learn from this process? Does Colombia's country dialogue relate to local sclr -type responses to crisis?

2. Map, to the extent possible given time and resources, current and past experience with community and citizen-led responses to the crisis in Colombia. Describe who the most relevant community actors are, their respective actions and priorities, and where relevant include a brief description of the most important local/national government and external/ international actors involved. This mapping includes important examples of non-aid actor responses (mutual aid, community response, CBOs, activist groups, etc.).

3. Describe the experience and potential interest of existing partners (identified by CoS and CA) in sclr activities. Explore and briefly describe whether synergies exist between the external aid and community and citizen responses to the crisis in Colombia by partners.

4. In relation to national partners, identify the most important local actors working on community- and citizen-led responses to crises and closely related protection issues. Include a brief description of the different types of activities in which these actors are involved where relevant to this study. This should be defined together with the Colombian partners.

5. Outline practical steps for L2GP and international NGOs to support Colombian partners, stakeholders and local communities in the development of sclr - inspired activities where this has been deemed relevant in response to the above points.

This exploratory study is based on an analysis of recent literature on localisation, project documents from different organisations, online interviews with representatives from the three international NGOs mentioned above and with 12 national organisations and community actors in Colombia. The CA partners involved in the study were Corporación Corambiente and Sisma Mujer. ACT CoS partners that participated were: Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace (CIJP), National Women's Network and Inter-Church Dialogue for Peace (DiPaz). These national organisations provided the consultant with information about their local and community partners in remote and difficult to reach areas. Lists of organisations and individuals suggested and those actually interviewed can be found at the end of this report. Time, resources and accessibility determined and limited the number of organisations and individuals consulted in the process.

3. Localisation in Colombia[2]

The Grand Bargain, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in May 2016, is a unique agreement between diverse humanitarian actors, who have committed to provide resources to people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

The signatories of the Grand Bargain committed to work on 9 key points or strands:
1. greater transparency;
2. more support and funding for local and national organisations (localisation);
3. increasing the use and coordination of cash-based initiatives;
4. reducing duplication and management costs;
5. improving joint and impartial needs assessments;
6. a revolution in participation: Include aid recipients in decision-making that affects their lives;
7. increase collaboration in multi-year humanitarian planning and funding;
8. reduce "targeted" donor contributions;
9. harmonise and simplify reporting requirements.

The Localisation Strand includes as commitments:
- Increase investment in the institutional capacity of local organisations.
- Improve cooperation between local and international organisations.
- Achieve, by 2020, an aggregate target of at least 25% of humanitarian funding channelled to local organisations 'as directly as possible.'
- Support national coordination mechanisms and include local organisations in international coordination mechanisms.
- Optimise the use of funding tools for local and national organisations, such as pooled funds.

The Localisation work stream promoted a series of country-level dialogues to incentivise local platforms for discussion, identification of challenges, and opportunities on the implementation of localisation commitments, based on a series of previous assessments that identified that this issue was not being discussed at the local level.[3] In June 2021, the Grand Bargain signatories revised the structure and priorities. Of particular relevance to this study, it was agreed to continue the workstreams focusing on more support and funding tools for local and national actors, greater transparency, and the so-called "participation revolution"

(placing people affected by crisis at the centre of project design and formulation).[4]

According to the annual report on the Country-Dialogue on Localisation Colombia, there is a high presence and operation of national and international NGOs. In 2019 the number of active organisations was 193,070.[5]

The same report concludes, based on a literature review of reports on localisation in Colombia, that despite the high presence of NGOs, their operational capacity is 'reduced by the lack of direct funding, which in turn limits the individual and joint actions of these organisations.'[6] The report also highlights the importance of pooled funds, which provide operational continuity for different organisations. However, there is a call from the organisations accessing these funds to be more than just implementing partners of international organisations.

The report highlights the value of partnerships, since they allow greater operability and greater operational range for different NGOs. However, most partnerships are between international and national actors, leaving aside local actors and social organisations, which, like national actors, are often not perceived as peers, and are placed under subcontracting regimes that limit the equitable conditions between them.[7] International humanitarian actors in Colombia have a significant knowledge on the Grand Bargain and localisation, while information and awareness of the topic decreases the more local the actor is.[8]

Finally, a recent study points out that a few countries appear more in localisation research: Syria (13 studies), Bangladesh (12 studies) and South Sudan (11 studies). Latin America and the Caribbean are not prominently represented in these. Only 3 studies have been conducted in Colombia.[9] The most important finding of one of these is that many of the local and community groups interviewed do not identify their work as humanitarian. Their mission is advocacy and protection of human rights. They provide consistent services to communities, but these activities change and adapt during times of crisis to meet adverse circumstances. There is no division between humanitarian and development work. These organisations stress the importance of investing in 'strengthening the local social fabric' before and after crises, which would support local leadership.[10]

4. Violence and displacement in Colombia

The main humanitarian needs are in rural, peripheral and hard-to-reach areas of the country.[11] Violence against civilians in Colombia worsened in 2020-2021 during the coronavirus pandemic as armed groups increased their operations amid struggles over territory. The complex humanitarian emergencies in the country affect certain population groups disproportionately, among them the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. These groups face some of the worst challenges and highest needs in the country, with their physical well-being severely affected by the lack of access to basic health, water, and sanitation services.[12]

Violence against former combatants, social leaders, and human rights defenders continues to be concentrated in 25 municipalities of the country. Mainly in areas prioritised for the implementation of the peace agreement between the former FARC-EP guerrillas and the Colombian state.[13] The coming years will be complex for Colombia. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an economic and social crisis that has deepened existing inequalities, such as gender inequalities. The National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) reported that for August 2021 the unemployment rate for women was 24.2% while for men it was 15.3%. A significant increase in violence against women is also being witnessed.

Disputes between illegal armed groups, including different FARC-EP dissident groups, the National

Liberation Army (ELN) and the Clan del Golfo (also known as Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia), over territorial control, and strategic illicit trafficking routes have intensified. This has exacerbated violence, particularly in areas affected by the conflict and prioritised for the implementation of the Final Peace Agreement to develop programs with a territorial approach Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET).[14] There have been several attacks against the security forces. The murders of ex-combatants, social leaders and human rights defenders continue to be concentrated in the PDET municipalities. Organisations throughout the country have expressed concern about this.

The persistence of violence continues to generate massive displacement and confinement, especially in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Córdoba and Nariño. According to The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs during January and November 2021, at least 72,300 people were forcibly displaced in 159 mass emergencies. This represents an increase of 62% in the number of events and 196% in the number of displaced people compared to the same period in 2020.[15] This is mainly due to the actions of armed groups and territorial disputes between them. All the organisations consulted for this study expressed deep concern about this violence. In the voice of one community leader: 'we are returning to the past and perhaps worse than before.'

5. Exploring the relevance of sclr-type activities

According to the representative of CA in Colombia, their work in the country is characterised by a clear-cut division between development and humanitarian projects and programs.[16] The CA partners with a national presence carry out work of a more legal and advocacy nature. However, there is significant interest in implementing new activities and trying out new ways of working.

One example is the case of Sisma Mujer. For this organisation, advocacy work is key. However, the pandemic pushed the organisation into other types of activities. In the words of a representative of Sisma Mujer: 'the pandemic forced us to rethink many things: gender violence in homes, thinking about humanitarian aid for food and shelter: that is our interest in this type of activities.'

For a Sisma Mujer representative in Montes de Maria, a region with a long history of conflict and violence, security and protection are more pressing:

…I can't stay in Carmen any longer. I am threatened. Neither the state nor the government, nor the mayor's office support… In cases of sexual violence, some people don't like that we accompany the women. However, we have many projects here, we have a sewing workshop. We have had support for a while now from the German embassy. Support for economic activities!

Another organisation, Corambiente, focuses on environmental issues and has previously worked on empowerment projects for rural women. Here there is also a great interest in sclr activities. According to Corambiente's director this is due to the type of communities the organisation works with. In her words:

We are working with communities that are in crisis: the farmer communities of Soto Norte, because they are defending their territory against successive governments that intend to approve a gold mining license, and secondly the farmer community represented by ASOCAB who are land claimants against private palm oil companies. They are subsistence farmer communities that have achieved a level of organisation that resists without violence, with high advocacy capacities, who have consolidated agroecology as a strategy for the protection and conservation of the territory.

With the support of CA, Corambiente has implemented a strategy to strengthen the organisational dynamics of Comite de las Pavas, a farmer organisation, in a context of displacement. It is based on a strategy to improve food conditions through ecological food production for self-consumption and income generation. They have also facilitated the improvement of temporary housing for families in the countryside in search of more dignified living conditions, which increased the possibility of permanent accommodation for displaced families in their area. The intention of this strategy was to increase the motivation of each family to defend their land and build, amid difficulties, a project for a dignified life. Due to their experience with communities in crisis and hands on approach, Corambiente could become a good option to facilitate sclr pilot projects.

The Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace (CIJP) is another national organisation that could give traction to a sclr component in Colombia. CIJP's work is extensive, and the organisation has a vast knowledge of the Colombian reality. However, when it comes to future programs of any kind, there is some scepticism on the part of CIJP's Executive Secretary:

Violence has not been resolved with well-known armed groups and we are witnessing new dynamics, which generate permanent situations of anxiety and displacement. In the current conditions, it is impossible to talk about development and peace without resolving the existing armed conflicts.

CIJP Executive Secretary's tone is more optimistic when it comes to the University of Peace. The University of Peace is an initiative promoted by CIJP in consultation with communities in different regions. It offers higher education in the areas most affected by the internal conflict, and the objective is to facilitate meeting and reconciliation between victims and those directly responsible for atrocities from all sides of the conflict. The University seeks to provide higher education appropriate to the socio-cultural characteristics of the regions affected by the armed conflict that previously have been marginalised from the right to education.

CIJP develops and facilitates cultural activities, sports, women's committees, youth initiatives, and community radio. In other words: the systemic approach of CIJP, characterised by work with the communities and based on the territories, is very similar to the sclr approach. By way of example, one of the community organisations supported by CIJP is Semillas de Paz, in Cajibio Cauca. This organisation has several projects on environmental issues, the mobilisation of young people, and the creation of a leadership training school.

Importantly, CIJP promotes, the declaration, delimitation, and visibility of thirteen (13)

Humanitarian Zones (*Zonas Humanitarias*) in the lower Atrato. This is a mechanism to protect the life and integrity of the processes and communities under the principle of distinction of the civilian population and as an exclusive place for civilians. A *Humanitarian Zone* is a protected area for the exclusive use of the civilian population. The model itself does not exist in Colombian legislation but it is based on the normative nature of the right to life and to protection of the civilian population in an internal armed conflict, as established in International Humanitarian Law. In the *Humanitarian Zones*, communities define and clearly mark the areas in which they are living and prohibit the entry of any armed actor, whether legal or illegal.

One of the organisations interviewed for this study founded the first *Humanitarian Zone* in Colombia: CAVIDA (Association of Communities of Self-determination, Life and Dignity). CAVIDA is also a close partner of CIJP. CAVIDA was created as a result of the displacement of the Cacarica community by paramilitary forces. The displaced population who returned to their territories organised themselves in Humanitarian Zones to prevent attacks on their life and personal integrity. The community demand respect for their rights to life, land, truth, justice and comprehensive reparation for crimes, perpetrated in most cases by the State, through direct action or omission. and the acquiescence and support of paramilitary groups. Leftist guerrilla groups also committed crimes against the community. CAVIDA's work, according to one of its representatives, is about:

> …*supporting community leadership processes, human rights, international humanitarian law and learning processes on national and international regulations on ethnic-territorial and collective rights of communities… We are implementing nonviolence and sustainable resource projects with external support as a means of resisting displacement and dispossession. Our strong motivation is to continue and maintain small-scale, local-resource-based livelihoods.*

In Cacarica, CAVIDA also played a significant role in the University of Peace as the initiators of its' first module and would appear to be a likely partner in sclr activities because of their history as an organisation working in conflict and crisis.

ACT CoS finances two projects that being implemented by the Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace - CIJP (The University of Peace) and the National Women's Network (RNM - women in action for peace). These are advocacy projects where there appears to be a potential for future sclr work. In the words of the representative of Act Church of Sweden in the country:

> *In Colombia, we see the sclr approach as a complement to these initiatives that already have processes with well-defined and vulnerable populations. These are processes where humanitarian needs arise as they go along, which are not always included in the approved projects, but which respond to the needs that the harsh reality is creating.*

Within the *Humanitarian Zones*, communities have launched their own education processes in the absence of the State and the precarious access to education. Study plans and curricular contents have been designed with the objective of responding to their ethnic specificities and condition as victims of the armed conflict. Community teachers participate in these processes with the support of university volunteers who, in agreement with universities, have contributed to the strengthening of the University of Peace proposal. Thirteen University of Peace locations are planned in Antioquia, Chocó, Cauca, Meta and Putumayo. These educational community processes are an excellent starting point for sclr pilot projects.

A recurring theme in the interviews is the connection between territory and community processes. As CAVIDA's representative explains:

> *As the Humanitarian Zones begin to take shape, these zones seek to prevent new attacks against our lives, they are spaces of territory that designate a neutral point in conflict zones. We intend to demand respect for life and the condition of the civilian population whose members demand respect for their fundamental rights and share a common life project based on the free self-determination of peoples and framed in the principles of truth, freedom, justice, fraternity and solidarity.*

This has also led some communities to declare *Biodiversity Zones* (*Zonas de Biodiversidad*) in some territories. These are defined by the Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace as areas of protection, conservation, and recovery of native ecosystems in Collective or Private Territories, and of affirmation of the right to food and dignified living. These zones are divided into different areas: areas of conservation, recovery, cultivation, housing, and sustainable uses. Although each area has specific functions, they are all interrelated. In this sense, the *Biodiversity Zones* have emerged as a new way of inhabiting the territory that allows for the social change required to guarantee a dignified life for returning populations.

Like the *Humanitarian Zones*, *Biodiversity Zones* are defined and bounded areas. They are a commitment to looking after the environment by communities. These processes are already ongoing and judging from interviews and the written material revised by the

consultant, community groups that inhabit these zones could implement sclr projects with the initial participation of a national partner if required. This also relates to the work of the Lutheran World Federation in Colombia which seeks to influence authorities and other actors together with partners to achieve the fulfilment of sustainable livelihoods adapted to the impacts of climate change at a community level in inter-ethnic contexts and promote the rights to land and territory.[17]

Gender

Substantial work is carried out by CA's and CoS' implementing partners in the prevention of gender-based violence, including important advocacy work done through several organisations. The most significant is the work of the National Women's Network. The National Women's Network is an alliance of organisations made up of 16 chapters in the country.[18] The network is a civil society organisation founded in 1992 as a feminist commitment to the integral realisation of women's human rights. It has a focus on the recognition of diversity for the political and cultural transformation of society. In this process, a diverse group of women proposed an advocacy strategy for the inclusion of law articles that would guarantee the effective realisation of women's rights. After this process different groups and independent feminists consolidated this network, whose main objectives are:

- To influence legislative processes in favour of women;
- Strengthening of regional and local women's organisations;
- Active political participation in decision-making bodies;
- Demanding and rights from social mobilisation;
- Advocacy in peace processes;
- Making the impact of the conflict on women's lives visible.

The network contributed to the peace process with national and international advocacy initiatives mainly highlighting the lack of implementation of the peace accords; the importance of involving and strengthening women in local political participation; pointing at the lack of protection mechanisms for human rights defenders; and advocating for the transitional justice system to address sexual violence. The network also supported local women groups advocacy efforts with local authorities for them to include women's proposals in the development of Local Territorial Development Plans (PDET in Spanish) as per the Final Peace Agreement.[19]

It is important to note, that even if the major focus of the National Women's Network is advocacy work at the national level, the activities of the local chapters cover a wide range of issues that are important to women, including economic empowerment and the provision of services such as water and sanitation. According to interviews with a network representative there is a desire to expand project activities towards socio-economic projects: 'We have discussed it: how to take our organisation towards a broader work objective, but it is not easy. We need a network that supports economic ventures.' It would appear that this network may be perfectly situated to act as facilitating agency to introduce the sclr approach to their chapters at the local level.

Peacebuilding and protection

Much work by international NGO's in Colombia focuses on human rights in the context of the peace process, in particular the rights of victims of the armed conflict. This is a major challenge given the lack of guarantees from the government. The peace process has not been promoted by the current national government, so locally led peacebuilding processes have become more important than ever. Each territory needs a particular type of peace depending on the actors involved in the conflict.

All interviewees expressed deep interest in sclr as a new approach that could add value to existing programs. For most organisations peacebuilding is a central element in their daily work. According to women's organisations such as Sembrando Vidas and Esfuerzate Corozal sclr could mean a more 'hands on' approach to the problems their constituency face. In other words, there is a will and desire to step beyond advocacy efforts.

It is worth highlighting the profound support for the work of accompaniment and lobbying with communities and human rights defenders on the part of both international and national NGOs. In the voice of a leader from Cauca: 'We can do this work by ourselves. But it is important to have contact with them in Bogotá.'

The sclr approach also potentially fits well with the renewed focus by international protection agencies and networks to 'go back to communities.' For instance, the Global Protection Cluster recently emphasised community-driven protection initiatives stating that: 'these types of initiatives should be analysed, show cased and expanded. Supporting local partners, authorities and communities in Colombia is key to deliver, to access and to sustain humanitarian impact and protection response.'[20]

6. Conclusion

Despite limited knowledge of the sclr approach, when explained the approach seemed to resonate very well with many of the national and local organisations interviewed. Due to decades of social mobilisation in response to decades of conflict and violence, Colombia has many strong local organisations with prior experience of community level activities. As the preceding report shows, organisations in the country draw on a wealth of peacebuilding experience driven by local actors.

Whether led by the church, local social movements or women's, farmers, Afro-Colombian or indigenous organisations, many initiatives have set examples in pioneering alternative approaches to advocacy, crisis response and development in areas affected by the armed conflict and natural disasters. Initiatives like the *Humanitarian Zones*, the National Women's Network and other existing advocacy, peace, gender, and protection work all present a strong point of departure for increasing even further ways of working that empower a diverse set of existing and new community groups.

In line with previous localisation reports about Colombia this study finds that most of the local and community groups interviewed do not identify their work as humanitarian. Their mission is advocacy, protection of human rights and the environment, and provision of services to populations which change rapidly according to the development of crises and challenges faced. There is little to no focus on distinguishing between 'external silos' such as humanitarian and development activities. At the same time, interviews summarised above in this study demonstrate a widely shared realisation of a growing need to complement advocacy work with more direct support to community groups as they face increasing violence, poverty and suppression producing needs and challenges across the full humanitarian-development-peace spectrum.

In conclusion, the interviews with the listed national and international NGOs point to a potentially strong synergy between existing activities, experienced local, national and international actors and a context sensitive and strategic introduction of sclr activities for those who express a direct interest to do so - provided it is continuously adapted to the many different realities and existing experience across Colombia.

Time to get started.

End notes

1. See **https://www.local2global.info** and **Survivor- and community-led crisis response: Practical experience and learning - Humanitarian Practice Network** (odihpn.org).
2. This section is based on the report **Diálogos-País Localización, 2021** (ifrc.org).
3. Six countries (Colombia, Myanmar, NW Syria, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Somalia) were supported by the workstream with additional inputs and contributions from other countries who have volunteered to carry out country level dialogues (Philippines and Turkey). For more information see: **Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream** (ifrc.org).
4. For more information about the Grand Bargain 2.0 endorsed framework and annexes see: **Grand Bargain 2.0 Framework [EN]** (interagencystandingcommittee.org).
5. Report **Diálogos-País Localización, 2021** (ifrc.org). The report however does not provide the source of this information.
6. Report **Diálogos-País Localización, 2021** (ifrc.org).
7. To get an idea of the number of social organisations in Colombia consult the list produced by the Ombudsman's office: **Directorio de Organizaciones Sociales** (originally published on defensoria.gov.co)
8. Report **Diálogos-País Localización, 2021** (ifrc.org).
9. See **Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: a literature study** (odi.org).
10. See **Case Studies on Local Humanitarian Action from Haiti, Colombia, and Iraq Tufts** (Feinstein International Center).
11. See: **Colombia Humanitarian Needs Overview Summary** (humanitarianresponse.info).
12. Ibid.
13. See for instance: **Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Colombia, 2021** (unmissions.org).
14. The Development Programs with a Territorial Approach (Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial) are planning and management instruments which aims to stabilise and transform the territories most affected by violence, poverty, illicit economies and institutional weakness, and thus achieve the rural development required by these municipalities. See: **Regional Development Policy in Colombia, 2019** (oecd.com).
15. See **Impacto y Tendencias Humanitarias entre enero y noviembre de 2021, 2021** (humanitarianresponse.info)
16. Interestingly and as mentioned in section 3, most local organisations don't operate having these categories in mind.
17. Lutheran World Federation: Estrategia del Programa Colombia 2019-2024. Vida digna, Paz y Territorio.
18. Two of them were interviewed by the consultant (Magdalena Medio and Bolivar).
19. For an overview and background of the Local Territorial Development Plans see: **PDET - Confianza y Paz** (confianzaypaz.com)
20. See **Colombia can only be compared with Colombia, 2021** (globalprotectioncluster.org)

Annex 1

Organisations interviewed

Bolivar Empowerment Network
Christian Aid
Church of Sweden
Communities of Self-Determination, Life and Dignity
Corambiente
Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe
Esfuerzate Corozal
Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace
Interchurch Dialogue for Peace
Las Pavas Committee
Lutheran World Federation
National Women's Network
National Women's Network, Middle Magdalena
Naya-Valle del Cauca Community Council
Sembrando Vidas
Sisma Mujer
Semilllas de Paz

Organisations not interviewed

Association for Integral Sustainable Development of
the Peasant Reserve Zone Perla Amazonica
(no response)

Biodiversity Zone La Madre Union
(no response)

Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe Partners in Colombia
(Awaiting 2022 slcr workshop)