Seizing a Window of Opportunity: Community Autonomy and Influence in the 2016 Colombian Peace Process

Dissertation Summary

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Abstract:

My dissertation research seeks to understand how rural grassroots movements shape the local impacts of a peace deal. Specifically, I ask: What explains variation in community autonomy and influence in local peace implementation? A peace process creates a fragile, volatile political context that poses both threats and opportunities for rural communities impacted by conflict. I hypothesize that variation in the autonomy and influence of communities in a peace process can be explained by their relative levels of 'regional integration', defined as the degree of representative functions and legal authority that individual communities delegate to regional organizations. I focus on rural Afro-Colombian movements in the Pacific region of Colombia in the five-year period following the signing of the 2016 Colombian peace agreement. I develop controlled comparisons in two regions of the department of Chocó, Atrato and Baudó. In each comparison, I assess the capacity of groups of communities to maintain their autonomy in the face of post-conflict insecurity created by FARC demobilization, and to advance their collective development interests in the participatory peacebuilding program PDET (Territorially-Focused Development Program). Overall, my empirical data suggest that the relative advantages of regional integration – organizational capacity, regional cohesion, external legitimacy – increase the ability of communities to shape local peace outcomes, although these advantages are mitigated to a degree by the tradeoffs of integration, namely democratic deficits and a lack of local independence.

Takeaways:

- The structural differences among regional collective organizing of rural communities play a determinative role in the outcomes of local peace implementation. Overall, the relative advantages of more integrated regions allow them to have greater influence in shaping peace implementation but frequently leads to internal democratic gaps.
- Attentiveness to structural differences should shape international support by keying international actors to the likely strengths and weaknesses of a given region's civil society infrastructure.
- Overall, grassroots collective action is a crucial resource for local peacebuilding and should be a key focus of international support through resources, capacity-building and diplomatic support.

Contents

Introduction

My dissertation asks: what explains community autonomy and influence during the implementation of a peace deal? For communities affected by conflict, a peace deal creates both new opportunities and new threats. On the one hand, the focus on 'inclusive' peace deals by the international community has created the expectation that contemporary peace deals address the political and economic causes of the conflict (Dudouet & Lundström, 2016). These reforms offer significant potential benefits for communities impacted by conflict. However, despite the hope a peace deal represents, it is also rife with potential threats for civilians. Peace deals create a moment of uncertainty and heated political competition that frequently re-generate or perpetuate the violence of the conflict. In this project, I seek to understand how conflict-affected communities shape these volatile, ambiguous impacts of a peace deal.

The case of the Colombian department of Chocó[1], where this research project takes place, proved to be no exception to this dynamic. After decades of bitter violence, the 2016 peace deal with the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) guerrillas created a wave of optimism in the department as it brought to a close the longest-running insurgency in Latin America. That optimism was reinforced by the creation of the largest participatory development program in Colombian history, the PDETs (*Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial*). The PDET program sought to radically transform the rural peripheries most affected by the armed conflict, "closing the gaps" between urban and rural Colombia. Community leaders in Chocó saw the PDET as a vital opportunity to advance their vision for *etno-desarrollo*, that is, development on the communities' own terms, informed and guided by their cultures and traditions.

However, that optimism was tempered by a recognition that with the imminent departure of the FARC, who had controlled large areas of Chocó for decades, other groups would rapidly move to take over FARC territories and the valuable drug trade routes and natural resources within those territories if the Colombian government was incapable or unwilling to effectively govern in rural Chocó. That is exactly what has happened in Chocó, along with many other areas historically affected by Colombia's armed conflict. The conflict has shifted to a new phase, in which other armed groups have come to the fore. The ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) guerrillas have assumed the mantle of Colombia's largest leftist guerrilla organization; agreements with FARC commanders sought to position the ELN to maintain control of FARC territories in Chocó. Their attempts for dominance in Chocó have failed in the face of a ferocious response from the AGC (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*), the paramilitary successor group which has emerged as Colombia's most powerful non-state armed actor. Other players, including FARC dissidents, urban gangs and (possibly) Mexican cartels create a still more volatile environment.

In this challenging context of peace implementation opportunities and threats, I seek to understand how communities influence peace outcomes to favor their interests, simultaneously influencing state-led peacebuilding projects like the PDETs and defending their autonomy from emerging threats like the post-deal war between the AGC and the ELN.

A Theory of Regional Integration

To answer these questions, this project examines differences in the regional organizing strategies of rural communities. I focus on one key difference, which I call *regional integration*. Regional integration can be understood as the degree of organization interconnectedness binding together the communities in a given area; communities can range from *highly independent* to *highly integrated*. To understand this difference, consider a potential rural development project: in a highly atomized region with many independent communities, each individual community seeks out, negotiates and implements their own projects. In

[1] Chocó is a department in the Pacific region of Colombia. Based on the 2005 census, the department is 83% Afro-Colombian and 13% indigenous, one of only two majority-black departments in Colombia. The department has the fourth lowest GDP per capita (about $2200) and the third-highest percentage of people living in poverty (65%) of Colombia. Its lowland geography on the seaward side of Colombia's interior mountain ranges makes it one of the rainiest places in the world, characterized by lush tropical forest crosscut by a vast network of rivers.

contrast, in a highly integrated region, a single regional authority is empowered to seek out and negotiate a development project on behalf of the communities in the region. Communities may also pursue an intermediate strategy, in which a regional organization is empowered to seek out projects on behalf of the communities of the region, but the final decision to participate in any project rests with the individual communities.

This project focuses on the *consejos comunitarios* in the department of Chocó. Consejos comunitarios are an 'ethno-territorial' organization that administer the collective land titles of black communities in Colombia, somewhat similar to a *cabildo* of an indigenous resguardo. Collective land titles were created by the Law 70 of 1993; they create a property that is collectively owned by the people who have historically lived within its boundaries. The lands cannot be legally bought or sold outside of the community, guaranteeing that they belong to the community into perpetuity. In Colombia, there are currently 232 formally recognized land titles covering 5.7 million hectares; within these collective land titles, the consejo comunitario is the "maximum internal authority" that administers the territory and natural resources, maintains Afro-Colombian culture, resolves internal disputes and represents the interests of the communities to external parties (Hinestroza Cuesta & Cuesta Rentería, 2017).

In Chocó, communities generated three different approaches to how to title their lands as they proceeded through the titling process in the 1990s and early 2000s. Communities either independently sought out titles that corresponded to their individual community, formed large titles that included all of the communities along an entire section of a river basin, or adopted a middle road approach, opting for individual, independent community titles but forming associations of consejos comunitarios to collectively represent their interests. This variation forms the basis of my independent variable: regional integration. Based on these differences, I create a three-part typology of regional integration, ranging from atomized regions of **independent communities**, which don't participate in a regional organization and each retain all legal authority over their territory, to **associations of consejos comunitarios**, in which communities retain legal authority at the community level, but participate in regional associations to represent their interests to outside actors, to highly integrated **consejos comunitarios mayores**, which concentrate legal authority and representational functions at the regional level.

Figure 1: Degrees of Integration Among the Consejos Comunitarios

These differences in regional organizing strategies shape the ability of different regions to mobilize communities and negotiate with third parties as well as their approaches to decision-making, tactical selection and conflict resolution, among other crucial issues. Following the social movement literature (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004), I argue that while more integrated organizations will likely benefit from greater organizational capacity, cohesion across communities and external legitimacy, they are at a relative disadvantage in terms of membership participation, local independence and decision-making agility.

I expect that increasing regional integration among groups of communities should generate three kinds of advantages: increased organizational capacity, regional cohesion and external legitimacy. First, I argue that increasing regional integration should lead to increasing organizational capacity. Through regional integration, communities collectively create a larger base of resources and human capital, including labor, experience, skills, expertise, and sheer numbers to draw on as compared to individual communities. This concentration of resources and human capital allows integrated regional organizations to specialize: parts of the organization focus on specific movement-related tasks and develop expertise through repeat practice (Polletta, 2013). Second, I argue that increasing regional integration allows groups of communities to act collectively with a cohesive strategy and vision. Regional integration provides a structure for internal linkages and communications that reduce ambiguity and promote efficient decision-making and information sharing (Staggenborg, 1989). These more centralized organizing structures allow for more formalized rules and enforcement mechanisms that facilitate internal control (Den Hond et al. 2015). Third, because regionally integrated communities are more professionalized and formalized, they are frequently granted more legitimacy by the state and international actors, which translates to better funding and more access to state institutional spaces (Andrews et al., 2010).

Given the benefits of centralization, why would communities select an atomized, independent titling strategy? This choice often comes down to the greater participatory opportunities, flexibility and local control that such organizing strategies offer. First, more independent communities offer much more opportunity for community members to participate directly in decision-making, because it is significantly easier for members of an individual community to gather and make decisions than for a whole region to do so. More direct opportunities to participate in decision-making has been shown to generate stronger interpersonal trust, commitment to the organization and greater internal accountability (Corrigall-Brown, 2012). Second, when individual communities integrate themselves into a regional organization, they give up some of their autonomy; that is, they lose control over decisions that directly affect their community. That independence allows for more flexibility to adapt strategies to the particularities of a specific local context, maximizing the value of local knowledge. Local actors with greater independence can adapt more quickly to rapidly changing situations on the ground, without having to wait for approval for action from a slow-moving bureaucracy (Ganz, 2010).

In what ways do these differences between integrated and independent communities matter for local peace implementation? I focus on two kinds of outcomes: pressuring for the state to be accountable to the promises it made in the peace deal, and civilian protection from the new threats that a peace deal can generate. I map how the differences in independent and integrated structures explored above relate to both kinds of outcomes in figure 2, below.

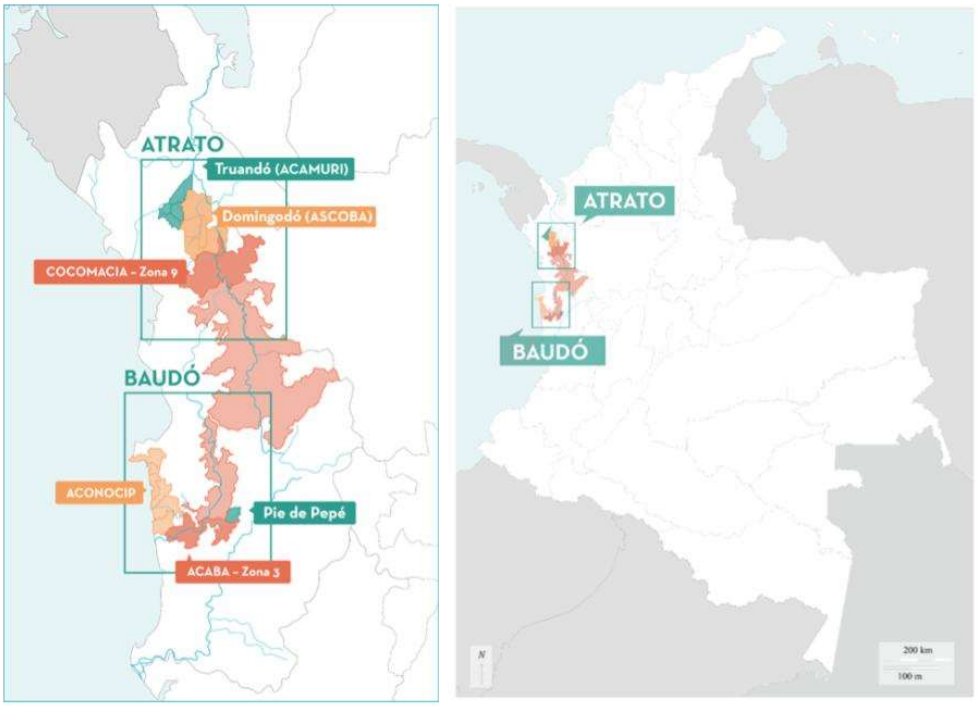
Figure 2: Independence and Integration Trade-offs for Community Peacebuilding

Research Design

To test the impact of regional integration, I developed two comparisons, each of which include three groups of communities. These groups of communities ranged from highly atomized, independent groups of individual consejos comunitarios to highly integrated consejos comunitarios mayores. The goal of the project was to identify the degree to which variation in regional integration shapes community responses to two key kinds of challenges that peace deals create: civilian collective protection from violence connected to a peace process, and accountability for the commitments to development and social inclusion that governments make in a peace deal. For the collective protection outcomes, I look at how communities have responded to violence stemming from competition between the ELN guerrillas and AGC paramilitaries following the FARC demobilization. Building from community-articulated peace platforms such as the *Acuerdo Humanitario ¡Ya!*, I focus on the degree to which communities have been able to limit a range of violence: direct physical violence, threats, disrespect for the territorial and social autonomy of the communities, displacement, confinement, recruitment and illegal economies, and violence against women and LGBTQ people (Tercer Informe del Acuerdo Humanitario ¡Ya!, 2019). To understand the struggle for accountability in peace implementation, I focus on the PDETs, a participatory development program created by the peace deal, in which communities in 170 of the most conflict-affected municipalities in Colombia articulated their development priorities for the state to repair the damages caused by the conflict. I investigate the degree to which communities have been able to advance their development proposals in the face of government foot-dragging, budget problems, elite capture and corruption.

The two comparisons are located in two regions of Chocó: Atrato and Baudó. The central challenge of a comparison is to choose comparisons that both reflect the variation in the variable of interest (from high independent to highly integrated communities) and yet are similar enough to be comparable in terms of economies, resource availability, geography, state capacity, conflict histories and political influences (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). I found that the best way to control for these factors was to seek groups of communities within the closest possible geographic area, that is, within the same section of the major river basins of Chocó. There are two areas in Chocó with all three organizing strategies (independent communities, associations of consejos comunitarios and consejos comunitarios mayores) in close geographic proximity: in the Atrato and Baudó river basins. The two groups of comparisons are illustrated in Figure 3, below.

Figure 1: Cases in Atrato and Baudó



At the border of the middle and lower Atrato regions, defined by the border between the Bojayá and Carmen del Darién municipalities, three neighboring clusters of communities are seated in the tributary rivers flowing into the western bank of the Atrato river. Furthest to the south, in the municipalities of Bojayá and Murindó are the 16 communities of the 'Zona 9', the northernmost section of the Consejo Comunitario Mayor COCOMACIA (Greater Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River, *Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato*), a highly regionally integrated organization. Immediately to their north, in the municipality Carmen del Darién are the 8 communities of the river Domingodó, a tributary of the Atrato. The eight communities are divided into four different consejos comunitarios, all of which belong to the intermediate-strategy regional association, ASCOBA (Association of Community Councils and Organizations of Bajo Atrato, *Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios y Organizaciones del Bajo Atrato*). Just to the north of Domingodó, at the far end of the integration-independence continuum, are the 6 communities of the tributary river Truandó. These communities don't belong to any regional organization; rather, they have formed a small, more independent association exclusively of the communities of the Truandó river called ACAMURI (Campesino Association of the Riosucio Municipality, *Asociación Campesina del Municipio de Riosucio*).

In the lower stretches of the Baudó river are three similar clusters of communities. The communities that border the Baudó river belong to the "Zona 3" of the highly regionally integrated Consejo Comunitario Mayor ACABA (General Community Council of the Rio Baudó and its Affluents, *Consejo Comunitario General del Río Baudó y sus Afluentes*). Immediately to the west are six smaller rivers that flow directly into the Pacific ocean; these communities have formed a looser association of consejos comunitarios ACONOCIP (Norsiviria Association of Community Councils, *Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios de Norsiviria*). To the east, the northernmost community of the tributary river Río Pepé, a community called Pie de Pepé, formed its own independent consejo comunitario.

Fieldwork

The empirical findings presented in the following sections are the results of three fieldwork visits to Colombia from 2019-2021 totaling approximately one year, including site visits to 20 rural communities and over 150 interviews conducted in Bogotá, Quibdó (the departmental capital of Chocó), and rural communities in Atrato and Baudó. Ensuring my own safety and the safety of my research partners was my highest priority in the field. My approach to informed consent focused on ensuring that anyone who participated in my research understood my purpose and the steps I would take to protect their anonymity. Following standard practice in conflict research, I have sought to maintain the confidentiality of my partners as much as possible (Campbell, 2017). I avoided gathering identifying data and I did not record interviews while in Chocó. I further sought to protect my data by writing notes in password-protected files in my computer as soon as possible after the interview and destroying the written notes.

As it did for the rest of the world, the pandemic caused significant disruption to my work. Given that most of the communities in my research sites in rural Chocó have extremely limited access to formal healthcare infrastructure, a return to research was a decision to be made with extreme care. In consultation with my committee and my contacts on the ground, we determined that more empirical research was essential for the dissertation, and that the dropoff in cases in September 2021 and the rapid increase in vaccine access made field research feasible. In order to keep myself and my research subjects safe, I was fully vaccinated and boosted, regularly tested myself, conducted interviews outside as much as possible and used standard PPE. With my committee and the IRB committee, I developed case rate cut-off points that would trigger an immediate return, and created emergency action plans if I or one of my research subjects became sick with COVID. To the very best of my knowledge, nobody I knew of or interacted with caught COVID during the course of my research.

Furthermore, I want to reflect on my understanding of reciprocity and accountability to my research partners: the consejos comunitarios who I worked with, as well as the many other people who helped me by sharing their valuable time and hard-earned knowledge. They did so despite the suspicion and necessity for caution that one would expect in a warzone, and despite repeat past negative experiences with other academics, despite the barriers of race, class and gender and huge differences in life experience. I am deeply grateful for the open-heartedness and wisdom of the people who received me in

Chocó, and it is my responsibility to carefully consider how to repay my debt to my friends and teachers. I understand reciprocity and accountability as my best efforts to honor the time of my collaborators and to create meaningful compensation and benefit for their participation, an ongoing openness to making space for feedback and communication, and maintaining real relationships of friendship and collaboration over the long run. This dissertation summary, which is also translated into Spanish, represents a part of my efforts toward reciprocity as an effort to 'return' my findings to my research partners in Chocó.

Summarizing the Findings

Empirical Results

Overall, my empirical data suggest that the relative advantages of regional integration increase the ability of communities to shape local peace outcomes. First, I examined the implementation of the PDET development program in the Atrato region[2] from the beginning of PDET implementation in mid-2018 through the end of 2021. I found that more regionally integrated communities received more projects, in further stages of advancement, and a greater diversity of projects. To evaluate the progress of PDET implementation, I compiled a list of all PDET initiatives that 1) directly involve the communities under study and 2) have made some minimum forward progress towards implementation.[3] The list was compiled through site visits to the communities, web searches of PDET reporting in Colombia, publicly available government documents, and documents shared with me by government sources. The complete list of PDET projects is available by request to the author.

60 different initiatives were identified that met the above criteria (as of December 2021). Of those 60, 41 (68%) went to the highly integrated COCOMACIA Zona 9 communities, 12 (20%) went to the middle-approach Domingodó communities in the association ASCOBA, and 7 (12%) went to the more independent Truandó communities in the association ACAMURI. Weighting per community, COCOMACIA received 2.6 projects per community, Domingodó received 1.5 projects per community, and Truandó received 1.2 projects per community. Of the 41 projects in the more integrated COCOMACIA communities in Zona 9, two projects have found financing, five are currently being implemented, and three are fully completed. For the middle-approach Domingodó communities in ASCOBA, two projects fully approved and financed and two others are currently being implemented. For the more independent Truandó communities in ACAMURI, just one project is currently being implemented and one other has approval and financing. Thus, COCOMACIA is the only one of the orgs to have fully completed projects; of their 41 projects, 19.5% are either being implemented or completed; in Domingodó, 16.7% of the projects are under implementation, in Truandó, 14.3% are under implementation.

Beyond the project totals and stage of implementation, I also examine the kinds of projects moving forward, focusing on projects that relate to the ethnic cosmovisions emphasized by the communities in the PDET planning process of Chocó. The Zona 9 communities in COCOMACIA have fourteen non-infrastructure projects advancing, including five specifically related to strengthening Afro cultural practices and COCOMACIA collective organizing. The Domingodó communities in ASCOBA have five non-infrastructure projects, including three projects directly related to strengthening the consejos comunitarios. The Truandó communities in ACAMURI have four non-infrastructure projects, including one project focused on capacitating leaders in the Truandó consejos comunitarios.

Second, I examined community collective protection from the rapidly intensifying conflict between the AGC and the ELN that followed the exit of the FARC from Chocó in 2017. I assessed community autonomy from the armed groups in this context by compiling IO, NGO and government reports on acts of violence (displacements, confinements, threats, assassinations, reports of armed group control) in the comparison communities, balanced by fieldwork. In both comparison cases, I found evidence to suggest

[2] The PDETs did not take place in Baudó, so my PDET research concentrated on the Atrato region.

[3] The ART created an 8-stage typology of progress, from "initiative identified" to "completed". I focus on projects that have advanced to at least the 2nd stage, which indicates that government entity is at least in the process of structuring the project for implementation.

that increasing regional integration offered some degree of increased protection from armed group violence, though no community I visited was free from a significant degree of armed group control.

The empirical evidence suggests that there is somewhat less violence in the highly integrated COCOMACIA communities than in the more independent ASCOBA or ACAMURI communities. The COCOMACIA Zona 9 has 16 communities; in Domingodó there are 8 communities and in Truandó 6 communities, all with comparable population density. Between 2016 and the end of 2020, OCHA monitor records 15 incidents of violence in the relevant COCOMACIA communities, 10 each in the ASCOBA and ACAMURI territories. Each area has had two officially recorded homicides over the period; there have been more major displacement events in ASCOBA (4) and ACAMURI (3) than in COCOMACIA (2) over that time (*OCHA Colombia Monitor Humanitario*, n.d.). Over the same time period, the Defensoría has emitted more *Alertas Tempranas*[4] for Truandó (6) and for Domingodó (5) than for the larger COCOMACIA territory (4) (Alertas Tempranas, n.d.). Weighting per community, COCOMACIA witnessed .9 violent events per community; in Domingodó (ASCOBA), 1.3 events per community, in Truandó (ACAMURI) 1.7 events per community.

From a range of sources, I heard that increasing regional integration generates greater protection from the armed groups: officials from the Defensoría del Pueblo told me that "the independent CCs are more affected by violence, easier to co-opt".[5] From Church leaders: "It would be difficult to survive here without the organization [COCOMACIA], which gives protection to the communities".[6] And from the communities of COCOMACIA themselves: "Because of COCOMACIA, there is a respect for the territory. Outsiders cannot impose themselves however they want, there's a protection".[7] Despite the work of COCOMACIA to build community protections, AGC paramilitaries permeate the communities of Zona 9. However, the situation in the COCOMACIA Zona 9 is still distinct from the ASCOBA and ACAMURI communities in the Truandó and Domingodó rivers, just to the north. Whereas in Riosucio, "almost all the CCs are physically not there", either permanently displaced to the bigger towns or staying only temporarily in the communities, "Bojayá has COCOMACIA", which maintains the communities despite enormous armed group pressure.[8]

In Baudó, the four communities under study in the Baudó river that belong to the highly integrated consejo comunitario mayor ACABA have no officially reported acts of violence since 2017 (though a 2017 Defensoria report showed that all four were under AGC control: (*Informe de Riesgo N. 008 17 (Baudó)*, 2017). Despite the relative insulation of a larger CCM, two ACABA leaders were threatened and forced to leave Baudó. However, the situation is even more difficult in the more independent communities. The communities inside the looser regional association ACONOCIP face serious threats from the armed groups: "Even though things have calmed a bit, you feel their presence, they're in the communities, maintaining their control".[9] NGO reports from 2019 reflect constant AGC and ELN presence, confinements, recruitment and social control by the armed groups in ACONOCIP territory (*Tercer Informe Del Acuerdo Humanitario*, 2019). A 2019 report from Chocoan civil society singles out the independent consejo comunitario Pie de Pepé as the community in Medio Baudó most affected by the armed groups, and describes a pattern of threats and exploitation of the young people in the community (*Tercer Informe Del Acuerdo Humanitario*, 2019).

Beyond the immediate benefits that more regionally integrated organizations delivered to their member communities, I also found that the more regionally integrated organizations created "spillover" effects, by which I mean that they generate benefits to communities outside of their specific membership (Fox, 1996). One example of these spillover effects is the connection between COCOMACIA and the most important Chocó-wide social movement platform, FISCH (Inter-ethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó). FISCH

[4] The Defensoría publishes *Alertas Tempranas* (Early Warnings) to signal an imminent risk of grave affectations to the human rights of a group of communities. As such, it functions as somewhat of a proxy for the quantity of violence a community is experiencing.

[5] Defensoría de Chocó, Personal Communication, 3/10/2020

[6] Bellavista Parroquia, Personal Communication, 10/5/2021

[7] Zona 9 CCL 1 meeting, personal communication, 10/8/2021

[8] Kroc Institute, Personal Communication, 2/26/2020

[9] ACONOCIP leader 1, personal communication, 11/6/2021

as an organization is tightly linked to COCOMACIA: COCOMACIA led the founding of FISCH, all the presidents of FISCH and the majority of its staff come from COCOMACIA. FISCH has played a vital role both in advancing the Chocó PDETs and in defending the autonomy of ethnic communities from the new wave of post-peace deal violence in the department. Assessing the overall role of COCOMACIA in the PDETs, a national Black leader explained, "COCOMACIA leads the Chocó PDET through FISCH, [because] COCOMACIA is the leader in FISCH…FISCH is the organization that Chocoan civil and ethnic leaders looked towards to make the PDET work, to bring everyone together and build a shared vision".[10]

Explanations

My research suggests that these systematic differences in peace outcomes between the communities can be explained by the degree of regional integration of those communities. Specifically, I find that increasing regional integration generates increased organizational capacity, internal integration and external legitimacy. However, I also found that that these advantages are in large part mitigated both by the advantages of more independent organizational structures – democratic and participatory deficits, local independence and flexibility – as well as by the serious organizational gaps that often proliferate in regionally integrated structures.

First, increasing regional integration allows communities to pool their people and resources, granting them a bigger platform and greater political weight in negotiations with the state. For example, in the PDETs, the highly regionally integrated organization COCOMACIA has used its platform to vocally criticize government actors on the lack of progress, generating tangible responses from the state. COCOMACIA denunciations of a paramilitary violence in January 2020 led Rafael Guarin, the presidential advisor for national security, to publically announce that the state must, "accelerate the PDET and strengthen the arrival of the State" in Bojayá ("En Chocó dudan de efectividad de PDET," 2020). PDET projects including community meeting spaces and school improvements in COCOMACIA Zona 9 communities were a direct result of this bottom-up pressure.

In defending against post-peace deal violence, regional integration likewise granted communities more political weight and greater safety in numbers. A leader of the middle-approach association ASCOBA explained to me that COCOMACIA has the strength and capacity equal to a municipality, and for that reason "COCOMACIA generates more projects" for their communities.[11] ASCOBA, for its part, has proven a highly effective negotiator with the state, leading the legal process that generated the remarkable court sentence T-622 in defense of the Atrato river, and advancing a broad educational reform (the *Champalanca* project) and successful new youth policy with the Riosucio municipality.

Similarly, in the Baudó region, the more regionally integrated organization ACABA was able to present a stronger collective response to armed group pressure than their more independent counterparts in ACONOCIP and Pepé. A distinct advantage of increasing regional integration is increased leverage in negotiations with other parties, and thus more consistent avenues to securing external support. When I asked a politician from Baudó what the difference between ACABA and the more independent consejos comunitarios in Baudó was, he answered simply, "they get more projects".[12]

A second key advantage of increasing regional integration is increased safety in numbers. COCOMACIA developed a human rights commission specifically to strengthen the collective safety of the communities: their main job is to, "be present, observe, show the communities that they're not alone...and also to show the armed groups that the communities are not alone. People are watching."[13] In comparison, leaders from the middle-approach ASCOBA communities in Domingodó see themselves as more vulnerable than the more integrated COCOMACIA communities: "A small CC can be very isolated (*puede quedar solo*).

[10] CONPA leader, Personal Communication, 2/2020

[11] ASCOBA leader 2, Personal Communication, 10/12/2021

[12] Baudó Politician, personal communication, 3/2020

[13] COCOMACIA junta directiva member 3, personal communication, July 2019

It's better to be in a bigger group".[14] In Baudó, a leader of the highly integrated organization ACABA explained the advantages of integration for collective protection: "we have more weight, more muscle, more strength, and more protection".[15] In comparing the communities of the more independent ACONOCIP with ACABA, an ACONOCIP leader reflects that, "Yes, we have our independence, but we're isolated, abandoned".[16]

Additionally, I found that because integrated communities can draw on more resources and specialize, they are often better able to professionalize and handle complex tasks. For PDET implementation, these advantages were especially reflected in the ability of more integrated communities to take a bigger role in formulating and implementing PDET projects. Considerable expertise is required to design and implement the development projects of the PDETs. For that reason, an official from the government agency ART (*Agencia de Renovación del Territorio*), the agency responsible for PDET implementation, explained to me that for project implementation, they are much more likely to contract more regionally integrated organizations which have more capacity, experience and reach in the execution of projects.[17]

In collective self-protection from the armed groups, the advantages of professionalization and specialization provided by regional integration led to stronger project planning and management capacity. In the Atrato region, COCOMACIA has an impressive base of highly professionalized movement leaders, including development experts, accountants and lawyers. Though perhaps not on the same level as COCOMACIA, the middle-approach ASCOBA is nonetheless well-equipped to offer professionalized support to the member CCs. In fact, that was a driving force behind ASCOBA's formation: "As communities, we don't have lawyers, accountants, professionals…but ASCOBA does, that's why we created it".[18] This is reflected in the range of high-impact projects undertaken by ASCOBA, including counter-recruitment, human rights and mine education programs supported by their youth commission.

Shifting to the Baudó region, I similarly found that the more regionally integrated communities could draw on a larger pool of professionals and develop greater task specialization. In the highly integrated ACABA, the leadership of the organization includes agricultural engineers, lawyers, accountants, environmental engineers and management experts. As a leader from the independent Pie de Pepé explained to me, "ACABA has more leaders, better training, more ability to build outside relationships, and gets more projects".[19] Specialization and professionalization allow ACABA to develop a much wider portfolio of projects than the other communities, including a fishing project in partnership with the communities of Bajo Baudó, and a humanitarian assistance contract with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).[20]

I found that regional integration strengthens cohesion among communities over a large area, allowing them to act collectively and strategically towards a shared goal. Leaders shared with me that an integrated group of communities like COCOMACIA can take decisions affecting the collective much faster and easier: "COCOMACIA has just one title, while ASCOBA has 14 titles and 14 different Juntas to manage. As a result, "COCOMACIA has more decision-making power. We [as ASCOBA] have to connect and bring everyone together, get everyone to agree."[21] Furthermore, I predicted that more integration would allow for a more bureaucratic, rules-oriented structure that facilitates top-down oversight and internal control. In the Atrato region, a leader of the highly integrated COCOMACIA leader explained to me, "we maintain authority over the territories. We have our own sanctions and castigos to maintain

[14] Domingodó Social Leader, Personal Communication, 10/22/2021

[15] Fieldnotes, ACABA recorrido 11/5/2021, Community 3

[16] Pilizá Leader 1, Personal Communication, 11/8/2021

[17] ART official, Personal Communication, 10/26/2021

[18] Domingodó CC leader 1, Personal Communication, 10/26/2021

[19] Pie de Pepé Consejero, personal communication, July 2019

[20] Fieldnotes, ACABA recorrido 11/5/2021, Community 2

[21] Quibdó Diocese 1, Personal Communication, 3/16/2020

order. We are the police and the inspector in our territories".[22] A long-time leader with experience in multiple processes communicated that:

> Whether or not we like it, we're in COCOMACIA. In [the more independent] Truandó, Clavellino does whatever it wants without ACAMURI knowing. In COCOMACIA, the [community] doesn't have that independence, COCOMACIA has a control over the territory, people don't sell their land to outsiders, they stay in the territory.[23]

In the region of Baudó, the highly integrated organization ACABA's strengths in territorial control were reflected in the communities explaining to me that they don't have the authority to sell any territory or negotiate projects without the permission of ACABA.[24] While the independent Pepé has strengthened its internal control processes through the carbon credits program, it is less bound to bureaucratic procedures of internal control than the more integrated ACABA. For example, a leader from the junta explained to me that in resolving a conflict, "The elders (*mayores*) will have the ultimate call, not the [organization]".[25]

I found that a final key advantage of regional integration is increased external legitimacy: because regional integration is likely to generate more formalized and professionalized organizations, which tend to be more respected and listened to by the government and international organizations. In the PDETs, I found that integration led to more effective interactions with the state and more extensive collaborations with international actors. The highly integrated COCOMACIA generated the strongest response from the state in denouncing the lack of PDET progress, placed a key leader within the ART bureaucracy and developed a USAID partnership with COCOMACIA offering training to hundreds of COCOMACIA members on the PDET (*PGO - Peaceful and Productive Atrato Activity*, 2021). The middle-range ASCOBA has also had a notable history of support from international actors during the PDET. Both COCOMACIA and ASCOBA were partner organizations with the U.N. in implementing the PDET program *Confianza y Paz*, which sought to build peace and reconciliation projects around the FARC demobilization zones (*Informe Final Del Proyecto Confianza y Paz*, 2020).

This increased external legitimacy extended far beyond the PDETs: as a member of the Defensoría noted: "Everyone respects the voice of COCOMACIA when it speaks, even legal and illegal armed groups".[26] ASCOBA also has strong international recognition as the pre-eminent Afro organization of the Bajo Atrato, with a history of support from UNDP, OIM, MISEREOR and others. Leaders from the more independent ACAMURI organization in Truandó explained to me that: "ASCOBA represents many more communities in Bajo Atrato…Whereas ACAMURI is just for Truandó. So they get more international attention".[27] In Baudó, members of the independent community Pepé also told me that ACABA secures more external support from international actors and greater responsiveness from the state than Pepé: "Because they are a bigger council, they get more [external attention]…For example international NGOs, they concentrate on ACABA, but not on us".[28]

However, I found that the advantages of regional integration are tempered both by the real advantages of community independence and by the serious organizational gaps likely to proliferate in regionally integrated organizations. My dissertation research suggests that these issues can be explained with reference to two advantages of more independent organizing structures: issues of internal participation, and community-level control over decision-making.

More independent organizational structures create more opportunities for everyday community members to participate directly in decision-making. In the more independent ACAMURI communities in Truandó or

[22] COCOMACIA Asesor 3, Personal Communication, June 2019

[23] Riosucio Pastoral Social, personal communication, 10/22/2021

[24] Fieldnotes, ACABA recorrido 11/5, Communities 2 and 3

[25] Pie de Pepé Junta Directiva 1, personal communication, July 2019

[26] Defensoría member, Personal Communication, March 10, 2020

[27] Truandó CC leader 1, Personal Communication, 10/18/2021

[28] Pie de Pepé Junta Directiva 2, personal communication, 7/7/2021

Pie de Pepé in Baudó, every adult member of the community participates in the general assembly, the ultimate decision-making body of the consejo comunitario. This level of direct participation from community members is logistically impossible in the regionally integrated consejos comunitarios mayores like COCOMACIA or ACABA, which have thousands of members spread over an area larger than several U.S. states. As such, most decision-making is delegated to a small group of leaders located in the departmental capital of Quibdó. From the perspective of a leader from one of the more independent ACAMURI communities of Truandó, the more opportunities for direct participation, "makes the people more united". He argues that this makes the communities respect the *reglamentos*, the rules of the community, since it was the community itself that defined these rules.[29] Similarly, leaders of the more independent communities in Baudó found that the reduced social distance between leadership and membership in an independent CC can generate a sense of shared ownership over the organization: "whatever project the community is doing, the junta will be right there alongside, as a constant presence". Meanwhile, the leadership of a big integrated organization "are not there every day with the people, they don't know what's happening in the communities".[30]

Among the more integrated organizations, the physical and social distance between the leadership in Quibdó and the communities in Atrato and Baudó generates miscommunications and mistrust within the organization. A COCOMACIA leader explained that "people imagine that COCOMACIA is full of money, it's a lack of information, people don't really know what our resources or capacity is".[31] Meanwhile, many in the communities perceive their leaders to be distant, politicized and corrupt: "One feels that COCOMACIA used to be a communal thing, of the communities. And now it is all about projects for the benefit of a few."[32] The same distrust was evident in Baudó, in the highly integrated ACABA, as evinced by a leader of the organization pleading with the community representatives present to communicate to the communities the work of the organizations "so that the communities know that these meetings are more than just handing out money".[33] In the PDET context, this physical and social distance between the leaders and the communities is reflected in the fact that multiple COCOMACIA communities had never heard of the PDETs.[34] This distance also possibly explains the widespread rumors in the communities that the COCOMACIA leaders were corrupt and mismanaging the PDET projects. An ART official explained that information and resources that flow to the COCOMACIA leaders don't necessarily arrive in the communities because of personal interests and rivalries within the organization.[35]

One of the clearest differences between the more integrated and independent communities is the degree of decision-making control in the hands of the community. When asking an leader of the more independent ACAMURI communities of Truandó about the comparison with COCOMACIA, he told me, "The advantage of the consejos comunitarios of Truandó is that each community is independent within its territory".[36] More independence means that any project benefits the communities more directly, without having to share with many other communities or be filtered by regional leaders. Because ACAMURI is only five communities, "we don't have to share whatever arrives here between so many people. What comes here is enough to distribute for all of us".[37] In Baudó, the community Pie de Pepé deliberately opted not to join ACABA in order to retain more community control over decisions that would impact their development. Regarding their experience as an independent consejo comunitario, the Pepe junta

[29] Truandó Social Leader, Personal Communication, 10/22/2021

[30] Pie de Pepé Junta Directiva 1, personal communication, July 2019

[31] COCOMACIA youth leader, Personal Communication, July 2019

[32] Zona 9 CCL 1, Fieldnotes, 10/8/2021

[33] Fieldnotes, ACABA meeting, 11/1/2021

[34] Zona 9 CCL 5, Fieldnotes, 10/9/2021

[35] ART official, Personal Communication, 10/26/2021

[36] ACAMURI youth leader, Personal Communication, 10/18/2021

[37] Truandó CC leader 2, Personal Communication, 10/19/2021

explained that being independent "allows us to generate (gestionar) more resources, we can seek out our own projects, to seek responses to the needs of our territory".[38]

Furthermore, because they are more bureaucratic, regionally integrated organizations are prone to rigidity and slow responsiveness. These issues are magnified by the fact that the limited financial resources available to the consejos comunitarios make it impossible to maintain a regular presence in the more distant communities. As such, the communities of the more integrated organizations face a challenging dilemma: they are dependent on an organization that can only infrequently reach them. COCOMACIA leaders in Quibdó admitted to me that "because of a lack of resources, we can't go to all the communities".[39] Thus, while the highly integrated COCOMACIA has developed a rich array of support systems to defend the communities, these support systems are hardly felt in the more distant communities. In the Zona 9, the communities felt that COCOMACIA "has abandoned us".[40] The same problem was felt in the highly integrated ACABA, in Baudó: "In the 20 years of ACABA, there's been communities that have not received anything, people aren't getting what they deserve… Pepé can be better organized, ACABA is so gigantic that the leadership can't arrive everywhere".[41] Organizational gaps can generate serious consequences for community self-protection. Leaders from Truandó and Domingodó argued that in the more integrated organizations, the absence of organizational leaders in the territories made communities vulnerable.[42] Meanwhile, the more independent communities can react more immediately to issues or conflicts on the ground: "whatever conflict, the legal representative is here, you don't have to look for them in Quibdó, they're here".[43]

Contrasting Evidence

In the previous sections, I have presented a story of trade-offs between integration and independence for rural communities: integration strengthens organizational capacity, regional cohesion and external legitimacy, but frequently leads to gaps in internal participation and community-level decision-making power relative to more independent communities. However, the empirical evidence I gathered is messier than the story presented in the previous sections: here, I explore contrasting evidence and areas in which my predictions failed or I found surprising evidence. I address three kinds of issues: the generalized limitations of any of the consejos comunitarios to create deeper political change, specific areas in which I didn't find evidence to support my predictions on the consequences of regional integration, and strategies communities have adopted to overcome the relative limitations of the three different organizational forms.

The consejo comunitario in this study face crushing impoverishment, a history of state neglect and racism, and a decades long conflict fueled by Chocó's ongoing importance as a strategic drug corridor and repository of a rich natural resources. The work that they do to advocate for the communities they represent creates fragile but nonetheless vital benefits. However their power relative to the structural obstacles they face must be contextualized. The consejos comunitarios are non-state organizations with no fixed resource base, working under extremely dangerous conditions. Their power to reshape regional power relations is inherently limited, and much of their work takes place 'along the margins'; without directly challenging the state or the armed groups. None of the organizations under study are able to create enduring, robust protections against the violence currently inundating Chocó. Even in the regionally integrated communities of COCOMACIA and ACABA, the armed groups exercise a predominant control over the lives of many, perhaps most of the communities. An ACABA leader tells me: "Our power is limited, we're not the state, we can just get rid of the armed groups".[44] Likewise, even COCOMACIA has been

[38] Fieldnotes, Pie de Pepé Junta meeting, 11/11/2021

[39] COCOMACIA junta directiva member 1, personal communication, July 2019

[40] Zona 9 CCL 7, Fieldnotes, 10/10/2021

[41] Fieldnotes, ACABA recorrido 11/5/2021, Community 2

[42] Domingodó Social Leader, Personal Communication, 10/22/2021

[43] Fieldnotes, Pie de Pepé Junta meeting, 11/11/2021

[44] ACABA junta directiva leader 4, personal communication, July 2019

unable to push forward the PDETs, which have been hampered by budget cuts, foot-dragging and brazen corruption, to anything close to their stated goals.

One specific finding that ran counter to my expectations was the inability of the more regionally integrated organizations to generate any consistent political power in municipal elections. The relationships between the mayors (*alcaldes*) and the consejos comunitarios are often overtly hostile. Overlapping authority and scarce resources put the alcaldes in direct conflict with the leaders of the consejos comunitarios. Meanwhile, political allegiances built out of a long history of machine politics create serious fractures within the communities that undercut the consejos comunitarios as political players. One might expect that the integrated consejos comunitarios mayores, which often cover multiple municipalities, would have a powerful political role. Yet a COCOMACIA leader explained that:

> We are strong in the organizing process, but weak in terms of politics. In the elections, we become politically divided. If we were united, we could elect the alcalde in any municipio…*Politiquería* drives this department, it's stronger than the organization.[45]

I also predicted that more regionally integrated organizations would be able to make more progress on gender equality within their regions, for which I found mixed evidence. In general, in Chocó there are strong patriarchal conventions about women's roles in the social organizing process that have only slowly begun to change. Queer and gender non-conforming people in Chocó are even far more marginalized in the organizing process. The highest visibility efforts to advance gender equality are coming from the more regionally integrated organizations, and in particular from the highly recognized COCOMACIA's gender commission. The commission has played a key role in leadership development and capacity building, and won a guaranteed minimum representation for women of ⅓ of the seats in the junta directiva, the leadership body of COCOMACIA. However, the organization remains mostly dominated by men. Meanwhile, immediately to their north, the legal representative of the less integrated ASCOBA is a woman; in one of the communities in Domingodó, an ASCOBA community in this study, six of the seven members of that community's leadership council are women.[46] In Baudó, the regionally integrated ACABA has also been unable to distinguish itself from the rest of the consejos comunitarios in the region on gender issues. Beginning in the last few years, ACABA has started to do some workshops on gender. However, of the three organizations in the Baudó comparison, only Pie de Pepé, the independent community, was led by a woman. Of the three consejos comunitarios in Baudó, Pepé also has the only women's association, which conducts workshops and is in the planning stages of developing a shared economic project.[47]

One surprising finding of my dissertation has been the adaptations that different communities have made to the relative limitations of their organizational structure. First, the highly integrated Consejos Comunitarios Mayores invented the figure of the *Consejo Comunitario Local* (CCL). The CCLs are administrative bodies overseeing one or a few communities; their function is to help manage the territory and connect the communities to the broader organization. A community leader in ACABA offered me the allegory of a U.S. president: a president can't administer all that territory themselves, so they have governors to help them.[48] An additional organizational figure used by the larger consejos comunitarios mayores to better link communities and the central leadership is the "zonal committee"; the consejo is divided into sub-regions, or zones, each of which have a fair amount of autonomy to solve problems without needing the leadership in Quibdó. These zonal committees are especially important in the more distant areas of COCOMACIA: "the zonal encounters maintain the strength [of COCOMACIA]. Through these structures, the communities still feel the presence of the organization".[49]

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[45] COCOMACIA junta directiva member 4, personal communication, 7/2019

[46] Domingodó CC rep 2, Personal Communication, 10/27/2021

[47] Pie de Pepé asesor, personal communication, 11/10/2021

[48] Fieldnotes, ACABA recorrido, Community 2, 11/5/2021

[49] COCOMACIA youth leader, Personal Communication, July 2019

Shifting focus to the intermediate-approach associations of consejos comunitarios, I note that because the associations of consejos comunitarios do not themselves hold the land titles, they can shrink or grow, or even be replaced by new associations depending on their members' perceptions of the value of participating. For example, the consejo comunitario of Unguía, in the northern tip of Chocó, is currently considering joining the ASCOBA organization to strengthen their organizations and respond to the incursions of wealthy cattle ranchers.[50] Meanwhile, other consejos comunitarios in ASCOBA mentioned that they are considering leaving the organization, as perhaps they would have more success independently.[51]

The more independent communities face two key challenges: they are easily isolated and have limited leverage in negotiations with the state and other external actors. Often, their answer to these problems has been to partner with a larger organization. A leader from the association ASCOBA in the Atrato, explained to me that the communities aren't alone; they're part of FISCH (the department-level coordinating platform); they denounce of armed groups through FISCH to reduce the pressure they would otherwise face.[52] Pie de Pepé, the independent consejo comunitario in Baudó, partnered with the integrated ACABA to bring in a carbon credits development program through REDD+. A coordinator of the REDD+ program explained to me that Pepé didn't have enough land to make it worth it for the external partners, so they partnered with ACABA to leverage the size of the consejo comunitario mayor.[53]

Takeaways and Contributions

The key takeaway from this dissertation is that overall, regionally integrated communities are likely more successful in maintaining their autonomy and influence in peace implementation. In both Atrato and Baudó, I found that more regionally integrated communities were exposed to less violence and subject to less armed group control. I found that in the more regionally integrated communities, there was real safety in numbers, stronger internal control, and greater external support to generate more economic and social projects. Furthermore, with regards to the PDET program, I found that increasing regional integration was able to further advance the projects because of the political power, technical expertise and external legitimacy of regionally integrated organizations.

Those findings come with a few caveats. First, I found that there are definite advantages to a more independent organizational structure. The increased opportunities for membership to directly participate in decision-making in more independent structures increases member commitment and reduces the logistical challenges. The increased flexibility that independence affords to communities also facilitates more rapid and better-targeted decision-making. Furthermore, there are serious downsides to integration: serious organizational absences, persistent miscommunications and mutual mistrust. These disadvantages are likely magnified by the effects of the ongoing conflict, which reduces mobility and breaks down social trust. A second key caveat is that communities are not trapped in the limitations of one organizational form: as mentioned earlier, they have found ways to either change or innovate from within their organizational structures to address these limitations.

I began this dissertation project with a central problem in contemporary peacebuilding. On the one hand, driven by the "local turn" in peacebuilding, research points to the fundamental necessity of centering local civilian voices in the peacebuilding process in order to generate durable local peace (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). However, this same literature repeatedly demonstrates that peace implementation is a fundamentally political, power-laden process in which both state and non-state elites with a demonstrated capacity for violence compete for limited power and resources. I ask: in the context of this violent competition for power, why and how would the most marginalized actors in society ever have a meaningful opportunity to shape peace outcomes? The central contribution of this dissertation is to address this question by focusing in on 'meso' or 'regional'-scale civilian collective organizing as a key strategy for grassroots communities build

[50] ASCOBA leader 2, Personal Communication, 10/12/2021

[51] CC leader, Personal Communication, 11/26/2021

[52] Domingodó Social Leader, Personal Communication, 10/22/2021

[53] REDD coordinator, Personal Communication, 7/5/2019

countervailing power. Building from research in rural development, I introduce into the discussion on peacebuilding the figure of the regional organization, a powerful strategy for rural communities to aggregate power, escape isolation, and "project voice upwards" (Fox, 2016).

How can the findings of this research project be applied to the practice of building peace? My research illustrates the consistently vital work that organized communities are doing to advocate for the most vulnerable people in post-conflict societies. Especially given their extremely limited resources and the unbelievably challenging context they operate in, many of these organizations are remarkably effective. From my perspective, directing resources and support to organized groups of communities is likely one of the most cost-effective and potentially transformative investments that international actors can make in a peace transition context. International peacebuilding actors tend to reduce civil society actors to professionalized NGOs operating in the capital (Paffenholz, 2011). By demonstrating in particular the potential of regional associations to successfully translate national-level peacebuilding efforts into sustainable, inclusive peace at the local level, my research suggests international actors must find ways to optimize the political space for such organizations.

Furthermore, I argue that a better understanding of variance in the regional integration of rural communities can significantly improve external peacebuilding interventions by offering implementers a way to read the 'organizational terrain' of a region and its likely strengths and weaknesses. For example, peacebuilders can recognize that more regionally integrated organizations might be more effective in generating responsiveness from state actors, but likely have greater questions about their own internal issues of accountability to constituents. This could also refine practices of capacity-building efforts for grassroots organizations. Of particular utility may be the strategies used by Chocó's consejos comunitarios to overcome the specific limitations of their organizational structures, which could serve as a starting point for communities in other regions to investigate their own organizational weaknesses and potential strategies to address them.

Final Thoughts

In 1993, a landmark piece of legislation, the Law 70, was passed in Colombia, forever changing the relationship between rural black communities and the Colombian state. Overnight, the law granted rural black communities a remarkable set of rights and protections; chief among them was the right to form *consejos comunitarios* incorporating collective lands that are "inalienable, immune from seizure and not subject to the statute of limitations". With the arrival of the new law, the communities were faced with a decision of how they wanted to form their titles: either to maximize local independence by soliciting a title just for their own community, or to build more collective power by creating a title that incorporated all the communities from their entire region. Other communities chose an intermediate strategy, electing for independent community titles but joining looser associations of consejos comunitarios. In the regions under study, Atrato and Baudó, these decisions were made by community leaders and their allies in response to the conditions that they faced in the mid-1990s, especially worries about land conflicts with their indigenous neighbors, their relationships with neighboring communities, and their stance on the extractive industries that were quickly expanding in rural Chocó.

Almost immediately after the communities submitted their petitions for the titles, Chocó was completely transformed by an armed conflict that would rage for decades, repeatedly displacing the communities, killing their leaders and destroying the social fabric that allowed the movement to emerge in the first place. While the consejos comunitarios were severely affected by the conflict, they continued to operate as perhaps the most important resource the communities had to resist the conflict. Likewise, with the announcement of peace in 2016, the consejos comunitarios have continued to serve as the voice of the communities as they navigate the complex, countervalent impacts of the peace deal. All of the consejos comunitarios are built from the same profound, living connection that exists between Afro communities in Chocó and their *territorio*. Nevertheless, I have argued that the different organizing decisions that the communities made when the consejos comunitarios were formed in the 1990s continue to resonate into the present. Decisions between independence and integration have generated real trade-offs for communities that deeply shape both their influence and autonomy in a peace process.

What can be learned from this research? I have argued that this work offers three key contributions to peacebuilding: creating a richer understanding of the how civilians simultaneously navigate the various challenging impacts of a peace deal, sharpening our attention to different organizing strategies within civil society, and developing a more refined attention to the ways that communities themselves seek to overcome the limitations of local organizing through regional organizing projects. I hope that this work contributes to peacebuilding practice by reiterating the vital importance of grassroots peacebuilding work and focusing attention on the relevant differences and tradeoffs in civilian organizing. Here, international peacebuilders gain an additional tool to understand the specific needs of the civilian organizations they work with. In doing so, I hope to strengthen the most dynamic tool we possess to build durable, transformative local peace: strong grassroots organizing.

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