

**A Troubling Nexus: Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice in the Context of
Socioeconomic Transformations in Catatumbo, Colombia**

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Abstract

International practice highlights the need to integrate peacebuilding (PB) and transitional justice (TJ) policies to enhance their effectiveness in transforming war-affected societies. However, there is limited empirical analysis of this integration. This study examines the relationship between TJ and PB in El Catatumbo, Colombia, using a qualitative approach. We focus on the linkage between *territorially focused development programmes* (PDET) and reparative TJ interventions (TOAR). We describe institutional, conflictual, political, and structural factors that hinder this relationship and conclude by highlighting how the political economy of each field (TJ, PB) influences the limited results.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Colombia, Final Peace Agreement, Transitional Justice, Catatumbo, Political Economy.

Introduction

Peacebuilding (PB)¹ and transitional justice (TJ)² are recognised as interrelated fields that often overlap in post-conflict contexts. Although PB and TJ have distinct origins and traditionally operated independently at the design level, there is now a growing emphasis on their interconnections and calls for better integration and coordination (Waldorf 2019). However, a gap persists, as there is still limited empirical exploration, particularly at the local level, of what such integration truly entails (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016; Hoddy and Gready 2022). This paper addresses this gap by analysing the interactions between PB and TJ in Catatumbo, Colombia, from the lens of socio-economic transformations in this local context.

¹ Inspired by the work of Lederach (1997), we understand PB as a set of policies, processes and social constructions aimed at generating social change, social justice and transformation of relationships (at the individual, relational, organisational and structural levels) to avoid the generation, continuity or reactivation of cycles of armed and structural violence.

² Following the UN's (2004) definition, we understand TJ as an institutionalised field of theory and practice that includes 'the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation' (4).

This issue is relevant because it has not been sufficiently addressed how such links between PB and TJ are being built and because it is assumed that complementarity and coordination between the two fields is necessary to deliver transformations leading to a lasting and positive peace. Although some recent studies have begun to explore these issues (Arnould 2016; Hronešová 2016; Lai 2016), the literature is still lacking on how linking occurs in practice in local contexts and what challenges exist (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016).

PB and TJ are not in and on themselves (positively) transformative. Therefore, we argue that the articulation between TJ and PB is far from clear or univocal. Some scholars suggest that such a linkage can even be problematic (Richmond and Visoka 2021), while others explicitly dismiss its possibility (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016). A country can undergo post-conflict processes and increase its economic and political inequalities, ramp up exclusion or continue reproducing the power structures that generated oppression. Transition itself is a field in dispute and its results are not known in advance; rather, they are the product of deep and constant struggles between actors with differentiated access to economic, political and social capitals.

Based on a political economy approach, we understand PB and TJ as contested domains where various actors vie, ally or converge to position their interests and needs shaping the transitional process.³ Political economy seeks to analyse the processes through which competing people -individuals, groups and classes- approach the allocation of scarce resources. It pays attention to the question of *who* –who enters into dispute, who wins or who loses or is affected in the face of particular interventions or policies. And it also focuses on the *what* –

³ In our interest in observing TJ and PB fields from a political economy angle, we are Inspired by Guzman's work (2020).

what are the processes in dispute or play: access to services, goods, rights, recognition, etc. (Boyce, 2018).

The political economy approach is essential for understanding the relationship between TJ and PB, as it helps reveal differences in agendas and intervention logics among various sectors that struggle to position their visions and interests in both fields. This can create contradictions, tensions, and challenges in their joint implementation. It allows for an analysis of power and resource disputes among different actors, highlighting who benefits and who is disadvantaged, and how these tensions take shape when implementing TJ and PB interventions and policies. It is not merely a question of whether linking these fields is desirable, but of understanding how institutional, political, and economic factors shape their feasibility in specific contexts.

Drawing on our fieldwork, we argue that during former Colombian president Ivan Duque's administration (2018-2022), the opportunity for a successful linkage between TJ and PB policies was squandered in the initial phase of implementing the Colombian peace agreement. This is motivated by institutional, political, structural and conflict-related factors, which may have not been taken into consideration by theoretical approaches that advocate for a desirable linkage between TJ and PB. Our findings question such a linkage by identifying the tensions and disputes between actors within the two fields who compete to shape the transition. The political economy behind PB and TJ policies may be different or even contradictory, which suggests that their linking may be more difficult than suggested by some advocates of the integration of the two fields.

To empirically address how PB and TJ policies interrelate we examine the interactions between Territorially Focused Development Programmes (hereinafter PDET, by its Spanish

acronym), a peacebuilding policy aimed at transforming the rural regions most affected by the armed conflict, and Work or Activities providing Reparations (hereinafter TOAR, by its Spanish acronym) which are part of the justice mechanism in the current transitional process. To carry out this analysis, we have relied on a qualitative research design that includes desk research (e.g., official reports and secondary literature) to gather information on the implementation of both PDET and TOAR, as well as 46 semi-structured interviews with local and national actors (e.g., state officials, representatives from civil society, ex-combatants, peasants and human rights defenders) conducted between September 2020 and December 2022. We analysed the interviews' transcripts using Nvivo through thematic coding. To protect the identities of the respondents, each interview was anonymised with an alphanumeric code and a general reference to the role of the person interviewed.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. In the next section, we present a brief context outlining the main features of the PDET and TOAR policies, and describe the Catatumbo region. We then move to review the relevant literature and frame our discussion. In the next section, we address the challenges that have hindered articulation in practice between TJ and PB, along with relevant factors that help explaining these challenges. Finally, we present some theoretical implications and conclusions.

The Context: PDETs and TOARs in the Colombian Catatumbo Region

The Colombian case provides a valuable opportunity to empirically examine how PB and TJ interact in practice from a political economy perspective. The country is currently advancing in the implementation of an ambitious six-point agenda outlined in the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) between the national government and the former Revolutionary Armed

Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC-EP). This agreement aimed to end more than six decades of armed conflict through structural transformations designed to reduce inequalities between rural and urban areas. Its key measures include a comprehensive rural reform, a political reform ensuring guarantees for opposition and participation, the transformation of the guerrilla into a political party, the reincorporation of former combatants with a collective approach, reparations for victims, and the establishment of a new transitional justice system (FPA 2016).

PDETs were conceived as planning instruments to address the structural inequalities of the Colombian countryside as part of Point 1 of the FPA, which aimed to address land-related grievances through three main strategies: the creation of a land fund for peasants, the formalisation of land titles, and the design of national policies to provide public goods and services in rural areas. Among these policies, PDETs stand out for their strong emphasis on participatory planning in the 16 regions most affected by the armed conflict, characterised by high levels of poverty, weak state presence, and illicit economies that had long fuelled violence. The PDET framework was ambitious, envisioning a bottom-up approach in which local communities would identify their own development priorities, shaping a vision of ‘territorial peace’ that combined state-building efforts with grassroots participation

TOARs, on the other hand, stem from Point 5 of the FPA, which established the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition, including the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (hereinafter SJP). The SJP was designed to investigate, prosecute, and sanction those most responsible for serious crimes committed during the armed conflict, offering conditional benefits in exchange for truth-telling and reparative actions. It has jurisdiction over former FARC combatants, members of the security forces, as well as state

agents who were not part of the security forces, and civilian third parties. Regarding the latter two, the Constitutional Court decided that their participation in the SJP would be voluntary, an approach that somehow dismantled the original model agreed upon in Havana by the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Michalowski et. al. 2018). TOARs are central to this approach, requiring individuals under the SJP's jurisdiction to carry out reparative works that contribute to victims' rights and community reconstruction.

Individuals appearing before the SJP can undertake TOARs at any stage of the process, either before their sanction is determined or as part of their imposed punishment if they acknowledge truth and responsibility (SJP 2020). TOARs may include activities such as humanitarian demining, infrastructure construction and improvement, electrification projects, crop substitution for illicit economies, environmental protection, reparation programmes for displaced peasants, or contributions to the search for persons missing as a result of the armed conflict (Law 1957 of 2019, art. 141; SJP 2024a). Thus, TOARs serve as a mechanism for repairing victims and addressing the harm caused within the framework of the armed conflict. Moreover, when implemented in PDET zones, they may not only fulfil the restorative component of the sanction imposed but also contribute to the transformation of the territories most affected by the conflict.

To analyse the interaction between PDETs, as a proxy for a peacebuilding policy, and TOARs, as a practice of transitional justice, we focus on the Catatumbo region—one of the areas most affected by the armed conflict in Colombia and designated as a PDET zone.⁴ While

⁴ Although Catatumbo is composed of 11 municipalities in the department of Norte de Santander, only eight were classified as PDET municipalities, namely: Convención, El Carmen, El Tarra, Hacarí, San Calixto, Sardinata, Teorama and Tibú (Procuraduría 2020)

this region is distinguished by its immense environmental and cultural wealth, home to the indigenous Barí and peasant communities, state institutional presence has been weak, and the provision of infrastructure and public goods severely lacking.

Although guerrilla groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN) since the 1970s and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and FARC-EP from the 1980s, had a presence in Catatumbo, it was the paramilitary incursion in the 1990s that led to the highest levels of human rights violations, forced displacement, massacres, and land dispossession. The National Army also committed serious crimes against civilians, including the execution of local residents who were then falsely reported as guerrilla fighters killed in combat—a practice widely known in Colombia as “false positives” (CNMH, 2018). As a result of this violence and the collapse of the peasant economy, the region underwent significant rural transformations: coca cultivation expanded, land grabbing increased, palm oil monoculture spread (notably in Tibú and Sardinata), and extractive industries intensified (Vargas and Uribe, 2017; Interview, Civil Society Organization P8, 26 April 2021).

Catatumbo was selected as one of the PDET territories due to its high levels of poverty, exclusion,⁵ significant presence of crops classified as illicit-use, and the severe impacts of the armed conflict. The PDET participation process followed a staggered structure, moving from the most local level (veredas) to municipal and regional levels. It involved peasant communities, ethnic groups, civil society, local authorities, and private actors. In Catatumbo, over 11,000 people participated (Interview, ART P5, 6 April 2021), although key community

⁵ The average unsatisfied basic needs (UBN) index of the subregion's municipalities is 41.4%, well above the national index of 14.1% (Procuraduría 2020). In the Catatumbo region, 29.3% of children do not attend educational institutions, 32% of homes do not have electricity, 85.2% have no water supply, and 93.1% of homes lack sewage systems (ART 2020).

organisations were excluded (Interview, Civil Society Organization P14, 16 July 2021). As a result, 1,115 initiatives were defined. During Duque's administration, 240 projects were approved, totalling 133,688 million Colombian pesos (approximately 31 million USD). Progress was mainly observed in planning, resource allocation, and the execution of some infrastructure projects, including roads, electrification, water and sanitation systems, and school improvements (ART 2022).

Of the 16 PDET zones nationwide, Iván Duque's government prioritised Catatumbo for the implementation of a "Roadmap" aimed at aligning the PDET process with other territorial planning instruments and establishing a territorial transformation plan to advance urgent development initiatives. To this end, Duque promoted the Sustainable Catatumbo strategy, an institutional initiative involving approximately 45 entities coordinating the allocation of economic resources linked to PDET projects (Interview, ART P9, 7 May 2021). However, the strategy favoured major business associations—such as Fedepalma, Fedecacao, the Cúcuta Chamber of Commerce, and ANDI—over peasant and indigenous organisations. Moreover, the Roadmap director in Catatumbo was the president of Asobancaria, the national business association of the financial sector (Interview, Consulting firm PDET SP12, 25 March 2021). Duque's prioritisation of Catatumbo was motivated by a mix of economic and strategic factors. Beyond the official discourse of development and stabilisation, the region presented an opportunity to consolidate business interests in mining, hydrocarbons, agribusiness, and territorial control in an area historically contested by armed actors.

Simultaneously, individuals appearing before the SJP began implementing TOARs in Catatumbo. Although the SJP has yet to impose sanctions, it has certified 20 TOARs carried out by former FARC-EP combatants before their legal status was determined (SJP, 2024b).

These ex-combatants engaged in projects such as maintaining rural roads and improving infrastructure in coordination with community representatives.⁶ Members of the security forces accused of false positives had not yet engaged in TOARs in the region.

The Debate: Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice Interactions

Although transitional justice is often described as a component of peacebuilding, both have been conceived as distinct fields with different origins, objectives, and approaches (Hoddy and Gready, 2022). Their relationship has at times been marked by tensions, notably in the 1990s, when the "peace versus justice" debate highlighted the divide between those prioritising accountability to strengthen the rule of law and those warning that pursuing justice might destabilise fragile peace agreements. It was argued that justice efforts could hinder negotiations when armed or political actors perceived judicial mechanisms as threats to their security or to peace accords.

The limited interaction between the two fields reflects their conceptual and practical separation (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016). Transitional justice prioritises accountability and victim redress, whereas peacebuilding seeks to prevent the recurrence of violence and address conflict root causes. In practice, although transitional justice has been incorporated into UN peace mission mandates, it has historically operated autonomously

⁶ Some of the TOAR initiatives carried out in the Catatumbo region include: the repair and maintenance of infrastructure at the school in the Alta Gracia hamlet and the installation of hose piping for wastewater collection in the municipality of Teorama; the maintenance of infrastructure at the Santa Helena School and the construction of a concrete track in the municipality of Tibú; the implementation of an environmental damage recovery programme, which involved land adaptation, tree planting, and the maintenance of the community hall in the 20 de Mayo settlement, located in the municipality of El Tarra (Bonilla, Valencia and Carrascal 2024).

(Sharp, 2018). Peacebuilding encompasses a broad range of activities, including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), institutional, economic, and cultural reforms, community dialogue, conflict transformation, promotion of the rule of law, and economic development (Parlevliet, 2010; Hoddy and Gready, 2022).

In recent years, efforts have emerged to integrate these approaches, recognising that the peace–justice dichotomy is not absolute. The “peace with justice” perspective argues that the two can be complementary depending on the context (Sharp, 2014; Parlevliet, 2010). The UN has reinforced this view, asserting that peace and transitional justice are interdependent objectives (UN, 2004). Greater coordination between them could reduce the risk of conflict recurrence (Lederach, 1997) and help address the structural causes of conflict, preventing transitional justice from becoming an isolated exercise (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016). This shift has sparked debates on designing justice mechanisms that not only avoid jeopardising peace agreements but also contribute to a more legitimate and sustainable peace (Hoddy and Gready, 2022).

General calls to strengthen PB and TJ links and acknowledgement of their conducive (‘one leads to the other’) (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016) and inherent relationships (they ‘go hand in hand’) (Sharp 2018) are still predominant. However, there is also an increasing concern with the need to clarify their ‘nexus’ and explore their contours more empirically (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016).

From a political economy perspective, the relationship between TJ and PB is closely linked to their ability to address the root causes of armed conflict and drive socio-economic transformation (Hoddy and Gready 2022; Guzmán 2020). Early critiques of TJ highlighted its failure to tackle systemic oppression, inequality, and structural violence—key factors in

conflict dynamics (Miller 2008; Laplante 2008; Sharp 2014). However, since the mid-2000s, scholars have increasingly explored TJ's role in shaping socio-economic conditions during transitions (Arbour 2007; Guzmán 2020). This has led to a broader approach that incorporates economic and social justice. Truth commissions have exposed the economic inequalities underlying conflicts (Waldorf 2020), while reparations have supported material and symbolic restitution, including access to education and health services (Sandoval 2017). Additionally, TJ mechanisms are increasingly trying to hold economic actors accountable for their roles in violence (Michalowski et al. 2018; Payne et al. 2020). These approaches are seen in initiatives like Colombia's land restitution and Peru's comprehensive reparations, which address multiple forms of inequality (Guzmán 2020).

Despite these advances, TJ's impact remains constrained by temporal, financial, and institutional limitations. To foster meaningful structural change, TJ institutions must collaborate with broader social and peacebuilding initiatives that transform the ideologies and structures sustaining past violence and repression (Sandoval 2017).

While some studies examine traditional TJ mechanisms and PB policies in cases like Afghanistan, Colombia, and Iraq, (Cante and Quehl 2016) they often fail to explore the connection between these fields or provide systematic evidence of how they might contribute to socioeconomic transformations. Where those connections are investigated, issues arise, such as institutions tasked with both TJ and PB functions leading to confusion about their roles, e.g., ICTY (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik 2016). Additionally, focusing on institutional strengthening as a PB strategy can undermine TJ efforts in certain contexts, such as in the DRC (Arnould 2016). Moreover, international interventions may either favour vocal groups through

strategic local governance, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hronešová 2016; Lai 2016), or overlook dissenting local voices, as observed in Libya (Lamon 2016).

Some theoretical studies critique the structural relationship between transitional justice and peacebuilding for aligning with Western elites and neoliberal economics, thereby distancing these processes from local community efforts (Sharp 2014; Richmond and Visoka 2021). Both fields have been criticised for their top-down approaches and technocratic neutrality, concerns that may be exacerbated by their integration (Sharp 2018). Furthermore, transitional justice's emphasis on normative issues and its failure to address socioeconomic inequalities constrain its interaction with locally driven peacebuilding processes (Turner 2021).

In response, scholars have advocated for a local turn that prioritises community-led initiatives (Richmond and Visoka 2021). However, this perspective often romanticises “the local”, overlooking conflicts and tensions among different local actors (Barrera et al. 2022). A more nuanced approach is therefore needed to account for these power dynamics. Nevertheless, conceptual ambiguity persists regarding what, where, and who constitutes “the local” in peacebuilding and its interaction with transitional justice (Ljungkvist and Jarstad 2021).

We conclude that a significant empirical gap remains in understanding the interaction between TJ and PB, particularly in recognising the fractures and tensions among diverse local actors. It is precisely in this area that our study seeks to make a meaningful contribution.

Challenges in Bridging TJ and PB: Insights from the Articulation of TOARs and PDETs

We examine the challenges in articulating PDETs and TOARs, and more broadly, in linking TJ and PB policies through an empirical analysis of Catatumbo. Following Duthie and Seils

(2017), we categorise these challenges into structural socioeconomic, violence-related, political, and institutional factors. We then derive theoretical insights from this case using a political economy perspective, offering new interpretations and critiques.

Structural Socioeconomic Challenges in the Territorial Context of Catatumbo

The political economy of the region presents significant challenges to the implementation of the Final Peace Agreement and the articulation of TJ and PB.

First, interviewees emphasised that for TJ and PB to work together, the agreement's comprehensiveness must be realised, addressing the structural challenges of local territories (Interview, Truth Commission P10, 17 May 2021; Interview Former Combatant FARC-EP P15, 23 July 2021). This is crucial for the Comprehensive Rural Reform and for effectively addressing old land issues; without clarity on property rights in Catatumbo, many PDET infrastructure initiatives will not be implemented, nor will those appearing before the SJP be able to participate. This point was raised by a researcher during an interview, when they stated that:

In this sense, to socioeconomically transform a region like Catatumbo, the first thing that is needed is to solve the land problem—that is, to determine to whom the land belongs and to find a solution to the problem of informality and other land conflicts. This continues to move at an incredibly slow pace, preventing a serious transformation of the region (Interview Researcher P1, March 2021).⁷

⁷ Notably, one of the signatories of the peace agreement made a similar remark (Interview Former Combatant FARC-EP P15, 23 July 2021)

The region exhibits a remarkably high degree of informality of rural property, with an index of 0.71⁸ (Procuraduría, 2020, p. 10). The municipalities in this area either have outdated rural land registries or lack them entirely. Moreover, various territorial zoning frameworks—including forest reserves, peasant and indigenous territories, and environmental protection areas—overlap, creating a complex and fragmented land governance system.⁹ Despite the existence of a territorial and environmental planning framework, settlement processes and external interventions have led to jurisdictional disorder. This situation is further exacerbated by the limited capacity of local authorities and the presence of illegal armed actors, which have severely undermined institutional mechanisms for regulating and sanctioning land-use conflicts (FIP 2021).

Beyond these historical dynamics, two major episodes of land dispossession have shaped Catatumbo: the expansion of the oil industry into Barí Indigenous territories and the paramilitary offensive of the 1990s, which enabled large-scale land acquisitions (Vargas and Uribe, 2017). Additionally, deforestation driven by illicit crops, cattle ranching, and extractive industries threatens the region (FIP 2021). These issues highlight the urgency of implementing the Agrarian Reform outlined in the Peace Agreement, yet progress remains stalled, with no substantial advances in rural reform plans, cadastral updates, or land formalisation (Procuraduría 2020; CINEP/PPP-CERAC 2019, 2021).

⁸ The rural property informality index estimates and identifies areas with informal land tenure, including plots unregistered in the cadastre or land registries (Procuraduría, 2020).

⁹ The Catatumbo region encompasses two protected areas (the Barí National Natural Park and the Los Estoraques Unique Natural Area), a Forest Reserve Zone established by Law 2 of 1959, two Indigenous Reserves (or *resguardos*, as they are called under Colombian legislation), and a Peasant Reserve Zone under formalisation since 2009, which some local organisations have de facto implemented (FIP 2021).

Second, the region faces contradictory views on what constitutes 'development', 'wellbeing', and how governance and territorial management should be. Various economic sectors advocate for the expansion of extractive industries—such as coal, oil, palm oil monoculture, and cattle ranching—often in ecologically important areas and indigenous reserves. This has resulted in longstanding resistance from peasant and indigenous communities (Interview, Truth Commission P10, 17 May 2021; FIP 2021; Interview, Civil Society Organisation P7, 12 April 2021).¹⁰

However, there are also differences and tensions among the sectors and organisations that oppose extractivism. Barrera et al. (2022) point out that, despite the apparent unity in collective struggles, Catatumbo is marked by deep territorial, social, and economic divisions. For instance, while the Peasant Association of Catatumbo (ASCAMCAT) advocates for the creation of a Peasant Reserve Zone (ZRC), the Barí people seek to expand their indigenous reserves, highlighting tensions over land use and control. Additionally, the presence of armed actors constrains social mobilisation, and rapid urbanisation—particularly in Ocaña and Tibú—has exacerbated inequalities regarding the rural areas of other municipalities in the region. Furthermore, the significant influx of Venezuelan migrants has contributed to these dynamics, as many provide cheap and precarious labour for both extractive industries and illicit coca cultivation (Idler 2019).

Third, the prioritisation and structuring of PDET projects—including their formulation and resource allocation—are no longer participatory processes, unlike the initial definition of

¹⁰ Such as The Asociación Campesina del Catatumbo (ASCAMCAT, Peasant Association of Catatumbo), the Comité de Integración Social del Catatumbo (CISCA, Committee for Social Integration of Catatumbo), the Movimiento por la Constituyente Popular (MCP, Movement for the People's Constituent Assembly), and the Asociación por la Unidad Campesina del Catatumbo (ASUNCAT, Association for the Unity of Catatumbo's Peasants). In the region there is also indigenous communities belonging to the Barí people, who have their own political organisation and territory.

the list of initiatives or transformations. Instead, these tasks have been entrusted to a small group of experts closely aligned with the business and investment sectors in Catatumbo (Interview Consulting firm SP12, 25 March 2021).

During the initial phase of the PDETs, more than 11,000 people in Catatumbo participated in formulating a list of proposed transformations, referred to as initiatives. However, a team of technical experts later developed a roadmap to prioritise which of these initiatives would be implemented as projects. This roadmap was presented to only 150 people, leaving the vast majority of participants—and the broader population—unaware of its content (FIP 2021; Asomunicipios 2023; Interview, Civil Society Organisation P7, 12 April 2021). As a result, many have expressed concerns that they do not know which projects have been prioritised or how they are being structured.

This perspective reveals power dynamics shaping the process in the region. Civil society organisations like ASCAMCAT, ASUNCAT, and CISCA, despite their legitimacy and capacity to mobilise local participation in the FPA's implementation, were excluded from decision-making on budget allocation and project prioritisation for the PDETs. Instead, economic actors linked to extractive industries and a few community delegates were given influence through the Sustainable Catatumbo Strategy.

The Organisations have denounced that there are no guarantees to participate in the allocation and execution of the resources of the PDET Catatumbo; that now it is not PDET Catatumbo but that it has been reconfigured into 'Sustainable Catatumbo' strategy, where the participants are businessmen and politicians of the region, where the communities that built the PDET no longer know the amount of money or the destination of the resources. The Social Organisations are doing oversight; above all,

they have turned to the road issue [i.e. building road infrastructure] in strategic places where coltan, coal and oil have been discovered. And there it is. So, in the end, the road is not to guarantee access, the best conditions for Village X, but rather the road is a possible corridor for mineral exploration. They are prioritising the issue of an extractivist project (Interview, Civil Society Organisation P7, 12 April 2021).

Given these circumstances, the fact that the SJP seeks, through the TOARs, to support the implementation of the PDETs may not necessarily be positively transformative for the victims and communities that inhabit those territories most affected by the violence. It may instead contribute to the consolidation of extractive economies that contravene the interests of those same communities and favour the reproduction of structural inequalities.

Fourth, various sectors and actors compete for influence over peace implementation initiatives and, more broadly, over the public policies and budgets allocated to the execution of the Final Peace Agreement (FPA), in an effort to capture the associated benefits. A particularly illustrative example of this dynamic is the Gamarra-Ocaña road, which, according to President Gustavo Petro (2025), was designed to favour economic elites while neglecting the needs of the local communities of Catatumbo. Nevertheless, it is not only major business interests that seek to shape the region's development. In contrast, peasant communities have played an active and constructive role in the construction of tertiary roads—small-scale infrastructure projects in rural areas—through their community action boards (Córdoba 2022). Moreover, the signatories of the Peace Agreement appearing before the SJP have taken part in the construction of tertiary roads and concrete trackways in the region as part of their TOAR commitments (SJP, 2024b).

In addition to the issues previously described, corruption also affected the PDET. Members of Congress, entrepreneurs, and local authorities were implicated in a network that misappropriated royalty funds intended for financing these PDETs. This had repercussions at both the national level and in the Catatumbo region, leaving many initiatives without funding (Morris 2024; Márquez 2024).

Thus, the implementation of the peace agreement through some of its policies, like that of PDET, has reinvigorated tensions originating in contrasting visions of development and the old and complex problem of land in the country. While the peace agreement was supposed to become a vehicle to tackle some of the dimensions of the land issues, its partial and slow implementation, in particular of its Point 1 (Peace Accords Matrix, 2021; Echavarría Álvarez, 2024), is showing the limits of the Agreement's transformative aims. This is partially reflected in the National Government's decision to allocate larger financial resources to Point 5 of the FPA, dedicated to TJ policies, than to Point 1 which contains most of the PB policies (Rodríguez-Llach and Martínez-Carrillo 2022). Against this backdrop, the linking between PB and TJ policies then becomes more unlikely. For mechanisms like TOAR to promote coordination at the local level, there must be something to coordinate with in the first place. But as the interviewees suggested, the unaddressed land issue in the region hinders, like in a domino effect, the implementation of the agreement's most transformative commitments.

An Overloaded Conflict: On the Difficulties of Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding in the Midst of War

After the signing of the FPA, the armed conflict was reconfigured, and security and human rights deteriorated in Catatumbo (Interview, Researchers P6, 12 April 2021; Procuraduría 2020; Echavarría Álvarez, 2024). The continuity of the war has affected in several ways both the possible processes of articulation between TJ and PB. It has put at risk those local leaders and social organisations that defended the FPA and pressed for the rural transformation of their territories. Several of them have now been identified or threatened by armed groups as military targets (Interview, Researcher P1, 16 March 2021)

Moreover, the persistence of armed groups and victimisations against the civilian population hinder dialogue in the region about the crimes committed by armed groups in the past and those that continue in the present, as well as the processes of enforceability of the rights to truth, justice and reparation.¹¹ Certain topics are vetoed for local communities in the territory or generate greater risk for them, such as forced recruitment or the substitution of crops destined for illicit use (Interview, Truth Commission P10, 17 May 2021; Interview, Pastoral Social P3, 29 March 2021; Interview, Leader from Civil Society Organisation P12, 3 June 2021).

People do not speak openly about the reparations they need or deserve as victims of the conflict because they fear the consequences they may face if they denounce perpetrators or claim their rights, so they prefer to do so very discreetly and only to the actors they trust (Interview, ART P5, 6 April 2021). If people do not feel safe speaking out and claiming their rights, the anchor points where policies meet (PDETs, reparations, TOARs) become less visible to actors, officials and institutions.

¹¹ Only in 2023, at least 12,000 people in Catatumbo have been affected by mass displacement, restrictions on humanitarian access, kidnappings, homicides, the recruitment, use, and exploitation of children and adolescents, as well as threats and extortion (OCHA, 2023).

For security reasons, some local actors are wary of former Armed Forces members participating in PDETs through TOARs. Many argue that such involvement requires institutional reforms, including deep purges, restructuring as outlined in the FPA, and an end to human rights violations against communities (Interview, Civil Society Organisation P8, 26 April 2021).

Additionally, victims' representatives, researchers, and public officials emphasise that military involvement in TOARs within PDETs is neither feasible nor desirable, given the presence of other armed groups, which poses serious risks to their safety (Interview, Victim's Lawyer SP2, 16 October 2020; Interview, Victim's Lawyer SP3, 29 October 2020). Similar concerns apply to former FARC-EP combatants, who may face threats while carrying out TOARs in regions where past grievances persist. This situation could undermine their commitment to transitional mechanisms, not necessarily leading to rejection but incentivising avoidance or requiring TOARs to be conducted elsewhere, sometimes under anonymity.

Finally, the officials of the entities in charge of the implementation of TJ and PDETs face limitations both in their movements to rural areas and in the performance of their actions due to the illegal curfews imposed by armed groups. (Interview Civil Society Organisation P7, 12 April 2021; Interview Truth Commission, 17 May 2021; Echavarría Álvarez, 2024). This context shows the difficulty of articulating both policies in the midst of war.

Political Challenges

One of the main political challenges in the articulation between TJ and PB policies has been the rejection of the peace process by a significant part of the population and by powerful economic and political actors. After signing the FPA, a referendum was held in which citizens

were asked whether they approved or rejected the agreements. Amidst an intense campaign of fake news and disinformation about the peace process, the 'No' camp narrowly won at the national level. This evidenced a deep polarisation of society regarding several of the agreed points and led to the reform of several of them. Although, in Catatumbo nearly two-thirds of voters supported the "Yes" option— a significantly higher percentage than the national average—voter turnout was low, reaching only a quarter of the electoral registry (Barrera et al 2022). Moreover, the results varied considerably both between and within the region's municipalities. For instance, in the municipality of Sardinata, a stronghold of the Conservative Party, the 'No' vote won by a significant margin (Barrera et al 2022).

Subsequently, former President Duque held power between 2018 and 2022, representing the Democratic Centre Party, a right-wing party that opposed the FPA. In practice, Duque's administration opposed the peace agreement by abandoning policies stemming from the FPA and, in some cases, deploying a direct attack against the institutions created after the peace process such as the SJP.

Among the main points of resistance the Democratic Centre party had against the peace process were: (i) opposition to the inclusion of the armed forces in the SJP under conditions deemed "equal" to those of former FARC combatants; (ii) resistance to land redistribution promised by the Comprehensive Rural Reform, as it threatened the interests of large landowners and political elites in the country; (iii) concerns regarding transitional justice, particularly the amnesty and pardons granted to former FARC combatants for political crimes, as well as the sanctions imposed by the SJP; and (iv) opposition to the inclusion of a gender perspective throughout the agreement (García 2021).

In addition to the above, a large portion of former President Duque's cabinet was opposed to including the PDETs in the National Development Plan, which would have left them totally underfunded and outside the country's policy agenda. Although in the end they were included, resistance persisted. In fact, the strategy used by some policymakers to push the PDET in Catatumbo and gain support from the national government has been to configure it fundamentally as a development strategy and therefore oriented towards economic growth and investment 'with a bias towards the future'—thereby detaching it from any link with other policies of the FPA oriented 'with a bias towards past,' including the sanctions of the SJP, amnesties and pardons (Interview Consulting Firm *PDET* SP12, 25 March 2021). This cabinet-level rejection of anything to do with the SJP explains in part some of the political resistance that has hindered the articulation between the TOARs and their linkage with the PDETs in the region.

Finally, the political support base for the FPA in the region, consisting mainly of peasant, ethnic and civil society organisations, was severely affected by the government's noncompliance; as a result, popular support for the programmes derived from the FPA has been weakened (Interview Civil Society Organisation P14, 16 July 2021; Interview, Social Leader P12, 3 June 2021).

Institutional Factors

The FPA lacks cohesive implementation at the national and local level, with significant gaps between agreed terms and actual practice, and no coordinated efforts among the institutions established by the Agreement (Interview Researchers P11, 19 May 2021; Interview

Victims' Unit SP1A, 29 September 2020; Interview, Former Combatant FARC-EP P15, 23 July, 2021).

The institutions established after the FPA, such as the SJP and the Agency for Territorial Renewal, which oversees the implementation of PDETs, have largely operated in isolation, prioritising their specific missions without coordinating with other institutions. In fact, the entities monitoring the implementation of the Peace Agreement agree that there has been no significant progress in inter-institutional coordination (Quinn 2023; CINEP/PPP-CERAC, 2021). While some SJP officials and magistrates considered linking TOAR with initiatives in PDET zones, such efforts were uncommon among Executive Branch officials in Duque's administration. For instance, regional officials responsible for PDETs in Catatumbo acknowledged the potential connection with the SJP's work but made no effort to actualise it (Interview ART P5, 6 April 2021; Interview ART P9, 7 May 2021). This indicates that at the local level, PB through PDETs is viewed as separate from the work of TJ, particularly that of the SJP.

This issue is not confined to local territorial officials; a similar situation occurred at the national level during Duque's administration. The former Presidential Advisor for Stabilisation and Consolidation, Emilio Archila, sought to separate the work of the Agency for Territorial Renewal from that of the SJP, citing the separation of powers between the judiciary and the Executive Branch. Despite some progress, a lack of dialogue persists between these institutions, indicating a lack of commitment to coordinate efforts between TJ and PB bodies (Interview ART SP8, 27 November 2020). This national-level stance, supported by the Presidential Advisory Office, likely influenced local officials, leading to their limited understanding of TJ and reluctance to collaborate with the SJP. It also suggests that local

institutional responses may be shaped by national dynamics, undermining the effectiveness of top-down PB processes. Despite the SJP recognising the need to coordinate with the Executive Branch to achieve its TOAR-related objectives, practical progress has been minimal. This kind of practical problems in the implementation were mentioned repeatedly in our interviews:

Beyond the political restrictions, in any case there are technical, operational and institutional difficulties in integrating this, that is, in the conception one can imagine it and say yes, the PDETs have to do with works and restorative actions, collective reparation and with reincorporation, but in any case to put this into practice with different bureaucracies, with different rhythms, goals, budgets, results ... It is difficult, that is, even if there were the political conditions to take this from conception to practice, perhaps it was too ambitious because everything has to do with everything and this question about simultaneity is tremendously tough to answer in practice (Interview Researchers P11, 19 May 2021).

In response to this lack of coordination, and taking advantage of the change in national government with the rise to power of President Gustavo Petro, the SJP established the Restorative System of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. This system is a cohesive and interconnected framework of authorities, procedures, and measures aimed at facilitating the imposition, implementation, monitoring, and verification of ‘special sanctions’¹² and measures contributing to the reparation of victims by those appearing before the JEP.

¹² These ‘Special Sanctions’ are the lenient punishments that the SJP can impose on those appearing before it, and the TOARs are part of them. They differ based on the stage at which they can be imposed and the restrictions they involve. For a discussion, see (Sandoval et al 2022 and Sandoval et al 2021).

The Restorative System is coordinated by an Articulation Committee within the JEP, responsible for guiding its implementation and fostering inter-institutional collaboration with both the national government and territorial administrations. Ultimately, its objective is to create the material conditions—through an existing portfolio of specific projects—that enable participants to carry out their TOAR as part of their own sanctions. The creation of this system is still very recent, and its operation remains unclear. Hopefully, it will succeed in establishing solid coordination processes; otherwise, it will be nearly impossible for those appearing before the SJP to carry out their TOAR within the framework of the sanctions they are required to fulfil (JEP, 2024).

Theoretical Implications for the Relationship between Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding

The case of Catatumbo during the Duque administration illustrates that the political economy dynamics underlying transitional justice (TJ) and peacebuilding (PB) initiatives may originate from different, albeit sometimes overlapping, forces. Political and economic actors often favour PB programmes that align with their economic interests—such as the PDET, whose implementation increasingly prioritises projects benefiting business sectors and economic elites—while simultaneously opposing or displaying less enthusiasm towards TJ mechanisms. Consequently, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) has faced strong resistance from these elites, persistent rejection by Duque’s government, and sharp criticism, all while struggling to address victims’ needs with limited technical and financial resources.

In the implementation of PB policies, victims and local communities are often marginalised or excluded from the technocratic phases of budgeting and execution. In contrast, TJ mechanisms, at least discursively and to some extent in practice, place victims at the centre, although the JEP lacks the capacity to fully meet their expectations. Ultimately, the Catatumbo case suggests that the political economy forces shaping TJ and PB interventions may hinder their coordination and complementarity.

This may be explained by a combination of three interrelated factors. First, certain actors and representatives of powerful economic sectors succeed in influencing, at the local level, the objectives and forms that these processes adopt during implementation, thereby generating exclusion—and thus resistance—among other actors. A parallel process of elite capture of policies and exclusion of less powerful local agents is thus configured (Hronešová 2016; Lai 2016). The Colombian version of local PB, operationalised through the notion of "territorial peace" in the Final Agreement, also shows that the "local" can be sufficiently broad to include strong political and economic actors who then supplant communities and displace their agendas. National-level political changes prove extremely convenient for this process.

Secondly, the PDET were significantly altered by political changes at the national level, which hindered their articulation with TJ mechanisms. Although local participation in the PDET functioned relatively well during its initial stages, it was negatively affected following the rise to power of the Duque administration, exposing a crucial limitation: the institutionalisation of local peacebuilding practices generates a strong dependence on the political will of ruling parties. While the early stages of the PDET allowed the coexistence of

emancipatory and efficiency-oriented approaches, the subsequent phase of implementation was dominated by a top-down approach, wherein communities were primarily used to legitimise decisions made by technocratic bodies. These changes are heavily influenced by local political economy dynamics, but even more so by national political will, demonstrating that peacebuilding approaches continuously vary and are reconfigured.

Moreover, the political economy of the implementation of the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) operates differently across various levels. The unequal distribution of economic resources among the different points of the FPA—with Point 5, particularly the JEP, receiving the largest proportion during the analysed period—suggests that broader forces and interests are at play. However, this does not imply that the resources allocated to the TJ system and its policies are sufficient to achieve all their objectives. The lack of adequate funding for the Programme of Collective Reparations (TOAR) reveals these limitations.

While this dynamic unfolds nationally, political economy operates differently in the regions. There, fewer resources are allocated despite the greater need to fulfil one of the Agreement's main objectives: the radical transformation of territories marked by war and inequality. In decisions regarding how to invest these resources, local actors with closer ties to business and political interests have held an advantage over rural communities and organisations. Internal divisions among the latter have further facilitated decision-making processes that exclude their direct participation. This is reflected, for instance, in the prioritisation of investments in certain types of infrastructure over structural solutions to

regional problems—solutions that communities themselves often prefer. As a result, the most transformative PB policies risk remaining merely on paper.

Thirdly, the initial design of the policies appears to have lacked a more decisive approach, at least regarding budgeting, implementation timelines, and the allocation of responsibilities. In order to foster successful integration between PB and TJ policies, rhetorical recognition alone is insufficient; it is necessary to materially decide how much funding will be allocated to each policy, what the optimal timing for their implementation should be (whether concurrently, sequentially, and in what order), and who will be responsible for ensuring such coordination.

Empirical observation confirms the importance of analysing the political and power disputes that permeate the transitional process. Decisions such as the prioritisation of initiatives and the structuring of projects under the implementation of the PDET, which appear to be technical processes based on objective and technocratic methodologies, in reality conceal political exercises wherein various local actors, with differing degrees of access to power, dispute the type of well-being and developmental orientation they seek to imprint on the transition process. Furthermore, it is evident that promoting the integration of PB and TJ without critical analysis risks exacerbating the challenges faced by both fields (Sharp 2018). Indeed, if TJ mechanisms were to complement PB policies that benefit not victims but powerful local actors who successfully influence decision-making or profit from market-oriented interventions, TJ would ultimately reproduce and reinforce structural inequalities. Thus, it is

pertinent to ask again: complementarity, coordination, and better integration for what purpose and for whom?

Finally, armed actors that remain in conflict continue to exert coercive power over communities and their territories, restricting their demands for justice and peace and impeding the implementation of policies. Beyond the reluctance to engage with TJ mechanisms (Sharp 2018) or the risk that judicial processes may undermine the transition (Kent 2020), persistent political violence remains a critical factor limiting effective coordination between PB and TJ policies. Eradicating political violence entirely is essential for creating a safe environment in which justice mechanisms can effectively complement policies aimed at fostering well-being and peacebuilding.

Conclusion

While there are potential connections between TJ and PB policies, various structural, institutional, political, and violent dynamics—at both local and national levels—have hindered their coordination. The FPA's opportunity to integrate diverse policies for socioeconomic transformation in war-affected territories has largely been squandered in its first six years. In Catatumbo, all interviewees agreed that no major socioeconomic changes have occurred and highlighted the lack of coordination between PB and TJ measures in achieving a territorial approach to peace.

The Catatumbo case under President Duque's administration illustrates how the political economy of implementation shapes the relationship between PB and TJ, often aligning with the interests of powerful economic and political actors. PDET's increasingly prioritised

projects benefiting business sectors and economic elites, while mechanisms such as the SJP faced strong opposition from these same groups. Coordination between PB and TJ is not merely a technical challenge but a political struggle, where influential actors redefine peace process priorities to their advantage. As a result, rural communities and victims are often excluded from key development decisions, complicating meaningful and equitable integration between these fields. Nonetheless, campesino and ethnic communities continue to resist, denounce injustices, propose alternatives, and achieve some gains in shaping peace. Real opportunities have emerged for those appearing before the SJP to engage in reparative initiatives and territorial reconstruction.

Political economy dynamics shape PB and TJ policies at national and regional levels. Nationally, transitional justice has received a larger share of funding than other components of the FPA, though resources remain insufficient. Regionally, funding is even more constrained, limiting efforts to transform war-affected territories. Under Duque, PDET's shifted from an initial balance between emancipatory and efficiency-driven strategies to a more technocratic and centralised model, relegating communities to a legitimising role rather than active decision-making. These factors underscore that PB-TJ coordination is neither automatic nor neutral but contingent on shifting political and economic forces. Rather than addressing historical inequalities, the process risks reinforcing them, raising critical questions about who truly benefits from supposed coordination.

Although the FPA provided general guidelines for institutional coordination, these have not materialised in practice. Institutions have worked in isolation, focusing solely on their own mandates without meaningful linkages. Interventions also contend with complex territorial conflicts in Catatumbo, exacerbated by unresolved land tenure issues that obstruct broader

peacebuilding efforts, within a context of escalating armed conflict that heightens risks for victims, human rights defenders, public officials, peasants, and social and ethnic leaders.

Restorative works and actions offer concrete opportunities for articulating TJ and PB processes. However, their implementation requires stronger dialogue and coordination between executive and TJ institutions at local and national levels, and demands overcoming significant political, institutional, and structural challenges amid ongoing armed conflict in Catatumbo.

The conditions enabling public policy implementation are often overlooked in academic research. Administrative aspects—such as budgeting, bureaucratic competence, skill development, coordination, and timing—are rarely prioritised theoretically and remain underexplored. As this article demonstrates, further empirical research on these issues is essential not only to develop more explanatory theoretical models but also to strengthen policy implementation that fosters lasting and stable peace.

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