

Bottom-up peace: community alternatives to armed violence in Brazil and Colombia

Paz desde abajo: alternativas comunitarias a la violencia armada en Brasil y Colombia

Paz de baixo para cima: alternativas comunitárias à violência armada no Brasil e na Colômbia

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Abstract

Latin America, often described as a non-war zone, paradoxically registers some of the world's highest homicide rates. Throughout different parts of the region, persistent conflict emerges from entrenched forms of armed violence, affecting both countries with legacies of internal warfare, such as Colombia, and those formally at peace, like Brazil. These realities expose overlapping patterns of direct, structural, and cultural violence and challenge simplistic dichotomies of war and peace. In view of the limitations imposed by top-down frameworks within the prevailing regional peace and security agenda, this research reimagines peacebuilding in Latin America from the bottom-up. It foregrounds the imperative to incorporate the voices and lived experiences of communities most affected by violence into strategies for achieving sustainable peace. To this end, the study examines the Instituto Favela da Paz in Brazil and the Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó in Colombia, exploring how both respond to deep-rooted insecurities and armed violence through grassroots, transnationally connected initiatives.

Keywords: Armed violence, local actors, Latin America, Brazil, Colombia.

Resumen

Latinoamérica, a menudo descrita como una zona sin guerra, paradójicamente registra algunas de las tasas de homicidio más altas del mundo. En distintas partes de la región, el conflicto persistente surge de formas arraigadas de violencia armada, afectando tanto a países con legados de guerra interna, como Colombia, como a aquellos formalmente en paz, como Brasil. Estas realidades exponen patrones superpuestos de violencia directa, estructural y cultural y desafían dicotomías simplistas entre guerra y paz. Ante las limitaciones impuestas por los marcos verticales dentro de la agenda regional de paz y seguridad, esta investigación reimagina la construcción de paz en América Latina desde abajo. Destaca la necesidad imperativa de incorporar las voces y experiencias vividas de las comunidades más afectadas por la violencia en las estrategias para lograr una paz sostenible. Para ello, el estudio examina el Instituto Favela da Paz en Brasil y la Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó en Colombia, explorando cómo ambas responden a inseguridades profundas y a la violencia armada mediante iniciativas de base comunitaria con conexiones transnacionales.

Palabras clave: Violencia armada, actores locales, América Latina, Brasil, Colombia.

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Resumo

A América Latina, frequentemente descrita como uma zona de não-guerra, paradoxalmente registra algumas das maiores taxas de homicídio do mundo. Em distintas partes da região, o conflito persistente emerge de formas arraigadas de violência armada, afetando tanto países com legados de guerras internas, como a Colômbia, quanto aqueles formalmente em paz, como o Brasil. Essas realidades expõem padrões sobrepostos de violência direta, estrutural e cultural e desafiam dicotomias simplistas entre guerra e paz. Considerando as limitações impostas por abordagens de cima para baixo na agenda predominante de paz e segurança regional, esta pesquisa propõe uma reimaginação da construção da paz na América Latina a partir das bases. Destaca-se a necessidade imperativa de incorporar as vozes e experiências vividas das comunidades mais afetadas pela violência nas estratégias de promoção da paz sustentável. Para isso, o estudo examina o Instituto Favela da Paz, no Brasil, e a Comunidade de Paz de San José de Apartadó, na Colômbia, explorando como ambas respondem a inseguranças profundas e à violência armada por meio de iniciativas enraizadas na comunidade e conectadas transnacionalmente.

Palavras-chave: Violência armada, atores locais, América Latina, Brasil, Colômbia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Latin America is widely regarded as a non-war zone due to the prolonged absence of interstate conflicts throughout the twentieth century and the enduring normative consensus among its countries on resolving disputes peacefully through diplomatic mechanisms. However, this surface-level characterization stands in stark contrast to the reality of pervasive violence across much of the continent. Confrontations between state forces and violent non-state actors, as well as internecine group disputes, have persisted in various national contexts throughout the region. As reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), the region has consistently ranked among the world's highest in homicide rates, with levels of violence frequently comparable to those observed in zones of armed conflict. While armed violence, often intricately linked to organized crime and transnational drug trafficking, constitutes the most visible dimension of this crisis, it is by no means the sole factor. Violence in Latin America is deeply rooted in specific socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts, shaping the region's security landscape in complex and multifaceted ways (Ferreira, 2022).

These realities underscore the inadequacy of simplistic dichotomies such as 'war' and 'peace' for accurately characterizing the region, since, although Latin America may be classified as a non-war zone, it is far from constituting a genuine zone of peace. The conventional categories of "war" and "non-war," often uncritically transferred from other settings, are insufficient to apprehend the intricacies of regional dynamics. The conventional categories of "war" and "non-war", often uncritically imported from other settings, are insufficient to apprehend the intricacies of regional dynamics. The conflict-ridden realities of Latin America — shaped by the intersection of formal and informal elements — demand analytical frameworks that transcend reductive binaries. This necessity is highlighted not only by the prevalence of military-grade weaponry, territorial disputes, and widespread civilian casualties, but also by conflicts rooted in informal and often insidious patterns of violence, including gang rivalries, illicit trafficking, systemic urban insecurity, profound economic asymmetries, and a pervasive culture of violence. These configurations routinely evade the explanatory capacities of traditional peace and security paradigms.

Moreover, the persistence of these forms of violence is exacerbated by a public security agenda that prioritizes militarization and the repression of overt criminal activity. Such strategies fail to address the structural and cultural roots of violence, limiting their efficacy to the transient suppression of its most visible symptoms. Consequently, measures such as the demobilization of insurgent forces, military operations against criminal groups, enhanced border surveillance, and the imprisonment of prominent leaders have failed to prevent the emergence of new actors, who rapidly reorganize to occupy the power vacuums left in the wake of state interventions — thus perpetuating illicit activities and sustaining a continuous cycle of violence (Jung & Rudnicki, 2022).

Understanding armed violence in Latin America requires an analysis that goes beyond its overt manifestations, encompassing less visible yet equally critical forms, such as structural and cultural violence, which pervade the region. Such violence is profoundly embedded in macrostructural conditions dating back to the colonial era, perpetuating institutional fragility, socioeconomic exclusion, and patterns of cultural domination. These dynamics are evident not only in countries with histories of armed conflict, such as Colombia, but also in seemingly stable contexts like Brazil. In both Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Apartado, Colombia, one observes convergent political, economic, and social developments, where the emergence of armed groups amid institutional weakness is both a consequence and a catalyst of entrenched patterns of marginalization. These groups not only emerge from these contexts but also intensify and perpetuate them, further increasing the vulnerability of local actors and civilian populations.

Faced with these enduring realities, which are often obscured both by conventional analyses that focus exclusively on warfare and by the inadequacies of public security agendas grounded in state-centric approaches, communities affected by violence not only adapt but also demonstrate resilience and take an active role in

addressing these challenges and advancing peacebuilding at the local level. Their efforts extend beyond confronting the most visible forms of direct violence, encompassing — first and foremost — the profound, underlying causes rooted in structural and cultural dimensions. Likewise, to effectively comprehend and mitigate contemporary violence in the region, it is imperative not only to acknowledge conflicts that elude traditional categorization, but also to recognize the ontologies, practices, and resilience of those who confront everyday violence and devise creative strategies for peacebuilding within their communities.

To address these complexities, Critical Peace and Conflict Studies provides a robust analytical framework that transcends the state-centered logic of conventional security paradigms. This epistemological orientation contributes in two principal ways. First, it challenges the prevailing war/non-war dichotomy by drawing on Johan Galtung's triadic model of violence — comprising direct violence (immediate and visible), structural violence (systemic conditions that perpetuate harm), and cultural violence (norms and discourses that legitimize violence) — thereby facilitating a more holistic understanding of conflict in Latin America. Second, it reconceptualizes peace by expanding its definition beyond top-down, institutionalized interventions to encompass grassroots agency and community-driven initiatives. From this vantage point, peace is understood not merely as the absence of war or violence imposed from above, but also as a dynamic process actively constructed from below through local practices of resistance, coexistence, and transformation.

Accordingly, this study aims to address a significant gap in the analysis of conflict in Latin America by examining grassroots initiatives in the face of critical contexts of violence — including those unrelated to traditional histories of war. The research focuses on peacebuilding efforts led by the *Instituto Favela da Paz* in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó* in Colombia; both internationally recognized for their innovative, bottom-up strategies and for their participation in the transnational Global Campus peacebuilding network. The findings reveal that local actors in both contexts possess an acute awareness of the structural and cultural underpinnings that sustain direct violence, informed by their lived experiences and nuanced understanding of these conflicts' underlying causes. In response to persistent state inadequacy and their heightened vulnerability to violence, these community-led initiatives have organized collectively to foster positive peace through collaborative, contextually grounded alternatives. By promoting active community engagement, strengthening social bonds, and fostering reciprocal trust, these networks offer innovative solutions that create pathways toward sustainable peace within the region.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative and exploratory approach within the field of Critical Peace and Conflict Studies, with a deductive orientation informed by Johan Galtung's seminal theorization of direct, structural, and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990). Moving beyond conventional, state-centered analyses of peace and insecurity, the study aims to illuminate how complex and persistent vulnerabilities — encompassing but not limited to direct violence — are experienced, negotiated, and transformed by local actors within distinct Latin American contexts. The research addresses the analytic limitations of binary war/peace frameworks and instead emphasizes the continuities, overlaps, and ambiguities that permeate the lived realities of marginalized communities.

To this end, the empirical investigation adopts a comparative case study design (George & Bennett, 2005), focusing on two territorially and socio-politically distinct contexts: (I) *Instituto Favela da Paz*, an urban initiative located in Jardim Ângela, São Paulo, Brazil, marked by a context of urban conflict; and (II) *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó*, a rural community in Colombia characterized by a history of armed conflict and collective resistance. Both cases, historically marked by armed violence and marginalization, were intentionally selected for their local specificities, but also for their active participation in the Global Campus network, an international network organized by Tamera (Portugal), which connects community-led peace initiatives in violent territories worldwide. This dual contextual lens allows for a robust

exploration of how locally-driven strategies are shaped, shared, and re-signified across distinct yet analogous Latin American realities.

Data collection relied on methodological triangulation. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to establish the conceptual, historical, and analytical background related to violence, vulnerability, and local agency in Latin America, engaging with both theoretical and empirical sources. Historical and contextual mapping was further carried out for each site through the analysis of institutional reports, academic studies, and official documents, tracing the broader trajectories that shaped the emergence of these community-driven peace initiatives.

Empirical data for the *Instituto Favela da Paz* case was collected through semi-structured, narrative interviews, primarily with Fábio Miranda, one of the founders and current main coordinator. Data were gathered in two phases: first, through a virtual interview in late 2020, and later, during an in-person visit in late 2024 to the institute's headquarters in *Jardim Ângela*, São Paulo. This field visit enabled direct conversations with all principal coordinators — residents of the neighborhood who also live at the institute. However, the analysis specifically reproduces and interprets the experiences and narrative of Fábio Miranda, as his role is central to the design and ongoing coordination of the project. The interviews were narrative and flexible, inviting reflection on concrete practices as well as on broader community imaginaries and philosophies.

In the case of the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó*, direct interviews proved unfeasible due to contextual constraints. Accordingly, the analysis relied upon a careful reading of published testimonies, documented interviews, self-representations compiled in both academic literature and public media, as well as audiovisual materials. This reliance on secondary, heterogeneous sources was intended to approximate local narratives while acknowledging the difference in data depth compared to the Brazilian case.

Rather than systematically mapping the transnational network, this research focuses on describing the contexts and practices of both case initiatives, while also considering their transnational cooperation in fostering these localized peace actions. Importantly, this approach does not exhaust the diversity of initiatives across Latin America, nor does it capture the full range of actions undertaken in each case. Instead, it seeks to underscore the importance of mapping varied contexts of violence — not necessarily linked to war — and to demonstrate the imperative of incorporating civic participation in peacebuilding processes, thereby highlighting the creativity and agency of communities operating outside state-centered paradigms. Further research could deepen the analysis of transnational dynamics and encompass additional community-led experiences across the region.

3. BETWEEN PEACE AND VIOLENCE: THE LATIN AMERICA PARADOX

Latin America, and South America in particular, have traditionally been characterized within the literature on security and international relations as an anomalous region due to the remarkable endurance of interstate peace across their territories. Despite the persistence of unresolved territorial disputes (e.g., Colombia and Venezuela; Bolivia and Chile; Chile and Peru), South American diplomatic institutions operate within a paradigm of perpetual peace and consistently rely on international law to address interstate disagreements. This prevailing normative consensus among regional states regarding the peaceful resolution of disputes renders the prospect of regional interstate warfare quite unlikely. Geopolitically, the region is thus conceived as a “zone of non-war,” distinguished by its sustained absence of interstate conflict throughout the twentieth century, in stark deviation from global historical patterns (Villa & Pimenta, 2016; Battaglini, 2012).

Notwithstanding this interstate tranquility, the region continues to exhibit consistently elevated homicide rates that, according to United Nations data, approach those observed in active conflict zones (UNODC, 2023). At first glance, this scenario appears to be principally linked to the proliferation of armed violence perpetrated by violent non-state actors, particularly those associated with organized crime and drug

trafficking. Although the region is frequently categorized as a non-war zone, ongoing clashes between state forces and criminal organizations, as well as inter-group rivalries, have significantly contributed to the continent's high levels of violence (Ferreira, 2017). Yet, beyond the conspicuous influence of organized crime — the most visible and impactful vector of violence in the region — there exists a less apparent but equally prominent dimension: the deep-rooted social and political historicity of violence, which is profoundly interwoven with the sociopolitical fabric of Latin American societies.

Crucially, the region's peaceful borders, often celebrated for underpinning interstate stability, paradoxically facilitate not only the legitimate movement of people and goods but also the expansion of transnational illicit flows. As Peter Andreas (2003) argues, the open and demilitarized nature of many Latin American frontiers, rather than containing violent threats, has enabled the flourishing of transnational criminal undertakings, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, arms trading, and terrorism. In this context, borderlands characterized by limited governance capacity and persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities present particularly fertile opportunities for illicit actors adept at exploiting jurisdictional discontinuities as they navigate increasingly intertwined global economies. These factors are critical to understanding the complex interplay between regional peace, interstate cooperation, and the ongoing challenges posed by transnational illicit networks (Kacowicz, Lacovsky & Wajner, 2020).

The region's conflict dynamics, shaped by the interplay of formal and informal elements, demand an approach that moves beyond the simplistic dichotomy of war and peace. While not strictly classified as conventional armed conflicts, many of the region's manifestations of violence are characterized by protracted confrontations between state forces and non-state armed groups, the deployment of military-grade weaponry, the exercise of territorial control, and significant civilian casualties — features typically associated with formal warfare, despite the absence of declared war. Concurrently, these conflicts are embedded in informal patterns of violence, such as gang rivalries, drug trafficking, and pervasive urban insecurity, which frequently elude the parameters of traditional peace and security frameworks.

The field of Critical Peace and Conflict Studies offers essential analytical tools for addressing the limitations of traditional analyses, which have often remained preoccupied with distinguishing between war and non-war scenarios, or formal and informal conflicts. This field emphasizes the integration of three dimensions of violence (direct, structural, and cultural) thereby offering a more holistic understanding of conflict. Despite its significant potential, these conceptual frameworks remain insufficiently incorporated into analyses of the various forms of violence prevalent in Latin American societies (Ferreira, 2022). Within this theoretical framework, violence is conceived as comprising three interrelated dimensions: direct violence, which manifests visibly; structural violence, which encompasses the political, economic, and social arrangements or conditions that systematically position individuals and groups in situations of vulnerability, such as economic asymmetries and social marginalization; and cultural violence, which is comprised of discourses or symbols that legitimize the other forms of violence (Galtung, 1990).

Galtung (1990) conceptualizes these dimensions as the vertices of a triangle, each mutually influencing and reinforcing the others within a continuous cycle of violence. As Ferreira, Maschietto & Kuhlmann (2019) note, "in practice, they complement and coexist with each other, as structural violence often leads to direct violence, and cultural violence constitutes structural violence, and so on" (p. 71). According to Galtung, conflict is a dynamic and interactive process that only reaches its full expression when all three components are concurrently present. He distinguishes between latent conflict, characterized by a conflicting structure absent of visible attitudes or behaviors, and manifest conflict, in which these elements become explicit (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005).

From this perspective, distinct contexts such as Brazil and Colombia are aptly understood as conflict-affected settings. In addition to their prevalent rates of violence and criminality, both countries exemplify the enduring legacy of historical inequalities, as reflected in persistent socioeconomic disparities and racial segregation — clear manifestations of structural violence. These similarities can be traced to colonial processes

that subjected these societies to intensive economic exploitation, notably through the systematic enslavement of Africans and the subjugation of Indigenous populations. Such structural inequalities are, in turn, sustained by a pervasive culture of violence that infuses social and normative relations, and are further aggravated by high levels of instability, which are characteristic of culture violence (Ferreira, 2022).

The traditional public security approach, with its emphasis on militarization, has primarily focused on combating direct violence and the overt manifestations of criminal activity. However, such strategies have proven inadequate in reducing overall levels of violence — even in societies that have ratified peace agreements intended to end protracted civil conflicts, such as Colombia, or in countries historically regarded as democratic and peaceful, such as Brazil. Although military operations against criminal organizations, enhanced border surveillance, and the incarceration of prominent leaders are frequently implemented, new actors rapidly occupy the resultant power vacuums, thereby sustaining illicit activities (Jung & Rudnicki, 2022). To effect meaningful change in conflict-related behaviors, it is crucial to address underlying social injustices and to foster the transformation of attitudes and social relations (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2005). This perspective is increasingly echoed within communities most affected by violence, whose lived experiences and practices point to the relevance of civil society participation in peacebuilding processes — a theme that will be further analyzed in the following sections.

4. COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES IN CONTEXTS OF CRITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AMERICA

Historically, research agendas in International Relations have focused on the role of the state and international organizations in promoting security and peace efforts, operating predominantly within a top-down paradigm, where policies and strategies are formulated and implemented from above (Richmond, 2004). As Ramos (2021) notes, this phase is closely associated with the concept of negative peace, in which peace is understood simply as the absence of war, and the state — embodied by its military and security forces — is positioned as the central actor. Within this framework, peace is maintained through the institutionalization of social control and the legitimization of militarization as a means to secure order, with violence functioning as a tool to suppress disruptions to the prevailing sociopolitical structure.

Since the 1990s, the logic of the international peacebuilding consensus has taken shape, encompassing a set of discourses and practices adopted by a variety of international actors to resolve conflicts peacefully. This consensus is fundamentally based on liberal and democratic peace premises, namely, that economically interdependent liberal democracies do not resort to war, and that, within domestic affairs, these systems possess institutional mechanisms for resolving disputes through peaceful means (Richmond, 2004). Despite this conceptual evolution — such as the inclusion of civil conflicts on the global agenda — the notion of peace remains fundamentally anchored in the State, retaining a legalistic-institutionalist character oriented toward the expansion of the liberal-capitalist system. Although references to the promotion of human rights and socioeconomic development are frequently invoked, these objectives are often subordinated in practice to the consolidation of state authority and the maintenance of an idealized social, political, and economic order (Ramos, 2021).

Some of the most critical perspectives on the liberal peace project argue that it often overlooks deeper understandings of the root causes of conflict, potentially exacerbating economic insecurity and undermining local dynamics (Randazzo, 2016). These top-down narratives produced by national elites, academics, or the media tend to overshadow the local narratives through which people in conflict-affected areas articulate and interpret everyday realities (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). Citizen participation, while nominally included in the liberal peace project, is largely conceived as an endpoint within a top-down framework, rather than as an active, generative force in peacebuilding itself (Ramos, 2021).

Johan Galtung's formulation of Positive Peace in the 1960s (defined as the absence of direct, structural, and cultural violence) represented a pivotal moment in peace studies theory, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between social participation, justice, and collective emancipation (Ramos, 2021). Building on this foundation, recent years have witnessed growing calls for more plural and diverse narratives in peacebuilding, driven by the recognized limitations of traditional top-down approaches to peace. Since the early 2000s, the so-called "local turn" has emerged, influenced by critical and post-structuralist theories and alternative methodologies such as ethnography. By centering local agency and incorporating multiple ontologies of peace arising from within communities, these approaches seek to bridge gaps left by conventional paradigms (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Pearce & Perea, 2019; Randazzo, 2016).

Three interrelated theoretical discourses that have gained prominence alongside increasing calls for the inclusion of civil participation in peace processes are particularly relevant to the analysis presented in this research and the case studies explored below, namely: Imperfect Peace, Transformative Peace, and Peace Formation. The notion of Imperfect Peace reframes peace as a dynamic, negotiated, and continuously evolving process shaped by the active agency of those directly involved, recognizing the coexistence of peace and violence as intrinsic to human interaction. From this perspective, the persistence of violent conflict does not negate the existence of peace or preclude the pursuit of peace-oriented practices (Ramos, 2021). Building upon this understanding, the concept of Transformative Peace underscores the indispensable role of civil actors as agents in the articulation and construction of peace, rather than as passive recipients of state-led interventions (Montañés & Ramos, 2012; Ramos, 2021). Finally, the Peace Formation framework emphasizes that many peacebuilding efforts initiated by local actors frequently emerge outside formal institutional channels, often materializing through informal, infrapolitical practices that circumvent state and official structures (Braga, 2024; Buer, 2024; Richmond, 2013). Collectively, these theoretical lenses serve as crucial analytical frameworks for illuminating the ways in which societies or conflict-affected communities empirically reconfigure their own realities.

Despite the critical role of civil agency in advancing peace, community-based initiatives are often constrained by economic, political, and social forces emanating from their broader environments. In response to these constraints, transnational cooperation among peace actors has emerged as a pivotal strategy for enhancing resilience and reducing dependence on conventional, hierarchical approaches to negotiation (Richmond, 2013). The cases analyzed in this study exemplify these dynamics: both the *Instituto Favela da Paz* and the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó* are situated within international networks, notably through their engagement with Tamera and the Global Campus — an alliance that connects local peacebuilding efforts worldwide and facilitates reciprocal exchange of expertise, financial support, and practical assistance¹.

Accordingly, the following analysis concentrates on the initiatives led by these two communities, illuminating their roles as active architects of peacebuilding through practices firmly grounded in local realities and undertaken outside of state-led institutional channels, while being reinforced by transnational cooperation aimed at fostering autonomy and reducing external dependency — a dynamic that embodies both Transformative Peace and Peace Formation paradigms. These forms of peacebuilding agency, ontologies, and practices do not presuppose the complete eradication of violence as a final state; rather, they often require navigating and managing the persistent coexistence of violence and peace within their respective contexts — thereby also resonating with the concept of Imperfect Peace. Furthermore, despite their location within contrasting socio-territorial contexts (urban conflict zones in Brazil and rural, civil war-affected regions in Colombia) both communities face analogous challenges, particularly those arising from the dynamics of direct, structural, and cultural violence as theorized by Galtung. Simultaneously, they cultivate innovative and synergistic strategies through their participation in intercommunal networks and mechanisms of reciprocal support.

4.1 *Instituto Favela da Paz: Building peace amidst violence in Sao Paulo, Brazil*

Brazil, the largest nation in Latin America, embodies a profound paradox. Despite its limited involvement in international conflicts and the absence of any officially recognized civil war — and frequently regarded, from a traditional perspective, as a pacifist nation — it nonetheless consistently ranks among the world's most violent societies (Ferreira, 2021). This apparent contradiction is largely attributable to the country's elevated rates of homicide and pervasive insecurity, which reflect a complex web of armed violence — arising both from confrontations between the state and organized crime, as well as internecine disputes among criminal factions vying for control over drug trafficking routes and the illicit market at local, regional, and transnational scales (Moura, 2005; Ferreira, 2021). While violence permeates all sectors of society, its consequences are particularly acute for residents of urban peripheries, where these effects are most intensely felt in their daily lives. For these communities, daily existence is often marked by volatile territorial control and recurrent shootouts precipitated by incursions from rival criminal organizations or state security forces (Buer, 2024).

While criminality represents the most visible manifestation of violence in contemporary Brazil, it is best interpreted as an expression of deeper structural dynamics rooted in the nation's historical trajectory. Sérgio Adorno (1996) argues that Brazilian society is characterized by a particular historicity of violence, tracing its origins to the colonial era under Portuguese dominion, when systems of inequality were systematically imposed upon Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. At no point in Brazilian history were civil rights truly internalized as political rights, and throughout the nation's trajectory, all forms of resistance and collective mobilization — whether Indigenous uprisings against colonization or popular revolts during the imperial and republican periods — were met with severe repression² (Adorno, 1996; Ferreira, 2021). This legacy forged a state apparatus profoundly shaped by patrimonialist practices, where public authority was routinely commandeered for private benefit. Patriarchy, authoritarianism, violence, inequality, patrimonialism, and social intolerance are persistent features of Brazil's historical experience, which continue to find significant resonance in the present day (Ferreira & Mascchietto, 2024; Schwarcz, 2019).

Ferreira (2021) further elaborates by emphasizing that the power hierarchies and forms of structural violence entrenched during the colonial period established the foundations for enduring systems of economic and social exclusion — a structure that remains vividly reflected today in the extreme disparities experienced by marginalized groups, particularly Black and Indigenous populations. As Ferreira & Maschietto (2024) point out, this environment fosters the persistence of symbolic violence, which legitimizes and sustains the ongoing victimization of these particular communities. As a result, a vicious cycle develops: direct violence sustains and is sustained by structural violence, while symbolic violence helps to render both forms seem normal or inevitable. Even with meaningful political and social changes over time, the forms of violence established during the colonial era remain deeply embedded in Brazilian society, proving extremely difficult to change through technocratic solutions alone. Notably, recent data reveal the continued impact of these processes: in 2023, 76.97% of homicide victims in Brazil were Black or Brown individuals (IPEA; FBSP, 2024).

Even with the enactment of the 1988 Constitution, which followed two decades of authoritarian rule and marked significant advances in the institutionalization of civil and political rights, the authoritarian legacy has continued to influence Brazil's institutions and societal behavior. Repressive measures have remained internally legitimized as a necessary tool for resolving conflicts and maintaining order. Despite the principles of social justice underpinning the new democratic legal framework, the socioeconomic reality of the period was marked by deepening inequality and a pronounced escalation in homicides and violent crime in Brazil's major urban centers (Souza, 1994). As the Brazilian case suggests, this pattern calls into question the extent to which a functional democratic state can serve as an effective instrument of peace or, at the very least, as a sufficient condition for its attainment (Ferreira & Maschietto, 2024).

The city of São Paulo exemplifies the complex relationship between the state, socioeconomic inequality, violence, and conflict. Throughout the twentieth century, the rapid industrialization of what would become

one of Brazil's most important political and economic centers attracted a massive influx of migrants and rural workers, drawn by the expanding demand for labor in the city's factories (Feltran, 2020). However, this urban expansion was accompanied by spatial segregation, displacing low-income and Black populations to the city's peripheries — such as the district of *Jardim Ângela*, which to this day remains the district with the highest concentration of black and brown residents in São Paulo: a territory marked by pronounced social and spatial segregation (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2023). This area emerged in the 1960s through informal land occupations and self-built housing. Beginning in the 1990s, São Paulo's industrial sector underwent a profound productive reorganization, with many companies relocating their operations to the state's interior (Feltran, 2020).

Parallel to this process of increasing labor precarization, the rise in unemployment and informality converged with the establishment of new drug trafficking routes: cocaine began to arrive through Amazonian corridors, while marijuana was trafficked via Paraguay. Within this context, the urban peripheries became epicenters of a new economic dynamic, where historically marginalized groups — particularly poor and Black populations — began to accumulate wealth through involvement in the illicit drug trade. However, this accumulation came at the cost of a significant surge in violent crime (Feltran, 2020).

In the 1990s — a decade during which the city of São Paulo witnessed a 10.1% increase in violent crimes (Adorno, 1996) — the southern district of *Jardim Ângela* was identified by the United Nations as the most violent place in the world. The area recorded a staggering homicide rate of 116.23 per 100,000 inhabitants, with a large portion of the population living under conditions of extreme social vulnerability (Dimenstein, 2006). This period also saw the emergence of what would become one of the most influential criminal organizations in Latin America: the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC). Founded on August 31, 1993, inside the Taubaté prison in São Paulo, the PCC rapidly secured hegemonic control over the state's prison system and extended its reach into the urban peripheries, ultimately establishing itself as a dominant force in Brazil's main economic and drug consumption centers (Villa, Braga, & Ferreira, 2021).

It was within this context of violence and exclusion that brothers Claudio and Fábio Miranda, both lifelong residents of the area, launched a grassroots movement in the late 1990s to transform their local reality, choosing to remain in the community rather than leave it behind. In 2010, this initiative was formally institutionalized as the *Instituto Favela da Paz* (Favela da Paz Institute – IFP), with the mission of fostering peace through a wide array of projects spanning art, culture, technology, health, sports, sustainability, and education. The institute has since positively affected thousands of local residents. Created and led by community members from *Jardim Ângela*, the IFP stands as a powerful example of the capacity of grassroots organizations to resist, negotiate with, adapt to, and even transform contexts of systemic vulnerability. Since its founding, the Institute has earned recognition for implementing innovative solutions, such as the first biogas system in a Brazilian *favela*. Other notable initiatives include rainwater harvesting, solar energy systems, organic waste biodigesters, food self-sufficiency programs, and community-led peace and justice efforts (Passos & Ferreira, 2023).

The actions undertaken by the *Instituto Favela da Paz* in response to São Paulo's armed violence are notable both for their approach and their impact. In the face of the historical absence of the state in urban peripheries — or, alternatively, a presence frequently perceived as negative —, the Institute addresses the void left by inadequate public policy and infrastructure, crafting a self-sufficient and sustainable reality for local residents. According to co-founder Fábio Miranda, the project offers "*a reality completely different from what the system provides*", a model of self-sufficiency that grants individuals a renewed sense of autonomy and hope by enabling them to generate their own energy, cultivate their own food, and reuse rainwater (Passos & Ferreira, 2023).

Concurrently, the absence of effective public policies and a substantive governmental presence has created a vacuum that has been subsequently occupied not only by local initiatives such as the *Instituto Favela da Paz*, but also by armed groups that provide alternative, informal frameworks of criminal governance, as evidenced by the PCC in São Paulo (Villa et al., 2021). By contrast, community-led efforts play a crucial role in empowering local populations and redefining the social image of the neighborhood. Through music, artistic

and cultural production, and the creation of alternatives to drug trafficking, the Institute strengthens social bonds and cultivates a renewed sense of self-esteem and belonging among residents. This transformation directly challenges dominant narratives that equate favelas with criminality, while simultaneously underscoring the community's ability to generate innovative solutions in adverse conditions.

Brazil is an emblematic case of the three variables that, according to Galtung's typology, constitute a conflict scenario. While the state tends to employ a repressive approach primarily aimed at combating direct violence and criminality, the IFP seeks to address the root causes of violence by offering alternatives that promote both personal and community development. As Fábio Miranda has emphasized in an interview:

"We are not here to fight crime; we are here to create expectation and hope in people. That [combating crime] is the consequence" (Passos & Ferreira, 2023)

In this regard, the IFP differentiates itself from conventional public policies by placing its primary emphasis on the creation of opportunities and the promotion of social justice as fundamental pathways to peace. Miranda conceives the project as an endeavor to construct an alternative reality in which self-sufficiency and sustainability serve as the basis for the emancipation of residents.

Aiming to minimize dependence on the state and its frequently absent or ineffective infrastructure, the *Instituto Favela da Paz* has established transnational partnerships with global peace initiatives such as the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó* in Colombia. These alliances reflect a shared commitment to confronting and overcoming local challenges and vulnerabilities through intercultural collaboration that is designed to cultivate peace—even in the most violent contexts—while sustaining hope and resilience. As Miranda emphasizes,

"This exchange... one experience inspires another and builds [collective] strength" (Passos & Ferreira, 2023)

These networks convene annually to deliberate and share best practices, reinforcing their actions through mutual collaboration (Passos & Ferreira, 2023). The subsequent section is dedicated to an analysis of this other peace initiative.

4.2 *The Comunidad de Paz: Peaceful resistance in San José de Apartadó, Colombia*

To understand the protracted civil conflict in Colombia, which intensified from the 1960s onward, it is essential to situate it within a broader historical tradition of violence that dates back to the colonial period and has continued through various phases of the republic (Safford & Palacios, 2011). Since the beginning of Spanish colonization, Colombian territory has been marked by violent domination, characterized by land expropriation, the exploitation of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, and the imposition of a rigid and exclusionary social hierarchy. This structure of violence was not dismantled with independence in the early 19th century; rather, the break from Spanish rule resulted in new armed confrontations that, while establishing a new political order, maintained the deep roots of structural and cultural violence³ (Palacios, 2006).

After gaining independence, Colombia entered a prolonged period of political instability, characterized by recurrent conflicts between liberal and conservative factions vying for centralized authority and the direction of national modernization. Driven by oligarchic interests, these ideological disputes triggered successive civil wars throughout the 19th century, embedding violence as a structural feature of the country's political landscape (Safford & Palacios, 2011). This legacy of conflict extended into the 20th century, and by the 1960s, in the context of the Cold War, new armed actors emerged. Leftist guerrilla movements such as the FARC, founded in 1964, and the ELN, established in 1965, gained ground by mobilizing around longstanding grievances related to socio-economic inequality and political exclusion. Other insurgent groups soon followed,

including the Maoist-oriented EPL, the urban-based M-19 supported by middle-class intellectuals, and the Indigenous-led Quintín Lame. In response to the growing insurgent threat, right-wing paramilitary forces began to form, most notably with the establishment of MAS (Death to Kidnappers) in 1981 by drug cartels. While claiming to combat guerrillas, these paramilitaries also aimed to displace small landholders and eliminate political dissent in strategically valuable regions (Palacios, 2006; Safford & Palacios, 2011; Skretteberg, 2015).

This escalation of armed conflict was further compounded by widespread disillusionment with the oligarchic bipartisan regime, especially in a society increasingly marked by polarization. In rural areas, intense social tensions prevailed due to land inequality and the marginalization of peasant communities, while in urban centers, rapid population growth, rising poverty, and widespread informality deepened existing disparities. These pressures were exacerbated in the late 1970s with the rise of powerful drug cartels, whose operations — centered around strategic trafficking routes originating in Colombia's coastal regions — quickly became some of the most profitable in Latin America. The influx of drug money fueled corruption and violence, strengthening the financial capacities of both guerrilla and paramilitary groups. As the illicit economy expanded, paramilitary forces proliferated and consolidated alliances with landowning elites, mafia networks, and elements within the military, further entrenching the dynamics of violence and impunity across the country (Skretteberg, 2015).

After several failed attempts, on November 24, 2016, the Final Agreement for the End of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace was signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), establishing six key pillars, including agrarian reform and the creation of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), in order to end hostilities and ensure justice for the victims of the conflict. Almost a decade after the peace agreement, however, there remain territories with limited or no state presence, and high levels of violence continue to be reported, particularly against human rights defenders. At the same time, crucial aspects of the peace process, such as the implementation of agrarian reform and the effective operation of the JEP, have stalled. Promises that the Agreement would address the country's entrenched economic inequalities, widely regarded as a core driver of the conflict, have not been fulfilled, contributing to widespread disillusionment regarding the prospects for achieving sustainable peace (Gordon, Henao, Duque, & Dolan-Evans, 2020).

Despite international recognition (including the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Juan Manuel Santos after the ratification of the peace agreement in 2016) the so-called post-conflict period in Colombia has revealed a series of persistent security dilemmas. In many rural areas, where the presence of the state has historically been minimal, a liminal situation has emerged in which neither war nor peace fully prevails. The demobilization of the FARC, once the country's most powerful guerrilla group, created a power vacuum that allowed for the fragmentation and multiplication of violent actors. Dissident factions of the FARC, remaining guerrilla forces such as the ELN, paramilitary successors, and criminal gangs began to dispute control over strategic territories, particularly coca-producing zones, which rapidly became epicenters of violent confrontation. Simultaneously, the disarmament of the FARC facilitated the expansion of illicit economies, including illegal mining, logging, and land grabbing, further exacerbating land conflicts and increasing the vulnerability of social leaders, human rights defenders, and Indigenous communities (Castillo, 2024; Nilsson & Marín, 2020).

The department of Antioquia, where the municipality of Apartadó is located, exemplifies these post-agreement tensions. Historically, Apartadó served as a refuge for marginalized populations, such as runaway slaves, Indigenous groups displaced following the dissolution of their reserves, and those defeated in civil wars during the 19th century. Officially incorporated only in the late 1960s, Apartadó remained a peripheral and neglected territory for much of the 20th century, characterized by subsistence economies and the enduring absence of state institutions (Restrepo, 2011). Its strategic location and abundant natural resources, however, increasingly attracted the interest of political and economic elites, transforming the region into a contested

zone. Over the decades, campesinos and Indigenous peoples were systematically dispossessed of their lands, often through violent means, to make way for mining operations, agroindustrial plantations, and megadam infrastructure projects.

It was in this context of structural abandonment and intensifying territorial disputes that the Urabá region, including Apartadó, became a stronghold of guerrilla activity. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, groups such as the FARC and ELN operated in the area under the banner of defending peasant struggles. Their growing influence extended into local social movements, which became increasingly infiltrated by insurgent actors. In response, national elites and powerful landowners backed the formation and expansion of paramilitary forces, thereby entrenching a complex web of armed confrontation among multiple factions. These dynamics were particularly violent in Apartadó and surrounding municipalities, which, alongside departments like Arauca, recorded the highest homicide rates in the country between 1980 and 1997, a trend that persisted into the early 21st century (Cubides, 1998, p. 253 apud Restrepo, 2011).

Amid a prolonged cycle of violence and repeated episodes of forced displacement, the peasants of *San José de Apartadó* founded the Peace Community in March 1997 as a form of non-violent civil resistance. Their initiative emerged as a direct response to the failure of all armed actors — both state and non-state — to ensure security or uphold human rights in the region. Since its inception, the community has remained firmly committed to neutrality in the armed conflict, structuring its collective life around fifteen principles of coexistence. These include a refusal to participate in war, non-collaboration with any armed group, the rejection of illicit crop cultivation, and a commitment to values such as diversity, solidarity, transparent dialogue, freedom, justice, and community-based alternatives.

Comprising over a thousand peasants from different villages in the *Apartadó* region, the Peace Community has become a powerful symbol of grassroots resistance in the midst of Colombia's internal conflict. However, its stance of neutrality and autonomy has also made it a target of ongoing violence perpetrated by guerrilla forces, paramilitary groups, and state security agents. Over the years, more than 200 of its members, including many prominent leaders, have been assassinated. The threat has intensified in recent years with the expansion of the *Clan del Golfo*, also known as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), a group that emerged after the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Now considered one of the country's most powerful criminal organizations — particularly active in rural areas like Urabá — the AGC employs tactics such as killings, forced displacements, land grabs, and the predatory exploitation of natural resources to assert control. Despite their paramilitary nature, these groups are officially classified by the Colombian government and armed forces as ordinary criminal gangs (*bandas criminales*, or bacrim) (Nilsson & Marín, 2020).

Through a community-centered approach, the Peace Community has focused its efforts on overcoming the social divisions created by war. These initiatives aim to foster a culture of peace that transcends violence by prioritizing collective healing through empathy and forgiveness. The underlying logic is to break the cycle of violence that perpetuates trauma and suffering. As community leader Eduar Lanchero poignantly noted⁴.

“The armed groups are not the only ones who kill. It's the logic behind the entire system. The way people live generates this kind of death. That is why we decided to live in such a way that our lives would generate life. One essential condition that kept us alive was not participating in the game of fear imposed on us by the armed forces' assassins. We made our choice. We chose life. Life corrects and teaches us” (Restrepo, 2011)

The peaceful resistance of the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó*, situated within Colombia's protracted conflict, exemplifies a grassroots struggle for sustainable peace in a region long marked by social exclusion and state absence. Located in a territory characterized by high mobility and a fragile national identity, Apartadó has long witnessed the systematic repression of social mobilizations by various armed actors, exposing the state's complicity in a scenario of chronic violence (Restrepo, 2011). Despite these

adversities, the community remains steadfastly committed to peace, grounding its resistance in unity and grassroots organization.

This community-based initiative reflects an empirical understanding of what it means to transform conflict; recognizing that, without eradicating deep-rooted social contradictions and replacing a culture of violence into a culture of peace, meaningful change in conflict behavior is unlikely. While the *Comunidad de Paz* is engaged in the construction of positive peace, the Colombian government continues to lack the sensitivity and political will to enact substantive change. This underscores the limitations of formal peace agreements, however significant they may be, in restoring a social fabric deeply fractured by war.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to demonstrate that, although Latin America is often perceived as a “zone of non-war”, the region’s persistent and multifaceted patterns of violence fundamentally contradict this oversimplified view. With homicide rates that rival those of active war zones, the prevalence of violence across the continent cannot be attributed exclusively to violent non-state actors and organized crime, nor can it be adequately captured through simplistic binary distinctions between war and peace. Instead, these dynamics reflect a deeply rooted socio-political history of violence shaped by chronic social exclusion, pervasive economic marginalization, the enduring legacies of brutal colonization, and persistent institutional fragility. These structural conditions have produced states that continue to grapple with the effective integration of their populations and the realization of civil rights, thereby perpetuating environments where both persistent and emergent forms of violence flourish. In this context, Galtung’s typology of violence provides a comprehensive and nuanced analytical lens that facilitates the integration of diverse conflict scenarios — ranging from urban violence in Brazil to rural civil conflict in Colombia — within a unified theoretical framework.

The enduring cycle of violence in Latin America underscores the imperative for reimagining frameworks of peace. In light of the limitations of the regional peace and security agenda, which has traditionally adopted a top-down orientation, this study has sought to reconceptualize peacebuilding in Latin America through a bottom-up perspective, incorporating the narratives of communities directly affected by conflict. It examined how the *Instituto Favela da Paz* and the *Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó* have adapted to, navigated, and, to some extent, transformed their respective historically vulnerable realities. The analysis revealed that both communities confront a continuum of violence — comprising direct, structural, and cultural dimensions as delineated in Galtung’s triadic model. In response to the intersecting challenges of state inaction and armed violence, these communities have devised self-governance strategies rooted in nonviolent resistance and the sustained cultivation of a culture of peace, while also engaging in transnational cooperation to decrease reliance on conventional top-down negotiations and strengthen their collective agency. In contexts characterized by historical patterns of state neglect, repression, or harm — where such local perspectives have seldom, if ever, been genuinely integrated into peacebuilding efforts (if these can indeed be called ‘peacebuilding efforts,’ given their predominant focus on control and criminalization rather than on inclusion or the reconstruction of contexts devastated by multifaceted violence) — it is striking to observe how these actors, through creative grassroots practices and lived experience, persist in constructing and pursuing peace. In sum, these transformative processes unfold not in partnership with the state, but rather in spite of it—or at its very margins.

Incorporating the lived experiences and voices of those who persistently confront violence is imperative to disrupting the cycles of instability and inequality that afflict the region. Only through the critical recognition of local agency and context-specific constraints can more realistic and enduring strategies be devised to address the intricate challenges of peace and conflict in Latin America.

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Notes

- [1] The Global Campus is an international network of educational and peace-building projects initiated between 2004 and 2008 by Sabine Lichtenfels and Benjamin von Mendelssohn. Officially established in 2006 during a meeting at Tamera (Portugal), it brings together diverse initiatives across the world— such as in Brazil, Colombia, Kenya, Mexico, and Israel-Palestine — united by shared ethical values and a commitment to fostering a new culture of peace through decentralized learning and trust-based cooperation (Tamera, 2020).
- [2] Since colonial times, violence has been employed as a tool of control and repression in Brazil. Notable examples include the Confederação dos Tamoios (1556–1567), brutally repressed by colonial forces; the Revolta de Vila Rica (1720), sparked by dissatisfaction over gold exploitation in Minas Gerais; the Confederação do Equador (1824), a separatist movement in Pernambuco violently crushed by the imperial army; and the Guerra de Canudos (1896–1897), during the Republic, when state forces used extreme violence to annihilate a community opposing the established order. These episodes, among many others, have contributed to a political culture in which violence is often a common response to demands for rights and social organization (Ferreira, 2021).
- [3] The break from Spanish rule during Colombia's independence process triggered armed confrontations, including the Battles of Boyacá and Carabobo. The 19th century was a period of near-continuous civil war, exemplified by the "War of the Supremes" (1839–1842) and the "Colombian Civil War" (1851–1854), which reflected persistent power struggles between regional and national elites, often in disagreement over centralization and the distribution of resources. This cycle of violence escalated with the "Thousand Days' War" (1899–1902), one of Colombia's most devastating conflicts, which left widespread destruction, weakened the state, and solidified a tradition of resolving conflict through violence. The period known as La Violencia (1946–1964), marked by a bloody confrontation between Liberals and Conservatives, involved broad social participation and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths (Safford & Palacios, 2011).
- [4] Testimonies from leaders of the Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó referenced in this text were drawn from interviews conducted by Gloria Restrepo, as presented in her article on the production of memory in two municipalities in Antioquia that have shown alarming indicators of violence since the 1980s. For a more detailed analysis, see: Restrepo, G. (2011). Memoria e historia de la violencia en San Carlos y Apartadó. *Universidad Humanística*, (72), 157–188.

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