Conflict Sensitivity Analysis in Ecuador

November 2024

In 2024, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted a study to identify protection risks amid the current rise in violence in Ecuador and potential humanitarian interventions. The qualitative methodology integrated the construction of a timeline and a conflict sensitivity analysis with primary and secondary sources. Focus groups were held with community leaders and representatives from social organizations in six provinces (Carchi, Manabí, Esmeraldas, Pichincha, Guayas, and El Oro) and interviews of civil society actors, academics, and government entities. The study identified local tensions, risk factors, social connectors, coping measures employed within the communities, and strategies and actions that foster peacebuilding and social cohesion in response to the prevailing context, grounded in gender-sensitive approaches, human rights, and actions that do not harm.

Violence in Ecuador has escalated significantly since 2021. In January 2024, the Government declared an internal armed conflict, triggering a complex interaction of structural, economic, and social factors.

IRC's Conflict Sensitivity Analysis, developed with the support of its partners, reveals a dynamic evolution of violence, with regional particularities, presenting new challenges for public, private, and civil society actors.

Context

Ecuador was the most violent country in Latin America and one of the most violent globally in 2023, reporting 8,004 violent deaths (47.25 homicides per hundred thousand inhabitants). The escalating violence in the country is closely linked to organized crime, with drug trafficking being its primary manifestation. Drug trafficking has also fueled related crimes, such as arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, and illegal mining.[i]

Ecuador is witnessing a deterioration of the social fabric, characterized by fear and mistrust among communities, complaints regarding the actions of state institutions, the normalization of narcoculture, and the pervasive violence instigated by the activities of Organized Crime Groups (OCGs).

Effects which have become more visible in the country

The escalation of violence in the country, the breakdown of the social fabric as a result of violence, the limitations of the state and persistent inequalities added to preexisting gaps in the provision of essential services and guarantee of rights in some of the territories of Ecuador, increasing protection

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risks, especially for the most vulnerable populations, including women, children and adolescents (NNAs), LGTBIQ+ population, population in human mobility and ethnic communities.

Among the effects identified, the following stand out:

- **Erosion of social cohesion**
  This is evident in various aspects of daily life, such as the widespread distrust towards institutions and neighbors, manifested in the decrease in participation in community activities, the rise in neighborhood surveillance, and increased protection risks for the population, including virtual protection risks. Additionally, phenomena such as the normalization of violence and the polarization of opinions regarding security and justice reflect a profound social division. This fragmentation of the social fabric is exacerbated in areas with a higher presence of organized criminal groups, where there is insufficient attention to the structural causes of violence, leading to a perception of distrust towards government institutions among communities.

- **Reduced livelihoods opportunities**
  The escalation of violence in Ecuador has exacerbated the economic crisis, significantly affecting the livelihoods of the population. Rising extortion, robbery, and kidnapping have forced some companies and small businesses to close, resulting in increased unemployment, job insecurity, and internal displacement. This insecurity has created a climate of fear that has deterred investment and limited entrepreneurial opportunities.

- **Increase in internal and external population flows**
  This is evident in a significant rise in migratory flows, both internal and external. Ecuadorians, along with individuals from other nationalities, have been forced to leave their homes in search of safety due to extortion, homicides, and a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity. Nearly 80,747 people have been displaced as a result of armed violence, in pursuit of better security conditions. This situation has resulted in large-scale forced displacement, with individuals seeking refuge in other regions of the country or being compelled to undertake perilous migratory journeys to destinations like the United States. Such actions have become a desperate response to the lack of opportunities and the persistent threat to life.

- **Recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents**
  The normalization of violence, poverty, and lack of opportunities has exposed children and adolescents to greater risk. The growing presence of armed actors in schools and communities has generated a climate of fear and coercion, facilitating recruitment, which is exacerbated by the absence of opportunities and the need for security within these communities. This phenomenon affects the physical and psychological development of children and adolescents, increasing their vulnerability to situations such as drug trafficking, contract killings, and sexual exploitation.

- **Trafficking in persons**
  Human trafficking continues to rise in Ecuador, with victims, predominantly young women, being exploited in various illicit activities through deception, coercion, and threats. The country has become a source, transit point, and destination for trafficking, with criminal networks operating both nationally and internationally. Certain groups, such as individuals in human mobility, children and adolescents, and the LGBTQ+ community, are particularly vulnerable to this risk, which is exacerbated in virtual environments. Trafficking remains a persistent issue that demands a comprehensive and coordinated response at both national and international levels.

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- **Increase in violence and mental health problems**
  The impact on the mental health of the population in Ecuador's current scenario is significant, and it is clear that gender-based violence, racism, and xenophobia have intensified, exacerbating social inequalities and creating a climate of fear and insecurity. The normalization of violence, both in public and private spheres, has resulted in an increase in cases of depression, anxiety, and suicide, particularly among young people. Limited access to mental health services and the stigma surrounding mental health further complicate the situation. There is an urgent need to implement measures to address the structural causes of violence and strengthen social protection and mental health systems.

- **Increased risks for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) implementing in territories**
  CSOs in Ecuador confront an increasingly complex and perilous situation stemming from heightened violence, marked by extortion and direct threats, which has curtailed their ability to conduct activities in the affected areas. Community leaders and field workers find themselves in a precarious predicament, facing constant dangers that jeopardize their physical and emotional well-being. Despite their dedication to the communities, many CSOs are compelled to scale back or suspend their projects due to insecurity.

  The presence of GDO has caused a rupture in the social fabric and imposed limitations on access and transit in certain territories, rendering CSO interventions in the most vulnerable communities increasingly difficult. To operate in these contexts, organizations must build trust with community leaders and adapt to local dynamics, which carries significant risks. This situation directly impacts the ability of CSOs to provide humanitarian assistance, strengthen the social fabric, and foster community development. Urgent measures must be implemented to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers and enhance the capacity of CSOs to function in complex and challenging environments.

- **Strengthening of state service delivery systems**
  Government institutions, at both central and local levels, play a crucial role in fostering peace and promoting resilience in communities affected by escalating violence. To achieve this, it is essential to strengthen state institutions and improve the provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, education, and health. Education, in particular, stands out as a key factor in the development of protective elements and social cohesion, with schools in several areas continuing to serve as safe and protective spaces. In addition to enhancing basic services, it is vital to tackle the structural causes of conflict. This involves bolstering the rule of law and institutions, as well as promoting economic and social development. Initiatives like fostering entrepreneurship and creating employment opportunities can aid in reducing violence and enhancing social cohesion. Coordination among various levels of government and the active participation of communities are critical for the success of these initiatives.

Coping mechanisms and connecting factors

The information gathered from focus groups and interviews within the communities identified coping strategies designed to strengthen the social fabric. These strategies included *mingas*, the maintenance of organized community structures, the promotion of neighborhood and improvement committees, as well as water committees and other forms of local organization. Additionally, schools were recognized as a gathering place that provides protection for children and adolescents.

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Recommendations to address the effects associated with the escalation of violence in the country

Interventions developed to address the conflict must articulate the principles of humanitarian action, development, and peace with a Do No Harm approach. Actions should be directed towards:

- Strengthening the social and community fabric to enable communities to build resilience in times of crisis, mitigate risk processes, enhance trust-building, and consolidate protective spaces:

  To strengthen the social and community fabric, IRC recommends implementing various strategies to promote peaceful coexistence and resilience. These include community mediation programs that promote dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution. We also recommend community activities such as fairs, festivals, and sporting events, which strengthen social and cultural ties. Finally, psychological support networks that assist victims of violence, providing them with safe spaces to share their experiences and receive the necessary support are also critical.

- Building the capacity and strengthening institutions and the rule of law, to enhance confidence in institutions and promote the development and implementation of public policies that address the structural factors of the conflict and the needs of victims:

  To strengthen institutions and the rule of law, the IRC proposes to train public officials in conflict resolution, human rights, and gender to improve attention to victims and prevent violence. The proposal also seeks to strengthen citizen participation through mechanisms such as consultative councils and neighborhood councils, thus guaranteeing greater community representation in decision-making. Finally, we propose to develop communication campaigns to raise awareness on the importance of the rule of law and violence prevention.

- Fostering protective factors that promote the development of positive life plans for children and adolescents, transform gender inequalities, provide better opportunities for social mobility, and promote inclusion and peaceful conflict resolution:

  To foster protective factors IRC recommends implementing peace education programs in schools, which promote values such as respect and tolerance. Furthermore, we recommend the creation of safe spaces for adolescents where they can develop social and emotional skills and the development of livelihood programs that generate income and employment opportunities, particularly for young people and women.

- Strengthening the actions of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), emphasizing peacebuilding, humanitarian principles, and do no harm.

  The IRC proposes initiatives that allow for experience exchange among organizations and the creation of financing mechanisms to support community-led peace-building projects. Strengthening the capacities of CSOs in monitoring and evaluation and the Do No Harm approach, supporting CSOs to improve security protocols, among other strategies, is essential to guaranteeing the effectiveness of their interventions.

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Sources:

[i] Ecuadorian Observatory of Organized Crime (OECO), 2024. Report El Paraíso Perdido? Firearms Trafficking and Violence in Ecuador. http://surl.li/kzytgw

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FULL DOCUMENT

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November 2024

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Acronyms

- CDF - Frontier Commandoes
- ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross
- CRS - Social Rehabilitation Center
- CJNG - Jalisco Cartel - New Generation
- DMG - Metropolitan District of Guayaquil
- DMQ - Metropolitan District of Quito
- FARC - Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
- FFAA - Armed Forces
- FOS - Oliver Sinisterra Front
- FUR - Urias Rondon Front
- GAD - Decentralized Autonomous Government
- GDO - Organized Crime Groups
- HCCI - Community Home for Child Care
- IRC - International Rescue Committee
- MDI - Ministry of the Interior
- MCDS - Coordinating Ministry of Social Development
- MCS - Coordinating Ministry of Security
- MJDHC - Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Worship
- MMDH- Ministry of Women's Affairs and Human Rights
- MIES - Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion
- MINEDUC - Ministry of Education
- MSP - Ministry of Public Health
- NNA - Children and adolescents
- CBOs - Community Based Organizations
- OECO - Ecuadorian Observatory on Organized Crime
- NGOs - Non-Governmental Organizations
- UN - United Nations
- CSO - Civil Society Organizations
- PN - National Police
- PPL - Persons Deprived of Liberty
- SCO - Organized Civil Society
- SENPLADES - National Secretariat of Planning and Development
- SETED - Technical Secretariat on Drugs
- SNAI - Servicio Nacional de Atención Integral a Personas Adultas Privadas de la Libertad y a Adolescentes Infractores (National Service for the Integral Care of Adults Deprived of their Liberty and Adolescent Offenders)
- UPC - Community Police Unit

Presentation

Since 1933, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has endeavoured to assist individuals affected by humanitarian crises to survive, recover, and rebuild their lives. Over the years, we have broadened our mission to over forty countries, delivering essential health, education, and empowerment services. We place particular emphasis on safeguarding women and girls from the inequalities they encounter.

In the past year, IRC, along with our partners, has reached over 31.5 million people affected by conflicts and disasters, providing vital support during crises. Latin America, in particular, has been a key focus of our operations, where we have addressed urgent humanitarian needs arising from forced migration and conflict in the region. From assisting Venezuelans in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, to supporting at-risk communities in Central America and along Mexico's migration corridors, our work aims to alleviate suffering and build resilience.

Ecuador has seen a significant rise in violence in recent years, altering the local context and creating new challenges, particularly for the most vulnerable groups: women, children, adolescents, the LGTBIQ+ community, individuals in mobility, and ethnic communities. In response to this new reality, IRC in Ecuador has developed a Conflict Sensitivity Analysis, utilising global methodologies tailored to the local context to comprehend the causes, triggers, and effects of violence in the country.

Based on the results of the study, it is imperative that the intervention strategies of civil society organisations (CSOs), both national and international, along with public and private entities, be oriented towards the protection of the most vulnerable populations, as well as the strengthening of the social fabric of communities affected by violence and organised crime. It is essential to leverage cultural and ethnic strengths and the presence of the State to work within an articulated network, incorporating those connecting elements specific to each region, to address the complexity of the problem.

This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive view of emerging risks and how they impact the territories where the IRC has a presence. Proposals are made to address these risks in a systemic and coordinated manner, collaborating with governmental actors, international and local organisations, academia, and the private sector. Through this analysis, the IRC reaffirms its commitment to protecting vulnerable communities and contributing to the development of sustainable solutions for a safer and fairer Ecuador.

1. Introduction

The increase in violence in Ecuador is a complex phenomenon that responds to diverse structural, cultural, economic, and social causes and affects territories in a differentiated manner. The Conflict Sensitivity Analysis conducted by IRC highlights the evolution of violence in the country, focusing on understanding its causes, triggers, and effects in the current context. This analysis aims to provide information that facilitates understanding of the situation in Ecuador and highlight lessons learned that can improve the interventions of the programs implemented by IRC and its partners.

This study has been developed through the adaptation of the Conflict Sensitivity Methodology, applied by IRC in fragile contexts, which incorporates the perspective of action without harm and cross-cutting gender and rights approaches. This allows for the identification and systemic addressing of the associated risks, paying special attention to the most vulnerable populations, including children, adolescents, women, people in conditions of human mobility, ethnic communities, and the LGTBIQ+ population.

The methodological process consisted of an exhaustive review of secondary sources, complemented by four focus groups with technical teams of social organizations and community leaders from Carchi, Manabí, Esmeraldas, Pichincha, Guayas and El Oro, as well as eight semi-structured interviews with key civil society actors, academic experts and representatives of government entities at the central government level.

The document is structured in six sections. The first section briefly describes the methodology used by the study. The second section presents an analysis of the escalation of violence in Ecuador, exploring historical milestones that have marked changes in its nature, the actors involved and the dynamics in the country's different regions. The third section addresses the effects of violence, highlighting its impact on the most vulnerable populations. The fourth section proposes strategies for coping with the risks identified at multiple levels, focusing on strengthening protective factors. The fifth section details specific recommendations and actions that IRC and its local partners propose to address the conflict's immediate consequences and its underlying causes.

The last section offers conclusions that contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon and suggest future research lines to be developed.

In the framework of the partnership and collaboration in Ecuador between IRC and the organizations Centro de Desarrollo y Autogestión (DYA), Fundación Alas de Colibrí (ACF) and Fundación Lunita Lunera (Fululu), we express our most sincere **gratitude for their valuable contribution in conducting the Conflict Sensitivity Analysis 2024.**

Finally, we would like to thank all the people who participated in the focus groups and the key actors who shared their experiences and perspectives through the interviews. Their participation was fundamental to identifying risks, tensions, and opportunities that will allow us to promote social cohesion and peacebuilding in Ecuador's current complex context.

This joint effort not only enriches our understanding of our environment but also establishes a clear path toward implementing inclusive and sustainable strategies. These strategies seek to address the most pressing needs of vulnerable communities and strengthen the bonds of cooperation that make a positive and lasting impact possible. Their commitment and openness inspire us to continue working in alliances, and we are convinced that real change is built with everyone's contribution.

2. Methodology

In the current Ecuadorian context, it is essential to use tools, approaches and analytical frameworks that are gender-sensitive, based on a human rights perspective and built on the premise of action without harm. Conflict sensitivity analysis offers the possibility of ensuring that the activities and actions developed do not increase existing tensions and, on the contrary, contribute to peace and social cohesion by enhancing connectors and decreasing the possibility of the emergence of divisive factors or directly addressing key drivers of conflict.

For this analysis, the IRC technical team adapted its own Conflict Sensitivity Analysis and Action without Harm methodologies. Primary information was collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews in Carchi, Manabí, Esmeraldas, Pichincha, Guayas and El Oro. This primary information was complemented by an extensive documentary review obtained from official documents, newspaper articles, and research from national and international sources.

During the first quarter of 2024, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of academia, public entities and civil society organizations to identify the conflicts faced by the population in the territory, its main actors, milestones, causes, risk and protective factors, as well as possible solutions proposed by the participants.

In addition, four focus groups were conducted with the participation of twenty-eight people. These groups were composed of community leaders and representatives of partner organizations in the IRC intervention territories. This space allowed us to characterize the tensions and escalation of violence at the geographic level, identify coping measures that the community and CSO actors implement in their territories, as well as the connecting and dividing factors that are recognized in the communities.

As part of the methodological process, a timeline was developed that accounts for the structural, historical and systemic nature of the current escalation of violence in Ecuador. The timeframe analysis considers the period between 2016 and the declaration of internal armed conflict in Ecuador in January 2024.

The information gathered from primary and secondary sources, and the study results were presented and validated in a national workshop organized by IRC and its partner organizations in Ecuador. In this space, the findings, existing risks, and possible alternatives and recommendations for the humanitarian sector to address them were discussed.

3. Conflict Analysis

"(...) What do we say about the boys and girls, who were 9 years ago and today are our adolescents who are stigmatized as the bad ones, those who do not know what to do, those who go around living to die, those who make up the gangs those were our children 8 years ago, who were left with a crisis, an earthquake, a war, especially in Jama and Pedernales, and that no one took care of them and their emotions, and that we have today? Those children without north and without south."

Women, Health and Protection Technique, Focus Group Manabi, January 31, 2024

3.1. Context

On January 9, 2024, the Government of Ecuador declared, using Executive Decree No. 111, the existence of an "internal armed conflict" after an escalation of violence in the most important Penitentiary Centers, several explosive attacks in the country, and the irruption of Organized Crime Groups (GDO) in a television channel.

These events, together with the increase in intentional deaths and crimes linked to the presence of OCGs, created a scenario of generalized violence and a security crisis. In this context, it became necessary to study the causes and effects of violence to adapt strategies and interventions from a humanitarian perspective, which are reflected in this analysis.
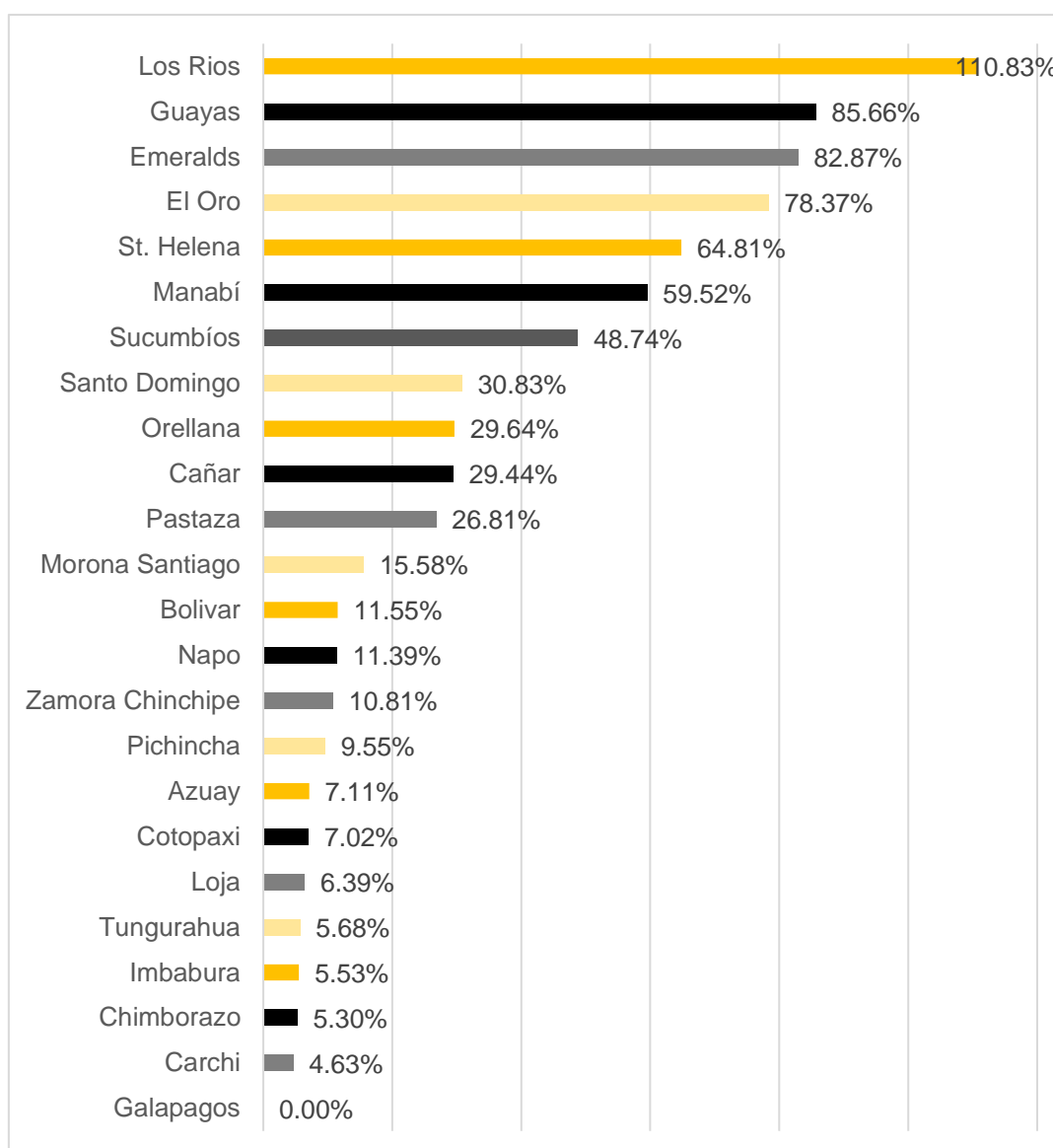
The increase in violence in Ecuador has particular characteristics in each territory and is a multifactorial phenomenon that varies in its complexity and response approach. The escalation of violence and the declared conflict is closely related to organized crime, the main manifestation of which is drug trafficking. Drug trafficking has fueled other related crimes, such as illegal arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion and illegal mining (OECS, 2023; OECS, 2024). It is estimated that illicit economies generate more than US$10 billion annually for these criminal groups, which contrasts with the multidimensional poverty situation of the population in Ecuador, which reaches 37.3% at the national level, 23.0% in urban areas and 67.9% in the rural sector (ENEMDU, 2024).

The OCGs in Ecuador are one of the most visible actors in the conflict, both because of their presence in the territory and the control they exercise over it, as well as their links to illicit economies and other criminal activities; their ability to adapt and expand their operations both inside and outside the prison system (National Police of Ecuador, 2022). The OCGs in Ecuador show relationships with international, European, Asian and Mexican mafias and cartels, as well as with Colombian armed groups, mainly FARC dissidents, related to drug, arms and supply trafficking (Austin & Shuldiner, 2024).

In 2023, Ecuador was recognised as the most violent country in Latin America and one of the most violent in the world (InSight Crime, 2024), reporting 8,004 violent deaths, which indicates an increase of 574.30% compared to 2019. This translates to a national rate of 47.25 homicides per one hundred thousand inhabitants (OECS, 2024).

Graph 1. Homicide Rate 2023

Province	Rate
Los Rios	110.83%
Guayas	85.66%
Emeralds	82.87%
El Oro	78.37%
St. Helena	64.81%
Manabí	59.52%
Sucumbíos	48.74%
Santo Domingo	30.83%
Orellana	29.64%
Cañar	29.44%
Pastaza	26.81%
Morona Santiago	15.58%
Bolivar	11.55%
Napo	11.39%
Zamora Chinchipe	10.81%
Pichincha	9.55%
Azuay	7.11%
Cotopaxi	7.02%
Loja	6.39%
Tungurahua	5.68%
Imbabura	5.53%
Chimborazo	5.30%
Carchi	4.63%
Galapagos	0.00%

Source: OECS, 2024. Prepared by: Authors

As previously mentioned, the reality of the conflict is represented in a nuanced way across the territories, addressing the specificities of geographic location, local vulnerabilities, structural inequalities, and the economic dynamics of the region.

The number of homicides serves as a clear indicator of the scale of the current security crisis, which significantly impacts several provinces in the country. The provinces in the coastal region have a homicide rate exceeding 50 per thousand inhabitants (OECS, 2024). Provinces such as Guayas, Manabí, Santo Domingo, and El Oro have established themselves as focal points for drug trafficking and the illegal arms trade, with the ports of Guayaquil and Manta being exploited by transnational criminal organisations to transport illicit substances abroad (Bargent, 2019; APGRE-IRC, 2023).

This has led to a rise in crime and homicide rates in cities such as Guayaquil, Durán, and Samborondón, which account for 35.06% of all homicides in the country and have

become epicentres of drug-related violence (OECS, 2024). In these cities, a significant portion of the OCGs involved in illicit activities—including drug trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, contract killings, and robberies—converge (Policía Nacional, 2024; Dalby, 2024) Along the same lines, the province of Los Ríos has been transformed into an essential logistical node for the storage and transportation of drugs, which has increased violence and homicide rates in cities that previously did not experience these levels of crime (Bargent, 2019; García, 2024).

For example, the province of Los Ríos experienced a violent death rate increase from 46.29% per hundred thousand inhabitants in 2022 to 110.83% in 2023. In Guayas, there were 2,033 homicides in 2022, escalating to 3,672 by 2023 (OECS, 2024). The northern border provinces, such as Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos, are particularly affected by drug trafficking and smuggling due to their proximity to Colombia and the activities of dissident armed groups from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), including the Oliver Sinisterra Front (FOS) and the Urias Rondon Front (FUR), along with the GDO and drug trafficking cartels (Austin & Shuldiner, 2024).

These provinces have become crucial corridors for drug and arms trafficking to the interior of the country and international markets, leading to an escalation of violence and increased insecurity in these regions, eroding the social fabric of the communities (Proaño 2022).In the Amazon and Sierra regions, illegal mining has become one of the main activities that fragments the social fabric and is linked to the illicit economies generated by organized crime groups.

3.2. Timeline

Ecuador's history has been marked by structural processes and contextual milestones of a political, economic and social nature that provide inputs to explain the recent escalation of violence. Recent studies point to a dual causal relationship between poverty, inequality, criminality and violence, where these factors feedback and aggravate each other (Madrueño, 2016; UNDP, 2021; Jaramillo, 2024; Pozo, 2024).

Although poverty and inequality are not direct causes of crime and violence, their interaction with other factors, such as lack of access to opportunities and institutional weaknesses, significantly increases the likelihood of these issues flourishing. In turn, criminality and violence create a vicious cycle that obstructs poverty reduction and perpetuates inequality, hindering progress and social welfare (Madrueño, 2016; UNDP, 2021; Jaramillo, 2024; Pozo, 2024).

Although the study acknowledges the structural and contextual conditions that may have contributed to the escalation of violence prior to the analysed period, it concentrates on the timeframe from 2016 to January 2024 for methodological reasons. During this period, we explored the events that led to the rise in violence and criminality over the last decade, which are significant drivers of the current situation in Ecuador.

The definition of the specified period is based on two key events. Firstly, the earthquake in April 2016, which exacerbated the already existing inequalities in the provinces of Esmeraldas and Manabí, exposing the population to greater risks of social exclusion and violence. This event resulted in a total of 676 fatalities, 6,274 injuries, and 80,000 people
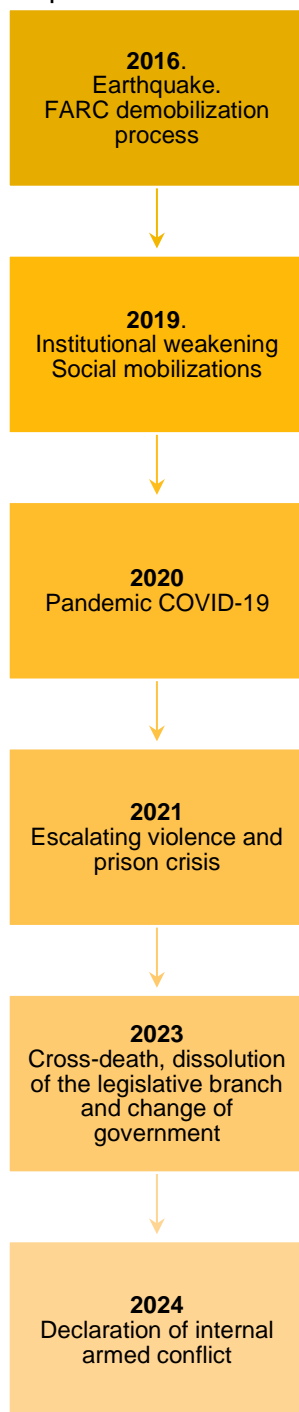
displaced (World Bank, 2021). The Ecuadorian State estimated the cost of reconstruction at over US$3.3 billion, while losses in financial flows amounted to more than US$500 million (Senplades, 2016; World Bank, 2021). This heightened the vulnerability of these regions, facilitating the proliferation of illicit activities and increased insecurity.

Secondly, the demobilisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), following the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC in 2016, resulted in a power vacuum on Ecuador's northern border that was quickly exploited by dissidents and other armed groups, who discovered the country to be a fertile ground for their illegal operations (Miranda, 2018).

The impact of these two events not only affected the areas directly involved but also had repercussions at the national level. Several structural factors converged within the national territory, where the social and economic effects of both phenomena, compounded by poverty and inequality as well as pre-existing criminality and the lack of effective mechanisms for reconstruction and recovery, facilitated the expansion of criminal networks, particularly in sectors linked to drug trafficking and smuggling. The situation of vulnerability fostered the entrenchment of illicit activities that progressively spread to other regions of the country, thereby increasing levels of violence and criminality throughout the territory.

The period between 2016 and 2024 reflects the intensification of a cycle of violence that responds to both local factors and international dynamics. During this time, Ecuador experienced a deterioration in its socioeconomic conditions, evident in the fluctuations of the multidimensional poverty rate, which stood at 59.9% in December 2016, peaked at 71.1% in 2019, and decreased to 67.9% by December 2023 (ENEMDU, 2024).

It is important to note that this analysis does not attempt to disconnect the recent events of the increase in violence and crime experienced in recent years from the possible historical causes but rather seeks to highlight how structural and contextual factors interact and intensify at critical moments.

2016. Earthquake. FARC demobilization process
↓
2019. Institutional weakening Social mobilizations
↓
2020 Pandemic COVID-19
↓
2021 Escalating violence and prison crisis
↓
2023 Cross-death, dissolution of the legislative branch and change of government
↓
2024 Declaration of internal armed conflict

Understanding the complexity of the phenomenon is fundamental to designing policies and interventions that address both the immediate and underlying causes of the increase in violence in Ecuador, which require comprehensive and multisectoral attention to restore peace and promote justice and social cohesion in the country

The following are the main milestones identified by the participants in constructing the timeline for this study.

Milestone 1. Political and social changes

The recent increase in violence and criminality in Ecuador has a multi-causal origin. Since the late 1990s, along with the influence of the Colombian conflict, two key events have marked the current situation, as already mentioned; on the one hand, the 2016 Earthquake, which affected Manabí and Esmeraldas, leaving after-effects that still persist, such as limitations in access to basic services, limited recovery of livelihoods in the area. On the other hand, the demobilization of the FARC increased violence on the northern border and, in the face of this, there are still great challenges for the country.

Starting in 2017, the economic crisis and the boom in violence linked to organized crime intensified simultaneously as austerity policies in response to the local and regional economic crisis; in this sense, the budget for state security forces was reduced, weakening their capacity for action.

In 2019, the measures were reflected in the weakening of some state institutions, with the disappearance of key Ministries for the development of social policy -such as the Coordinating Ministry of Social Development (MCDS) and Technical Secretariat on Drugs (SETED)-, and in the area of security -the Coordinating Ministry of Security (MCS) and the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Cults (MJDHC)-, with their competencies being assumed by other State portfolios, within the framework of a plan of austerity of the public sector that limited the capacities of prevention and response in the territory. Additionally, in 2019, a significant national mobilization was mainly in response to the government's economic measures, destabilising Ecuador's social and political landscape.

In 2020, socio-political and health measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic deepened inequalities, especially in vulnerable territories affected by previous phenomena.

By 2021, the Ministry of the Interior was reestablished as responsible for internal security, and in 2023, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights was created; however, there are still difficulties in addressing the phenomenon due to its complexity and new dynamics.

In 2022, the economic and social crisis became visible again, expressing itself in a new social mobilization that culminated in the call for a "Death Crusade[1] ", which led to the dissolution of the Legislative Power and the holding of early elections in 2023. This sequence of events highlights the political and social changes, which in some way contribute to the deepening of structural problems and the latency of the problem of violence.

Milestone 2: Emergence of actors with violent and criminal expressions

In a context of structural inequality, poverty and social violence, violent actors emerged and evolved, consolidating the current Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs), with profound implications for the country's security. These groups found legitimacy and presence in territories with limited state intervention, particularly in border and coastal provinces, where they fought for control of drug trafficking routes in the Pacific Ocean. Violence has manifested itself in extortion, kidnappings and murders with a marked gender and intergenerational component, while human trafficking and sexual violence are used as mechanisms for territorial control, involving children and adolescents in illicit activities.

In the first decade of the 2000s, groups such as "Choneros", "Latin Kings", and "Lobos" confronted each other and the State, forcing the reconfiguration of these groups. In 2019, in the face of a security and prison crisis, a State of Exception sought to dismantle these organizations by transferring leaders between prisons. However, this strategy created multiple subgroups operating under independent leadership structures, generating an escalation of violence inside and outside prisons (Insight Crime, 2023).

The assassination of the leader of "Los Choneros" in 2020 led to a fragmentation of allied criminal gangs, which intensified conflicts over territorial control between GDOs (Mera, 2021).

Milestone 3: Consolidation of drug trafficking in Ecuador

Ecuador's strategic location, with access to the Pacific Ocean and proximity to major cocaine-producing countries such as Colombia and Peru, has made it a key point for international drug trafficking (Mera, 2021). More than a third of the cocaine produced in Colombia reaches Ecuador, from where around 500 tons of drugs are trafficked each year to North America and Europe (Pichel, 2021). This has facilitated the linking of GDO

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[1] Mechanism governing the process of impeachment of the President of Ecuador and dissolution of the National Assembly provided for in Articles 130 and 148 of the 2008 Constitution.

leaders with Colombian and Mexican cartels, consolidating the country as a central hub for drug trafficking in the region (Primicias, 2023).

With the strengthening of drug trafficking routes, the OCGs have diversified their criminal activities, engaging in extortion, kidnapping and assassinations, which has exacerbated violence and insecurity in the country (Barría, 2024).

As of 2021, 28.1% of persons deprived of liberty (PPL) in the country are related to crimes related to drug trafficking (CDH, 2021), which reflects the impact of drug trafficking in the area of security and social rehabilitation in the country. Ecuador, once considered only a transit country for drug trafficking, has become a country of stockpiling and distribution, which has driven the growth of illicit economies, arms trafficking and a significant increase in violence and crime.

Milestone 4: Signing of the Peace Accord in Colombia and changes in cross-border dynamics

The signing of the Peace Agreement in Colombia in 2016 promised the end of the armed conflict with the FARC-EP, however, the effects led to an intensification of territorial disputes between criminal gangs and the displacement of illicit activities to neighboring countries such as Ecuador (Miranda, 2018). The reorganization of dissident factions directly impacted the country's northern border, an area historically vulnerable due to structural conditions and state presence (Sánchez de la Vega, 2003).

Dissident groups, such as the Oliver Sinisterra Front (FOS), increased criminal activities in the area, increasing violence, as evidenced in 2018 with terrorist acts that included attacks, kidnappings and homicides (Asmann, 2018; Plan V, 2018). These events evidenced the need for an adequate security strategy to face the threats imposed by armed dissidents, displacing part of the conflict and instability to Ecuadorian territory, without having a comprehensive strategy to address this reality, which is linked to the conditions of political and social instability.

Milestone 5: Ecuador amid escalating violence and prison crisis

The prison crisis in Ecuador has reached critical levels in recent years. The closure in 2019 of the Technical Secretariat for Drugs and the Ministry of Justice weakened the state's capacity to manage prisons, aggravating internal prison conditions. In 2021, a prison massacre left 47 people killed, followed by other massacres that totalled more than 200 deaths that same year (HRC, 2021). This revealed that prisons had been transformed into centres of operations for organized crime, complicating the control efforts deployed by the State.

In 2022, prison killings continued, accumulating almost 500 deaths in two years, amid severe overcrowding, with 39,000 people incarcerated in an infrastructure designed for 30,000 people (CDH, 2022). In 2023, new confrontations in the Penitenciaría del Litoral and other penitentiaries resulted in more deaths and the retention of 96 penitentiary agents. The government's response to the above events was to declare a state of emergency and deploy measures to guarantee citizen security, allowing the intervention

of the Armed Forces and the Police, although without addressing the underlying causes of the crisis (CDH, 2023; Diario el Universo, 2023).

The situation reflects a systemic problem of lack of resources, precarious conditions and limitations in control, which contribute to the conditions that allow criminal networks to continue, expand and diversify their action and control in the territories. In this sense, comprehensive prison reform and a holistic approach to address the structural causes of violence and crime are required to restore citizen security and justice conditions in the country (KALEIDOS, 2021).

Milestone 6: Ecuador in the face of the consolidation of new forms of violence

"If one even looks at the logic with which the conflict has been functioning... we are seeing concrete expressions that have to do effectively with particular forms of rape for the fact of being women, that is, sexual violence and rape..."

Interview: Academic Human Rights Expert, February 1, 2024)

The year 2019 was the year with the lowest incidence of violence, with a total of 1,189 intentional homicides, as opposed to the year 2023, which stood out as the year with the highest incidence, with a total of 8,056 intentional homicides (Ministry of Education, Ministry of the Interior, National Police of Ecuador, 2024).

Between 2021 and 2023, Ecuador experienced a dramatic increase in violence, marked by terror tactics that reflect global influences on local conflict.

By 2022, homicides totaled 4,603, doubling those of the previous year and bringing the rate to 25 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Primicias, 2023). In 2023, the numbers of violent deaths increased to a total of 8,008, raising the rate to 44.6 per 100,000, which led to Ecuador being ranked as the most violent country in the region, above Honduras and Venezuela (Insight Crime, 2024).

According to data from the Attorney General's Office, the increase in extortion was equally considerable. Extortion grew 364% in 2023, making it the most reported crime with 21,811 cases (Attorney General's Office, 2023). Arms trafficking, which is also expanding, has fueled this crisis and is responsible for nine out of ten homicides in the country (OECS, 2023).

The identification of "hit schools" that recruit and train children as young as 10 years old, exposing them to organized crime (Charles, 2022) is a sign of the risks to which children and adolescents are exposed. Violence reached its peak with the massacre in the fishing port of Esmeraldas in April 2023 (Mella, 2023; El País, 2023). This period reflects the transformation of the conflict in Ecuador, with increasingly complex patterns of violence.

Milestone 7: Declaration of "internal armed conflict" in Ecuador, escalation and current crisis situation

In 2023, Ecuador experienced a significant increase in violence, reflected in the 640% increase in homicides of children and adolescents (NNA) compared to 2019 (UNICEF, 2024). This increase in violence, hired killings, and extortion seriously affected educational communities, causing displacement and school dropouts (León & Mantuano, 2023). On the other hand, the prison crisis and the escalation of violence led to the declaration of a state of emergency for 60 days in the national territory through Executive Decree No. 110 on January 8, 2024.

"In this war, those who are most affected are the popular sectors, diversities, children, adolescents and young people."

Male, Community Leader Focus Group Leaders nationwide. February 8, 2024

As a result, there were numerous attacks with explosive material, several alerts of possible attacks in the main cities of the country, and the takeover of a news channel while a live broadcast was being carried out. These events led to the enactment of Executive Decree No. 111 of January 9, 2024, which declared for the first time in the history of the country the existence of an "internal armed conflict", recognizing 22 criminal groups as terrorist organizations, and authorizing more significant military intervention to contain the widespread violence, both in prisons and in several cities of the country (Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador, 2024).

In conclusion, the environment of violence and criminality fueled by structural factors and the expansion of transnational criminal organizations has generated a negative cycle that affects both security and social welfare. Growing insecurity not only increases crime rates, but also deepens conditions of marginalization and poverty, making it difficult to create an environment of development and social cohesion. To break this vicious cycle, it is crucial to implement comprehensive public policies that address both the structural causes of violence and the prevention and rehabilitation of affected communities.

4. Effects of the conflict

The escalation of violence in the country has had the effect of breaking down the social fabric, as well as increasing protection risks, especially for the most vulnerable populations, including women, children and adolescents, LGTBIQ+ population, population in human mobility and ethnic communities.

Using the proposal of the triangle of violence (Galtung, 2003), the iceberg of the effects of the current conflict in Ecuador is established based on the information collected in the focus groups and interviews. In this, it is observed how direct or visible violence is only the tip of the iceberg, a small part of the phenomenon. This is evidenced in the homicide rate, as well as in the prison crisis, attacks, extortion, increased violence, and the strong presence of GDOs in the territories.

Iceberg de Efectos del Conflicto en Ecuador

Violencia Directa

Tasa de homicidios 2023

46 / 100mil ha

- Amenazas y Extorsiones
- Crisis carcelaria
- Aumento de violencia en todas sus tipologías
- Desplazamiento interno y transfronterizo forzado
- Desapariciones
- Tráfico de armas
- Homicidios (de tipología por encargo)
- Aumento de Femicidios
- Narcotráfico y microtráfico
- Presencia de GDO, control territorial y disputa por control de zonas
- Reclutamiento, uso y utilización de NNA

Violencia Estructural

- 54.6% de la población ocupada trabaja en el sector informal
- Subempleo 20.4%
- Empleo no pleno 28.6%
- 26% de la población vive en pobreza
- 9.3% vive en pobreza extrema

- Inequidad-Incremento de pobreza extrema
- Aumento de riesgos de protección para NNA, mujeres, comunidad LGTBIQ+, en condición de movilidad humana y otros.
- Desempleo y precarización laboral
- Necesidades básicas insatisfechas
- Falta de acceso a servicios básicos

Violencia Cultural

Ruptura del Tejido Comunitario

Naturalización de las Violencias

- Narco Cultura
- Naturalización y reproducción de la violencia basada en género
- Naturalización de interacciones y relacionamiento desde conductas violentas
- Xenofobia, Racismo Clasismo: Campo-Ciudad - barrios vs conjuntos

To influence this violence, it is also necessary to act on other types of violence that are not so visible when analyzing the conflict and its components of structural and cultural violence. Structural violence refers to the set of structures that limit or deny needs, while cultural violence refers to attitudes that legitimize violence. In this sense, it is clear that conflict is not linear but multidimensional (Galtung, 2003).

In the first component (structural violence), we observe factors such as unemployment, which grew from 3.8% in the third quarter of 2023 to 4.0% in the same period in 2024, underemployment reaches 20.4% in the same period, and informality reaches 54.6% (ENEMDU, 2024). This reality is directly linked to the lack of access to social security, increased protection risks for the vulnerable population, and lack of access to basic services.

The second component (cultural violence) is identified in various areas of daily life, from the justification of gender-based violence to how communities accept the presence of armed groups as part of their reality. This acceptance is reinforced by the distrust of state institutions in some territories. On the other hand, the presence of narco-culture and the lack of economic opportunities legitimize participation in criminal activities as a viable alternative for many people, especially young people.

Consequently, several important effects of the current increase in violence have been identified and grouped together, which imply an increase in risks for the population. Among these effects, the following were identified:

- Erosion of cohesion
- Affecting livelihoods
- Increased internal and external population flows
- Recruitment, use and utilization of children and adolescents
- Trafficking in persons
- Increase in violence and mental health problems
- Increased risks for CSOs in the implementation of activities at the territorial level.
- Strengthening of state service delivery systems

4.1. Erosion of Social Cohesion

In Ecuadorian communities, networks of solidarity and trust, essential for well-being and resilience, are fractured in contexts of high conflict and prolonged crises. Families and communities, in an attempt to survive, are forced to coexist with the GDOs, which generates distrust and fragments the social fabric, creating "invisible borders" that divide both the communities and the families themselves and is reflected in the testimonies of those who work on the front line and show the division of the population.

The increase in fear among the actors in the territory is strongly associated with the intimidation actions deployed by the

"The population has been divided between: those who are being defended from these groups and who defend these vandal groups and those who are victims and are against them."

Male, Community Worker 4, National Focus Group, February 8, 2024.

OCGs and with the lack of capacity to respond adequately to the effects of violence, both horizontally, in the community, and vertically, as the population's trust in state institutions, mainly those related to security and justice, is undermined. The structural and cultural factors that have facilitated the legitimization of the OCGs are related to the narcoculture, which associates drug trafficking with heroic figures and the normalization of violence.

"(...) all this influenced at a cultural level by narcocorridos, narconovelas, all this narco culture that exalts the narco as the hero, the one who comes out of poverty, the one who vindicates himself, when one listens to narcocorridos they are that...stories with which children and young people resemble. And they say to themselves: "Oh I am also poor...oh I also sell drugs...oh I also bought a little house for my mommy...".

Male, Education Technician 1, Focus Group, Esmeraldas, February 1, 2024

The narco-culture has penetrated the family nucleus, weakening the protective role of families and increasing the risk of recruitment of children and adolescents by drug traffickers. Youths, influenced by this culture and with limited opportunities in their territories, are more likely to see drug trafficking as a way to improve their economic and social status. This divides the population, reduces the capacity for local organization and becomes a critical dividing factor.

The influence of drug trafficking on culture has changed social practices. The portrayals of GDO figures that glorify them, linked with the representations of the lifestyle associated with criminal economies, pose a risk factor that undermines the capacity of communities, families, and individuals to develop positive coping processes.

In some interviews, the role of the OCGs and their leaders in the territories is highlighted, where the community holds them in respect, especially in areas where they have provided donations or offered a certain level of "protection" to inhabitants against the actions of this or other OCGs.

The state response has deployed measures to strengthen internal security, with less emphasis on the structural causes of violence. This has led to a perception of distrust towards government institutions among communities (Latinobarómetro Report, 2023).

The cases of corruption that have been made public, the inaction and lack of adequate resources to address the problem of violence and increased criminality have eroded the trust of communities in public institutions and the security system (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). This has led to the fact that, in many cases, OCGs are seen as the providers of security and protection in the communities, as manifested in several testimonies.

"

"The image of the Armed Forces is very discredited ... that the police
or the military work with these gangs and say ahh ... ...dditionally, one
can call them, the ECU911, they still do not arrive (... ... That happens
with the Prosecutor's Office, that happens with all s... ...ck of response
from state and law enforcement agencies...the only ... ...he delinquent,
the neighborhood boss, he tells you if you pay me ... ...value, I assure
you that the others will not come here to rob and kil... ...".

Male, Education technician 1, Esmerald...

"The problem is between Los Choneros and Los Lobos, but I am separate... As long as they don't touch me, as long as one of my family name doesn't die, it can continue. And this repeats itself... There is a large percentage of our population that is looking at the violence with a certain burnout.... Let them continue killing each other, I'm not interested... But I don't do anything about it, close the door of my house and close the window."

Mujer, Técnica de salud y protección, Grupo Focal Manabí, January 31, 2024.

The stories and testimonies reflect the erosion of social cohesion, showing how trust in institutions and the state's security and justice system has been fractured.

The rise in violence and crime, fueled
by narco-culture, has resulted in the deterioration of the social fabric in the provinces most affected

The lack of articulation between the State and civil society continues to be a key obstacle in facing this crisis, in the words of one expert interviewed:

"There are structural conditions that are causing this, which is not only a problem of some gangs, there is a State that morally has been co-opted, and that has to change, and we are not working on that, that is, we are not going to be able to generate changes, or they are going to be provisional partial changes, perhaps partial successes." (Interview Academic Expert in Human Rights, February 1, 2024).

Hence, the approach to the conflict must address both the structural and cultural causes of violence, focusing on restoring and recovering the social fabric, improving confidence in the actions of the State and all levels of government, and articulating work with civil society organizations and community leaders.

4.2. Affecting Livelihoods

> Due to insecurity, the concern is the lack of sources that generate income, many places, many stores have closed due to insecurity and many families have been left without the economic income they had. Many have closed and well, they have gone to other places, to the countryside, because in the countryside the crime rate, I believe is not so high."
>
> Male, Education Technician 1, Focus group Esmeraldas, February 1, 2024

The increase in violence and crime in Ecuador has severely affected employment generation, directly impacting the livelihoods and economic security of the population. Approximately 30% of the business sector in the country has been a victim of crime in 2023, highlighting extortion, robbery and kidnapping as the main risks; also, 90% of companies report an increase in insecurity (Ipsos, 2023). This increase in violence and insecurity has direct effects on employment, both in the formal and informal sector; in this sense, acts of crime and intimidation, such as bombings, extortion, and murders, among others, have led to the closure of businesses, enterprises and companies (Austin, 2023).

The situation is more critical in territories where criminal groups dominate, and extortion has given way to kidnapping and contract killings. Communities resort to protection pacts with criminal groups, further weakening trust in security institutions and fostering a parallel system of governance. Thus, it is common to hear similar testimonies recounting this reality in interviews.

The protection mechanisms established within the communities are connected to the need for securing a livelihood and sustaining basic household conditions.

In this sense, as shown in the related testimony, these processes of organization of the family economy in areas severely affected by crime can also be linked to illicit economies, reducing people's chances of finding formal employment. Young people are particularly affected, seeing drug trafficking and micro-trafficking as economically attractive sources of income.

"Then they say: if I pay my fee, they defend me, they defend my business, and I am like untouchable I can exercise my functions" (...) at the same time as the security factor is not appreciated by the police, the communities are creating a small system that protects them (...) there are also those who call the police to warn them, but insecurity still continues".

Male, Community Worker 4, National Focus Group, February 8, 2024.

The increase in extortion of businesses and insecurity has generated fear among the population, forced displacement, business closures, and fewer opportunities for entrepreneurship and licit productive activities. The lack of jobs aggravates precariousness and facilitates violence, creating a vicious cycle of poverty, limited opportunities and criminality.

4.3. Increase in internal and external population flows

Increasing violence, coupled with historical poverty and limited formal employment opportunities, has exacerbated the vulnerability of Ecuador's population, especially in vulnerable and highly conflictive sectors.

In this context, people have been internally displaced or have had to migrate for safety. The population in a situation of human mobility, already facing precarious conditions, is even more affected by violence, exclusion and lack of community support.

"For this reason, what these migrants do is close their businesses, reinvent themselves or change countries (...) sadly, security does not depend on the police but on criminal groups."

Male, Community Worker 4, Nationwide Focus Group, February 8, 2024

Forced displacement is a reality; recent studies indicate that approximately 80,747 people in Ecuador have been displaced as a result of armed violence. The leading cause identified by the affected population is insecurity, followed by other causes such as family reunification, deteriorated economic conditions, and interpersonal violence (3iSolution, 2024).

As reflected in the testimonies of interviewees and focus group participants, violence reduces the possibility of creating support networks in the territories and sustaining the conditions that allow families and communities to lead dignified lives. Some testimonies refer to how the situation of violence and insecurity reduces the possibility of having businesses and accessing or maintaining jobs, which forces the displacement of people from one territory to another, both inside and outside the country.

"Latin America is experiencing a criminal crisis (...) because of the insecurity we are afraid that they will attack us or our families (...) many families already realize this and leave through the jungle, they are not creating roots, they are not being given the opportunity to create links to have a stable life. Migration in terms of insecurity is happening... it is not the same to say displacement due to armed conflict as having to live with armed violence, or having to live with guns in your head."

Male, Community Leader, Nationwide Focus Group, February 8, 2024

Ecuador is among the Latin American countries with the highest intention to migrate, with 47% of people willing to do so if they had the means (CID Gallup, 2023). Between October 2022 and May 2023, the number of Ecuadorian migrants apprehended at the U.S. border increased by 775%, and about 50,000 Ecuadorians crossed the Darien region in 2023, representing a 75% increase over the previous year (Coba, 2024). Many of these migrants are fleeing extortion and violence in their communities, as recent studies show that one of the main reasons for Ecuadorians to migrate are threats and the so-called "vaccines", which translate into money in exchange for protection from criminal groups (Mella, 2023)

The increase in risky migration and forced displacement not only affects people's life plans but is also linked to illicit economies and violence against women, children and adolescents as the groups most vulnerable to trafficking and sexual and labour exploitation.

4.4. Recruitment, Use and Utilization of Children and Adolescents

The recruitment and utilisation of children and adolescents by organised criminal groups (OCGs) is one of the effects that have started to be recognised as increasingly significant.

Testimonies from educators and community leaders reveal how the recruitment of adolescents has become normalized in educational institutions, with young people between 15 and 17 years of age being forced to join gangs under threat of death. In addition, interviewees and focus group participants pointed out that there are cases in which gangs enter schools armed, removing students against their will without the authorities being able to intervene

"Within the educational institutions it has become normal that the children belong to gangs, that they smoke, it is like it has become normalized (...) Two weeks ago...the gang members arrived at the school...they took out four children who did not want to belong to that gang...they arrived armed and nobody could enter, not even the authorities, because they were armed, they entered the school...there were the school children and the school children...we only saw how they took them out."

Woman 2, Education Technician, Focus Group Manabí, January 31, 2024

"Some students told me (...) teacher help me, I do want to finish school and continue studying, but I have to go because I'm "hot" ...it meant that they were looking for him to kill him, they were already threatened, because they went with the gang that was against his family".

Woman, Local Coordinator, Focus Group Manabí, January 31, 2024

Violence in neighbourhoods and schools is evident in the figures published by the Ministry of the Interior, which indicate that at least 770 homicides of children and adolescents were registered in the country in 2023, representing an increase of 640% over the 104 that occurred in 2019 (UNICEF, 2024)

The environment of violence in which children and adolescents live, added to social and cultural factors such as the normalization of narco-culture, intergenerational poverty and criminality, put this population at special risk. This situation sometimes forces children and adolescents to move from one territory to another due to violence, threats, extortion and even family relationships with criminals.

The lack of economic opportunities for young people in an environment of violence increases the vulnerability of this group. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, the absence of programs that generate a sense of belonging and family, and insecurity limit the options for young people, who see the OCGs as a more attractive economic alternative than the few opportunities present in their territories. The OCGs offer quick money in exchange for criminal tasks, which seduces young people with promises of income to help their families, access material goods, and avoid threats or attacks against them and their families.

"The consumption of substances is out of control...this also facilitates recruitment...it is easy to tell a child "if I give you this little white bag, you pull a little bit and wait here all night and I will pay you for it", or to say "Ah, you want your little joint of marijuana? then look, take such and such a thing from such and such a man and I will give it to you so you can buy the joints", this is happening with 11, 12 and 13 year old children.

Male, Education Technician 1, Focus Group, Esmeraldas. February 1, 2024

Substance use also facilitates recruitment, with children as young as 11 years old being lured with drugs in exchange for participating in illicit activities. Although there are no official figures on child recruitment, between January and June 2023, the National Police arrested 1,326 children and adolescents involved in crimes such as contract killings and micro-trafficking (Ramirez, 2023)

The recruitment of children and adolescents, especially girls and young women, is linked to drug trafficking, contract killings and sexual exploitation (Comité Permanente por la Defensa de Derechos Humanos, 2023). The problem requires a social agreement that places children and adolescents at the centre of comprehensive protection measures, given that current prevention and reintegration actions are insufficient to address the magnitude of the crisis in the different territories.

4.5. Trafficking in persons

The crime of human trafficking, particularly for sexual and labor exploitation, continues to be a critical problem in Ecuador, especially for children and adolescents. This effect of the conflict has strong gender components, as pointed out in several interviews and focus groups. According to data from the MDI (2024), 65% of trafficking cases correspond to women

"We are in a logic of war and a masculine logic. This strengthening of the masculine vision is also going to be affirmed by the very dynamics of these groups... many of these girls will also be recruited, forced by their partners, equally, mistreated and murdered. And how is it registered? That shows up as murders."

Academic Expert Interview on Human Rights, February 1, 2024.

In Ecuador, between 2019 and 2022, 475 victims of trafficking were registered, mostly young people between 19 and 29 years old (Montaño, 2023). The country is a point of origin, transit and destination of victims, mainly

of sexual exploitation, affecting both Ecuadorians and migrants from neighboring countries such as Colombia, Peru and Venezuela (UNODC, 2022). The strategies used by criminal networks include coercion, threats, promises of a better life, retention of documents, taking advantage of people's vulnerability.

"Unfortunately, the issue of adolescent prostitution is occurring...type of trafficking...it had not been seen with such force, at least in Monte Sinai, but in the city of Guayaquil there is an increase in the issue of sex work at street level, all of downtown Guayaquil."

Woman, Community Worker, Focus Group Guayaquil, February 5, 2024

An emblematic case was that of Canoa in 2022, where a pedophile network exploited some 400 children, operating from a hotel under the guise of helping families affected by the earthquake. Although the network was dismantled through an international operation, the victims still lack the necessary emotional and psychological support (PRIMICIAS, 2023).

The Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (PACTA) 2019 - 2030, states that the common target of human trafficking in Ecuador is for sexual exploitation with 80% of cases, followed by labor exploitation, with 11% recorded (GTRM, 2024).

This crime of trafficking is connected to the restriction of the exercise of other rights, such as education, health and protection. Addressing this problem in the current context of violence requires a multi-actor and multilevel institutional effort, given that criminal networks increasingly operate through virtual means and are difficult to detect.

4.6. Increase in violence and mental health problems

The increase in various types of violence in Ecuador reflects a profound crisis that

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"This patriarchal structure not only imposes inequalities not only for the female gender, but for men as well. All these mandates of masculinity, of what is expected of men, that they be violent providers, that they have many women, that they use weapons, that they consume drugs, that they are not afraid of anything, that they are part of gangs and tribes, these are harsh social mandates that in Latin America... come from a tremendously violent patriarchal structure, which also sustains organized crime and drugs

Collective Health Expert Academic Interview, February 1, 2024.

primarily affects the most vulnerable populations. Gender violence, in particular, has been made invisible and has intensified in a context impacted by machismo, narcoculture and structural racism. These factors have had a serious impact on vulnerable local communities and migrants, exacerbating labour precariousness and increasing exploitation in subsistence economies. Gender mandates are at the heart of the construction of masculinities, driving men to more aggressive expressions linked to problematic drug use, violence and membership in criminal groups.

Violence against women is a significant social and public health problem. The II National Survey on Family Relations and Gender Violence reveals that 65% of women have suffered some type of violence throughout their lives, with higher incidence among Afro-Ecuadorian women (71.8%) (INEC, 2019). In 2023, the Aldea Foundation registered 321 femicides, of which 178 are linked to organized crime (ALDEA Foundation, 2024). The intersectional affectations are undeniable. The conflict is differentially affecting children, women, ethnic populations, those in human mobility and gender diversity, and this is reflected both in people's testimonies and in interviews with experts.

> "There is racial profiling, which young people have to live day by day (...) which is a problem that is seen in the slums of all the provinces (...) the most affected are foreigners, the diversities that live in these sectors."
>
> Male, Community Worker 3, National Level Focus Group, February 8, 2024

Violence also manifests itself in the family sphere. In Guayaquil, 14,024 cases of domestic violence were reported between January and October 2023, with an average of 49 alerts per day (García A., 2023). Community leaders understand that fear and lack of guarantees have led many women to stop reporting these cases, perpetuating a cycle of normalized violence.

Structural racism and historical exclusion of Afro-descendant populations contribute to vulnerability. As mentioned by some testimonies, there is racial profiling and discrimination against the Afro-descendant population and a resurgence of expressions of xenophobia. Discrimination is a reflection of the growing stigmatization of certain ethnic groups, exacerbated by the perception that the migrant population receives more support than the locals.

The normalization of violence has led to an increase in mental health conditions (López, 2023). Narcoculture and overexposure to violence in traditional media and social networks have raised the levels of tolerance towards violence, as expressed in several testimonies of the people who participated in the research.

> "They normalized violence. Here they murder six people and after they are shocked... they share the video where everything is so ugly, a sea of blood, and that goes viral and you reproduce it... A person who is being killed, they are doing something to him and you are recording it. Where is your human side? You're not horrified by that..."
>
> Woman, Health and Protection Technician, Focus Group Manabí, January 31, 2024

Recent studies indicate that 20% of children and adolescents in the country present symptoms of depression or anxiety, and 10% have considered or attempted suicide (World Vision Ecuador, 2023). This group presents difficulties in recognizing and managing negative feelings, as well as in expressing their concerns and emotions to a mental health professional (World Vision Ecuador, 2023).

The accounts of those close to the population show the urgent need to address the issue. The efforts of the State, civil society, organizations and the community must focus on this, on building life plans that are dignified and that allow them to exercise their right to

live free of violence, and to this end, it is necessary to strengthen mental health care processes and the provision of psychosocial services.

4.7. Increased risks for CSOs in the implementation of activities at the territorial level.

"We have encountered complex realities at the level of organizations, issues of extortion, assaults, violence, and also at the territorial level. The threat on all of this... has greatly limited our ability to continue executing some activities such as the monitoring we do of a territory and the participation in some workshops that we had to suspend."

CSO Expert Interview, March 1, 2024

Local CSOs and international organizations have managed to gain the trust of communities through their work in the territory. However, the increase in violence is creating an increasingly risky environment for their activities, limiting their possibilities for action.

Community leaders also face dilemmas when returning to high-conflict contexts. Despite the risk, they feel a deep conviction to contribute and help their communities. However, this

conviction and vocation for service is limited by the material reality of insecurity and the potential effects of violence, which can limit leaders' actions in vulnerable territories.

The testimonies of those who work in the territory are evidence of this, showing the fear of returning and the consequences they could face.

"We question ourselves a lot, obviously, as human beings, as parents, as brothers and sisters, as children. To return to a context as conflictive, as risky as Mount Sinai, but within that is to have this conviction, not since, if people need us, but also how we think we can contribute."

Male, Community Worker, Focus Group Guayaquil, February 5, 2024

Increased risks for CSOs, international organizations and community leaders, due to extortion and insecurity, have led to the suspension of projects and interventions. Entering certain territories with a high presence of OCGs and criminality for the development of humanitarian aid interventions requires the establishment of close relationships with community leaders who can facilitate access, strengthening processes and protective factors from the local level.

5. Coping and resilience building

"

We are like grains of quinoa, if we are alone, the wind carries us away. But if we are united in a sack, the wind does nothing. It will sway, but it will not make us fall. We are like the moor straw that is plucked and grows again... and of moor straw we will saw the world."

Dolores Cacuango

In contexts of crisis and protracted conflict, community resilience emerges as a fundamental path to peacebuilding and development. While the challenges are significant and rooted in structural conditions, there are also connecting factors that offer hope and real opportunities for transformation.

Through the Conflict Sensitivity Analysis, connecting elements were identified that can help reduce tensions, foster social cohesion, as well as conflict prevention and transformation.

Community: Individual and collective resilience

In the process of collecting information through focus groups and interviews in the IRC intervention communities, coping strategies aimed at strengthening the social fabric were identified. In provinces such as Esmeraldas and Guayas, the importance of historical leaderships was highlighted as protective factors that should be considered in future interventions. These leaderships, often threatened, generate positive changes in the communities, becoming factors of change, promoters of resilience and social transformation.

"Those people, men and women, who in some cases are teachers, youth leaders, neighborhood leaders, in others the parish priest, there are people who have leadership roles that go beyond the institutional framework... these leaders are making a big difference".

Male, Project Coordinator, Esmeraldas Focus Group, February 1, 2024

Likewise, community needs, linked to the collective sense of well-being, emerged as a connecting factor in Esmeraldas, Guayas and Manabí.

Particularly in Monte Sinai in the city of Guayaquil, the role of organized community structures, such as the Neighborhood Committees, which facilitate the identification of common interests and goals, strengthening social resilience, was highlighted. Through these organizations, actions can be planned to foster social cohesion and peaceful conflict resolution (Vallejo, 2009).

"The neighborhood mingas have a very effective result... Through the leader of the sector, president of the neighborhood... they invite everyone to join... to clean up the neighborhood... everyone goes out with their broom... they put on speakers, play music, the neighborhood is happy, everyone leaves the house to clean their fronts... after the minga they play sports... The neighborhood is beautiful, nice and ready for any other upcoming activity."

Male, Education Technician 2, Focus Group, Esmeraldas, February 1, 2024

Community networks serve as spaces for mutual support and solidarity. Initiatives such as bingos, school fairs, sports and cultural festivities have been key to maintaining social cohesion. For example, the potential of neighborhood "mingas" was highlighted. These spaces are especially recognized by community actors as meeting places for the development of positive activities that contribute to collective well-being. On the other hand, especially in rural areas, the organizational potential of water boards is valued as a mechanism for building collective wellbeing and participatory decision making.

It is crucial that communities actively participate in decision-making to ensure that their voices are heard and that the policies implemented respond to their needs. In contexts of high conflict, it is essential to establish support networks to protect community leaders at risk.

Strengthening of State Service Delivery Systems

State institutions, at both central and local levels, face the challenge of implementing effective conflict management strategies that not only address the immediate effects of violence, but also strengthen protective factors and promote long-term resilience in affected communities.

"When the school is good, it is sustained... also, the opposite happens when the school is weak and the community is not organized, that gives us insecurity. The school as a community refuge...but you need to work with the teachers...to have them focused, trained, motivated...you can do serious work."

Male, Education Technician, Focus Group Manabí, January 31, 2024

"When the school is strong, the community has somewhere to turn."

Woman, Education Technician 2, Focus Group Manabí, January 31, 2024

It is essential that these strategies include institutional strengthening and the improvement of basic infrastructure, focusing on access to fundamental services such as water, sanitation, education and health, closing gaps in education and employment, as well as fostering social cohesion.

As mentioned by the interviewees, strengthening the rule of law and institutions can contribute to addressing the causes of the conflict in order to close existing gaps. An example of this strengthening is the valuing of education as a right and the school as a meeting place. This can be achieved by promoting the school as a protective and protected environment where members of the educational community (students, teachers, families, leaders and local authorities) strengthen their capacities in the management of multiple risks and in the consolidation of mechanisms to promote safe schools.

The school occupies a central place in the community, providing security, containment and effectively marking the presence of the State in the territories. In addition, teachers, student counselors and other educational professionals become positive adult role models for students and play a key role in supporting the development of protective factors.

"The gastronomic and entrepreneurship fairs. Where groups of single mothers, students, people from the neighborhoods organize to do these fairs to promote their businesses and publicize their products."

Male, Education Technician 2, Focus Group Manabi, February 1, 2024

Actions that promote the development of livelihoods operate as connecting and protective processes. Gastronomic fairs and entrepreneurship programs that additionally strengthen the organization and community fabric were valued.

6. Challenge Statement: Proposals from IRC and allied organizations

It is important that the interventions that are developed follow the principles of humanitarian action and the do no harm approach. As demonstrated by the Conflict Sensitivity Analysis, the situation in Ecuador is not only contextual, but is also associated with structural causes that require a comprehensive and systemic approach, where the State, communities, civil society organizations, academia, and international cooperation actors have a central role.

Due to the current complexity of the situation in the country, the presence and action of the State alone is not enough. A joint approach is needed to guarantee the rights of those who have been violated, to strengthen and/or develop plans, policies and projects that strengthen the connecting and protective factors of individuals and communities. In this line, it is necessary to work along the following lines:

Strengthening the social and community fabric

- Strengthening Community Participation by promoting the active participation of communities in decision-making that impacts their lives. This includes the development of spaces for dialogue between communities, CSOs, CBOs and public entities, at the local and national levels, to identify specific needs and strategies to address them through a comprehensive "triple nexus" approach .[2]
- Fostering Social Cohesion, promoting the building of trust and cooperation both among community members (horizontal cohesion) and between the community and the State (vertical cohesion). This implies strengthening coping strategies based on solidarity and joint work, especially in crisis situations, to reduce the impact of conflicts, promote collaboration and build relationships based on dialogue and active participation.
- Strengthening and support to community leaders in conflict prevention and transformation processes at the territorial level.
- Creation and strengthening of community networks focused on local leadership, the recovery of public spaces, the development of life plans (both individual and community) and the consolidation of safe spaces for the protection of the most vulnerable populations.
- It is essential to place children and adolescents at the center of actions to address the current situation in Ecuador. For example, the implementation of methodologies that promote loving upbringing and the creation of spaces for play,

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[2] The **Triple** Humanitarian-Development-Peace **Nexus** (HDPN) seeks to strengthen collaboration, coherence and complementarity between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actions, adapting to the needs of the context and prioritizing collective results. It is based on multi-year and flexible funding, local and national empowerment, and coordination among actors according to their comparative advantages, promoting integrated and sustainable solutions that connect immediate response with long-term development (CR, 2024. Governance Unit).

aimed at improving the integral development of children in the first five years of life. In the case of adolescents and young people, it is essential to work on violence prevention from the approach of co-responsible masculinities, mental health and community participation activities for the recovery of public space.

- Provide training and awareness-raising on human trafficking to prevent the normalization of this crime.
- Develop and implement specific care programs for survivors of violence and strengthen the capacities of the national and local system through the transfer of methodologies to public entities and CSOs.
- Sensitize the community about gender-based violence and provide support to survivors through protection circles. These spaces should reflect on power relations and sexuality, encouraging new masculinities and non-violent behaviors.
- Promote community participation and enhance connecting factors through the development of strengthening spaces such as mingas, fairs and cultural activities.
- It is important that faith-based organizations, academia, foundations and the media support community advocacy, giving voice and visibility to organized communities, and promoting the strengthening of those with a fragile social fabric through recognition of their management.

Strengthening the capacities of national and local systems

- Promote the harmonization of national regulatory frameworks with international principles, to generate processes, protocols, and intersectoral practices that address the complexity of the current conflict in the country, achieving public policies and regulations that include approaches of conflict sensitivity, protection and action without harm.
- Support the strengthening of the technical and organizational capacities of the national and local Education, Health, and Justice systems to address the needs and main risks experienced especially by the most vulnerable populations:
  - o Technical assistance and accompaniment in the implementation of protocols focused on prevention and protection, especially in attention to survivors of human trafficking, gender violence, mental health and prevention of teenage pregnancy.
  - o Strengthening the Education System in the design and implementation of socioemotional curricula, including the transfer of methodologies (e.g. "Healing Classrooms"[3]), the training of educators in psychoeducation and

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[3] IRC's **"Healing Classrooms"** methodology focuses on creating safe and resilient school environments that promote emotional well-being, stability and learning for children and adolescents affected by conflict and crisis. It includes training teachers in pedagogical strategies for managing classrooms in emergency contexts, addressing the impact of stress and trauma on students, as well as practical psychosocial support tools, social-emotional learning activities and approaches to strengthen students' sense of control, belonging and resilience. In addition, it fosters inclusive school dynamics that prioritize protection,

the creation of art workshops and play spaces that favor socioemotional learning.

- o Technical support to the Education System to update school risk management and emergency education plans, incorporating psychosocial risks. Similarly, strengthen prevention and response protocols to create safe educational communities, adapted to the current conditions of the country.
- o Strengthening teachers' capacities to address new risk situations (e.g., signs of domestic violence and other forms of violence) that arise for children and adolescents in educational institutions
- o Develop and/or strengthen programs that address the mental health issues of children and adolescents and communities affected by the escalation of violence.

- ■ Support the development of intersectoral protocols, policies and practices that systemically address forced displacement as an effect of the escalation of violence.
- ■ Strengthen the capacities of public service providers and civil society to address the needs of the mobile population in a context of escalating violence, which may bring with it new impacts.
- ■ Provide technical support to strengthen protocols, policies and procedures to address the recruitment and use of children and adolescents by GDOs.
- ■ Strengthen coordination between public entities and between public entities and CSOs to generate intersectoral responses that address not only the visible but also the structural causes of the escalation of violence in the country.
- ■ Collaborate with local and national public entities to ensure compliance with the Code Purple in cases of gender-based violence in health centers, thus guaranteeing adequate and timely attention to victims.
- ■ Strengthen accountability mechanisms and promote transparency in project implementation.

Actions to generate protective factors

- ■ Strengthen protective environments through the implementation of education programs covering adolescents, early childhood and emergency education. This should be complemented with the creation of Community Child Care Homes, focused on the development of the life plan of children and adolescents (NNA).
- ■ Promote access to essential services such as health, education and livelihoods for people in a situation of human mobility.
- ■ Create and strengthen safe spaces for adolescents to discourage involvement in criminal activities. Offer art workshops, educational programs that integrate a gender perspective (non-violent masculinities) and soft skills training (e.g., leadership, conflict management, etc.). These spaces should include youth-led initiatives, raising awareness of the risks of recruitment by GDOs and generating employability opportunities through partnerships with the private sector.

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empathy and emotional recovery, ensuring that classrooms are spaces for healing and holistic development. (IRC, 2024)

- Build specific programs for the care of children and adolescents recruited or used by criminal gangs, providing containment and protection, as well as alternatives for employability and socioeconomic reintegration.
- Position the construction of a Peace through the creation of a national and territorial peace-building roundtable. This table should address alternative strategies to violence, empower communities through educational initiatives and develop capacities for peaceful conflict management and resolution.
- Train the media to ensure responsible dissemination of peace-oriented content to counteract the violence promoted by the OCGs.
- Lead communication campaigns aimed at the prevention of gender-based violence.
- Strengthen the capacities of children and adolescents on the prevention of sexual violence and knowledge of their sexual and reproductive rights, implementing comprehensive sexuality education processes both in and out of school.
- Generate a support system for caregivers that includes psycho-emotional support kits, training and financial assistance.

Actions to strengthen CSOs and CBOs

- Strengthen the capacities of CSOs/CBOs in peace-building approaches, humanitarian principles and Do No Harm, enabling them to develop soft skills for conflict management, and the development of strategies to address territories in conflict.
- Strengthen the capacities of CSOs/CBOs to generate livelihood, financial access, employability and entrepreneurship programs.
- Develop guidelines, protocols and methodologies to attend and provide services to children and adolescents who are or have been part of GDOs.
- Generate programs on secure information in alliance with CSOs and public entities that allow permanent monitoring of security alerts in critical areas.
- Project implementation should incorporate circular economy principles, ensuring that resources directly benefit communities.
- The roots of structural and cultural violence must be addressed, focusing on generating economic opportunities, improving access to education, and strengthening health and justice systems. Promoting a culture of peace and respect for human rights, as well as addressing xenophobia and discrimination, can reduce tensions and foster social cohesion.
- It is crucial to work closely with communities and local and national institutions to strengthen their skills in conflict prevention and management.
- Create collaborative networks between CSOs, governments, academia, business and media to collectively address the challenges of conflict, amplifying efforts to strengthen the most affected communities and sharing best practices that strengthen the effectiveness of interventions.

7. Conclusions

The conflict sensitivity analysis conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Ecuador, together with its partner organizations and stakeholders, provides an in-depth understanding of the complexity and escalation of violence in the country. This analysis has focused on identifying the causes, triggers and effects of the recent escalation of violence, providing essential information to improve the interventions of humanitarian aid programs implemented by IRC and its partners.

The conflict in Ecuador is multi-causal and stems from deep structural inequalities, exacerbated by economic and social crises, as well as the breakdown of the social fabric and the penetration of organized crime. This disproportionately affects vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents, women, racialized people, people in human mobility and LGBTIQ+. However, there are challenges to identify the differential risks for people belonging to ethnic groups, in a situation of human mobility and LGBTQ+ community, as well as to design strategies and interventions to minimize the impacts and effects of the current scenario on vulnerable groups that are affected with greater inequality in crisis situations.

Prolonged crisis deepens poverty and inequality in affected communities, limiting development opportunities and directly affecting people's livelihoods, which in turn reinforces illicit economies, violence and vulnerability.

Organized crime and illicit economies are defining characteristics of the conflict, affecting the different provinces of Ecuador in different ways. In this sense, generating differential strategies according to the specific conditions of each territory will strengthen the approach to the current situation.

State militarization is not enough to address the structural causes of violence. A comprehensive intervention involving public and private entities, CSOs, and CBOs is required to carry out actions at the social, economic and productive levels. It is necessary to strengthen the confidence of citizens and state entities, both at the national and local levels.

The recruitment of children and adolescents by organized crime is one of the most critical effects of the conflict. It is crucial to establish prevention and reintegration mechanisms for victims.

An increase in emerging forms of violence has been observed, such as sexual and gender-based violence, and human trafficking for both labor and sexual exploitation. These dynamics require specific attention and the implementation of tailored programs to protect the most vulnerable populations.

There is a significant naturalization of violence and its impact on the life projects of children and adolescents. This is mediated by the narco-culture and the exaltation of violence in social imaginaries, which cracks the social fabric, increases protection risks, and limits the possibilities of exercising rights in an adequate manner

Active participation of communities in decision making and strengthening their capacities are essential to address the challenges of conflict. Historical leadership and community structures are key to resilience, as a connector of communities.

It is essential to develop specific policies to protect migrants, guaranteeing their access to basic services, health and education, as they may be victims of double jeopardy due to the upsurge in violence. This includes measures to ensure their social inclusion and the protection of their rights, avoiding their exploitation and vulnerability in conflict environments.

Internal displacement, as a result of violence and criminality, is a phenomenon that is increasing nationwide. This puts at risk the adequate exercise of the rights of people who are forced to leave their homes. For this reason, it is essential to develop comprehensive support processes that allow access to effective protection mechanisms, support and livelihoods, as well as processes for the prevention of risky migration and safe return.

The conflict analysis indicates that in areas where there is a perceived lack of basic services and limited state response, the OWGs establish different forms of governance. Therefore, institutions should prioritize the improvement and provision of basic services and infrastructure, focusing on access to water, sanitation, health, education and social cohesion. This implies increasing the presence of the State in territories facing high vulnerability to conflict and where there is a notable presence of OWGs.

Collaboration between the government, civil society and the international community is crucial to address the escalation of violence in Ecuador and the effects it has brought with it. Transparency in the management of resources focused on the promotion of a culture of peace and respect for human rights should also be encouraged in order to reduce tensions and build trust between citizens and public entities.

Information for decision-making is limited. In this regard, the information management systems of the institutions must be strengthened and interoperability must be fostered in order to have better data that will make it possible to account for the magnitude of the conflict and to calibrate interventions.

Interventions implemented in the territories must be sensitive to the conflict, considering local dynamics and their particularities, ensuring that actions do not exacerbate the conflict or cause additional damage to the communities.

Glossary

The document is based on the principles of international humanitarian law for the analysis of conflict sensitivity. In this line, the concepts and definitions presented in this section seek to broaden the panorama for a better understanding of the conflict phenomenon in the Ecuadorian context.

Indiscriminate attacks.
Indiscriminate attacks are (a) those that are not directed against a specific military objective; (b) those that employ a method or means of combat that cannot be directed against a specific military objective; or (c) those that employ a method or means of combat whose effects cannot be limited as required by IHL; therefore, in each of these cases, they attack by nature military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction. Indiscriminate attacks are prohibited (ICRC, 2016).

Connectors.
These are those elements that have brought people together in an environment of crisis and conflict and that foster trust, interrelationships, equity, joint work, mutual support, which can contribute to the construction of peace and harmony in communities (Tejiendo Paz, S/f).

Armed conflict.
An armed conflict is said to exist when there is an armed confrontation between the armed forces of two or more States (international armed conflict); or between government authorities and organized armed groups; or between several such groups within the same State (non-international armed conflict). Other situations of violence, such as internal tensions and unrest, are not considered armed conflicts (ICRC, 2016).

Peacebuilding.
Efforts aimed at preventing the outbreak, recurrence or continuation of armed conflict, encompassing a wide range of political, development, humanitarian and human rights programs and mechanisms (UNHCR, 2006).

International Humanitarian Law
Body of international law consisting of treaties and customary rules that aim, in time of armed conflict, to limit the suffering caused by war, by protecting persons who do not or who have ceased to take part in hostilities and by restricting the methods and means of combat that may be employed (ICRC, 2016).

Enforced Disappearance.
"Enforced disappearance" means the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge such deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, removing him or her from the protection of the law (ICRC, 2016).

Forced displacement.
Displacement of the civilian population for reasons related to the conflict, unless such displacement is necessary for the safety of civilians or for imperative military reasons (ICRC, 2016).

Inner turmoil and internal tensions.
There are internal disturbances, without constituting armed conflict, when the State uses armed force to maintain order; there are internal tensions, without constituting internal disturbances, when force is used as a preventive measure to maintain public order (ICRC, 2016).

Dividers
They are sources of tension, distrust, suspicion or division, which can generate social conflict (Tejiendo Paz, S/F).

Organized Armed Group.
A group of persons with an organized power structure who carry arms and engage in hostilities as a non-State actor subject to IHL; dissident members of a State's armed forces may also be considered to constitute an organized armed group (ICRC, 2016).

No Harm Action Framework.
It is a tool of the conflict sensitivity approach. It starts from the recognition that the project can contribute to positively transform conflicts, strengthen social cohesion and build peace in communities, but can also generate unintentional harm, increasing tensions, fragmenting the social fabric or exacerbating conflicts (Tejiendo Paz, S/f).

Livelihoods.
A combination of resources used and activities undertaken to make a living. Resources include individual skills (human capital), land (natural capital), savings (financial capital), equipment (physical capital), as well as formal support groups and informal networks (social capital) (UNHCR, 2006).

Displaced Person or Internally Displaced Person
International law has strictly defined the term "refugee", but not, the term "displaced person". The latter is generally applied to persons fleeing their homes due to armed conflict, other situations of violence or natural disasters, but without crossing the border of the State in which they reside (ICRC, 2016).

Multidimensional poverty
Corresponds to the percentage of people who are deprived in one third or more of the indicators of education, work and social security, health, water, food, housing and healthy environment, weighted by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC, 2024).

Recruitment.
Refers to the manner in which individuals become members of armed forces or groups (ICRC, 2016).

Refugee. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that a refugee is a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (ICRC, 2016).

Serious violations of IHL.
In armed conflicts, whether international or not, "serious violations of international humanitarian law" may be committed. These are serious violations that constitute war crimes when they endanger protected persons (e.g., civilians who are prisoners of war, the wounded and sick) or protected property (e.g., civilian objects or infrastructure) or when they infringe on important values. Most war crimes involve death, injury, destruction or unlawful taking of property. An act may constitute a war crime if it infringes on universal values (ICRC, 2016).

Sexual violence.
Acts of a sexual nature that are imposed by force or coercion, such as that caused by fear of violence, coercion, detention, psychological oppression or abuse of power exercised over any victim, whether a man, woman, boy or girl. Taking advantage of a coercive environment or the victim's inability to give genuine consent is also a type of coercion. Sexual violence includes: rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization or any other type of sexual violence of comparable gravity (ICRC, 2016).

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