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## **Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency: A Colombian Case Study**

Rosie McGee with Jesús Alfonso Flórez López  
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# Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency: A Colombian Case Study

Rosie McGee with Jesús Alfonso Flórez López

## Summary

In a situation of longstanding and complex violent conflict in Buenaventura, Colombia, we used action research to explore with social activists what power, violence, citizenship and agency mean to them and how they experience and exercise citizen agency in relation to the violence. This Working Paper presents our conceptual and theoretical starting points, action research process and findings.

Direct violence was at a peak in urban Buenaventura when the action research was conducted, manifest in some particularly macabre forms. Yet in exploring the interconnections between power, violence and active citizenship, what emerged most strongly were structural and symbolic violence. These are experienced by Buenaventura citizens in ways that correspond to certain power theorists' interpretations of 'invisible power'. Most citizens have yielded to the encroachment of violent norms, language and imaginaries, allowing these to infuse their social roles and interactions and the socialisation of children and youth.

The action research participants, however, represented a minority of active citizens who respond differently to direct, structural and symbolic violence. They navigate it using a range of responses: innovative organisational practices; mould-breaking models of social leadership; the de-legitimation of violent actors, actions and attitudes; and other visible and invisible expressions of individual and collective resistance to the violent re-shaping of norms, beliefs and values.

The case study highlights the interconnected nature of direct, structural and symbolic forms of violence; contributes to theorising invisible power from this grounded and richly contextual perspective; illustrates the shortcomings of simplistic assumptions about citizen engagement in fragile and violent contexts and the importance of 'seeing like a citizen'; and sheds light on debates about citizen agency and structuration in processes of social change.

**Keywords:** power, violence, citizenship, citizen agency, action research, Colombia.

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# 1 Introduction

The 'Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency' (PVCA) programme addresses the need for aid agencies and change agents working in situations of chronic violence and fragility to shift from a state-heavy to a more citizen-centred perspective. Through a series of qualitative research and action-research case studies in five diverse violent settings, the project investigates critically the scope and substance of citizen action in violent contexts, in the light of the recent spread of rather uncritical assumptions about the power of citizen agency. In this way, the project aims to bring fresh understandings to the question of how citizens can best be supported in such complex settings.

A starting premise is the potential, in contexts affected by conflict and violence, for positive change to be driven or supported by agency of ordinary citizens, and the need for developing the most appropriate means by which other actors such as aid or peace-building organisations can support this. This research seeks to deepen understandings of citizens' individual or collective exercise of agency to engage in non-violent ways with the conflict or with each other in relation to the conflict, exercise social leadership, or confer legitimacy on others who exercise leadership. Its findings help to re-calibrate and hone expectations about citizen agency in violence-affected contexts, and offer some avenues for more effective intervention by aid and conflict-transformation organisations.

In **section 2** we introduce the conceptual framework we are using in the PVCA programme, and explain the methodology used. In **section 3** we introduce the context of the Colombia case study, presenting both the country in general and Buenaventura in particular as settings where the use and abuse of power and violence are intricately interwoven with senses and practices (Oosterom 2014a) of citizenship. Findings from the fieldwork in Buenaventura are then presented and discussed in **section 4**, organised around two core themes: 'Seeing like a citizen of Buenaventura: Citizenship, violence and invisible power', and '(De-)legitimation, resistance and leadership'. **Section 5** concludes.

## 2 Framework: concepts, research questions and methodology

Our conceptual framework brings together fresh starting assumptions about the scope and substance of power, citizenship and agency in a violent setting, and an epistemology and methodological approach consistent with these. Below we set out our conceptual framework, starting by defining key terms and concepts, moving on to the main propositions of interest and research questions, and closing the section with an overview of our methodology.

### 2.1 Concepts

At the outset of the PVCA programme a UK-based research team carried out an extensive review of key concepts and, through a series of debates about them, derived our working definitions for this programme. We have published key aspects of these debates and our full working definitions of core terms and concepts elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Here we provide only a summary of definitions of the concepts most essential to the Colombia case study.

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<sup>1</sup> McGee with Oosterom, Pettit, Scott-Villiers and Tadros. forthcoming 2016; Oosterom 2016.

### 2.1.1 Power

Our understanding of power draws on the work of many power theorists and reflects their varied emphases. It includes:

- ‘Visible power’: the kind of power at play in observable, formal decision-making. It describes the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of political decision making, and how those in positions of power use these to maintain control. As such, it entails both structure (the rules, structures, authorities, institutions) and agency (actors with relative power) (Pettit 2013: 44).
- ‘Hidden power’: the organisation of bias in agenda-setting. It refers to the ability to control what gets onto the decision-making agenda and who is involved in deciding. ‘Hidden power’ includes the practice of ‘non-decision-making’, and the mobilisation of certain interests (or bias) to win over others (Gaventa 2006; Pettit 2013).
- ‘Invisible power’: ‘the subtle shaping of people’s beliefs and expectations, such that some conflicts never need to arise’ (Pettit 2016: 8). At its simplest, it is defined like this:

Probably the most insidious [of the three forms of power], *invisible power* shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of those affected. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people’s beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the *status quo* and even of inferiority. Processes of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe.  
(excerpt from Just Associates which draws on the work of VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) and Rowlands (1997), cited in Gaventa 2006: 29)

Some theorists treat power as a manifestation of intentional coercive or dominating agency of one or some actors over others (e.g. Lukes). Other theorists are more interested in power as invisible social and ideological conditioning, embedded in and reproduced by social structure (e.g. Hayward, who describes it as ‘networks of social boundaries’; Foucault, for whom ‘power is everywhere’, and Bourdieu, for whom it is ‘culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure’<sup>2</sup> in the form of what he calls ‘habitus’: socialised dispositions that guide thinking and behaviour.

In the scholarship to date, there has been more focus on the nature and effects of power than on its making. Notable exceptions to this are VeneKlasen and Miller (2002), whose work focuses on equipping social and political activists to resist it and overcome it through empowerment processes; and, in the more theoretical realm, Haugaard, who has written about the constitution and creation of power through the confirmation and reproduction of social order (2002). If power is created this way, then it can also be undermined, through the dis-confirmation and alternative re-configuration of the social order.

### 2.1.2 Violence<sup>3</sup>

Our understanding of violence is multi-faceted and broad, and built up through an iteration between empirical observation and theoretical perspectives on violence. It goes well beyond direct person-to-person violence, to span:

<sup>2</sup> See [www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/](http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/bourdieu-and-habitus/).

<sup>3</sup> Our understanding has been nourished and influenced through our interaction with the Violence, Participation and Citizenship research group of the Citizenship Development Research Centre (2000-2010) ([www.drc-citizenship.org](http://www.drc-citizenship.org)) and the work of the research group’s convenor Jenny Pearce (Pearce 2007).

- ‘Structural violence’: the violence of socially unjust structures which have impacts on survival, wellbeing, identity and freedom (Galtung 1969: 170).
- ‘Cultural violence’: violence of both the direct and the structural kind that have become legitimised, normalised and ‘acceptable to society through the symbolic sphere of human life’ (Pearce 2007: 16).
- ‘Symbolic violence’: violence which is ‘exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ derived from his or her recognition of social classifications and ‘symbolic power’ which are being wielded against him/her (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 167).

In our view chronic violence matters as well as acute violence, and ‘violence in peace’ can be as serious a matter as ‘violence in war’, in the words of anthropologists Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

### **2.1.3 Citizenship and citizen agency**

For our purposes, citizenship goes well beyond formal electoral or social participation. A citizen is ‘someone who belongs to different kinds of collective associations and defines their identity from participation in activities associated with these different kinds of membership’ (Kabeer 2005: 21–2).

Citizen agency is then the raising of an issue in the public sphere (Lister 2003), using higher levels of political agency and interacting with relatively powerful actors and forms of authority.

Embracing the notion of ‘horizontal citizenship’, we extend our sphere of interest beyond citizens’ relationships with the state, government or non-state violent actors who challenge or usurp state power, to the nature and dynamics of relationships among citizens.

‘Structuration’ is the term which Giddens coined for the constant interaction of agency and structure, in arguing against earlier visions of social theory that posited a dualist relationship between individual agency and structure. From Giddens’s perspective, society is in a continuous process of structuration, with human actions simultaneously structuring society and being structured by it (Giddens 1984). Applied to our research context, it means that people’s agency is both a driver of and response to conflict, and that they navigate everyday life encounters by meeting actions and events with responses that either confirm or disconfirm prevailing structures (Haugaard 2003). Vigh (2006) calls this process ‘social navigation’, a concept we also find relevant for our research.

We think of the relationships between ordinary citizens and comparatively powerful actors as governance arrangements, even though in the contexts the PVCA programme has worked in, the comparatively powerful actors are often some combination of illegal, non-state and armed, rather than peaceable, legal state actors. These relationships are often between complex configurations of actors with different degrees and forms of power at their disposal, and can be characterised by either contestation or support, which can be variously manifested.

### **2.1.4 Resistance**

We did not include in our initial literature review the literature on resistance, nor go looking for examples of resistance in our fieldwork. We enquired in an open-ended way about views on power, and about citizens’ and social actors’ responses to complex, violence-prone contexts. In the Colombia case, resistance emerged prominently and richly in people’s self-

identification as local citizens. We therefore include here a brief review of key aspects of resistance literature and discourses, and later explore how our empirical observations relate to it.

In Scott's path-breaking work 'Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance' (1985) he argued that by emphasising peasant revolutions, scholars had hitherto neglected other forms of political activity by marginalised people. In fact, he argues, there is a broad 'landscape of political activity between silent quiescence and revolution' (Oosterom 2014a: 47-8; Scott 1985), of kinds of collective action which are unquestionably political (Scott 1989: 33). The range of tactics he calls 'everyday resistance' all express a rejection of power-holders on the part of people who lack the means to oust them (Oosterom 2014a: 48) – that is, they constitute resistance in an ontological and axiological sense. Scott (1989) distinguishes 'everyday resistance' as being 'disguised' in form, comprising 'foot-dragging, poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion' – all 'political masking' rather than overt rejections of the powers that be, deployed by people who use their 'tactical wisdom' and 'avoid calling attention to themselves' (1989: 35).

Expanding on this later, Barter (2012) points out that forms of 'everyday resistance' are often symbolic and less coordinated and less risky than mobilised guerrilla activity, hold the potential for social change, and undermine the legitimacy of armed groups' (Oosterom 2014b: 10). Vinthagen (2007) points out from Scott (1985) onwards, attempts to create taxonomies or definitions of resistance have looked at it from various angles - who the resister is; the resisters' normative, conscious project or intention; how resistance operates. This taxonomical approach, s/he argues – looking at who or what is being resisted; how resistance operates, and against which superordinate agent - obscures the basic fact that resistance is about denying, challenging or undermining power relations, and is often about resisting a social *structure* rather than an actor or form of *agency*.

In terms of the effects of resistance Scott has proposed, '[i]nasmuch as every act of compliance with a normative order discursively affirms that order, while every public act of repudiation [...] represents a threat to that norm, everyday resistance leaves dominant symbolic structures intact (Scott 1989: 55). He allows, however, for situations in which hidden transcripts are 'continually testing the line of what is permissible on-stage'. When something ventures across the line, 'a new *de facto* line is created, governing what may be said or gestured' (*ibid*: 59). Johansson and Vinthagen (2014) push the study of resistance further when they step beyond Scott's structural Marxist view of power and analyse it from a Foucauldian understanding of power as non-coercive, productive, relational and 'everywhere'. According to these later contributions to resistance studies, we might expect to see different forms of resistance arising in relation to different forms of power – visible, hidden and invisible - and in relation to power exercised or experienced in different domains – public, private and intimate.

## 2.2 Conceptual framework

Having derived the working definitions and understandings set out above on the basis of a fine-grained, theoretically pluralist and deliberately interdisciplinary review of relevant literatures, we arrived at a set of propositions that constitute the conceptual framework underpinning the research.

To sum up our conceptual framework as a set of propositions:

1. In a violent setting, **agency** is a highly complex process of navigation of the terrain and of the power relations that connect actors to each other. Any mistake in this navigation is costly, because some actors' **power** in relation to others is backed up with the threat or actuality of **violence**.

2. **Identity** is recognised to be a key aspect of citizenship and agency. In situations affected by violent conflict, identity will shape and differentiate both experiences of violence and responses to it. Understanding the part identity plays in citizenship and agency is therefore an important part of understanding citizens' responses to violent settings.
3. In violence-affected settings there arise forms of non-violent social **leadership**, individual and collective, which are rare, risky and important to the wellbeing and agency of citizens.
4. Ordinary citizens are connected to violent actors and non-violent leaders, and to violent structures and norms, via complex relationships in which the major currency is **legitimation**, which can be conferred or withheld in various ways.
5. Citizens' everyday actions, **agency** and expressions of **identity** will tend to either confirm or disconfirm prevailing social norms and structures in contexts of violence.

### 2.3 Research questions

We (the IDS researchers) formulated three research questions in advance, on the basis of the starting premises set out above, and phrased fairly broadly to allow for adaptation and refinement to suit the purposes of each case study. The questions were then debated and re-worked with local research and activist partners in each case, to adapt and prioritise them for the local context and attune them to other programmes carried out by our partners. We hoped that this way, the programme would give rise to outcomes directly relevant to our co-researchers' and participants' work:

1. How do social actors react to complex, violence-prone contexts? In such circumstances how do they exercise agency and use citizen engagement strategies to realise their rights or transform conflict? How do their reactions confirm or negate the legitimacy of powerful actors and structures, tacitly or consciously?
2. What hinders their efforts to engage in some way with the conflict and what facilitates them? What can be gained through reflexive analysis of the roles that immersed social actors themselves and external actors seeking to support them, play in catalysing or restraining both violence, and agency to transform violence?
3. How can international social actors (aid donors, INGOs and others) best interact with these expressions of agency and these strategies in the interests of violent conflict transformation and prevention? Are there cases when they should not get involved?

We focused primarily on the first and second of these research questions, selected by the Colombian team members as most relevant to the Buenaventura context.

### 2.4 Methodology

Our methodological approach is consistent with our starting propositions and our overarching concern with the lack of analysis of people's everyday navigation of and engagement with violent conflict settings. We borrow from the Citizenship DRC the approach of 'seeing like a citizen'. This approach '[...] starts with the perceptions of citizens themselves and asks how they interact and view the institutions from which they are expected to benefit' (Gaventa 2010: 63). Adopting this vantage point had implications for all other aspects of our research design: our case selection, methodological approaches; our relationships with co-

researchers, research subjects and contexts; and our and others' judgements about the validity of our work. Further details on these aspects are provided in Annexe I.

For the Colombian case study, in 2014 we worked as part of a five-person team with three other Colombian activists and researchers on an action research initiative in Buenaventura. We are a British, social researcher based at a UK applied research institute, with a past in NGO advocacy and several years' experience working on development and human rights programmes and research in Colombia (McGee), and a Colombian anthropologist, theologian and political sociologist with decades of activist experience in community work and human rights advocacy among indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples in the Colombian Pacific (Flórez López). Other members of our research team are, like Flórez López, involved in processes of peaceful social activism in Buenaventura in diverse ongoing roles, ranging from originator and leader, through participant, to supportive outsider-activist. Many of our activities took place at the parish centre of the Catholic parish of *San Pedro* (St Peter) in the Alfonso López neighbourhood of Commune 3, served by the Redemptorist missionary order of Catholic priests.

We focused our participatory, reflective exploration on a set of four ongoing organisational processes in the city, some of which in the event proved more tangible, solid, lasting and researchable than others:

- A **'round-table' process of dialogue** between local government and representatives of a wide range of social actors. These included various organisations of the Catholic Church (Social Pastoral team; Afro-Colombian Pastoral Centre; Life, Truth and Justice Commission; religious Orders); commercial establishments; NGOs; civic committees formed to claim fundamental rights such as water, housing and health; grassroots organisations formed in defence of ethnic rights of the Afro-Colombian population (e.g. PCN, *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* or Black Communities Process), etc.
- A **'Humanitarian Space'** established in the heart of a neighbourhood acutely affected by paramilitary violence and state connivance. The process is led by the 'nayero' community (people originating on the river Naya), with external support and protection provided by local Catholic clergy, national NGOs, international NGOs and UN agencies. This community has been taking up residence along the tidal edge of the city for decades and have reproduced here the traditional livelihood strategies and social dynamics of their places of origin, within the legal recognition and collective rights framework afforded to autonomous Afro-Colombian collectives in the wake of the 1991 Constitution. In a context where all the tidal margins of the city are now in the control of legal and illegal armed actors, the community has appealed to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission for protection, and has obtained Precautionary Measures<sup>4</sup> for the protection of their lives and territory. They have formulated their own internal plans for community life and protection, environmental conservation and organisational strengthening, and communicate their positions through the use of street theatre and music as well as through more conventional approaches to social communication, consciousness-raising and political lobbying. The community leaders, strongly committed to the defence of the collective territory and collective rights, have confronted violent actors in the name of these. The Humanitarian Space is seen in Buenaventura and further afield as an outstanding example of unity.

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<sup>4</sup> Precautionary measures' are defined thus: Dictated by court orders in order to ensure that a right may be made effective in the case of a dispute, that recognise the existence and legitimacy of that right. Precautionary measures do not imply a judgment regarding the existence of a right, but do involve the adoption of legal measures aimed at implementing the right should it eventually be recognised (Ossorio 2006). Definition available at <https://temasdederecho.wordpress.com/tag/concepto-de-medida-cautelar/>; authors' own translation.

- A **youth platform** comprising several human rights and arts associations in the city. Meeting frequently, this ‘youth action’ platform accesses, creates and facilitates spaces for engagement in public policy processes. It holds events, affirmative actions and cultural spaces for youth, human rights and the right to territory. Through its actions it aims to reclaim memory and public spaces abandoned by the municipal public administration. It holds its meetings in the Catholic parish of San Pedro, in the Lleras neighbourhood of Commune 3.
- **A collective of women’s organisations** that forms part of the network ‘Breaking Silences’ (*Rompiendo Silencios*) and other activist networks in the city. Victims of the armed conflict, they have organised themselves around the theme of memory and the struggle for women’s rights. This collective takes part in various spaces and processes focused on violence against women and presses for the problem to become visible and be addressed at the national level. The constituent organisations are located in various Communes and neighbourhoods of the municipality, where the women work to support community dynamics and keep alive the memory of the armed conflict.

The action research engaged social leaders and groups of citizens who are engaging in these processes while living amidst acute and sometimes macabre forms of violence. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions and reflective learning workshops,<sup>5</sup> we explored with them the roots of the violence currently affecting Buenaventura and its relationships to the forms and waves that had gone before, and the nature of citizenship as they experience it; inquired into recent manifestations of civic rejection of violence; and investigated the organisational forms and social leadership around which rejections of violence and expressions of resistance were cohering.

To protect the identity of action research participants, in this report all interviewees are anonymised and referred to only by type (e.g. Catholic priest; human rights defender). All Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants are anonymised. Each time a primary source is referred to in the text the reference is prefaced with ‘Ph 1’ (or 2, 3 or 4) denoting in which of the four research phases it took place.

## 3 Context: Colombia and Buenaventura

This section describes the national and local context, drawing on a limited selection of quite focused literature.

### 3.1 Colombia

Colombian scholarship includes much political science and sociological literature theorising violence, and even a whole academic inter-disciplinary field referred to as ‘*violentología*’ and populated by ‘*violentólogos*’. What was most useful for our purposes, however, was the relatively new, often more interdisciplinary and very specific literature on various aspects of citizenship since the 1991 Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

Colombia is a notoriously violent country. For the last 50 years, a civil conflict has been waged between government forces, guerrillas and paramilitary groups, in recent decades blurring into ‘narco-violence’. Violent civil conflict has continued after a flawed process of

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<sup>5</sup> See list at Annex I.

<sup>6</sup> García 2009; García Sánchez 1999; Hurtado Galeano and Naranjo Giraldo 2002; Kaplan 2013; Naranjo Giraldo 2004; Pécaut 1997; Pécaut 1998; Tubb 2013; Vivas Piñeros 2006.

paramilitary demobilisation commenced (2005-2012) and the initiation of the latest peace negotiations between government and the FARC guerrilla (2012-present).

Some attribute modern Colombia's violent history to the ravages of Spanish colonial domination since the sixteenth century. Others blame the restricted citizenship afforded to the majority of Colombians since Independence in 1810. A new Constitution in 1991 sought to redress these antecedents, characterising the country as a 'Social State under the rule of law'<sup>7</sup> and offering an impressive bill of individual and collective rights and an array of spaces for democratic citizen participation in a newly decentralised system of governance. But that was in 1991, and the period since, on aggregate, has been no less violent than before.

Throughout waves of internal displacement, massive human rights abuses and atrocities, ordinary Colombians have come through by exercising 'survival agency' and 'coping agency' in multiple and often sophisticated ways (e.g. Justino 2008). The forms of agency offered by the 1991 Constitution were qualitatively different from these forms: spaces were created and promoted for people to exercise agency as citizens, in relation to each other and to government, and in the public arena, by participating in the political, social and economic and cultural life of this multi-ethnic, culturally diverse and historically violent nation. These spaces reflected the origins of this constitution-making process as a process of peace-making and social and political reconciliation and reconstruction, after some of the most violent years in the nation's history.

Adding to the repertoire of 'survival agency' or 'coping agency', then, Colombian people in the twenty-first century have responded in three main ways to violence with what we call (following Lister's definition) 'citizen agency', in three main manifestations. First, they have joined the violent conflict as armed actors: beyond the approximately 446,000-strong Colombian armed and police forces<sup>8</sup>, estimates of paramilitaries and guerrillas have each reached several tens of thousands.<sup>9</sup> Second, they have constructed, organised and sought to make real the opportunities and spaces for democratic citizenship offered by the 1991 Constitution to build a participatory model of governance, to replace or at least counterbalance the exclusionary elite bipartisan model in place since Independence. Third, within the multifarious 'warscapes' (Nordstrom 1997) or 'social terrain' of the conflict (Vigh 2006), they have used their 'social navigation' skills (*ibid.*) to mitigate the effects of conflict on civilians, mediate between armed actors, and model new social norms of non-violence and rejection of violence. The second and third of these constitute the scope and focus of this action research process; the first is beyond our scope.

In terms of citizen agency within the framework of the 1991 Constitution, the Bill of Rights was a response to societal demands for citizen participation that had been articulated for decades. Among the spaces for citizen agency that it opened up, the most relevant to this case are:

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<sup>7</sup> The flamboyant opening line of Colombia's 1991 Constitution fares less well in translation. The best translation we can come up with, with the help of interpreter and translator James Lupton, is:  
**'Article 1.** Colombia is a social state under the rule of law, organized in the form of a unitary decentralized republic with autonomous territorial entities; it is democratic, participatory and pluralist, founded on respect for human dignity, on the labor and solidarity of the persons constituting it and on the primacy of the general interest' (own and James Lupton's translation, *Artículo 1, Constitución Política de Colombia*, available at [www.ramajudicial.gov.co/documents/10228/1547471/CONSTITUCION-Interiores.pdf/8b580886-d987-4668-a7a8-53f026f0f3a2](http://www.ramajudicial.gov.co/documents/10228/1547471/CONSTITUCION-Interiores.pdf/8b580886-d987-4668-a7a8-53f026f0f3a2)).

<sup>8</sup> DIÁLOGO Revista Militar Digital – Foro de las Américas, available at [http://dialogo-americas.com/es/articulos/rmisa/features/regional\\_news/2012/05/29/feature-ex-3182](http://dialogo-americas.com/es/articulos/rmisa/features/regional_news/2012/05/29/feature-ex-3182), accessed 2 March 2016.

<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to obtain realistic estimates of the number of guerrilla or paramilitary combatants. According to one reliable source, over the years of the paramilitary demobilisation process (2005-2012), just over 35,000 paramilitaries formally demobilised ([www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Sobre-las-cifras-oficiales.pdf](http://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Sobre-las-cifras-oficiales.pdf), accessed 2 March 2016). A military source calculated that the number of active FARC guerrilla combatants fell from 20,700 to 6,700 between 2002 and 2012 ([www.noticiasrcn.com/nacional-pais/querrilla-las-farc-contaria-15700-hombres](http://www.noticiasrcn.com/nacional-pais/querrilla-las-farc-contaria-15700-hombres), accessed 2 March 2016).

- Various mechanisms of protection of 'Fundamental Rights', which citizens can invoke directly and via simple procedures. Noteworthy among these are the *Acción de Tutela*, *Derecho de Petición* and *Acción de Cumplimiento*.
- Recognition of a series of rights of indigenous communities, enabling them to realise their right to Self-Determination, in particular Special Indigenous Jurisdiction, by which they are entitled to apply their own justice systems within their territories; and the granting to their territories (*resguardos* or reservations) the same rights as municipalities in respect of public funding to complement social programmes of the State.
- Constitutional and legal recognition of Afro-Colombians as an ethnic group, the development of a legal framework for collective land-titling of Afro-Colombian territories, and the devolution of several aspects of governance to Afro-Colombian elected authorities to exercise within their collective territories.
- Development of certain rights ratified by Colombia in international conventions and treaties. Noteworthy here is the establishment of the Right to Prior Consultation, which prevents the state or individuals from undertaking any project or work in the territories of indigenous or Afro-Colombian peoples without receiving their approval to do so through a prior consultation exercise.
- The recognition of citizens' right to peaceful protest.

In terms of modelling new approaches to non-violence and rejection of violence, over the early 2000s, 'resistance' initiatives have mushroomed all over the country. Differing in the details of the social organisations involved, forms taken, political hues and degrees of militancy in their positions, they nonetheless constitute a social movement of resistance. *Resistencia* in Colombia differs from the literature about peasant resistance (Scott 1985, 1990), anti-Soviet resistance (Petersen 2001) and *campesino* resistance (Wood 2003) in one important sense: it is about '*manteniéndose en el territorio*' (resisting in one's own territory). This phrase, frequently heard on the lips of ordinary Colombians who resist and social activists who support them in various ways, is a vital clue to what Colombian victims of conflict are resisting and surviving: organised, violent campaigns to dislodge them from their territory. Rejection of violence and violent actors in a context where the state has routinely and demonstrably wielded and sponsored violence and dispossession, has developed into a range of forms of resistance to – or at least deliberate disengagement from – various facets of the state and of formal governance norms and institutions. Some such cases of 'resistance' have been researched, (Hernández Delgado 2009; Hernández Delgado 2012; Kaplan 2013) and inevitably, the forms that most challenge the legitimacy and power of the state – notably the 'Peace Community' model – have been criticised and even vilified especially by state actors (Belalcázar 2011).

Some examples of civil, unarmed resistance across the country and in Buenaventura are:

- '**Autonomous Territories**' (*territorios autónomos*): Ethnically circumscribed territories, indigenous as well as Afro-Colombian, invoke their right to Self-Determination to declare themselves Autonomous Territories in which the presence of military bases or armed actors are not allowed. There have been many cases of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities expelling regular soldiers of the Colombian army, guerrilla combatants and paramilitaries from their territories.
- '**Peace Communities**' (*Comunidades de Paz*): Established around the country by *mestizo* and Afro-Colombian peasant communities, these are spaces where a set of

social, behavioural and governance norms is pacted between inhabitants, different from the dominant norms in the country. A crucial difference is that no armed actor is allowed to enter. They have proven very difficult to sustain, and have been subjected to frequent and intense attacks by the various armed actors as well as conservative social forces, but still exist and maintain their position. The best-known and most emblematic example is the 'Peace Community of San José de Apartadó' in Antioquia, north-western Colombia.

- **'Popular Constitutional Assemblies'** (*Asambleas Populares Constituyentes*): In several municipalities, citizen representatives have convened and held dialogues with State entities and illegal armed actors, in an effort to secure people's right to live in peace. These often involve the declaration of a 'Territory of Peace' to discourage acts of war in the municipality.
- **'Denunciation'**: Resistance is expressed through reporting and publicising human rights violations, in multiple forms ranging from public denunciation, historic commemoration, legal action by the State's own investigators and prosecutors and legal cases brought before international human rights organisms such as those of the United Nations, the Organisation of American States, or other sovereign states. These utilise international jurisdiction regarding crimes against humanity and seek (generally successfully) to oblige the Colombian government to intensify protection measures applying to specific individuals or communities. In Buenaventura, human rights organisations, United Nations agencies and a very few independent journalists, as well as Catholic Church leaders, denounce abuses, most of them only since 2013 when the levels and nature of violence reached unprecedented levels.
- **'Construction of Memory'**: Many communities that have repeatedly denounced human rights violations perpetrated during acute phases of violent conflict, have established 'Construction of Memory' (*Construcción de Memoria*) initiatives. These are spaces in which the violent facts are 'condensed' to commemorate community members who have been killed or been disappeared as victims of the conflict. Their faces and the circumstances of their death or disappearance are often on display, to inspire memory. This practice, common all over Colombia, strengthens the social fabric between bereaved and grieving community or family members, enabling them to grieve collectively. In Buenaventura there is a *Capilla de la memoria* (Chapel of Memory) in the Lleras neighbourhood where we focused our research. Its participants are all women, whether because such commemoration and collective grieving are constructed as a gendered, women's, practice, or because most of the victims commemorated there are male – their husbands, partners and sons.
- **'Humanitarian Zones/Spaces'**: Over the years of intensification of the armed conflict, some rural communities took steps to limit the penetration of armed actors in their territories by creating 'humanitarian zones' or 'spaces'. A Humanitarian Zone is demarcated by a (symbolic) fragile enclosure around a number of households, to indicate that it is not open to any actor bearing arms, be they army, paramilitary or guerrilla actors. A Humanitarian Space is similar but within the space illegal (e.g. paramilitaries) and/or institutional (e.g. national police) armed actors are present, and part of the strategy is to engage them constructively and non-violently rather than keeping them out (Interview 6, human rights, defender). Some 15 Humanitarian Zones and Spaces have been set up along the Pacific Coast and in the *Llanos Orientales* (Eastern Plains) regions of the country. The most recent and novel 'Humanitarian Space' was established in April 2014 in an urban area of Buenaventura, in the neighbourhood known as the *Puente de los Nayeros* (landing of the people of the river Naya). Its urban location and high public profile are contributing to make more visible the problem of

human rights violations in the city and forcing the State to implement protective measures.

### 3.2 Buenaventura

The great majority of participants in our Colombia case study, as of the population of the city of Buenaventura, are Afro-Colombian.<sup>10</sup> While the 1991 Constitution brought Afro-Colombians as well as indigenous peoples formal equality within the 'social state under the rule of law', the historic roots and patterns of ethnicity and ethnicised identity in the country mean that the Afro and indigenous experience of citizenship remain very different from that of *mestizo* and white Colombians. Scholarship on ethnicity in Latin America and on 'ethnic citizenship' (e.g. Ndegwa 1997; Wade 1997) offers clues about why and how Afro-Colombians' ethnicity shapes the way they relate to the openings for citizen participation afforded by the 1991 Constitution and the expressions of non-violent resistance up and down the country, including those now springing up in Buenaventura.

Buenaventura, a port city on the Pacific coast and Colombia's only commercial access to the Pacific Ocean and Asia, is currently one of the most violent parts of the country. In 2013, at least 13,000 inhabitants of the municipality of Buenaventura were displaced, and the homicide rate was 48 per 100,000 – both figures which topped their respective leagues among Colombian municipalities. 150 cases of missing persons reported from 2010-2013 are presumed by official sources to constitute forced disappearances, more than twice the rate for any other Colombian municipality (Human Rights Watch 2014). Currently under way are plans for a massive upgrading and modernisation of the port. The 'Master Plan', named *Proyecto Buenaventura 2050* (Project Buenaventura 2050), has been prominently championed by the Office of the President of the Republic, other parts of national government, and the Colombian and international private sector.

While the facts and figures cited above evoke at a general, objective level the complexity, dimensions and horrific nature of violence in Buenaventura, it was from the perspective of ordinary Afro people living in this 'warscape' that we set out to explore power, violence, citizenship and agency.

## 4 Findings: seeing power, violence, citizenship and agency like a citizen of Buenaventura

We present and discuss our findings in this section in the shape of core themes that featured strongly in our focus group discussions, interviews, workshops and participant observation opportunities.

The first subsection, 'Violence, citizenship and invisible power', opens with perspectives on violence and citizenship that we elicited during the first fieldwork phase. We describe, summarise and interpret the perspectives arising in the conversations we seeded. Through these we thread insights from our review of recent Colombian literature on the subject, which informed both our interviewing and our analysis of what was said - and not said. As the action research process unfolded, the quality of our dialogue with co-researchers and participants became more reflexive and analytical. The subsection therefore goes on to

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<sup>10</sup> The population of the municipality of Buenaventura is 327,955 according to DANE projections for 2010. Of these, 90 per cent are Afro-Colombian, 6 per cent indigenous (of the ethnic groups *wounaan*, *embera*, *páez*, *epedara siapidara* and *katío*) and 4 per cent *mestizo* (of mixed indigenous and European descent). 51.8 per cent are female and 48.2 per cent male. 90.4 per cent of the population resides in the city of Buenaventura and 9.6 per cent in rural areas.

present the participants' reflexive analysis of how the context of long-term structural violence shapes citizen agency. This centres on how a deeply embedded culture of violence operates as invisible power, shaping the agency of these participants and other actors, and also shaping norms of behaviour and processes.

The themes of 'Organisation, (de-)legitimation, resistance and social leadership' are then discussed in subsection 4.2. These forms of citizen agency, heavily shaped by the warscape, were not directly elicited by the way we planned and framed our fieldwork phases, but emerged as significant themes as the action research process unfolded

## **4.1 Citizenship, violence and invisible power**

### **4.1.1 Citizenship**

Asked how they felt as citizens and how they would describe their relationship with the state, people themselves used the term 'violence' in explaining their material deprivation and marginalisation. High levels of 'direct violence' play out against a backdrop of intense and longstanding 'structural violence', as distinguished and defined by Galtung (see 2.1.2 above). This featured large in people's narratives on themselves as citizens. Interviewees and participants gave descriptions of near-total local state failure in all respects – provision of services, rule of law, protection of the population. Most people's direct experience of the state is at municipal level and below, where they all experience it as a major perpetrator of structural, symbolic and even direct violence. Nobody cited the state as offering solutions in any way.

We heard very little support for the ongoing municipal round-table process that seeks to bring the municipal-level representatives of all arms of the state together with representatives of diverse social actors in a conciliatory participatory planning process. Many of those we spoke to chose to distance themselves from such processes, as a way to de-legitimize and 'resist' the state.

Many responses related the state's local-level actions and deficiencies to national-level dynamics. In particular, people are acutely aware of how Buenaventura's geopolitically strategic location has set it at the heart of Colombia's twenty-first century development model. Firm and convincing assertions were made to us that the nature and level of structural violence in the city derives directly and intentionally from the national imperative – on the part of both national government and national private sector, increasingly globally integrated in nature - to develop Buenaventura as a mega-port. In practice, this means emptying much of the city of its residents, at all costs. This narrative is subscribed to by all those we interviewed, and by all members of our research team. It is also strongly supported by historic evidence of myriad cases of systematic dispossession and massive displacement of Colombian citizens in the interests of capital, spread across the country, usually carried out by paramilitary armies of some kind, working with the active involvement or complicity of the state.<sup>11</sup>

In an attitude mirrored by the ambivalence of the white and *mestizo* Colombian population towards them, Buenaventura Afro-Colombians' membership of the Afro population – their 'ethnic citizenship' (Ndegwa 1997), in its political, historical and territorial dimensions – seems to come before their 'state citizenship' in the way they perceive and describe themselves. Intersecting with other aspects of their identities, it affects the way they experience and exercise citizenship. Research on ethnicity in Colombia and Latin America

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<sup>11</sup> Until recently, such narratives were often dismissed as the self-seeking propaganda of left-wing and human rights activists. In the last decade intense judicial activity, often instigated by human rights organisations, has produced dozens of high-level convictions of army and government personnel in relation to such cases. This gives ample credence to the explanation cited here for such entrenched and intense structural violence in Buenaventura.

more broadly has established that members of the minority black population of Colombia differ from those of some other Latin American nations in emphatically considering themselves nationals of Colombia (Wade 1997: 85). Yet the participants in our research clearly do not think of themselves as full 'citizens' of the country in the sense enshrined in the 1991 Constitution. The way people voiced their citizenship to us, as a struggle to defend their Afro-Colombian rural livelihoods and cultural identity, resonates with a point made by Isin and Wood in their major work on citizenship and identity:

There are important connections and intersections between race, ethnicity and class; in practice these identities inform and shape each other in an often inextricable matrix that may blur their borders. [...] [D]istinct social and political movements have been framed in terms of race and ethnicity [...]. In whatever way we come to understand race and ethnicity, we must respect the reality of the experience of these ethnicities for many people, particularly in terms of discrimination. (Isin and Wood 1999: 50)

Historical ethnic discrimination is clearly central to the 'citizenship experience' of the Afro-Colombian population of Buenaventura, a point we will return to below in discussing resistance. Afro-Colombians in Buenaventura, on the marginalised and poorly-connected Pacific coast, have several powerful reasons to feel marginalised by the nation. The longest-standing reason is the historic racism and 'internal colonialism' to which they have been subject since Independence (1810) and the end of slavery (1851). During the long period of consolidation of the independent Republic of Colombia, this region has been marginalised in terms of social, economic and cultural rights. The Pacific coast has always been seen as the resource-rich region, there to be exploited by the highly centralised nation, and the port of Buenaventura as functional to this extractive model. A more recent reason is the heavy costs of the internal armed conflict borne by the people of the Pacific coast, nearly all Afro and indigenous, which have been relatively ignored compared to the costs borne by some other parts of the country. A more recent reason still is the planned upgrading of the country's port capacity and access to the Pacific basin by way of a major re-purposing of their city, or as they tend to call it, their *territorio* (territory).

The *territorio* was explained to us as a physical space in Buenaventura city, limited by its topography and the surrounding terrain, on which have converged a number of Afro-Colombian communities uprooted from their rural origins. Communities that used to live up particular rivers along the Pacific coast used to land their produce at particular points along the Buenaventura shoreline. Over the past several decades, pressures related to violence as well as livelihoods have driven them to set up permanent residence at these landings in the litoral zone. To make the landings habitable at high tide as well as low, during the 1990s they 'built the land', as they put it: they paid garbage collectors to transport garbage to these sites to use as landfill, and built a 'street' per river community, fingers protruding into the sea, with names such as *el puente de los nayeros* (the landing of the people originally from communities located up the river Naya). Around these 'streets' people built their traditional residences with planks, on stilts in the surrounding water, reached by boardwalks. Effectively, then, they are not only residents of neighbourhoods but creators of their *territorio*, a condition which adds moral authority to their territorial claims and rootedness at the same time as adding legal ambiguity to the status of these neighbourhoods.

The spontaneous informal development that the city has undergone in social, territorial and livelihood terms, has been used by 'outsiders' to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of the local black population. To differentiate them from the Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific coast, these 'outsiders' are often called *paisas* in supposed reference to their ethnic group (*mestizo*) and territorial origins. In fact, *paisas* are people from the city of Medellín and surrounding province of Antioquia, but on the Pacific coast the term is used for everyone who is not either black or indigenous, whatever their origins.

The state in its local manifestations has kept the physical places of residence of much of the Afro population in a state of material impermanence and legal limbo.<sup>12</sup> By doing so, it has contributed to keeping their citizenship precarious. Lack or withdrawal of legal recognition of people's rights of residence, combined with negligible public service provision, have had very significant effects on citizenship. They have militated against the development of community fabric, which has developed in spite of them. It has disabused citizens of any positive expectations of the state and its agents, and given them little or no need to develop collaborative relationships with these.

In recent times, the lack of connection people feel to the nation state has been exploited by illegal armed groups. As young people reflected during the research process, this has often been with the complicity of the Afro population:

*Who's in charge here? The armed groups – and we've helped them into that position. That's what the Colombian state wants – to have a way of ruling that keeps us [the Afro population] submissive.*  
(Ph 2 FGD Youth of Humanitarian Space)

Women leaders commented on the lack of legitimacy of the municipal authorities:

*The mayor receives his orders from somebody and carries them out, because if he weren't acting on the orders of somebody, he might actually do a good job as mayor, do what he's meant to do, but that's not happening...*  
(Women leaders FGD, Phase 2: 10)

Some cultural manifestations of Afro identity have been weakened or suppressed in the past decade as a result of violent conflict. The routinisation of violent deaths has generated both fatigue and fear. Over the 2000s this led to a decline in Afro cultural rites around death, which are particularly elaborate and public. There are some recent signs of recovery of these rites, for instance the revival of the singing of *alabaos*, choral songs offered to God and Christian saints, usually sung at funerals and wakes. One of the mass protests that occurred relatively spontaneously in Buenaventura shortly before our fieldwork began was constructed around a funeral procession: the coffin of an assassination victim was paraded around the city by an angry crowd and up nine flights of stairs of the municipal building, to be laid at the door of the mayor's office.

While Afro identity, as ethnic citizenship, clearly serves as a factor of cohesion, it is also trivialised and exoticised in the context of the port upgrading and modernisation project. The architects of *Proyecto Buenaventura 2050*, consultants brought in from Spain, built into the project ways to exploit the cultural wealth of the Afro population, allocating space in their urban plans for 'eco-tourism' and 'perhaps a traditional Afro-American dance school' and proclaiming at a public meeting, 'Long live ethnic diversity, it's a source of wealth!'<sup>13</sup> This was interpreted by women research participants thus: 'We are the orang-utans that people will come to see, banana in hand [...]. Ask any investors and they'll tell you the Pacific has a population that dances folk dances, they think we live up in trees and can be viewed like monkeys' (Ph 2 FGD Women leaders).

All in all, then, a past and present of violent colonisation and exploitation, first of indigenous Colombians by Europeans and then of some Colombians by other Colombians, has given the majority Afro population of Buenaventura a collective citizenship shaped by normalised

<sup>12</sup> In the early 1980s the littoral fringe of the city, the '*bajamar*', already considerably populated and in places titled as private property, was decreed by the Maritime authorities to be a zone of special State protection, belonging to the sea. This meant that public services would not be installed there and no further land titles would be issued (Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist).

<sup>13</sup> Notes from FINDETER presentation of Proyecto Buenaventura 2050, May 2014, Phase 2.

structural violence. The birth and organisational process of the Afro social movement the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (Black Communities Process, PCN) in the 1990s and the advances in Afro and indigenous rights during and following the Constitution-making process of 1991 helped to dislodge the norm of structural violence against these peoples for a time, at least at the discursive level. This dislodgement never became substantive, however; and even at the discursive level it seems to have reverted in the 2000s. The 'Proyecto Buenaventura 2050' vision with its plans for re-purposing the city as a complex of privately-owned, futuristic mega-ports whitewashes out the black Afro population, their livelihood rights and territorial claims.

From the perspectives of the people we engaged with, seeing like a citizen in twenty-first century Buenaventura means members of a historically marginalised, discriminated-against Afro-Colombian ethnic group struggling to see through the dense networks of corruption and malfeasance surrounding them at the local level, to peer vaguely into the distance. All that the distance holds is an exclusionary, white-dominated, violent state, at best a clientelist provider of electoral campaign trifles – not insignificant to those with little access to such things - often an irrelevant and shadowy presence, and at worst a murderer and torturer. Many Afro citizens of Buenaventura are simply not looking to the state: they are looking the other way.

#### **4.1.2 Violence**

Citizenship identity is multi-dimensional. As well as being Afro-Colombians, most Buenaventura residents used to be salaried workers who depended economically on jobs in the port. A port worker and union leader whom we interviewed cited mass unemployment as a central manifestation of the violence, along with the poor working conditions and violated labour rights and human rights faced by even those lucky enough to have retained employment through the recent wave of port privatisation and workforce downsizing. Reflecting on how violence had evolved over the past 20 years in Buenaventura, he characterised it as passing from 'a violence of street-fights, violence within the same community over a disagreement' through 'the violence we had later, of the *BACRIM* (*bandas criminales*, criminal bands<sup>14</sup>), paramilitaries, guerrilla militias....', to today's situation of 'a structured violence, backed by so much economic power and armaments' (Interview 5, trade union organiser).

*We're seeing that Free Trade agreements at the international level are generating even worse violence. Multinationals, so keen to get their hands on resources and profits, expand indiscriminately, leading to displacements of communities. It's no secret that when the commander of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia [United Colombian Self-Defence Groups, the national coalition formed to consolidate the power of multiple local and regional paramilitary armies] Carlos Castaño was interviewed, he said that the Bloque Calima [Calima Block, a paramilitary army which emerged in south-western Colombia in 1999] came here by invitation – invited by businessmen, and if it was businessmen who brought them in, that was because of the international alliances that the private sector were setting their hopes on at that time.*  
(Interview 5, trade union organiser)

The structural violence of a savagely capitalist labour market is thus closely connected, not only ontologically but causally, with direct violence, and shapes people's sense and practice

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<sup>14</sup> 'BACRIM' or 'criminal bands' is the term used by government and mainstream media to refer to the upsurge of illegal armed actors that has been noted unequivocally in many regions of the country to coincide with the supposed demobilization of paramilitaries. The widespread supposition among Colombian society, although not officially shared by government, is that they are in fact re-configured, re-named, re-branded bands of paramilitaries who have supposedly demobilised, and by doing so have secured immunities and amnesties for crimes committed as paramilitaries.

of citizenship via their identity as members of the labour force, as we shall see in the conceptual discussion of violence in this section to which we now turn.

As already described in section 3.2 and reinforced by the above findings on citizenship, the context of Buenaventura has long been one of structural violence against the majority Afro-Colombian population. Research participants' perception and experience of direct violence, both military and social, has increased fairly unchecked over the 1990s and 2000s despite a series of national government moves purporting to rein it in. A recent significant move was the paramilitary demobilisation process initiated by the right-wing government of President Uribe (2002-10), implemented from 2005 onwards amid intense publicity. Widely regarded as a farce and a failure,<sup>15</sup> it was even more farcical in Buenaventura and the Valle department than in most other areas of the country. A Catholic priest in a Buenaventura parish, instrumental in the municipal Round-Table dialogue process and perhaps the least politically radical and most cautious of all our participants, described the demobilisation process thus:

*There's a network of paramilitary groups forming across Colombia - the Urabeños, for instance. This can happen easily thanks to the strong links between the paramilitary groups and the forces of law and order. The paramilitaries haven't gone and they haven't demobilized; they've just re-organized, around drug trafficking. In Buenaventura all the groups make their presence felt, because of its strategic situation as a port, the 'sea of the future'; because there are lots of expectations centred on this city. A city which is completely unprepared for connecting to the outside world.*  
(Interview 2, Catholic priest)

In February 2013 the Colombian sociologist, journalist and social justice advocate Alfredo Molano dared to publish a feature in the national daily newspaper 'El Espectador' titled 'Buenaventura: Between poverty and violence'.<sup>16</sup> Amid a broadly triumphalist capital-city discourse about Colombia's pacification and its economic development into the Pacific Basin, Molano broke a deafening silence by reporting the extreme levels and atrocious forms of direct violence as well as the devastating structural violence still oppressing most of the population of the municipality of Buenaventura, one of the 'natural treasures' of Colombia. He squarely blamed the 'neo-paramilitaries'-cum-drugs-mafias operating with the complicity of state security forces. He cites a resident explaining in detail the phenomenon of *casas de pique* (chopping houses):

There are houses where they [the 'neo-paramilitaries'] take people to dismember them. The neighbours hear the shouts of pain, people can't sleep. No way can they report anything - unless they want to be the next person dismembered. These houses are in lots of neighbourhoods, it's not just one case, there are loads of them, and they're called chopping houses (*casas de pique*).  
(Molano 2013, authors' translation)

The article boldly accused the national government and captains of industry and trade of complicity with the violence, the neo-paramilitaries and interwoven illegal drugs trade. Drawing intensive national attention to the level and nature of violence in Buenaventura for a time, Molano's article was a discursive challenge too: forcing images of the crudest and cruellest forms of direct violence into people's living rooms, it shook the complacency of a country which had come to think of itself as 'post-conflict'. Molano explains:

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<sup>15</sup> Including by such prominent and 'establishment' voices as the Organization of American States, the official monitoring body for the demobilisation peace process. See also Amnesty International ([www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/continued-presence-of-paramilitary-type-groups-in-colombia](http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/continued-presence-of-paramilitary-type-groups-in-colombia)), and a 2013 report by *Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris* ([www.arcoiris.com.co/2013/03/del-caguan-a-la-habana-existe-una-decada-de-adaptacion/](http://www.arcoiris.com.co/2013/03/del-caguan-a-la-habana-existe-una-decada-de-adaptacion/)).

<sup>16</sup> [www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/buenaventura-entre-pobreza-y-violencia-articulo-406499](http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/buenaventura-entre-pobreza-y-violencia-articulo-406499).

Terror tactics demand that everyone notices but nobody tells; that everyone sees the seizing of the victim in the street and how they're dragged away, hears their screams for help, their pleas for forgiveness and mercy, and at the end, their groans of pain. Then, silence: a terrible vacuum. The screams live on in people's heads. Everyone is afraid of being the next on the list that nobody writes. The next-door neighbours hear, the whole neighbourhood hears, the area knows, the whole city hears about it. The authorities don't hear, don't see, don't know.

(Alfredo Molano, [www.elespectador.com/opinion/remilitarizacion-buenaventura-columna-482425](http://www.elespectador.com/opinion/remilitarizacion-buenaventura-columna-482425))

Molano's breaking of the silence, plus a collective act of public rejection of violence in the form of the mass march in Buenaventura in February 2014 which mobilised great numbers of people (estimates ranged from 20,000–25,000) and was led by the Catholic Bishop, shamed the national government into action. In March 2014 just before our fieldwork started, the army 'militarised the city'. This consisted of suddenly multiplying the numbers of armed forces (army and police) on the streets, and dismantling certain longstanding *casas de pique* including that of the *puente de los nayeros*. 'Militarisation' did not bring a cessation or even marked reduction in violent crime. Several violent murders were reported in the city during the four days of our first fieldwork phase (and not all violent murders get reported). Frequent armed combats between one illegal armed group and another fighting for the control of particular *barrios* continued unabated, notwithstanding the military patrols and checkpoints. Far from making unarmed citizens feel safer, the intensified military presence made them feel less safe, and the continuation of 'violence as usual' only lent credibility to theories of complicity or active cooperation between the armed forces and the illegal armed groups.

The macabre and brutal picture painted by Molano was confirmed by our co-researchers and research participants, some of whom had dared to be interviewed by him. Our first conversation in the Humanitarian Space initiative was with a community leader known for speaking out against violence and playing a prominent role in the Humanitarian Space Initiative. It took place sitting outside his house in one of the streets built from landfill. There was a vacant lot next door where a building had evidently recently been knocked down. In the middle of the conversation he gestured toward the vacant lot, raised his voice and said loudly, 'Here we are in front of a chopping house (*casa de pique* or *picadero*). It sounds hard, doesn't it? Really hard' (Interview 1, community leader, *nayero* bridge Humanitarian Space). A young man spoke for many of the youth participants in our research when he said: 'I was brought up in a street where the guerrilla held one end and paramilitaries held the other, with combats going on all through my childhood' (Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations). Reflecting on youth in this city where violent and early death is the norm rather than the exception, a woman social activist summed up the attitude of young men who have got involved in the illegal drugs trade: 'They say, "I'd rather live five years as a king than 20 years as a beggar"' (Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate).

The territorial dimensions of the violence are manifest in two main ways. Firstly, in a setting where each neighbourhood is under the control of one armed group or another, 'there are invisible frontiers, where a man can't go because if he does and isn't one of that group, they'll kill him, or disappear him' (Ph 2 FGD Women leaders). Even children are keenly aware of where they can and cannot go. This phenomenon of invisible demarcating 'lines' or 'battle fronts' is familiar from work on urban violence elsewhere (Moncrieffe 2008, 2009; Pearce 2007). A map of *comunas* which we obtained at the start of our research was annotated for us by one of our co-researchers to show which armed group was in control of each *comuna*.<sup>17</sup> When the annotations were updated four months later it transpired that several had changed hands in the interim, a process that occurs through gun battles in the streets as

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<sup>17</sup> A term used in Colombia to refer to an administrative unit in the urban area of a medium-sized or large city. See [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comunas\\_de\\_Colombia](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comunas_de_Colombia).

well as disappearances and assassinations of members of the enemy group. The physical space of the parish church of *San Pedro* (St Peter) in the Alfonso Lleras neighbourhood of Commune 3, which was the venue for most of our action research workshops and focus group discussions, was described by many respondents of diverse ages and characteristics as a 'protective space, even though it's stigmatized' (Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations). It has consciously been created as a protective space by the Redemptorist missionary order of priests who serve it, one of whom was on our research team.

Secondly, extreme violence is enacted in carefully-chosen places almost performatively, with the objective of terrorising and sowing fear. *Casas de pique* are located in densely populated residential neighbourhoods, including many consisting of the *casas de palafito* typical of the shoreline of Buenaventura and the whole Pacific coast. These are houses built on stilts above the water from thin board, sticks and branches. Between such houses in crowded neighbourhoods, noise travels a long way. The location of one particularly notorious and longstanding *casa de pique*, demolished by the armed forces just before we began our research, was in middle of the densely populated neighbourhood that was later designated a Humanitarian Space, one of the four organisational processes on which our research focused.

Fear is heightened by the blurred lines between the State's armed actors and the illegal armed actors. The various non-state armed actors who control every neighbourhood in the city do so in full sight of the State's security forces. The police and army are selective in their presence, actions and targets. Their legitimacy is nil among our research participants and low in general. They allow and support the social legitimation of non-state armed actors, through their absence or failure to challenge these actors or their actions.

Fear, then, inspired by the actuality or threat of violence, shapes people's sense and exercise of physical agency through limiting their use of physical spaces and of the public space. The propagation of fear constrains and suppresses social activism and agency of a 'transformative' kind, and even of a 'coping' kind, as in this example given by a member of a women's group:

*Around that time, they killed our friend Chila. We were busy carrying out a community activity, and as soon as that happened, we shut down. We just shut down. We didn't go out any more. There were some holes in my house then, and I used to sit there looking out through the holes, unable to go out because of the fear. We had these pink t-shirts for the community activity. We hid the t-shirts – I put mine inside my pillow - because we thought that Chila had been killed as a result of the community activity we were all involved in.*

(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders).

At the organisational level too, fear shapes and constrains agency:

*People do come together around issues, but fleetingly, depending on what they want to mobilize about. There's no permanent platform of organizations. There was one, started up by a group of young people in 2010, but they didn't have much funding, and then they suffered a robbery at their premises, and then they were threatened by the paramilitaries, and they left Buenaventura.*

(Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate)

A young male participant of the non-violent youth movement that operates out of the parish church of *San Pedro* talked about his first experiences of going to rural areas of the municipality to facilitate workshops for children:

*We spent three whole days beforehand being trained in methodology. But it was just as well: we needed it, so that we could relate to people right [when we got there]. I knew I could facilitate the process OK, but I was so scared when I arrived, because there were four lads, members of the guerrilla, who turned up armed at every workshop. While the children were busy painting, they asked me who I was, what I'd come for... I nearly wet myself. I mean, we're all used to hearing gunshots the whole time, but to have kids of 13, 14, 16 right there in my workshop with their weapons...!*

(Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations)

Mainstream media both nationally and locally in Buenaventura sensationalise violence at the same time as normalising it. Children readily connect the high levels of everyday violence in the streets of their city with the intense violence seen daily on television and in the newspapers. In a children's focus group several children explained that the custom of chopping people up (*picando*) began in Buenaventura when a violent soap opera on television portrayed a victim being chopped up.

The violence is gendered, in both form and effect. Violent assassinations of women have increased to the point that one participant in our research recently wrote a dissertation for her Sociology Masters course on femicide in Buenaventura. Women and men participants reflected on how disappearance, torture, assassination and dismembering of women – including, recently, the dismembering of a pregnant woman in the neighbourhood where our research was mainly conducted - are 'the worst [types of] violence that we're living through in Buenaventura at present' (Co-researcher, commentary on Phase 1). They are used to teach a lesson of fear and domination in reprisal for acts of civilian resistance:

The various resistance mechanisms used by the community haven't stopped the criminal acts of paramilitary groups – on the contrary, they've infuriated these groups to the point that they've changed their *modus operandi*. A very common practice is changing personnel [illegal armed actors] from one *barrio* to another [by their commanders] to ensure they don't form any personal ties with the population. Another, the most atrocious of all, is the dismembering of pregnant women, as happened in Alfonso Lleras *barrio* on 29 April 2014.

(Co-researcher, commentary on Phase 1)

The location of this crime was the neighbourhood where our research activities were focused and its date was two weeks after our first fieldwork period ended and during the militarisation of the city.

Less directly but nonetheless gendered, almost all those we spoke to made strong associations between the longstanding illegal armed violence and the intensification of domestic violence:

*All the violence is connected. Your husband might be having an affair, and you find out, so he beats you up and leaves you in a real mess, so you go and report him to the Police, and then people tell you that the woman he was having an affair with was also hanging out with 'los malos' [literally, 'the baddies', meaning the illegal armed actors], so you race home, sling some stuff together, gather up your children and get out quick, to go into hiding at a [female] friend's house, because you can't stay in your house in that situation [for fear of reprisal against the husband or family by 'los malos']. All the violence is connected.*

(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders)

This was related to changes in social institutions and values, some of which are considered core to Afro ethnic identity:

*If someone's beaten his wife, or fought with his wife, some people go to them [the illegal armed actors] to get them to beat up the husband for it [...]. We Afros used to resolve our conflicts between ourselves, but now that's a task for the paramilitaries, who have the authority and decide what to do: whether they punish the husband and how. And people legitimize it: they seek them out to get them to pay people back through violence. The authority figure used to be community elders; now it's the paras.* (Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist).

*The family is the nucleus and base of all society. The family brings people up by teaching them to respect values: to respect others, to take responsibility, to be considerate of others and collaborate with them. All that comes from the family. But in a family where nobody is taught respect, where nobody is taught to share, where nobody's taught solidarity with others, what can you expect those children to turn into when they grow up?*  
(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders).

Some connected illegal armed violence and domestic violence by claiming that the prevalence of both is down to *machismo*. Others argued that the former normalises violence throughout society, with predictable consequences for the ways households, couples, parents and children address their differences. Predictable too are the consequences for citizen engagement and citizen agency among women, girls, young people and children who learn these new social norms.

Changes in norms extend to norms of dress: one respondent narrated the beginnings of illegal armed violence in Buenaventura thus:

*It started at the end of the 90s and start of the 2000s, and it started with stigmas: anyone [male] who wears an earring, who's got long hair, who wears the wrong trainers.... and we started hearing about people who disappeared and never came back – forced disappearances, violent attacks on people... that was how it started to affect community life.*

(Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist)

Taken together, the urban cartography of violence that children and adults alike have to navigate on a daily basis and the media's role in normalising violence, progressively erode norms of social acceptability and decency. Through socialisation processes and inter-generational transmission (Moncrieffe 2006) these get replaced with new codes of behaviour that people gradually stop questioning and adopt as their own.

#### **4.1.3 Invisible power**

The sophisticated and ubiquitous workings of 'visible power' and 'hidden power'<sup>18</sup> are all too evident in Colombia at all levels of society, economy and polity, and have been much researched by *violéntólogos*, political scientists and scholars of the history and impacts of *narcotráfico* (e.g. Jaramillo Martín 2014; Jiménez Caballero 2009; Pearce and Vela 2005; Pécaut 1997; Sánchez Gómez 2009). What the testimonies of ordinary Afro citizens of

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<sup>18</sup> And also the singularly Latin American phenomenon of '*poder oculto*', defined as 'an increasingly perceptible and common phenomenon in [Latin American] societies: the formation of a network or structure of power relationships which, surreptitiously with respect to the state structure at a certain level (local, regional, sectoral or national), works underground to co-opt and immobilise or restrict formal power in that space. *Poder oculto*, a *de facto* institution, converts itself into the real power-holder from the shadows, at the expense of the rule of law, operating according to its own interests' (Robles Montoya 2002: 13; authors' translation).

Buenaventura add to the picture is intricate insights on violence as 'invisible power' broadly defined: the way violence shapes meanings and re-defines what is acceptable.

The passages above on citizenship and violence mainly relate research participants' own accounts, experiences and positions, including examples in which they had navigated unseen battlefronts and territorial demarcations, or made tactical temporary withdrawals from community activism for fear of violent reprisals. In these instances their own participation in community, social and political life had been curtailed or shaped by actual, threatened or feared violence. This section, on violence experienced as 'invisible power', is about the myriad invisible ways in which violence inhibits, constrains or shapes perceptions and exercise of citizen agency. Research participants talked about people avoiding all community activity as dangerous, disciplining youth or wives by means of authoritarian violence wielded or threatened by extra-familial armed actors, or teaching children to speak the language of armed aggression. In this, they were speaking not of themselves in the present, but of others, or of themselves in the past, *before* they became part of the organisational processes we were looking at. The section demonstrates how research participants have developed a level of consciousness of the invisible power of violence, and deliberately modified their relationship with it.

The excerpt below, from a focus group discussion with children, offers insights into the workings of violence as invisible power, and also into how it is transmitted from one generation to another in the form of violent cultural and social norms learned by children from adults:

Child 1: *What scares us? Hmm. I'm scared of walking through dangerous areas, scared they'll kill me, rape me, send someone after me to dismember me, that's what I'm scared of.*

Interviewer: *Do they do things like that to children?*

Child 2: *Ooooh yes. In these neighbourhoods right here, and in others, most of all in the Bolívar neighbourhood, there's a gang (banda). They do even more to you there, there's a butcher's right there [...]*

Interviewer: *Who's in charge in Buenaventura?*

Child 1: *Judging by the rapes, and the physical abuse, the message is loud and clear that they [paramilitaries] are in charge.*

Child 2: *Well, if someone has a fight with someone and you go and report it to the police, the police can't do anything. You can't go and report it to the police. But if you go and report it to them [the paramilitaries], what they do is, they beat up the person, they kill them, they chop them up, that's what happens.*

Interviewer: *Does the community report things to them?*

Child 2: *Yes, people report things to them, like 'I had a fight with so-and-so', or 'so-and-so is threatening me', so that they [the paramilitaries] go and smash them up; 'I'll give you so much [a fee], what will you do to him for that?' Or if someone is owing you money you go to them and get them to call in the debt, and if the person doesn't pay they know what they've got coming to them. That's why there are so many disappeared people.*

Interviewer: *Do people report children to them, too?*

Child 2: *Yes, they go and ask them to punish children. If children steal, they go and tell them, so that they'll hit them.*

Interviewer: *Who goes and asks them [the paramilitaries]?*

Child 2: *People in the community, parents, that sort of thing*  
(Ph 2 FGD Children of the parish of *San Pedro*, Commune 3)

These interview excerpts illustrate participants' reflections on other people:

*Everyone's lost control, and who has the power now? The guy you know, or the guy with the weapon? That's the way people think, even children: in children's minds the symbols of power and authority are the paramilitaries, and it's always been that way.*  
(Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist)

*We're seeing that all kinds of violence generate more violence. [...] Even the way people speak generates violence, the words they use, the everyday terms. That's exactly what children do, isn't it? They use what they hear. They use the term 'dismembering' in their games or when they speak to each other. That builds up a really difficult problem in society.*  
(Ph 2 FGD human rights organisation)

*Violence is part of everyday life. A local woman gets threatened, directly or indirectly; an armed actor threatens a pretty woman because she isn't going out with him, or demands protection money from her family. We women sometimes naturalise these violences. There are domestic slaves, sexual slaves, among the armed actors, most of them are there out of their own free will. About 35 per cent of the Buenaventura population is youth [defined officially as between the ages of 14- 26], they've never known any context except the conflict. The phrase 'If I don't like what you say I'll chop you up' is an everyday phrase to them.*  
(Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate)

Other comments illustrate how research participants have 'taken consciousness' (to translate directly from the Spanish *tomar conciencia*), and stepped away from violence as a way of life:

*Kids would pick up old lightbulbs, sticks, whatever, and turn them into a pistol or a hand grenade, and go "Pow, pow, pow, got him...!", that's how things were [here] three months ago. That was what made us dare to say 'Enough! This has to stop!' Is it risky? Of course it's risky, but the community's understood that we have to take risks*  
(Interview 1, community leader, Nayero bridge Humanitarian Space)

*These past few years, working in the rural areas of Buenaventura, I've realised that it's different from here. There's a much stronger presence of armed actors there [guerrilla]. There are kids who are still with the guerrilla, but there are others who have changed, and left. That's true leadership.*  
(Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations)

Among members of women's organisations, the notion of power as invisible social and cultural norms that shape the realms of the possible, resonated strongly. Foucault's notion of [invisible] 'power is everywhere' is brought to mind by one woman's phrase 'Power is invisible, but touchable' (Ph 2 FGD Women leaders). Women's descriptions of the gender dimensions of power were peppered with irony, to show that in their view, male domination was far from justified, even if most women experience it as fairly inevitable. For instance:

*Where we are really powerful is in our social and community process. There, we run the show. Setting up a meeting about the little schoolchildren, doing something about the streets that haven't been swept, about the school that doesn't have furniture.... There, now, we women have undisputed power, and we do it with a lot of dedication, love and care. [But] Are we involved in decision-making processes? No.*  
(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders)

The normative suppression and undermining of women's political and citizen agency and leadership is usual in Colombia and in Afro-Colombian culture. However, the prevalence and high awareness of armed and domestic violence against women that we found suggests that it may be accentuated in the Buenaventura case by aspects of the warscape. While these suppressive norms are usually enacted by husbands or male partners, it is often rumours or gossip circulated by other women that prompt the husband to enforce them, and so the gender *status quo* is maintained and reproduced.

Even while displaying their acquired awareness and critical faculties, the women admitted that these reconfigurations of invisible power that they engineer consciously and strategically, are sometimes overwhelmed by their own internalisation of gendered social norms or norms of electoral malpractice. An occasion was cited when a woman councillor was almost elected for the first time, but women themselves failed to use their votes to get her elected because 'just then the man with the briefcase came along' (Ph 2 FGD Women leaders). Solidarity between women was seen to be as vulnerable to malicious gossip as men calculate it is:

*We're so organised here in Buenaventura that I think if we really united, the Council would have only women councillors, the whole of the Town Hall would be run by women. But we're oh so capable women in some things, and yet as soon as a rumour starts to circulate, even if everyone knows it's a lie, we believe everything we're told, and that's enough to tear it all down, all our collective process. We women need to pull together, that's what men are afraid of and why they block our path to power; but as soon as a compañera announces her candidacy for the municipal elections, men are ready to start up rumours [...]. Our problem is, we don't believe in ourselves.*  
(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders)

While these instances could be considered failures by the women to confront invisible power, they might also be the result of tactical choices to operate within the norms of invisible power rather than challenge it, in specific circumstances.

In sum, we found that the invisible power of violence imposes psychological and ideological boundaries on citizen agency and participation. These go unnoticed by some people, but by others – including most of our research participants – they are noticed and confronted at some level. The latter may respect and observe the 'networks of social boundaries' (Hayward 1998) in which violence immerses them, as an everyday survival mechanism. But at the same time, they recognise them and name them, which is a precondition for acting on them; and sometimes they go on to act on them, in a wealth of ways. When they do so, they are no longer behaving only as agents of their own survival – working within their 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984), performing tactical social navigation - but simultaneously operating as change agents, navigating strategically. Our co-researcher (Flórez López) expresses this as adopting the 'amphibian strategy' – going underwater when necessary but always eventually coming up for air and looking around. In naming and transgressing the boundaries of invisible power, they are eluding symbolic violence; they are actively refusing to be complicit with it or with its protagonists.

Long-term structural violence, then, as well as inhibiting and constraining citizen agency, can shape agency in positive ways. It can stimulate transgressive agency, unleash subaltern

politics and fuel organisational processes. Or perhaps, in a context of deep-rooted, historic, ethnically defined marginalisation and inequality, rather than being stimulated by the violence, these are ever-present latent tendencies that are surfaced and activated by it.

This leads us on to discuss forms of citizen agency that we observed as responses to violent conflict: organisation, (de-)legitimation and resistance.

## **4.2 Organisation, (de-)legitimation and resistance**

*People react to violence in a range of ways. In some cases, the social actor manages to recover. In others, violence suppresses agency. In other cases, new social actors spring up. Violence has psychological effects on people's motivations and emotions. Some people decide not to continue with the organisational process they're involved in; the agency and the leadership get fragmented. Or, the agents and leaders themselves get annihilated.*

*In cases where people get involved or stay involved with an organisational process which is about claiming their rights and identifying why the violence is happening and what effects it's having, that's an effort to construct dynamics and strategies in response to the violent actors and their aims.*

*For instance, if the violent actors are aiming to gain control of a territory as part of someone's long-term economic interests, a fundamental step is to [collectively] identify the underlying issues, working and re-working ways to block those interests, always starting from the need to preserve life while exercising freedom of expression - always centrally focused on preserving life - designing strategies to contest the interests of the violent actors and whoever is behind them.*

(Interview 6, Human rights defender)

This excerpt is from an interview conducted at the end of our action research process with a human rights advocate actively involved in the *puente de los nayeros* Humanitarian Space. It spans the full range of forms that citizen agency tends to take in violent conflict situations such as that which grips urban Buenaventura. This section unpacks these forms at greater length, presenting findings and reflections on organisation, (de-)legitimation and resistance, in turn.

Withdrawal into forms of 'survival' or 'coping' agency and self-censorship also arise in the excerpt: suppression and annihilation; liquidation of opponents of the *status quo*. Given our focus on citizen agency as the bringing of issues into the public sphere (see Section 2.1.3), these are beyond our present remit. We discuss them no further except to note that annihilation, as well as the much more common withdrawal and self-censorship, are familiar social and community-level consequences of violence in modern Colombian history, including at the heart of organisational processes led by this very interviewee and by our co-researchers over the past few decades.

### **4.2.1 Organisation**

Colombia is still known as one of the most dangerous countries in the world to belong to a trade union<sup>19</sup> or to social organisations focused on human rights, peasant, indigenous or Afro-Colombian identity and livelihood claims. Systematically, since the 1960s every left-wing political party that has formed has been violently annihilated. Yet Colombian people are fervent organisers. In Buenaventura, despite the intense presence of paramilitary groups, the

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Trade Union Congress (see <https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-issues/countries/colombia>). This has been the situation for at least 25 years.

organisational fabric - a patchwork of all sorts - is flourishing and, at the time of our research, appeared to be going from strength to strength, bolstered by the mass march of February 2014.

Almost all the participants in our action research case study were members of one or more of the four organisational processes we explored. As such, most had become conscious of the 'invisible power' effects of violence and, through their participation in the organisational process in which we met them, are engaged in some relevant form of critical reflection and/or action.

These individuals may well have been drawn to these organisational processes because their own prior socialisation processes had sowed the seeds of this consciousness. The life histories of many of them point towards this explanation. Nonetheless, it was clear that the collective organisational processes were now nurturing the growth and maintenance of critical consciousness. Clear too were the strongly shared characteristics of consciousness: a refusal to become inured to violence and its effects; explicit recognition and open discussion of illegal armed groups and individuals while tactically keeping a distance from them to preserve own lives and physical safety; acknowledgement of territorial demarcations while tactically navigating around them; an alertness to both the negative role of inter-generational transmission in propagating violence and its positive role as a key pathway to non-violent social change; and a critical discourse on the state coupled with self-critical awareness of the roles of their own forbears and their former selves – and sometimes their present selves - in perpetuating clientelist and corrupt governance relations and being over-awed by 'power over'.

The leader of a human rights organisation explained to us:

*Violence itself generates some positive reactions [in terms of organizing]. We see it in lots of contexts. Without such macabre violence, people might just carry on being indifferent, not reacting. When people see [such macabre] violence with their own eyes – when they see a woman being chopped up – people are moved. They experience fear, but there is a moment when they say 'That's enough!' Or they leave, move away. Paradoxically, violence has that quality - either it gets normalised, or it leads to an awakening.*

(Interview 6, Human rights defender)

The leader of the Humanitarian Space initiative cited earlier said while pointing out the site of the demolished *casa de pique* (chopping house):

*But we have to set aside our fear. We're sitting outside a place where there were many deaths, but we have to name them and claim them. Those who lost their lives in this place have given us the spiritual strength, the energy to say 'Enough!' We can't let that situation happen of 'yesterday they came for my neighbour and I didn't speak out; they came for the priest and I didn't speak out, then they came for me and it was too late'<sup>20</sup> [...] That's why the community of San Francisco of the puente de los nayeros, with all our problems and fears – because of course there are fears – has taken up the mantle of peace and said we have to stand up and construct a place of peace, so that our children can play like they're doing over there, and we can sit and talk like we're sitting*

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<sup>20</sup> The saying referred to is a quote from Pastor Niemöller, a prominent and outspoken German protestant pastor in Hitler's Germany who was later interned in a concentration camp. It goes: 'First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me' (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>).

*and talking, right here where two or three months ago we couldn't sit because it was full of people with rifles, pistols, revolvers, grenades.*

(Interview 1, community leader, Nayero bridge Humanitarian Space)

In a focus group discussion with women from the collective of women's organisations, many participants recounted how they had arrived at their women's organisation or at this collective via concrete steps they had taken to address their and their children's material needs in a situation of structural violence. These steps, part of their 'coping agency' or 'survival agency', had led them towards individual assertiveness, organisational abilities and a collective identity. Many of the testimonies included having confronted and navigated the prohibition or disapproval of husbands and partners on the way. For the participants, all of whom had lost family members to violent death, forced disappearance or membership of an illegal armed group, these consciousness-raising experiences and repertoires of tactics were equally useful for challenging, subverting and reconfiguring repressive social norms of any kind, whether relating to gender roles or to pervasive violence.

*Community organization processes have really contributed [to our empowerment] - it's through those networks that you get to know things and learn how to go and claim your rights. You don't know beforehand – you don't have it clear that you need to go and fight for it because it's your right. We got training that really taught us things and enabled us to analyse and understand the reality we're living in today. People who didn't go through that training would say 'I'll take the 2 million pesos of relocation money and go and live in Ciudadela San Antonio' [the small concrete houses far from the sea, provided by an under-funded re-location scheme intended to encourage the residents of the coastal strip to move] – they wouldn't think of the [issue of the] territorio and our livelihoods in the territorio. When you become aware of what you have, you have to fight, take ownership, defend your sense of belonging and of all you've fought for. That's why organisations are important – to give us freedom to express ourselves, to get about, to speak out like we are now [...].*

*To be able to start getting into those spaces of participation, of power and decision-making, we women need to already have gone through quite a lot, to have had a lot of hard knocks in life from the situations we've lived through. You have to be a mother with lots of children, let down by men, and have your own life. If you look at rural areas, men are the representatives [of the household], or the president of the Neighbourhood Action Committee. As soon as we started trying to mobilize those women - you have to try to do it while they cook food for their menfolk - as soon as those women started to challenge decisions their husbands take, their husbands would say 'What are you doing getting involved in this? Get out of it or I'll bash you!*

(Ph 2 FGD Women leaders)

The citation above suggests that the accumulation of a certain 'power within', a resilience developed through surviving livelihood crises, emotional crises and individual and family crises, is a pre-condition for engagement in organisational processes that contest the *status quo*. That is, 'survival' or 'coping' agency can lead to citizen agency, and can also school people for it. Organisations are experienced as the 'power with' that equips individual members to overcome the paralysis of fear, spurn attempts to buy them off, and resist the devaluation of their expectations and rights claims that would otherwise result from this situation of normalised violence and unaccountable governance.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> On 'power with' and 'power within' see Just Associates 2006, Making Change Happen No. 3, 'Concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace', available at [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net) and also available in Spanish at [www.justassociates.org/en/publication-language/spanish](http://www.justassociates.org/en/publication-language/spanish).

#### 4.2.2 (De-)legitimation

*At this point, we all know who's there, but they no longer have that power and that force, because people's actions have taken it away from them' (young woman member of youth group, recognising that the surrounding communities all have a history of violence.*

(Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations)

The low level of legitimacy attached to formal State institutions – both administrative institutions, and the forces of law and order – has already been discussed in Section 4.1 in the context of describing research participants' perceptions and experiences of citizenship and violence. The scant legitimacy people attach to the State derives from the neglect they have always experienced at its hands, and from their conviction that public administrators and local-level elected leaders are controlled by the same interests as the illegal armed actors. This is a violent polity, in which the threat or use of violence is integral to the workings of electoral clientelism and impunity in abuse of public office. These systems, in turn, perpetuate violence by keeping those who benefit from it in power - or just behind the throne. If citizens have withdrawn or withheld legitimacy from the State, on whom or what have they conferred legitimacy? At some point in the 1990s, one respondent told us, in the neighbourhoods of Commune 3 'there was a change, to authority wielded through fear' (Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist). Authority is imposed and maintained over neighbourhoods through the threat and use of violence and the workings of fear. Among the majority of Buenaventura residents, this violence-based authority is legitimate: it is the system they understand, its logic is more tangible than that of the corrupt and ineffectual administrative arms of the State, and its workings are closer at hand, easier to see and to navigate, albeit at a cost.

The paramilitary or 'criminal band' actors of today, and guerrilla movements of the past, have their own ways of legitimating themselves. 'Recycled' (i.e. falsely demobilised) combatants of the paramilitary group *Bloque Calima* moved into town confidently after the 'demobilisation process', enlisted community members and obliged them to participate in community activities under threat of banishment. Paramilitarism as a *modus operandi* has been proven to be structurally linked to massive human displacement across the country since the late 1980s, but at the same time:

*[...] violent actors don't always want to displace citizens, because citizens in the territory they have 'captured' are necessary. Either as a human shield, to use as a negotiating chip; [...] or, to legitimate them. If people leave and there is nobody left to dominate, there is no sense in holding an empty territory.*

(Ph 2 FGD human rights organisation)

Ex-paramilitaries now permeate so many Buenaventura families that the population no longer acts as checks and balances on their violent excesses as they did back in the 1990s and 2000s. In children's minds, 'the paramilitaries are the reference points for power and authority, [children] have never known any others' (Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist). By using the illegal armed groups as the *de facto* forces of law and order (Ph 2 FGD Youth of Humanitarian Space), the majority population has legitimated them and their ways of operating.

Armed actors connected to the drug trade, often the same actors with paramilitary pasts or presents, also have ways of legitimating themselves. They do so by wielding power ostentatiously, particularly by immoderate consumption and spending, sometimes on high-visibility charitable donations that fill gaps left by the State in urban infrastructure. Reflecting on the effects of drugs money among young Afro-Colombians in Buenaventura one participant noted that although drugs money came to them fast and plentifully at certain

times, 'we [the Afro community] didn't act like agents with power. There, too, we were used, instrumentalized' (Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate). The attitude of most Buenaventura youth who got involved in trafficking she summed up in the memorable phrase, 'Better to live five years a king, than 20 a beggar' (*ibid.*).

Against this backdrop of progressive legitimization of non-state armed violence, sometimes insidious, sometimes overt, participants in the action research stood out as de-legitimisers. Speaking with the relative strength of members of collective processes, they represent those mentioned in the citation that opens this section, whose response to extreme violence is to 'get involved or stay involved with an organisational process which is about claiming their rights and identifying why the violence is happening and what effects it's having, [in] an effort to construct dynamics and strategies in response to the violent actors and their aims' (interview 6, human rights defender).

Sudden upturns in the intensity of violence or particularly macabre events can have a dramatic effect in terms of de-legitimation of violence. We see this in the events of February 2014, when in Buenaventura, heavily paramilitarised, racked by financial extortion, drug trafficking, violent commercial exploitation and gun violence, tens of thousands of residents organised, mobilised and staged a mass march under the slogan 'To bury violence to live in a territory with dignity'. The march was the outcome of negotiations between a wide range of parties, seeded by a sub-set of actors whose rejection of violence led them initially to mobilise for a 'civic strike' (*paro cívico*), a term that belongs to the Colombian lexicon of social resistance. Intense negotiations between diverse actors re-shaped the plans into a peaceful mass march, under this all-inclusive, anti-violence, pro-social slogan, carefully formulated to bring the wide range of actors together around what they did all have in common: the rejection of violence. Seeking a leader or convenor for the march who would be considered legitimate by all participants, the organising committee approached the Catholic bishop, an unquestionably respected figure behind whom very diverse currents of public opinion could converge. In assuming this role, the bishop was representing an institution with profound reach throughout society and very widespread legitimacy among Colombians of diverse ideological and political positions. These qualities not only give the Catholic Church convening power and legitimacy, they also enable it to offer a measure of protection to members, followers and co-activists.

### **4.2.3 Resistance**

A term that we did not introduce but which was among the most frequently heard in our interviews and focus groups was 'resistance'. Participants used it in relation to a wide range of actions and positions they are actively involved in: the construction and maintenance of physical or social spaces of contestation and protection such as the Humanitarian Space or the organisational activities that centre on the parish of *San Pedro*; mass mobilisation for events such as the anti-violence march of February 2014; the physical resistance 'in the territory' of Afro citizens refusing to relocate inland despite ever-intensifying violent efforts to displace them; the 'ethnic' or 'cultural' resistance of the Pacific coast Afro-Colombian movement; the deliberate construction of a non-violent counter-culture; and, in the case of the Humanitarian Space initiative, the reporting and denouncing of illegal and abusive actions to both the Colombian authorities and international human rights authorities such as the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and the UN Human Rights Council.

These actions and positions differ in form, and resist a range of different things: the dominant development ideology including its emphasis on mainstream, 'modern', urban, livelihood strategies and their representatives the Colombian State and the port companies; violence and the drugs trade as a *modus vivendi*; prevailing violent cultural and social norms; human rights abuses, illegal acts and impunity by branches of the State and para-State. Yet as a bundle of everyday actions and positions, they have a strongly shared meaning of

'resistance' in the minds of everyone we talked to. 'Surviving in a context of such abandonment [by the state] has been an act of popular resistance', we were told (Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate). This is the language of social militancy, the lexicon of the Colombian left, carrying historical resonance. It illustrates how survival agency bleeds into citizen agency. A women's group told us that in their understanding, 'resistance' is a broad ideological rejection of an exclusionary development model, as well as specific political and social rejection of the forms of power to which they are subjected (Ph 2 FGD Women leaders).

What connects all of the forms of resistance we heard about is that they bring acts or issues into the public realm. As such, they are expressions of collective citizen agency, according to Lister's (2003) definition, and fit within a cultural anthropology perspective on resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2014; Vinthagen 2007). It is less clear how they relate to the classic political sociology definitions and literature on resistance, associated primarily with Scott (1985; 1989; 1990). After looking at the forms of resistance practised by the research participants, we will compare our empirical observations with Scott's classic concept of 'everyday resistance' and the related literature, to see what light they shed on these.

What forms, then, has this resistance practised by the research participants taken?

*As the state has never given us anything, people resist in their territory ['hacen resistencia en el territorio'], because the state can't come along now and say that this territory belongs to it, when people have eked out a living here through survival tactics, hand-to-mouth. Fine time for the state to come along and say 'We need to save you, to put in place the Master Plan!' That's why everyone mistrusts it so much. A state that has always neglected us, that's never helped us in any way, comes along suddenly with one of these great big projects – and we're meant to believe it? That doesn't convince the community – because of that total neglect the state has always shown towards us.*

(Ph 2 FGD human rights organisation)

The deep 'territorial rootedness' [*arraigo territorial*] people talked of is rootedness in ethnicity, class and livelihood as well as geographic space, and 'resisting in the territory' [*resistencia en el territorio*] is central to coastal Buenaventura Afros' explanation of what they are doing there. As Isin and Wood argue in relation to ethnic discrimination, '[t]he social movements that were the results of resistance to such discrimination are undeniably 'real' and political [...]' (Isin and Wood 1999: 50). Here resistance is, before all else, about staying put.

The establishment of the Humanitarian Space on the landfill now called the *punto de los nayeros*, with its recently dismantled 'chopping house' (*casa de pique*), armed teenagers flitting in and out and uniformed soldiers patrolling the corners, symbolises 'resistance in the territory' like nothing else. This is an act of resistance of violence and defiance of the highest order and highest risk, towards illegal and State armed actors as well as the local administration which has been trying for years to persuade these residents to re-locate. The Humanitarian Space strategy is complex, multi-stranded and multi-layered<sup>22</sup>: it combines social mobilisation, political awareness raising, litigation, spiritual and cultural strands of activity, and extends upwards and outwards from this street to the national-level human rights advocacy circles in Bogotá, Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica and the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. A peculiarly Colombian response to a very Colombian problem, it is in some ways emblematic of the classic 'everyday resistance' as characterised by Scott (1985), and in other ways contradicts it.

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<sup>22</sup> Or 'vertically integrated', to use a term coined by Jonathan Fox. See Fox (2001) and Fox (forthcoming 2016).

While resistance in Buenaventura is primarily about staying put, it is also about mobilising. The march of 19 February 2014, a mass anti-violence mobilisation that drew in as much as one-fifth of the city's population, took place in the thick of armed extortion, violence, assassination and forced disappearances. It was a highly public challenge that spurned violence as a culture, defied its proponents and de-legitimised their ways of working. While the citizens of Buenaventura cannot avoid violence, they can resist condoning it and legitimising it, and on this occasion did so very publicly, with the theatrical touch of marching behind a coffin which was carried up nine storeys of the municipal headquarters and laid at the Mayor's door.

A third illustration of resistance that we encountered is harder to describe. Research participants simply withheld legitimacy from violent acts and actors. They denied them the responses of admiration, awe or fear on which these actors' legitimacy, authority and power tend to rest. Although this rejection was expressed in small, often subtle ways, it was not 'disguised' or 'hidden' but 'public', to use Scott's terms: not lowering voices when referring to illegal armed actors; calling illegal armed groups by their names instead of using euphemisms or abstractions; ignoring social boundaries imposed by violent actors, or outwitting them; resisting the colonisation of everyday language with violent words or norms. In these ways, people limited or negated the effects that violence could have on their lives - paradoxical as this sounds when nearly all of them were bereaved and grieving bereaved mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, brothers and sisters.

The contrasting examples of resistance mentioned here raise the question of active vs passive resistance. Assuming a particular mental attitude or staying put and refusing to move may seem passive, particularly when contrasted with a highly visible and risky mass march. In this context, however, people staying put or withholding legitimacy from the culture of violence constitutes very active resistance, against consistent and violent efforts to dislodge them physically, psychologically or socio-culturally. Whether a given case of resistance should be considered 'active' or 'passive' depends on the complex, shifting and volatile dynamics of the context, as pointed out in discourses of resistance within subaltern theory (Scott 1989).

In Buenaventura we found that most of the behaviours through which resistance is manifest are not acts of quiet, low-profile sabotage or irreverence familiar from the 'everyday resistance' literature, nor should they be reduced to their symbolic aspects, powerful though these are. Research participants do not try to hide the fact that their behaviour is resistance, because so much of it is about staying put, not going. As staying put cannot be hidden, part of the resistance strategy is to stay put as visibly and loudly as possible. In terms of its meaning, it is about resisting being frightened away or scared into affirming the prevailing culture of violence. In contrast to Scott's position that 'political masking' is core to everyday resistance, resistance in Buenaventura is about political *unmasking*. By unmasking invisible power for what it is, these forms, far from leaving dominant symbolic structures intact, systematically undermine them.

Scott's work on resistance is helpful in understanding these behaviours as kinds of citizen agency with particular meanings. But helpful too are some later developments of the concept which embrace its contextual, relational, intersectional nature and appreciate how it reflects the particular forms and manifestations of power to which it responds (Johansson and Vinthagen 2014; Nordstrom 1995 cited in Oosterom 2014a). Setting up a Humanitarian Space in Commune 3 is resistance to the visible power of armed gang control; marching through the city with tens of thousands of others 'to bury violence to live in a territory with dignity' is resistance to the hidden power of the drugs trade, commercial encroachment and the state security forces' corruption and impunity; and refusing to live in awe of violence and the violent can be seen as resistance to pervasive, invisible power.

And every action of resistance invites a reaction: the militarisation of the city in April 2014, the intensification of attempts to buy off Commune 3 residents and relocate them in *Ciudadela San Antonio* starting in October 2013 and ongoing in August 2014; the mysterious fire that consumed the wooden-built neighbourhood of Santa Fe, the last urban neighbourhood to mobilise in visible resistance to commercial encroachment by the port companies, in April 2014. As initiatives of organisation, legitimation, de-legitimation and resistance germinate under particular structural conditions and agential possibilities and each take their place in the richly textured, shifting weave of citizen agency, so the structures engage them and respond.

In this programme we did not set out to review much conceptual or theoretical material about resistance because we were focusing on power. A lesson for us and for others wishing to understand agency in violent settings is that as citizen agents in these settings are 'subalterns' (that is, people who are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure and subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes), the scholarship and concepts of resistance are as relevant as those of power. This opens up some interesting directions for further research and theorisation with practical applications to the challenges of supporting ordinary people in contexts of violence and abuse of rights and freedoms.

In the concluding section, we revisit our initial research questions and offer a theoretical framework for understanding what is going on at the nexus of power, violence, citizenship and agency in urban Buenaventura, which is at the same time a strategic framework for envisaging how the agency of relatively powerless citizens in such circumstances can best be supported.

## 5 Conclusion

The Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency programme set out to explore:

- How do social actors react to complex, violence-prone contexts? In such circumstances, how do they exercise agency and use citizen engagement strategies to realise their rights or transform conflict? How do their reactions confirm or negate the legitimacy of powerful actors and structures, tacitly or consciously?
- What hinders their efforts to engage in some way with the conflict and what facilitates them? What can be gained through reflexive analysis of the roles that immersed social actors themselves and external actors seeking to support them, play in catalysing or restraining both violence, and agency to transform violence?
- And finally, how can international social actors (aid donors, INGOs and others) best interact with these expressions of agency and these strategies in the interests of violent conflict transformation and prevention? Are there cases when they should not get involved?

In this section we bring together responses to these questions that arose from the action research in Buenaventura, Colombia.

### 5.1 Agency impaired

Vigh (2006) writes about the effects of violence on agency thus:

At its most basic violence is a relationship between agents whereby at least one of the parties experience a limitation of his/her agency that is interpreted as illegitimate [...].

Using this perspective, violence goes beyond interpersonal violence, including the concepts of structural, cultural and symbolic violence [...]. Common to all violence is thus an issue of *agentive impairment* constituted within the relationship between the aggressor and the victim [our emphasis].

(Vigh 2006: 23)

At the beginning of our action research process, our focus was on actors and agency. Structures and norms were of concern to us, but were peripheral to our vision. In the course of the research they came sharply into focus: both those that underpin violence, and those that are created and reproduced by violence. Arguably, in the setting of Buenaventura it is the socialised yet de-personalised nature of violent structures, norms, practices and imaginaries that makes them so powerful - their lack of 'attachability' or 'attributability' to particular actors. It would seem that violently un-civic, anti-social agency *and* structure *both* impinge on citizens' options, awareness and behaviours. The more deeply embedded violence becomes, the less it seems to make sense to distinguish 'direct' violence (stemming from direct agency) from 'structural' violence<sup>23</sup> - unless, that is, distinguishing them helps to detain and counter them.

While violence is often experienced as what we call visible or hidden power, the Buenaventura research makes clear that it is also experienced as a near-overwhelming invisible power, transmitted structurally from generation to generation through beliefs, social norms, ideologies and everyday habitual practices. Violence as invisible power impairs subaltern agency – in this case, what we are calling citizen agency.

This is a 'first-round' structuration process, in which violence elicits from most people a reaction of unthinking compliance with these violent norms and behaviours. These people submit to the cultural reproduction of violence - they do what Haugaard (2003) calls 'confirm-structuring'. Other people flee, go underground, or at least disguise or abandon their 'active citizen' identities.

## 5.2 Structure confirmed and disconfirmed

Others still, or these same people after being part of particular awareness-raising and change processes, can and do respond by exercising civic, civil pro-social agency. For these actors, the violence resuscitates and reinvigorates ongoing or earlier organisational initiatives or impulses, such that violent actors' attempts at legitimisation often elicit from them responses of de-legitimation. When the more straightforward, common, ideal-type forms of citizen engagement in governance and social life find themselves suppressed or displaced by the inexorable logic of violence, resistance bubbles up. The resistance is intrinsically shaped by various contextual factors, including the particular manifestation(s) of power that citizens are experiencing. This is a 'second-round' structuration process. When they respond in these ways to structural conditions and dynamics, active citizens are 'disconfirm-structuring' the violent actors and their violence.

We encountered, then, 'confirm-structuring' by the majority of the population of the uncivil agency and structures; 'disconfirm-structuring' of the same by the minority active citizens; and then 'confirm-structuring' by the minority active citizens of *alternative* models of collective agency, governance, citizenship and leadership put forward by some peers, allies and leaders. In effect, while the majority opt for 'resistance as exit', a minority opt for 'resistance as proactive citizen agency'. While this tendency does not stop the shooting or eject the illegal armed actors, by confirming or negating – consciously or unconsciously – the legitimacy of the powerful actors and structures, non-violent citizen agency does affect the dynamic structure of the warscape.

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<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Robin Luckham, as peer reviewer, for making me think about this.

The form of power experienced is mirrored in the nature of resistance to power. In a time, place and social context where violence's most striking impact is as invisible power - as a network of social boundaries (Hayward 1998), a discourse, an ideology – the most salient forms of resistance are those that defuse, neutralise or subvert invisible power. They inhere in the deliberately countervailing attitudes, relationships, individual and collective behaviours and organisational models and processes of the minority active citizens.

### **5.3 Addressing impaired citizen agency by supporting disconfirming structure from the outside**

A conjuncture like that of urban Buenaventura in 2014 does not only elicit responses and positions from citizens and their allies, the 'insiders'. 'Outsiders' too are moved by the conjuncture to take positions. They are forced to choose between exercising their position actively and visibly, or holding it passively. A relatively low-risk, tacit way of expressing one's solidarity is through such things as choice of language to use in everyday conversation: for example, avoiding the military metaphors and sanitising or dehumanising euphemisms so common in the local lexicon and local media reporting. In the circumstances in which we conducted the action research, even these relatively 'passive' positions of solidarity are 'active' to the point of being risky, and constitute a purposeful exercise of agency.

Those who actively exercise their position of solidarity with the minority non-violent active citizens take considerable risks in doing so. The protective political accompaniment model applied by some actors embedded in urban Buenaventura rests on the premise that an outsider's identity, whether they be from Bogotá or Europe, constitutes a protective skin of sorts. In the calculations of the violent, the costs of harming these outsiders are higher than the costs of harming local people. These costs are mainly in the currency of legitimacy; they are political in nature. Depending on the identity of the outsider, their protective aura might extend beyond their skin to act as an umbrella, shielding those close to them. Colombian 'outsiders' who manage to resist and navigate successfully in this dangerous warscape, not only surviving themselves but enabling other resisters to survive, do so largely because of their shrewd, experientially-based approach to international 'outsider' support. The human rights NGO which comprehensively supports the Humanitarian Space in the *puente de los nayeros*, promoting critical awareness and carefully honed forms of resistance, has developed a complex model of local, national and international protection over years of trial and error including disappearances, assassinations and death threats. Its strategy of combining permanent physical accompaniment with protective diplomacy and advocacy of the social, political and legal varieties at the national, inter-American and international levels, is an example of vertically integrated human rights advocacy at its best, and at its most dangerous for the protagonists.

The financial costs of vertically-integrated models of human rights advocacy and critical consciousness-raising are considerable if safety considerations are factored in, so financial support from outsiders is usually essential. Its providers need to recognise, though, that aspects of the context may defy the bureaucratic requirements of a results-based approach to aid management,<sup>24</sup> and will need to be prepared to provide their funding within the frame of a mutually trusting partnership, allowing relative autonomy for the key actors to allocate funds in response to need and continuous analysis of the dynamic context.

A simple but valid form of outsider support that we found our mainly 'outsider' research team could make, less dramatic than protective political accompaniment, was that of bearing witness to the organisational, legitimisation and resistance initiatives and processes with which

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<sup>24</sup> See for example [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/175945/DFID-external-results.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175945/DFID-external-results.pdf), and for a critique, [www.mango.org.uk/guide/whyrbmnetwork](http://www.mango.org.uk/guide/whyrbmnetwork).

we interacted. The crisp vision of outsiders can recognise, confirm and affirm dynamics that insiders may no longer see, adding legitimacy to ongoing awareness-raising processes, or facilitating and catalysing them where they are not already happening.

These forms of outsider support, offered mainly indirectly from a distance, or through longstanding embedded actors, can strengthen the non-violent resisters without crowding an already complex dynamic scenario or increasing the number of potential targets of violence. Beyond these, it is questionable whether any other forms of direct outsider support to active citizens in resistance are useful and appropriate. The greatest resource for outsiders wanting to support active citizen minorities to 'disconfirm violent structure' in contexts where citizenship and human life itself are fragile, is the accumulated experience, wisdom and networks of local actors and their longstanding companions, who are to be found in almost every Latin American instance of violence and rights abuse but are in shorter supply in some other contexts with different histories of governance and social organisation. Perhaps their hardest challenge is the need to work obliquely, indirectly and remotely, and over the long term, with little promise of tangible, visible results over the short or medium term.

#### **5.4 Demobilising structural violence**

In the growing citizen engagement literature and practice that exists within the development aid sector, great faith is placed in citizen agency as a remedy for unaccountable governance, in all kinds of settings, fragile, violent and non-violent. Citizen mobilisation and engagement are presumed to be triggered by information about rights and entitlements, which is expected to mobilise people to fill in for state weaknesses, complement public action and claim accountability by revealing abuses of rights or leakages of public funds.

This action research in Colombia, firstly, adds to the growing evidence that in situations characterised by violence past or present, collective or individual action in the face of state failure to provide for and protect citizens is constrained by far more than 'information asymmetry' or the inability to organise and mobilise efficiently and effectively. Other determinants include citizens' perceptions of themselves - which range from hapless victims with needs, to knowledgeable agents with rights; people's sense of whether there is any point in taking action; the degree to which their motivations are self-interest, community-mindedness, solidarity, a need for therapy or self-redemption after trauma; and, crucially, a reasonable certainty that one's action will not be punished by violence or dispossession. These important additional dimensions are brought into focus through the lenses of power analysis, thus affording the additional explanatory power that is needed to better understand citizen-level dynamics in these settings.

Secondly, the case shows how non-violent active, organised citizens' complex processes of 'amphibian'-like social navigation are confronting the legitimacy and the drivers of violence – both structures and agents – in their midst. They are not numerous enough nor strong enough to significantly reduce the level of direct, inter-personal violence; and their counter-hegemonic impact on indirect structural violence is small, slow and hard to detect when set against their overwhelmingly violent surroundings. Supporting such processes is a lengthy, delicate undertaking, requiring significant leaps of faith. Supported by its international partners, the Colombian State continues adopting measures purported to end the armed conflict and reach a peaceful national political settlement by demobilising non-state violent actors. Its efforts will be in vain or unsustainable unless Colombian citizens can demobilise the structural, cultural and symbolic violence that has become so established among them.

# Annexes

## **Annexe I: List of interviews, focus groups and workshops conducted**

All interviewees are anonymised and referred to only by type (e.g. Catholic priest; human rights defender). All Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants are anonymised. Each time a primary source is referred to in the text the reference is prefaced with 'Ph 1' (or 2, 3 or 4) denoting in which of the four research phases it took place.

### ***Phase 1 (April 2014)***

Interview 1, community leader, Nayero bridge Humanitarian Space

Interview 2, Catholic priest

Interview 3, Woman community leader and gender equity advocate

Interview 4, President, Local Action Committee and PCN (Black Communities Process) activist

### ***Phase 2 (May 2014)***

Ph2 FGD Women leaders

Ph 2 FGD Human rights organisation

Ph 2 FGD Children of the parish of *San Pedro*, Commune 3

Ph 2 FGD Youth of Humanitarian Space

Presentation of Project Buenaventura 2050 (Findeter)

### ***Phase 3 (June 2014)***

Interview 5, trade union organiser

Action research workshop with members of women's groups, community development organisations, church organisations, ethnic associations, human rights organisations, youth organisations.

### ***Phase 4 (July-August 2014)***

Ph 4 FGD Women leaders

Ph 4 FGD Youth of parish and community organisations

Action research workshop on leadership with social leaders from range of community organisations and processes

Interview 6, Human rights defender

## **Annexe II: Methodology**

### ***The methodological and epistemological approach of the PVCA programme***

The PVCA programme takes a social constructivist, actor-oriented approach. While there are methodological differences between one case and another, a common thread was to centre not on formal, official structures or institutions, nor on national-level actors, but to engage local-level actors – local change agents, participants in social conversations and mobilisations, individuals and collectives – as our research subjects and collaborators. Some of the case studies did engage with national-level and international actors and processes, insofar as these local actors were engaging with them. The data gathered and constructed with co-researchers and subjects was primarily (not exclusively) qualitative; slightly different sets of methods were used in each. Choice of method was determined by the context, by the preference of researchers and co-researchers, and by which specific research questions were of most interest in each case.

Case study selection logic has been shaped by the mixed nature of the PVCA programme as both action research and qualitative research. In keeping with our action-oriented objective, we have selected cases in which, first and foremost, our work could encourage and support citizen agency by the co-researchers or participants in relation to their violence-affected contexts. This is with a view to ensuring they are useful to the local co-researchers and social action processes they are engaged in. In keeping with our concerns about theoretical gaps and blind spots, the cases were selected so as to permit rich, diverse description and empirical exploration of the above starting propositions, test their validity and their implications in a range of contexts, and identify the conditions under which the propositions apply most and least. In this respect, they are a combination of ‘atheoretical descriptive’ and ‘theory-testing’ in nature (George and Bennett 2005), aiming not to cumulatively prove or disprove any particular theory but to advance conceptual clarity through ground-truthing some propositions and sharpening them, and to provide a basis for potential theory-testing research at a later date.

All five case studies built on past work of the IDS researchers. They took place in partnerships growing out of earlier collaborations with in-country social activist or research organisations and actors, firmly grounded in the local processes and contexts that made up the cases explored. In many cases we worked with organisations whose members and local partner organisations engage in peaceful and non-violent ways with the latent or overt conflict around them. Organisational and institutional capacity in relevant applied and action research is scant in southern countries undergoing or emerging from violent conflict, so we sought to enhance these capacities through our engagement wherever possible. Broadly speaking, then, they count as participatory research and in some cases participatory action research.

### ***Research quality and validity***

Situating the research as ‘seeing like a citizen’ has implications for how we and others understand the validity of our work. If the perspectives we aim to unearth, learn from and draw conclusions about are those of citizens in violence-affected settings, then the normal academic canons of validity are not the only ones or the right ones to use in judging its quality and validity.

The traditional criteria for judging the quality and validity of quantitative research conducted within a positivist or post-positivist paradigm of enquiry are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, and the alternative but commensurate criteria posited for qualitative research within in these paradigms are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2011; Trochim 2006).

The PVCA project is located in a slightly different epistemological terrain, which takes in elements of participatory and action research as well as qualitative research. Judgements about its validity must therefore be framed within what has been called 'extended validity' (Lincoln *et al.* 2011) associated with the participatory research paradigm: assessing 'the ability of the knowledge [generated] to become transformative according to the findings of the experiences of the subjects' (Lincoln *et al.* 2011: 114). Also relevant are action research quality standards. These are concerned with whether the action research:

- explicitly develops a praxis of relational participation;
- is guided by a reflexive concern for practical outcomes;
- is inclusive of a plurality of knowing;
- is worthy of the term 'significant'; and
- is emerging towards a new and enduring infrastructure.  
(Bradbury and Reason 2001)

It was not within the scope of the PVCA case studies to re-visit later and systematically assess how far these participatory and action research standards of quality and validity had been fulfilled. But the ongoing involvement of most of the PVCA researchers in the social settings or processes explored is a – admittedly, highly positioned – way of assessing how far the work proves itself valid over a longer timeframe than the case study period.

### **Fieldwork**

The work was carried out through four fieldwork phases in April, May, June and July 2014, each lasting 3-4 days. Analysis and co-construction of meaning was mainly carried out together with participants, in the collective 'reflective workshop' spaces we convened and facilitated. The research team held its own collective analysis session after the first and the final fieldwork phase, and continued the analysis together in a less formal, discursive way throughout each fieldwork phase. Each researcher also engaged in focused individual analysis when transcribing and writing up notes from the interviews, discussions and workshops held.

### **Phase 1**

The first phase of fieldwork in Colombia in April 2014 consisted of exploratory in-depth interviews with key informants, focusing on their perspectives on violence, citizenship and citizen agency. We explored these key informants' perspectives, illuminated by insights from a review of recent literature on themes of citizenship, violence, power and citizen agency in Colombia which both informed the interviewing and our interpretation of what was said.

From the set of research questions above, the Colombia team elected to focus on the first two of the research questions, as the most relevant to that context: how social actors exercise agency and use engagement strategies in reaction to their complex, violence-prone context; and what hinders and facilitates their efforts to engage - including reflective and reflexive analysis with participants of the role that external actors and immersed social actors themselves play in catalysing or restraining both violence, and agency to transform violence.

The research team initially worked together to develop a shared understanding of our purpose and of the key concepts in play in PVCA. These are all concepts with enough kinds of 'baggage' – normative, cultural, linguistic, disciplinary, Colombian, Latin American – to require considerable discussion and co-construction of meaning in an inter-cultural, multi-actor research team. The exercise was greatly enriched by the fact that two of the team are more social activists than social researchers, and live and operate in the *barrios* of Buenaventura.

We then began to familiarise ourselves with the warscape of Buenaventura and its civilian and non-violent actors. We sought out and met with a range of actors involved in different kinds of collective action process: the president of a neighbourhood Community Action Committee (*Junta de Acción Comunal*), the most local level of governance; an ex-employee of the Municipal administration involved in community activism; a social leader who is spearheading a newly established 'Humanitarian Space' in the *Puente de los Nayeros*, in the heart of an area controlled by one of the two dominant armed groups; representatives from the United Nations office of the High Commissioner for Refugees who are accompanying and supporting the Humanitarian Space process; a relatively highly-educated, socially mobile woman who is active in several grassroots, regional and national women's groups and spaces of the Colombian feminist movement, including on issues of violence against women; a Catholic priest who is among the leaders of a very broad multi-actor conciliation process that was born out of the latest large-scale social protest in the city, which in turn was sparked by the acute levels of violence and dramatic local manifestations of state failure in respect of public services. We spent several hours at a time in the Humanitarian Space, observing the comings and goings of residents, local armed actors, soldiers, police, NGOs and international agency personnel who are supporting the Humanitarian Space.

In all these preliminary exploratory encounters, we employed a semi-structured interview approach focusing on our core concepts of citizenship, agency, violence and power. We concluded fieldwork with a reflection and planning session in which we discussed and analysed what we had learnt about these concepts and in some cases their intersection, and what this meant for planning the rest of the case study. We also re-visited our aspiration to conduct the work as action research, weighing up how feasible that is in this context.

The four 'social processes' on which we chose to focus for the remainder of the process were:

- A '**round-table**' process of dialogue between local government and representatives of a wide range of social actors. These included various organisations of the Catholic Church (Social Pastoral team; Afro-Colombian Pastoral Centre; Life, Truth and Justice Commission; religious Orders); commercial establishments; NGOs; civic committees formed to claim fundamental rights such as water, housing and health; grassroots organisations formed in defence of ethnic rights of the Afro-Colombian population (e.g. PCN, *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* or Black Communities Process), etc.
- A '**Humanitarian Space**' established in the heart of a neighbourhood acutely affected by paramilitary violence and state connivance. The process is led by the 'nayero' community (people originating on the river Naya), with external support and protection provided by local Catholic clergy, national NGOs, international NGOs and UN agencies. This community has been taking up residence along the tidal edge of the city for decades and have reproduced here the traditional livelihood strategies and social dynamics of their places of origin, within the legal recognition and collective rights framework afforded to autonomous Afro-Colombian collectives in the wake of the 1991 Constitution. In a context where all the tidal margins of the city are now in the control of legal and illegal armed actors, the community has appealed to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission for protection, and has obtained Precautionary Measures<sup>25</sup> for the protection of their lives and territory. They have formulated their own internal plans for community life and protection, environmental conservation and organisational strengthening, and communicate their positions through the use of street theatre and

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<sup>25</sup> 'Precautionary measures' are defined thus: Dictated by court orders in order to ensure that a right may be made effective in the case of a dispute that recognises the existence and legitimacy of that right. Precautionary measures do not imply a judgment regarding the existence of a right, but taking aimed at realising the right to legal action is eventually recognised (Ossorio 2006). Definition available at <https://temasdederecho.wordpress.com/tag/concepto-de-medida-cautelar/>; authors' own translation.

music as well as through more conventional approaches to social communication, consciousness-raising and political lobbying. The community leaders, strongly committed to the defence of the collective territory and collective rights, have confronted violent actors in the name of these. The Humanitarian Space is seen in Buenaventura and further afield as an outstanding example of unity.

- A **youth platform** comprising several human rights and arts associations in the city. Meeting frequently, this 'youth action' platform accesses, creates and facilitates spaces for engagement in public policy processes. It holds events, affirmative actions and cultural spaces for youth, human rights and the right to territory. Through its actions it aims to reclaim memory and public spaces abandoned by the municipal public administration. It holds its meetings in the Catholic parish of *San Pedro*, in the Lleras neighbourhood of Commune 3.
- A **collective of women's organisations** that forms part of the network 'Breaking Silences' (*Rompiendo Silencios*) and other activist networks in the city. Victims of the armed conflict, they have organised themselves around the theme of memory and the struggle for women's rights. This collective takes part in various spaces and processes focused on violence against women and presses for the problem to become visible and be addressed at the national level. The constituent organisations are located in various Communes and neighbourhoods of the municipality, where the women work to support community dynamics and keep alive the memory of the armed conflict.

These were all forms of collective agency - '*procesos organizativos*' in Spanish, for which the nearest English translation would be 'organisational processes' or 'social processes'. A close translation of this Spanish rendering, 'organisational processes', although slightly awkward in English, captures well the collective, dynamic, processual, fluid but directional nature of these processes, and helps place the emphasis on the collective *process* rather than on any single collective actor or multiple individual *actors*. To capture their nature as accurately as possible in English, we will call them 'organisational processes'.

### **Phases 2 and 3**

During the second and third fieldwork phase, the team convened focus groups and individual interviews with members of these processes to discuss understandings and experiences of power, violence and citizenship (second visit) and explore in depth power and power relations in the organisational processes we looked at (third visit). We also visited more of the neighbourhoods in which the participants live, work and organise, attended official presentations of the port modernisation plan 'Proyecto Buenaventura 2050', participated in and observed meetings of each organisational process of interest and consolidated their findings and interpretations by way of collective analysis sessions.

### **Phase 4**

In the fourth fieldwork phase, we convened focus group discussions with representatives of the organisational processes to explore the forms of citizen activism in which they are involved. We had planned to return to the Humanitarian Space on this final field visit to convene a focus group discussion there, or interview the leaders and key actors in the process in another location. This had to be cancelled because a recent escalation of declarations and acts of violence against the Space and its supporters had driven the community leaders into hiding and obliged other supporters to lower their profile. Fieldwork ended with a team workshop in which we reflected on the process and findings and advanced in the collective analysis of findings.

The final report was written by McGee with inputs from Flórez López, based on interview and focus group transcriptions and detailed notes from these collective analysis sessions.

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