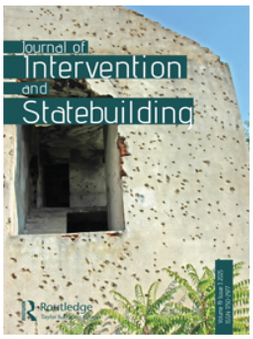

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State Officials' Impact on Peace Agreement Implementation: Insights from Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates how state officials can influence peace agreement implementation on the ground, focusing on Colombian local-level bureaucrats involved in the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement. Integrating rarely appreciated insights from public administration into peacebuilding research, it presents unique survey and complementary qualitative evidence generated through long-term research on-site (2021–2023). The article argues that, despite legal, institutional and administrative constraints, Colombian state officials significantly shape the inclusivity of the sub-national implementation process and support community actors to varying degrees and in diverse ways. Therefore, it advocates for greater attention to state officials in peacebuilding research more generally.

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Introduction

Implementing peace agreements is a core task of states in the aftermath of violent conflict. However, state entities are often blamed for peacebuilding shortcomings (DeRouen et al. 2010; López et al. 2020; Trejos 2020; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). State officials represent and enact peace agreement implementation (PAI) on behalf of the state. Nevertheless, beyond a growing body of anthropological peace research (Buchely Ibarra 2020; Burnyeat 2020a; 2020b; Vera Lugo 2022), peacebuilding scholars have rarely engaged with them to date.

This article posits that this is problematic because it treats states as internally homogeneous and neglects state officials' agency as well as their peacebuilding impact. It makes this argument in the context of participatory development programmes (PDETs) for the rural areas of Colombia's 16 most war-affected regions that were anchored in the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian State and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army). Coordinated by the *Agencia de Renovación del Territorio* (ART, Agency for Territorial Renewal), the PDETs involve massive investments in rural development but suffer from numerous shortcomings, including bureaucratic hurdles,

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slow implementation progress and limited participation that is nominal rather than transformative (Jaramillo Marín et al. 2023; Velásquez et al. 2021; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). I argue that, in addition to ART-internal centralism, the legal, institutional and administrative setup of the PDETs prevents regional ART officers from sustainably addressing PDET shortcomings but grants them some room for manoeuvre. By using their influence, regional ART officers significantly determine the inclusivity of the PDET implementation, community representatives' satisfaction and advocacy, and the achievement of wider state-building goals. Meanwhile, they support community actors to varying degrees because their assessments of their scope of agency, understandings of inclusivity and its practical implementation, and perceptions of their own PDET role differ individually. Methodologically, these claims are supported by an original survey, in-depth interviews with more than half of ART staff and other PDET stakeholders in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta-Serranía del Perijá (SNP) PDET region, participant observation of PDET events, and numerous personal interactions and exchanges via WhatsApp. The data has been generated since 2021 in the context of a larger research project on the PDETs.

Grounded in a conceptual understanding of PAI as an interactive, dynamic, and inherently political process, this investigation theoretically and empirically elucidates the role of individual state officials in the implementation of peace agreements. More specifically, it analyses how regional ART officers perceive and respond to participatory shortcomings in the sub-national PDET implementation and how they support community actors. Besides, it explores the key drivers and PAI implications of their agency mobilisation in the SNP. In doing so, this investigation draws on public administration research and anthropological studies of the state to examine state officials' peacebuilding impact.

This article contributes to several bodies of literature. First, it addresses the lack of examination of state bureaucracies in post-war settings. As a result, it sheds light on the poorly researched role of state officials in PAI and offers a much more nuanced picture of the inner workings of public policy implementation than is currently the rule in peacebuilding scholarship. This engagement is the cornerstone for this article's main message to the wider peace research community: the need to consider state officials' agency and their peacebuilding relevance. Furthermore, this article complements critical participation and inclusive peacebuilding literatures by directly engaging with the inclusion-related views and actions of little studied state officials rather than ignoring or blaming them for inclusion shortcomings. Hence, it adds a crucial but rarely appreciated perspective on exclusion in peacebuilding interventions and shapes awareness for the actions state officials take in response to participatory barriers. Finally, the article addresses gaps in the public administration literature, which has overwhelmingly researched civil servants in the so-called Global North (Peeters and Campos 2023, 979), and speaks to broader discussions of post-war trust-building (Burnyeat 2020a; Pospisil 2019; Rettberg 2020) by deconstructing how state officials influence government responsiveness and state-society relations.

This article firstly highlights the policy relevance of state officials for PAI. Importing insights from longstanding public administration research, it discusses determinants of their influence and situates these theorisations within the context of the PDETs and the role of regional ART officers in their implementation. The empirical analysis unpacks how the PDET setup and ART-internal centralism prevent regional ART officers from tangibly addressing core PDET implementation shortcomings but grant them room of manoeuvre. It then moves on to explore the mobilisation of their agency and its consequences. In doing so,

it does not overlook the internal diversity among ART staff and also analyses how individually diverging expectations, role perceptions, and understandings of inclusion in the context of the PDET implementation contribute to significant variation in the extent and tools they use to support community actors. The article concludes that state officials are key PAI players and advocates for further research on the influence of state officials on post-war public policy implementation and state-building more generally.

State officials in peace agreement implementation

Governments must approve peace agreements, but state officials coordinate their implementation on the ground. State officials constitute the visible face of states for citizens (Burnyeat 2020b). They also 'represent the hopes of citizens for fair and effective treatment by governments, even as they are positioned to see clearly the limitations on effective intervention and the constraints on responsiveness' (Lipsky 1980, 12). Consequently, a growing number of anthropological studies highlight that they often face tensions between personal commitment to a 'good cause' (such as peace, reparations, inclusion etc.) and practical obstacles that prevent their ideals from becoming reality. In doing so, many of them demonstrate a great deal of reflexivity and even 'bureaucratic activism' (Buchely Ibarra 2015), which involves 'working extra hours, pouring efforts into overcoming cumbersome bureaucracy (…) [and] making the state function via the personal efforts of individuals' (Burnyeat 2020b, 46).

State officials are much more than mere implementers of politicians' decisions. Public administration research has long emphasised government officers' agency and policy influence for instance (Lipsky 1980; Meier 1997; Shapiro 1988). In his influential work, Lipsky (1980, 13) even characterises street-level bureaucrats as policy-makers who 'exercise wide discretion in decisions about citizens with whom they interact' (Scott 1997, 37). Krause (2004, 43) thereby defines discretion as 'the ability of an administrator to choose among alternatives and to decide how the policies of government should be implemented in specific instances'.

Organisational characteristics, client characteristics and their individual attributes shape state officials' scope and actual mobilisation of agency (Scott 1997). In the organisational realm, formal rules (Aiken and Hage 1966) and organisational routines (Peyrot 1982; Wasserman 1971) restrict bureaucrats' flexibility. Similarly, departmental goals (Eitle 2005), values and ideologies (Jordan, Stråth, and Triandafyllidou 2003), managers (Henderson and Pandey 2013), politicians as superiors (Gilboy 1992) and their influence on frontline work (Peeters and Campos 2023) all impact state officials' scope of agency and behaviour by shaping organisational cultures, among other factors. Around the world, research on client characteristics has provided consistent evidence regarding the relevance of citizens' behaviour in interactions with bureaucrats. Factors such as whether they display likeable or unlikeable behaviour (Fleming 2020), their political preferences (Bussell 2019), socio-economic status (Gilens and Page 2014), ethnicity (White, Nathan, and Faller 2015) and/or minority status (Dinesen, Dahl, and Schiøler 2021) influence the support citizens receive from state officials. This is partly because bureaucrats perceive citizens as in need and deserving help (Jilke and Tummers 2018) or because they can serve particular political goals or other interests (Gilens and Page 2014). In a recent study, Barceló and Vela Baron (2024: 21) find a causally significant

positive bias among local officials towards conflict victims in Colombia. This effect is particularly pronounced when there is an 'ideological match between the party in power and the identity of the perpetrator of violence' as state officials want to demonstrate their commitment to peace and 'separate themselves from violent groups on their ideological side'. Thus, this finding also matches longstanding research, which evidences the impact of bureaucrats' individual attributes on discretion mobilisation. Relevant factors include but are not limited to their political attitudes and perceptions of a policy's value for citizens (Tummers 2011), (non)conformity and risk propensity (DeHart-Davis 2007), moral dispositions (Zacka 2017), professional role perception (Bell and Smith 2022), identity (Loyens, Schott, and Steen 2019), and employment terms (Peeters and Campos 2023), for example.

Public administration scholars have extensively documented that the agency of state officials is a general feature of public policy implementation, and there is no apparent reason why PAI settings should be an exception to this rule. The fact that PAI involves 'continued negotiation, renegotiation, sustained dialogue and continuous dispute resolution' (Joshi and Quinn 2015, 5) among numerous stakeholders and at multiple scales further raises this likelihood. While politically influenced legal, institutional, and administrative public administration or policy implementation arrangements affect state officials' scope of action, state officials may exercise their power in 'bad faith' (Kipo-Sunyehzi, Brenya, and Fusheini 2024) to pursue personal interests. Conversely, they may also act in alignment with the interests of their superiors or the citizens they serve on behalf of the state. This implies that the policy impact and consequences of civil servants' agency vary situationally and on a case-by-case basis, and depend on their actual behaviour. This is neither inherently good nor bad. Public administration scholars have argued that discretion is necessary for effective public policy implementation, as it enables bureaucrats to apply specialised knowledge and expertise (Lane 2020) and helps diffuse both power and conflict (Bryner 1987). These insights are relevant for PAI because they suggest that state officials, to some extent, influence the repercussions of common implementation blockages and obstacles on the ground (Ramsbotham 2022) and serve as crucial mediators of citizens' perceptions of PAI.

This article offers an in-depth examination of regional ART officers' support for community actors and their influence on the implementation of the PDETs. It iteratively engages with public administration and anthropological peace research to structure and interpret a large body of novel empirical data that systematically captures the perceptions and actions of regional ART officers among other features.[1] The interplay of various factors determines the scope, mobilisation and consequences of the agency of state officials on policy implementation processes and outcomes (Scott 1997, 37). Therefore, the purpose of this article is not to establish causal links but to focus on key determinants of the actions of ART officers, especially their participatory experiences and assessments of the PDET implementation, and to disentangle their impact on PAI dynamics and consequences. However, due to the context-dependent nature of these dynamics (Scott 1997, 37), I will first situate regional ART officers within the ART and the broader legal, institutional, and organisational PDET implementation setup. Based on the determinants of state officials' agency mobilisation introduced above – organisational characteristics, client characteristics, and bureaucrats' individual attributes – I will subsequently discuss

their potential implications for the agency of regional ART officials and their behavioural responses to the ongoing PDET implementation process.

Situating the ART

The ART is the state entity responsible for coordinating the PDETs' implementation. The PDETs are a core component of the comprehensive rural reform established under the 2016 peace agreement and are currently being implemented in the rural areas of Colombia's 16 most war-affected regions. Land inequality, socio-economic exclusion and a lack of state authority in rural areas represent root causes of the Colombian armed conflict (García Trujillo 2018, 60). The PDETs aim to address these structural conflict drivers by 'clos[ing] urban-rural breaches and creat[ing] conditions of well-being and living well for the rural population' (Colombia 2016, 7). In doing so, they also seek to settle the Colombian state's 'historical debt' (FIP 2017b) to its rural inhabitants who have disproportionately suffered from conflict-related violence and experience significantly higher levels of poverty, illiteracy, and food insecurity compared to the national average for instance. Development programmes have existed in Colombia long before the PDETs. However, what makes the PDETs unique is their exclusive limitation to rural areas, mandatory public investments, and PDET communities' significant input and nominally strong decision-making powers at all stages of their implementation (Colombia 2016, 11).

Citizen participation in the PDETs initially took place through a mass consultation process, during which 'more than 220,000 people' (Duque Márquez and Archila Peñalosa 2021, 202) contributed to the formulation of a total of 33,007 initiatives (ART 2024). Subsequently, the mode of participation shifted to an indirect model of delegated representation, in which democratically elected community representatives, organised into so-called *grupos motor* (hereinafter referred to as coordinating groups), decide on the types of developmental interventions to be pursued with PDET resources. In doing so, they work closely with the ART and the respective mayoralties, the latter being responsible for implementing prioritised projects. However, the practical implementation of the PDETs faces significant constraints, which are often associated with then-President Duque (2018–2022), an opponent of the peace agreement signed by his predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos. These shortcomings include, but are not limited to, bureaucratic hurdles (Jaramillo Marín et al. 2023, 45), a lack of enforceable rights for citizens and their exclusion from key decision-making and financial processes (Bachmann 2023; Velásquez et al. 2021; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). Additionally, there is a major corruption scandal, highly unequal resource allocation among the 16 PDET sub-regions (Echavarría Álvarez et al. 2023, 15), and little harmonisation with other rural policies agreed upon in the peace agreement, such as land distribution and illicit drug substitution programmes (Vélez-Torres et al. 2022).

The ART is a frequent target of such criticisms because the coordination of the implementation of the PDETs and their inclusivity is its responsibility (Colombia 2017, Art. 5). Established in 2017 through the spin-off of a department of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Bogotá-based headquarters hires and supervises regional ART officers. The national government appoints the ART leadership, largely determines the resource allocation for PDET projects and the ART's own budget, and monitors its performance. Consequently, its design reflects the centralist functioning of many public entities in

Colombia. Nevertheless, lower-rank officials in the ART headquarter and the regional offices significantly influence overall institutional achievements. According to regional ART officials, 'we are the voice and ears of the territories and make sure that they are heard in Bogotá' (Interview with ART officer 2021b). Meanwhile, regional ART staff also serve as the visible face of the state (Burnyeat 2020b) in relation to PDET inhabitants and their representatives, the aforementioned coordinating groups. Hence, their work involves intense interactions with the coordinating groups, and the participatory promises of the PDETs nominally imply that they should act in coordinating groups' interests and respond to their desires. Depending on their interpretation of their role, this can lead to varying effects on the mobilisation of their scope of agency. If regional ART officers primarily see themselves as state employees, the literature predicts limited exercise of discretion in their interactions with citizens, as they prioritise accountability and adherence to the orders of their hierarchical superiors (Jensen and Pedersen 2023; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Nielsen 2015). Conversely, regional ART officers who identify more as citizen-agents are likely to display greater discretionary behaviour because they value the needs and relationships with citizens. They may even act against their superiors' orders or interests to accommodate citizens' desires due to individual normative or moral judgements, for instance (cf. Jensen and Pedersen 2023; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000).

In addition to the Bogotá headquarters, 16 regional ART offices coordinate the PDET implementation in each PDET region. In the SNP, ART officers operate from offices in Valledupar and Santa Marta, the two largest cities in the area. They are selected based on their work experience and educational qualifications.[2] In addition to two finance experts, the team includes 13 other sector specialists with professional backgrounds in civil engineering, architecture, economics, agricultural engineering, public health, and law for example. Furthermore, two team members serve as liaisons with the ethnic and *campesino*[3] PDET communities and their representatives.[4] With the exception of four leadership staff members, all regional ART officers work as so-called *contratistas* ('contractors') under precarious short-term contracts without holiday entitlement, fixed working hours, social security, and pension payments. Although these employment conditions are common in Colombian public sector contracting, they have been linked to higher levels of perceived job insecurity and job dissatisfaction (González Arenas 2019). As a result, there are few incentives for regional ART contractors to defend their superiors' interests at all costs. This may lead to discretionary behaviour due to conflicts of interest between PDET citizens and Bogotá-based (political) principals for instance. Government changes in Colombia typically coincide with shifts in administrative personnel. Upward-facing behaviour becomes more likely when ART officers believe that the incumbent will remain in power. Conversely, the opposite situation can trigger the mobilisation of discretion as it allows ART officers to distinguish themselves from the government that hired them, thereby increasing the likelihood of contract renewal. Given the nominally strong decision-making powers of coordinating groups in PDET matters, ART officers have also mobilised their discretion to gain popularity and mitigate the threat of staff rotation (Peeters and Campos 2023, 981) through the support of coordinating group members, for example.

Most SNP officials have extensive careers in the public sector and began working for the ART in the initial months of its establishment. Half of them had prior professional

experience with today's PDET communities before joining the ART. Their individual profiles resemble those identified by other scholars (Pellegrino 2017; Vera Lugo 2022). In contrast to most PDET residents – among whom three-quarters are state-recognised victims of the armed conflict, yet less than 20% hold a higher education degree (MAPS and UNDP/PRIO 2020, 88) – all SNP ART officers have university degrees and reside in urban areas. None of them is a registered victim. Hence, there are significant social differences between the ART officers and the PDET residents with whom they work. This disparity may motivate ART officers to support citizens in order to gain their trust. Meanwhile, there is strong support for the peace agreement and its participatory agenda among SNP ART officers, which aligns with the sentiments prevalent among PDET residents (MAPS and UNDP/PRIO 2020). Conversely, this support contrasts sharply with the Duque administration's lack of political will and interest in implementing the peace agreement (Jaramillo Marín et al. 2023, 45), which was responsible for the majority of the PDETs' consultation and initial implementation phase. Nevertheless, citizens' government perceptions shape their relationship with state officials on the ground, regardless of the latter's political stance (Burnyeat 2020b). Depending on their professional role identity, these circumstances should encourage ART officers who identify as citizens-agents (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000) to support community actors, both openly and discretionarily. Although this may conflict with the interests of their government superiors, they can justify their actions by arguing that the government is acting against citizens' interests when hindering the implementation of the PDETs and constraining their inclusivity. Theoretically, this also reduces the risk of internal sanctions for ART officers who engage in discretionary actions to meet community actors' demands because it aligns with the purpose of the PDETs.

Data and methodology

This article evidences how regional ART officials influence the sub-national implementation of the PDETs. Original survey data from all 21 staff members of the SNP ART office (excluding administrative and office support staff) particularly informs its arguments. The survey was conducted from October 2022 and January 2023 and captures ART officers' perceptions and desires regarding the PDET implementation, as well as likely triggers of discretion mobilisation. However, it does not allow to explore ART officers' actual use of their scope of agency and its PAI consequences. Therefore, 13 semi-structured interviews with SNP ART officers (July 2021–December 2022) and numerous other PDET stakeholders (May 2021–June 2023), participant observations from 21 PDET events in PDET communities and urban centres of SNP PDET municipalities, ART meetings and office visits in Santa Marta (October 2021–August 2023), and constant personal and WhatsApp exchanges since October 2021 complement the survey data.[5] While interviews with ART officers based in Valledupar were conducted via videocall, interviews with staff from the ART office in Santa Marta were face-to-face.

The data generation took place in the context of a larger research project on citizen participation in the implementation of the SNP PDET[6] that involved several research stays on-site (2021–2023) of in total eight months length and not only engaged with ART officers but with PDET residents, community and victims representatives as well. Regional ART staff was supportive of this research from the very beginning and I

enjoyed constant access to the Santa Marta office.[7] This also enabled me to observe first-hand the actions regional ART officers take to address PDET implementation shortcomings and their motivations for doing so. The personal relationships I built over time were critical to this endeavour and I made use of them repeatedly to cross-check that ART officers are comfortable with this research and their contribution to this article.

Two regional ART leaders approved the survey, which was conducted online via Google Documents (October-December 2022). It consists of 23 items and several questions on the respondents. These were grouped into four sections, beginning with open-ended questions about their vision and actual experiences related to the implementation of the PDETs' participatory agenda. Moreover, the first section inquires the perceived relevance of citizen participation and ART officers' assessments of the overall implementation of the PDETs and the peace agreement. The subsequent sections explore their evaluations of the PDETs' inclusivity, their inclusion preferences and priorities because previous research suggests that these are key drivers of subsequent actions (Flinders and Dommett 2013, 492). The respective survey items are primarily based on qualitative thesis data generated during initial exploratory research and on the methodology proposed by the prestigious Colombian think tank Fundación Ideas para la Paz (2017a) to judge 'the quality and efficiency of participation bodies and exercises of participatory planning'. Items included therein cover the process design, stakeholders involved, resources, independence, transparency, effectiveness, legitimacy, sustainability and implementation. Besides, the second section asks respondents to identify participatory obstacles and responsibilities. Together, the two sections generate the core survey data, which give unique insights into these bureaucrats' inclusion-related experiences and desires. These are complemented by questions on the evolution of the latter over time, as well as their beliefs regarding the actual capacities of the ART and local administrations to implement these preferences. This is important, as it may influence their participatory expectations and their assessment of shortcomings. Finally, questions on ART officers' social and professional background and attitudes towards the peace process complete the survey to estimate their possible relevance for their discretionary behaviour. The head of office and I brought the survey to the attention of regional ART staff, both through personal interactions and via WhatsApp, promoting a 100% response rate.

Survey responses were analysed with Microsoft Excel and shared in an anonymised manner with the office heads, in the team's internal WhatsApp group and with those who had voluntarily registered their contacts.[8] Recordings were fully transcribed and shared with the interviewees. Given that the small team size may undermine their anonymity, every interview partner was asked retrospectively to consent again to the use of specific excerpts cited in this article. Interview transcriptions, notes on in-person and WhatsApp chats, as well as observations from PDET meetings were coded with NVivo and triangulated to the greatest possible extent. Data generation, analysis and theory engagement were thereby not clearly separated and sequenced, but intertwined and fundamentally interactive (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). More specifically, a relatively superficial screening of public administration and anthropological peace research was employed to assess the general suitability of these bodies of literature for understanding my initial empirical observation regarding the agency and policy impact of state officials, which motivated this article. The subsequent in-depth literature review helped distil potential categories of interest for data analysis, such as bureaucratic activism. A reflective

data analysis and interpretation process ensued, which continuously engaged with the literature to guide the empirical analysis and ensure the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn. At the same time, it assessed the implications of emerging findings for broader theoretical and empirical discussions about state officials.

State official perspectives on PDET inclusion barriers

Ex-President Iván Duque and his High Commissioner for Stabilisation and Coordination Emilio Archila sustain that the participatory implementation of the PDETs fostered 'a new vision of how to develop the public in our country' (Duque Márquez and Archila Peñalosa 2021, 204). Citizens, scholars and monitoring bodies significantly diverge from this assessment, pointing out serious participatory flaws and poor overall implementation progress (Echavarría Álvarez et al. 2022, 21–22; Foro Nacional por Colombia and Viva la Ciudadanía 2023; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). This section demonstrates that SNP ART officers' experiences contradict the claim of Duque and Archila, too. In doing so, it uncovers their awareness of PDET implementation shortcomings but argues that the PDETs' institutional setup and functioning, as well as the internal centralism of the ART prevent regional ART officers from addressing these weaknesses.

Two of the three inclusion obstacles most of them identify are a lack of commitment (66.7%) and a bad communication (43%) of the mayoralties. In this vein, one ART officer highlights that some

> mayoralties haven't even been willing to take part in the *mesas de impulso*.[9] They do not go, they do not participate. And when I send them information, one month passes, two month pass and I still don't have a reply. (Interview with ART officer 2022d)

Contrary to SNP ART officers' unanimous belief in the importance of the coordinating groups, 'there are mayoralties, which do not really interact with the coordinating groups' (Interview with ART officer 2022c). At times, this unwillingness is not even a secret: 'I have heard mayors saying: "Nobody obliges me to meet the coordinating group." And this is exactly how it is because there is no norm that demands it from them' (Interview with ART officer, 2022f). Mayoralties de facto occupy a crucial position in PDET matters, including sole responsibility for translating the initiatives into projects, securing funding, administrating the budget, and implementing approved PDET interventions. They do so because of decisions of the federal government, ART officers' ultimate superior. Regional ART officers do not have any influence on competency distributions and the general design of the PDET implementation. Therefore, although they agree with coordinating group members on the significance of the obstacles that SNP mayoralties pose to PDET implementation and inclusivity (Interview with coordinating group member 2021a, 2021b; 2022; Focus group with coordinating group 2022), the federal government's decision nonetheless obliges them to collaborate with the mayoralties. In doing so, it reveals important parallels with Dávila's (2017, 49–51) finding that critical state officials in Colombia's Land Restitution Unit cannot control whether they succeed in embodying the 'virtuous state' they strive for.

The exclusion of the coordinating groups from key decisions presents a similar structural obstacle to the PDETs' inclusivity. Echoing coordinating group members' criticism

(Interview with coordinating group member 2021a; 2021b; 2022; Focus group with coordinating group 2022), one ART officer vocally rejects that

> important decisions are being taken by *mesas de impulso* in which only public entities are taking part. We must clearly say it: This peace is designed for state entities. (…) The logic of the PDETs prioritises the mayoralties, not the communities. (Interview with ART officer 2022b)

According to SNP ART officers, the ART headquarter ordered its regional dependencies to hold these monthly meetings to promote inter-institutional exchange and coordination. The ART headquarters define meeting dates and receive the protocols from its regional offices in their aftermath. However, coordinating groups were not informed about the contents and outcomes of the *mesas de impulso*. The above-quoted ART officer questions the legitimacy of this practice and perceives it as constraint to the PDETs' responsiveness.[10] While the national ART leadership installed by the Petro administration in late 2022 put an end to this practice, at the time of the event discussed in this paragraph, he/she could not reject to run them without risking his/her job, leaving the underlying exclusion problem unresolved. This example speaks to critical participation scholarship, which has long deconstructed the persistence of exclusion despite inclusion rhetoric (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). Moreover, it demonstrates state officials' disconformity with decisions of their national-level superiors that has also been highlighted in ethnographic accounts of the state (for Colombia, see Buchely Ibarra 2015; Dávila 2017; Vera Lugo 2022). Nevertheless, regional ART officers are the 'face' of these superiors on the ground (cf. Burnyeat 2020b). This position makes them targets of criticisms and complaints from PDET inhabitants (Interview with regional ART officer 2022b; 2022c; 2022d) and influences their relationships with them, regardless of ART officers' personal perceptions and actions (cf. Burnyeat 2020a; 2020b).

A lack of resources is another core challenge for the PDETs and the inclusivity barrier most SNP ART officers identify. Aligning with the argument of Peeters and Campos (2023, 977) that most state employees outside of the so-called Global North work under conditions of chronic resource scarcity, regional ART staff argues that the absence of a dedicated participation budget undermines the fulfilment of the PDETs' participatory promises. One ART officer notes in the survey that budget constraints prevent financial support for intra- and inter-coordinating group, as well as joint meetings of coordinating groups and victims' representatives. It also restricts coordinating group members from travelling within their territories to disseminate knowledge and PDET information among the residents of PDET communities. Consequently, coordinating group members cannot fulfil their duties as community representatives. Furthermore, insufficient funding constrains travel from rural PDET territories to urban areas, for meetings with state entities or trainings, for example. Although ART officers (2022c; 2022d) generally perceive coordinating group members as eager to participate in trainings, the ART's lack of financial support often means that 'the assistance is very limited because they don't have the means to travel' (Interview with ART officer 2022d). Thus, even inclusion challenges that can be fixed comparatively easily, such as administrative and organisational deficits of the coordinating groups, remain unresolved. The underfunding of participatory spaces and activities is a general policy trend in Colombia (Velásquez et al. 2020, 225–226). In the case of the PDETs, to this adds that resource allocation lacks consistency,

too. For instance, a one-off budget enabled the first SNP meeting between Afro-descendant, indigenous, and *campesino* PDET representatives in 2022. However, the absence of follow-up funding prevented the repetition community actors had requested (Interview with ART officer 2022b). This illustrates how financial decisions can pose an obstacle to the development of an inter-cultural PDET vision and constrain collaboration and coordination between PDET community actors. Regional ART officers are aware of the negative implications of the under-financing of the PDETs' participatory component but depend on resource allocation decisions of the ART headquarters. Yet,

> we do not have real power. Our opinions, observations and suggestions are not considered even when they are very well-crafted. The structures in this country, the government, are very centralised. There is a decision-making supremacy at the federal level although an entity like ours, the Agency of Territorial Renewal, should be different according to its own definition. (Interview with ART officer 2022a)

From this officer's view, the internal centralism of the ART limits the agency of regional ART staff. Besides, it prevents them from resolving key PDET shortcomings because it restricts their access to key decision-making spaces within the ART. In doing so, this ART officer expresses a desire to diverge from the prevalent view in Colombia's rural territories that the state is absent, unresponsive, and untrustworthy (Burnyeat 2020a; McFee 2019; Ramírez 2015; Serje 2011). Nevertheless, as Dávila noted (2017, 49–51), this desire cannot be realised, and ultimately produces frustration.

Overall, regional ART officers are aware of PDET implementation shortcomings and often concur with community actors in the inclusion barriers they identify. However, in line with anthropological state research, this section has also shown that the PDETs' institutional setup and functioning, as well as ART-internal centralism prevent regional ART officers from effectively addressing participatory deficits. Nonetheless, they possess discretionary powers the analysis now turns to.

State official reactions to exclusion and consequences

Regional ART officers respond differently to inclusion constraints. One ART officer (2022d) argues that to '[a]rticulate is the only thing we can do, simply articulate'. In doing so, the official implicitly references a prevalent discourse in Colombia that a 'lack of coordination in the public sector' (McFee 2019, 146) impedes policy delivery and must be avoided through 'inter-institutional articulation'. However, McFee's (2019) PhD dissertation demonstrates that inter-institutional articulation rarely succeeds in reconciliation interventions in post-agreement Colombia. The above-cited statement also aligns with the coordinative responsibilities that the ART is legislatively obliged to assume (Colombia 2017). In policy terms, this reasoning underpins the openness of this and other ART officials to occasionally invite coordinating group members to the previously discussed meetings of the *mesas de impulso*, even in the absence of a corresponding order from Bogotá. Yet, they rejected its mainstreaming, which all SNP coordinating groups demanded, asserting that '[t]he political is not part of our business' (Interview with ART officer 2022c). In doing so, they convey a Weberian notion of an apolitical, rational state apparatus, which hints towards a more formalistic role identity of regional ART officers as state agents rather than citizen agents (cf. Jensen and Pedersen 2023;

Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Nielsen 2015). However, this role identity tends to ignore that Weberian conceptions of the state do not capture the reality of highly political bureaucracies and policy implementation processes (Burnyeat 2020b). Moreover, informal exchanges with coordinating group members reveal that it can also undermine the trust and hopes that community representatives place in them. This is problematic because state officials play a crucial role in shaping citizens' perception of the state (McFee 2019). In the worst case, they can even hinder the attainment of trust-building goals, which are particularly urgent in Colombia considering that above all the rural population perceives the state as absent, unresponsive, or illegitimate (Ramírez 2015).

Meanwhile, the opposite can also be true, and more citizen-oriented role identities exist among SNP ART officers. These differences contribute to significant variation in the actions they take to circumvent or transform participatory barriers in PDET implementation, despite their similar social backgrounds. On one hand, their efforts aim to modify the internal modus operandi of the ART. For instance, one ART officer (2022b) emphasises: 'Our regional office is one that says no. We express what we do not like and what we do not want to do'. However, given their limited capacity to trigger institutional change, these state officials particularly mobilise their agency where they have the greatest leeway: in their interactions with the coordinating groups. This frequently amounts to what Buchely Ibarra (2015) terms 'bureaucratic activism', which can take various forms and involve discretionary actions.

Information gaps play a prominent role in the support that regional ART officers provide to coordinating groups. Due to their intermediary position, they have an information advantage compared to their Bogotá superiors, PDET inhabitants and coordinating groups. They leverage this advantage by sharing information with coordinating group members that they might not be able to access at all, or only with delays. This includes details about internal ART processes and decisions, such as directives from Bogotá and experiences with the respective mayoralties. Research by Blom-Hansen, Baekgaard, and Serritzlew (2021, 658) suggests that bureaucrats influence political decisions through information management because 'politicians rely on policy information from bureaucrats when making decisions, and the way policy information is presented matters for the policy preferences of politicians'. Their insights are also relevant for understanding the discretionary sharing of information by regional ART officers with coordinating group members. Mindful of the fact that coordinating groups face information deficits due to the institutional setup and functioning of the PDETs, providing them with information is a low-threshold means of circumventing barriers to inclusivity. While informal information sharing cannot eliminate communication pitfalls and intentional information exclusion – such as those stemming from the exclusion of coordinating groups from the *mesas de impulse* – it enables coordinating groups to adjust their advocacy and posture towards the ART (Interview with coordinating group member, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). In doing so, it can indirectly enhance the inclusivity of the PDETs and serve the interests of community actors.

ART officers' support for coordinating groups extends beyond mere information sharing. Occasionally, they personally cover the travel expenses of coordinating group members to facilitate their participation in training sessions, for instance (Interview with ART officer, 2022f). The desire to 'give them the respect and the acknowledgment they deserve' (Interview with ART official, 2022f) also motivates some SNP ART team

members to volunteer their free time to respond to requests from coordinating groups and teach them project management skills. This behaviour aligns with ethnographic accounts of the state, which consistently demonstrate that deeply committed state officials strive to mitigate obstacles to policy implementation and often exhibit what Buchely Ibarra (2015) terms 'bureaucratic activism'.

Overall, the support provided by regional ART officers enhances the capacity of coordinating groups to influence PDET implementation and benefits their community advocacy and leadership. While such mitigation efforts cannot replace whole-of-government responsiveness, they do strengthen personal bonds and trust between regional ART officers and coordinating group members. This trust is expressed, among other ways, through public acknowledgment of their contributions, even in PDET meetings where allegations of unresponsiveness and corruption are prevalent. Additionally, this support motivates coordinating groups to seek advice from these ART officers regarding the actions they take to press for an inclusive PDET implementation (Focus group with coordinating group 2022). Despite structural PAI hurdles, the actions of regional ART officers influence the implementation of the PDETs' participatory agenda, as well as the PAI experience and advocacy of community representatives. In doing so, they can also impact the attainment of long-term trust-building goals typically associated with peace agreements (Joshi and Quinn 2015), underscoring the critical importance of local-level state officials in peacebuilding more broadly.

Community support and bureaucratic diversity

SNP ART staff varies in the support it grants community actors. While ART officers' actions depend on many factors (Scott 1997, 37), this section particularly takes up their lived PDET experiences again and examines how they shape their backing of coordinating groups in the light of institutional PDET implementation structures and the interactions taking place in them. Consequently, I argue that PDET (inclusion) shortcomings can both drive and constrain discretion mobilisation because ART officers have differing expectations and understandings of inclusion, leading them to draw distinct conclusions from the deficits of the PDETs.

Discontent with the lack of consideration from mayoralties can foster sentiments of solidarity with coordinating groups and trigger discretionary actions by ART officers (Interview with ART officer 2022b; 2022e). In this context, one ART officer informally described unofficial information sharing as 'a necessity because many municipal administrations violate the spirit of the peace agreement by ignoring the coordinating groups'. This suggests that rules not only constrain agency mobilisation, as highlighted by public administration scholars (cf. Aiken and Hage 1966), but can also serve as triggers. Moreover, their superiors are unlikely to detect informal information sharing with members of coordinating groups, making it improbable that discretionary actions will cause any sanctions. Furthermore, it defends the interests of coordinating groups and supports the achievement of PDET goals that are valuable to citizens, who are the intended primary beneficiaries of the PDETs (cf. Tummers 2011).

Conversely, overall satisfaction with the PDET implementation and inclusivity can prevent participatory pitfalls from triggering discretion mobilisation. For instance, positive overall assessments can help to downplay impasses as 'inevitable feature of the

implementation of any public policy' (Interview with ART officer 2022e) or minor disturbances in an overall successful and inclusive process, a tendency that has also been noted in the critical peacebuilding literature (Castillejo 2014, 2; Hirblinger and Landau 2020, 315). In fact, three out of four SNP ART officers report some degree of satisfaction with the fulfilment of the PDETs' participatory promises. Nevertheless, this does not prevent critically minded ART staff from openly questioning the PDETs' inclusivity: 'Real participation means that I feel that what I said or what we democratically decided or agreed upon has a direct impact on the final result which affects the lives of people. This is not happening' (Interview with ART officer 2022a). Although regional ART officers identify similar inclusion shortcomings, wholly different understandings of inclusion foster significant divergences in their PDET implementation expectations and discretionary behaviour. Research has shown that discretion mobilisation depends on bureaucrats' political attitudes (Barceló and Vela Baron 2024; DeHart-Davis 2007; Peeters and Campos 2023). By further exploring the micro-political underpinnings of this relationship, this section demonstrates that politically filtered interpretations of the policy goals civil servants should support also shape the mobilisation of discretion.

Finally, criticisms of the coordinating groups prevent some ART officers from granting them greater support. Although only one out of three regional ART officers links them to specific inclusion obstacles, almost two-thirds attribute general (co-) responsibility for current shortcomings to them. The same figure is only 55% for their own regional ART. The same figure is only 55% for their own regional ART. This indicates that more ART officers blame the coordinating groups for inclusion obstacles than they do their employer or themselves. Egocentric community representatives pursuing 'personal interests' (Interview with ART officer 2022e) contribute to this trend. As one ART officer puts it: 'The leaders themselves believe they'll remain in charge forever' (Interview with ART officer 2022c). This perception undermines some ART officers' willingness to collaborate with members of these coordinating groups and can also diminish their overall support for them. One ART officer informally concedes this, reaffirming Fleming's (2020) finding that unlikable behaviour shapes bureaucrats' attitudes toward citizens.

Although SNP ART officers unanimously believe in the importance of the coordinating groups, a critical stance towards their actual performance even leads one officer to assert that.

> they have to understand their role as well. Of course, they stated their needs. But they think they can dominate everything, that they are the owners of the PDETs, essentially. You heard the coordinating group of [name omitted to protect confidentiality] when they said nothing could be done without their consultation. It is not like this. The mayoralties can decide which projects they want to develop. They can present their projects without approval of the coordinating group. Of course, only if we talk about initiatives they proposed. But no, they want to select the project they want, how they want, and that they execute it as well without being prepared to execute a project. (Interview with ART officer 2022d)

Despite acknowledging the political, institutional, and administrative barriers to citizen participation in the implementation of the PDETs, this officer's reservations regarding SNP coordinating groups trigger a questioning of their demands for adjustments. Conversely, the previously quoted and other ART officers critique the PDETs' decision-making structures as 'traditional' and argue that they 'do not embody the real spirit of participation of the communities in this country. They are the same decision-making structures as always, which are part of the problems raised by the communities' (Interview with ART

officer 2022a). This second group of state officials is aware of the deficits of the coordinating groups but nonetheless advocates for a strengthening of their position and mobilises considerable resources – both openly and discretionarily – to support the coordinating groups. Rather than turning a blind eye to the multiple obstacles to inclusion in the PDET implementation process, they are prepared to challenge participatory exclusion (Agarwal 2001) in order to promote PAI inclusivity and government responsiveness. This stance may not align with the interests of the Duque administration that contracted many of them. However, in line with public administration scholarship (Barceló and Vela Baron 2024; DeHart-Davis 2007; Peeters and Campos 2022), the federal government's perceived unwillingness to fulfil its PAI duties incentivises these ART officers to leverage their space of manoeuvre to meet the inclusion expectations of community actors as well as their own (Interview with ART officer 2021a; 2022a).

Conclusions

State entities play a crucial role in the implementation of peace agreements and are often blamed for its shortcomings (DeRouen et al. 2010; López et al. 2020; Trejos 2020; Vélez-Torres et al. 2022). However, to date, peacebuilding scholars have paid little attention to those in charge of daily PAI on the ground: state officials.

This article demonstrates that neglecting state officials is problematic because it overlooks their agency and peacebuilding impact. By moving beyond the frequent reification of state institutions as homogeneous actors in existing peacebuilding scholarship, it shows that state officials can boost community actors' advocacy, strengthen personal bonds and trust, and influence citizens' PAI experience despite political, legal, institutional, and administrative constraints. This matters for PAI but is also indispensable to overcome government unresponsiveness and citizen distrust in the state, both in Colombia (Burnyeat 2020a; FIP 2017b; Rettberg 2020) and in post-war societies around the globe (Call 2012; Joshi and Quinn 2015; Pospisil 2019).

The analysis of regional ART officers involved in the implementation of the PDETs reveals important parallels with the public administration literature. Public administration scholars have long demonstrated that civil servants always possess a certain scope of action for instance (Lipsky 1980; Meier 1997; Shapiro 1988). The findings of this investigation suggest that PAI does not differ from other sets of state activity in this regard, as it grants state officials space of manoeuvre and allows them to influence peacebuilding processes and outcomes. Moreover, the data presented in this article reaffirms anthropological studies of the state (Buchely Ibarra 2020; Burnyeat 2020a; 2020b; Vera Lugo 2022) and analyses of international peacebuilding interventions (Autesserre 2014; Goetze 2016; 2020; Johansson 2021), which underscore the limitations of Weberian notions of the state and highlight the relevance of individuals within peacebuilding organisations.

The article evidenced the need for a greater engagement with public employees and a more nuanced understanding of their peacebuilding impact. To further relevant knowledge on the diversity and policy relevance of state officials and individuals within peacebuilding organisations, follow-up investigations could, for instance, examine citizens' and politicians' views of discretion mobilisation across multiple cases to better understand consequences of bureaucratic discretion for peacebuilding and (post-war) public policy implementation. Additional research on the impact of citizens on state officials' discretion

mobilisation is also important for identifying alternative pathways for citizens to enhance their PAI influence and for promoting peace processes' responsiveness to those who bear the daily consequences of war and violence: ordinary citizens.[11] [12]

Notes

1. For more detailed information, see later in this article.
2. There are scattered accusations of partisan loyalty or nepotism (cf. Salazar-Morales and Lauriano 2021). However, these appear to be the exceptions for both the current and previous SNP ART teams.
3. Throughout this article, I use the term *campesino* because the English equivalents peasant or rural farmer 'sound potentially derogatory, and secondly because *campesino* is a whole cultural category in Colombia and other parts of Latin America that is not accurately conveyed by these translations' (Burnyeat 2013, 437n).
4. The national-level change in government in August 2022 also affected the SNP ART as some contracts expired and were either not renewed at all or only renewed in the second half of 2023. While the entire leadership was ultimately replaced, a majority of the previous ART officers has retained their jobs. Please note that the information in this section pertains to the team during the Duque presidency (2018–2022).
5. All interactions took place in Spanish and quotes have been translated by the author. Ethical approval (no specific number) for the larger research project from which this article emerged was obtained on 1 March 2021 and renewed on 21 September 2022 from two IRB reviewers at the University of Kent. In the absence of an IRB at local Colombian universities, ethical decisions were discussed with academic colleagues based in the region as well. Everybody involved in this research has been proactively and fully informed about the purposes and their contribution to this investigation and consented several times to the data generation, storage and use. This included a strong emphasis on data subjects rights. Consent was registered via the survey, orally as part of interview recordings, or in written form.
6. Three primary motivations guided the selection of the SNP as research site: the region's notable absence from scholarly and policy-making debates on peacebuilding in Colombia, lower levels of physical violence compared to other PDET regions, as well as the fact that it has attracted more resources than any other PDET but does not show greater levels of citizen satisfaction with PAI (MAPS Survey and UNDP/PRIO 2020, 27), converting it into an intriguing case to examine exclusion as potential cause of PAI frustration.
7. I cannot rule out that being a white European facilitated these privileges. Nevertheless, I aimed to let community actors benefit from this by drawing ART staff's attention to open questions or information requests that they had shared with me prior to my office visits for example. See Ejimabo (2015) for a good discussion of the impact of cultural inequalities on research.
8. All respondents actively consented to this dissemination procedure. Answers to open and semi-open questions were not shared to protect their anonymity.
9. *Mesas de impulso* are monthly working meetings between public entities and authorities that have incidence in the PDETs.
10. Only half of them believe state entities are responsive to citizens most of the time.
11. This citation means that the interview took place in the urban centre of a PDET municipality, not in a (rural) PDET community itself.
12. The focus groups were conducted in the context of ART-convened PDET meetings. Dates are omitted here to safeguard coordinating groups' anonymity.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature and to not compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Interviews

ART officer. 2021a. Interviewed by the author. December 1, Santa Marta.
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ART officer. 2022a. Interviewed by the author. October 4, Zoomorphology.
ART officer. 2022b. Interviewed by the author. October 5, Santa Marta.
ART officer. 2022c. Interviewed by the author. October 12, Santa Marta.
ART officer. 2022d. Interviewed by the author. October 24, Santa Marta.
ART officer. 2022e. Interviewed by the author. December 9, Zoomorphology.
Coordinating group member. 2021a. Interviewed by the author. October 25, SNP PDET community.
Coordinating group member. 2021b. Interviewed by the author. November 12, SNP PDET municipality.
Coordinating group member. 2022. Interviewed by the author. October 28, SNP PDET municipality.

Focus Group

Coordinating group. 2022. SNP PDET municipality.