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# Does citizen participation promote peace agreement implementation? Evidence from Colombia

Cooperation and Conflict

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cac](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cac)**Theresa Bachmann<sup>1</sup>** 

## Abstract

Numerous large-n studies suggest that inclusion promotes peace agreement implementation. This study takes a different approach. Based on a combination of survey and complementary qualitative data, it examines the actual actions and interactions involved in implementing peace agreements on the ground. In doing so, it adopts a micro-political perspective which conceptualises peace agreement implementation as an interactive, dynamic and inherently political process. Drawing on empirical evidence from Colombia, this article demonstrates the importance of the practical implementation of inclusive peacebuilding and its perceived effectiveness as it shows that citizen participation does not always enhance peace agreement implementation. Reasons for this include the deception of citizens' participatory expectations through implementation shortcomings, participatory preferences and the misinterpretation of citizens' preferences on behalf of state representatives, for example. The article concludes that citizen participation does not inevitably stimulate peacebuilding successes and advocates instead for increased attention to the (unintended) consequences of inclusion discourses. This has significant implications for inclusive peacebuilding research and practice.

## Keywords

citizen participation, Colombia, expectations, peace agreement implementation, preferences

## Introduction

Inclusion has become the norm in peacebuilding realm (Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019), and the empirical evidence suggests that inclusion promotes peace agreement implementation (PAI) (Bell and O'Rourke, 2007; Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014; Wanis-St. John and Kew, 2008). However, numerous studies also evidence serious implementation problems and resistance to inclusion around the world (Bell, 2019; Çuhadar, 2020; Lederach,

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<sup>1</sup>University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

### Corresponding author:

Theresa Bachmann, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NZ, UK.

Email: [tbachmann.kent@gmail.com](mailto:tbachmann.kent@gmail.com)

2019). Despite these difficulties, existing research has not thoroughly investigated whether and how they can prevent inclusion from stimulating peacebuilding successes. Correspondingly, the claim that inclusion enhances PAI is primarily based on large-n analyses.

This article takes a different approach: Conceptually based on a notion of PAI as an interactive, dynamic and inherently political process, it examines from a micro-political perspective the actual actions and interactions involved in implementing peace agreements on the ground. Empirically, this research examines interlinkages between citizen participation<sup>1</sup> and PAI through a combination of complementary qualitative and survey data that were generated during a long-term research project (2020–2024) on the impact of citizen participation on the implementation of participatory rural development programmes established under the Colombian 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).

This article evidences that citizen participation does not inevitably promote PAI. More specifically, it does so by showing that a perceived or actual lack of implementation of participatory promises affects peacebuilding attitudes and can unintentionally undermine PAI as well. Consequently, this article makes several contributions to the literatures on inclusive peacebuilding and PAI. First, it figures among the first to empirically examine actual participatory preferences and expectations on the ground. This is important because numerous qualitative studies underscore that citizens vocally criticise shortcomings of supposedly participatory spaces (for Colombia, Gruner and Mina, 2018; Jaramillo et al., 2023; Sánchez and Rodríguez, 2015), but neither scrutinise the prevalence and social contingency of their perception nor desire among those implicated in participatory policy-making and implementation.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, many studies associate unmet expectations and insufficient consideration of citizens' views with peacebuilding failures (Call, 2012; Kohl, 2015; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022), but their meaning is usually taken for granted, homogenised or poorly specified. Besides, this article contributes to critical accounts of nominally inclusive peacebuilding practices (Bell, 2019; Brett, 2017;

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<sup>1</sup>Many scholars draw on Arnstein's (1969) definition of citizen participation as 'all kinds of activities that seek to influence existing power structures' (p. 216) in framing participation as expression of political agency (Cornwall, 2003a, 2003b; Gaventa, 2003; Lister, 1998). Accordingly, participation gives citizens varying degrees of policy influence and assigns them different roles. However, citizen participation 'mean[s] different things to different actors' (Donais and McCandless, 2017: 305), underpinning diverse and possibly divergent expectations and experiences of its actual implementation. Rather than imposing potentially inappropriate definitions, this article therefore adopts a consciously broad, empirical approach to inclusion that is rooted in the ideas and perceptions of those implicated in its enactment and implementation on the ground. Hence, it explicitly accepts that diverse notions of inclusion and its (expected) effects inform the lived experiences, wishes and actions analysed in this article. Please note that this article uses the terms citizen participation and inclusion/inclusivity interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup>An important exception to this is a study on citizen participation in Colombia (2003–2018) by the Foro Nacional por Colombia foundation (Velásquez et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), which includes a national-level survey of participation perceptions and practices among Colombia's urban adult population (Velásquez et al., 2020a: 2019).

Cooke and Kothari, 2001) by shedding light on (unintended) PAI consequences of participatory deficits, to which the literature has paid comparatively little attention so far. Finally, and most importantly, it helps to counter-balance a lack of empirical PAI research, which has largely failed to grasp the dynamism of PAI processes (Joshi, 2024). As a result, it demonstrates that citizen participation is not inherently PAI-conducive and shapes awareness for the manifold ways in which peacebuilding actors and their individual members perceive, contest and use institutional PAI arrangements.

The following section discusses existing research on the nexus between citizen participation and peacebuilding and puts them into conversation with insights from the critical participation literature. Subsequently, I introduce this article's micro-political approach to PAI and provide in-depth information on the research process and data body underpinning it. The empirical analysis deconstructs why citizen participation can fail to enhance PAI. Therefore, the conclusions underscore that citizen participation does not inevitably stimulate peacebuilding successes and advocate instead for increased attention to context-specific participatory expectations and preferences, as well as the (unintended) consequences of inclusion discourses.

## **Interlinkages between citizen participation and peace: insights from the literature**

Letting citizens take centre stage in peace processes can stimulate sustainable peace and democracy. On a practical-strategic level, many scholars highlight that it can enhance legitimacy and, therefore, greater public buy-in (Çuhadar, 2020: 6; Donais and McCandless, 2017: 294; Hirblinger and Landau, 2020: 305). According to Zanker (2017: 175), legitimacy emerges for both participation and outcome-related reasons. The latter thereby relates to the argument that citizens' involvement ensures a focus on root causes of violence and their consequences for the affected population, rather than mere attention to the priorities of armed conflict parties, such as power-sharing or amnesties for committed crimes (Ghais, 2022). Moreover, it can stimulate 'higher accountability between the conflict parties' (Paffenholz, 2014: 74), therefore enhancing peace agreements' likelihood of implementation. In addition, inclusivity creates platforms that can contribute to de-escalate conflict (Echavarría et al., 2022: 83) and 'promotes stability and resilience in new democratic institutions by prioritizing communication between political elites and citizens' (Bisarya et al., 2017: 251). As a result, it can represent a first step towards (re) building state-society relations and democratic institutions (Bell and O'Rourke, 2007). Involving citizens in peacebuilding can also enhance their commitment to its success (Ghais, 2022) and lower the risk of jeopardising PAI due to societal opposition or resistance (Paffenholz, 2014). On a normative level, inclusivity can be considered both a moral imperative and an instrumental vehicle for giving a wide range of stakeholders a voice, including marginalised groups (Brett, 2022; Jamar, 2021; Wise, 2018). Consequently, it can help address inequalities and socio-political root causes of violence by providing disadvantaged societal actors with the opportunity to press for effective institutional action (Zahar and McCandless, 2020).

The ‘disappointing results of top-down [peacebuilding] approaches’ (Donais and McCandless, 2017: 291) and the key role of societal actors and movements in peace processes and political transitions in numerous countries<sup>3</sup> have prompted policy-makers and practitioners to give greater weight to these arguments. This in turn has contributed to the consolidation of inclusivity as a peacebuilding norm and accompanying shifts in the peacebuilding agendas promoted by international actors, such as the United Nations (UN) (Donais and McCandless, 2017: 291). As a result,

[t]here has never been a more conducive set of normative international frameworks that together highlight the importance of inclusion. These include the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16, the work on UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. Perhaps the most comprehensive normative framework emphasizing inclusion has been the Prevention Agenda, including both the UN Sustaining Peace Resolutions, as well as the 2018 state-of-play report ‘Pathways for Peace’ from 2018, a joint study by the World Bank and the UN system. All of these frameworks state that without inclusion there is: no prevention of violence, no mediation or peacebuilding, and no sustainable political system. (Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019: 2)

Growing empirical evidence also suggests that inclusion promotes PAI. Numerous large-n studies (Bell and O’Rourke, 2007; Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014; Wanis-St. John and Kew, 2008) find that citizen participation increases the implementation and durability of peace agreements. In a particularly influential analysis of 83 peace agreements, Nilsson (2012) concludes that civil society inclusion reduces the risk of civil war recurrence by 50%. Follow-up studies have shown that the type and diversity of included civil society actors (Zanker, 2014), the modalities (Nilsson and Svensson, 2023; Paffenholz, 2014) as well as the sequencing (Dudouet and Lundström, 2016) of civil society inclusion influence the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of peace agreements. Studies on women’s participation have yielded similar results (O’Reilly et al., 2015). Peace agreements signed by women also contain ‘more provisions aimed at political reform and higher implementation rates for [those] provisions’ (Krause et al., 2018: 985) and gender-inclusive peace agreements contribute to enhancing women’s political rights after civil wars (Reid, 2021). These studies enjoy particular policy relevance because peace agreements have become one of the most prominent tools to end large-scale violence since the end of the Cold War (Joshi and Quinn, 2017). Yet, their ‘implementation often hits blockages and meets resistance, and is prone to delay, breakdown and collapse’ (Ramsbotham, 2022: 4). According to the literature, inclusive peace processes generate opportunity for robust and locally legitimate peace agreements to be reached and implemented.

However, the literature also suggests that the actual inclusivity of PAI practices is heavily shaped by strategies and resources of those involved. Countless studies evidence in this regard limits of citizen participation’s peacebuilding impact, significant

<sup>3</sup>These include but are not limited to Argentina, Chile, Poland, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Nepal and the Philippines. See, for example, Rood (2005), Cosgrove (2010) and Way (2014).

implementation problems and resistance to inclusion around the world. For instance, leading mediation experts and practitioners raise serious reservations about the ‘mishandling [of] inclusivity’ (Waldman, 2024: 16), pointing out among other concerns the lack of viability, the risks and the capacity constraints of mediation organisations. Besides, the influence of citizens may not suffice to ensure that peace processes address root causes of armed conflict (cf. Hirblinger and Landau, 2020), which could foster violence reduction and prevention (Nilsson, 2012). For instance, the study of Brett (2017) shows that Guatemalan civil society actors strongly influenced the content of the 1996 peace accords. Nevertheless, root causes of the armed conflict were excluded from the final agreement and constitute a key driver of post-war escalation of violence and instability. Societal actors can oppose peace processes as well. For example, in Sri Lanka, the pro-war movement effectively undermined the 2002 peace negotiations (Paffenholz, 2014: 88) and the signature of the slightly revised 2016 Colombian peace agreement despite the rejection of its original version in a public referendum led opponents of the peace agreement to argue that it was against the majority’s will (Bramsen, 2022). Hence, citizen participation does not inevitably boost public support for peace agreements and enhance in so doing the conflict parties’ implementation commitment, one of its potential benefits highlighted in the literature (Paffenholz, 2014).

In addition, obstacles to implementing inclusion frequently persist (Hearn, 2016; Hirblinger and Landau, 2020: 313; Vargas and Díaz, 2018: 391). Critical peacebuilding scholars have long pointed out international actors’ formal and technocratic peacebuilding approach (Barnes, 2017; Cooke and Kothari, 2001), which ‘often means conformity to rigid technocracy, the acceptance of Western bureaucratic norms, and local compliance in projects that are conceived, designed, funded, and evaluated by external actors’ (Mac Ginty, 2012: 171). This can affect the implementation of inclusive peace agreements because of the ‘danger of developing a “box-ticking” mentality around inclusion, which reduces sensitivity to the conflict context, potentially obscures important fault lines and can turn inclusion into a tokenistic exercise’ (Hirblinger and Landau, 2020: 315).<sup>4</sup> In this vein, critical feminist scholars have rightly criticised the failure to transform intersectional power inequalities through ‘add women and stir’ approaches, for example (Datzberger and Le Mat, 2018; Martín de Almagro, 2018). Despite a global trend towards more victims-oriented peace-making (Brett, 2022), Jamar’s (2021) study of victims provisions in more than a thousand peace agreements similarly identifies different forms of sexism, classism and racism. Prevalent essentialism resulting therefrom neglects complex interactions and fluid boundaries between individual and group-based identities and interests (Hirblinger and Landau, 2020: 315; Jamar, 2021: 285) and constrains the extent to which peace processes address inequalities and injustices (cf. Zahar and McCandless, 2020). Ultimately, power relations underpinning citizen participation not only remain untouched in peacebuilding interventions with limited forms of participation, there is a lack of reflection on their impact as such. Clare Castillejo (2014) underscores in this regard that ‘[s]uch approaches often assume that exclusionary practices can be addressed by capacity development,

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<sup>4</sup>For similar arguments, see also McGhie and Wamai (2011), Zanker (2014) and Barnes (2017).

rather than being a problem of lack of political will' (p. 2). Against this background, many studies highlight political tensions, dilemmas and power dynamics associated with inclusion (Bell, 2019; Close et al., 2019; Jamar, 2018, 2021; Pospisil, 2019). Yet, peacebuilding practices frequently pursue participation 'without consideration for political and socio-cultural issues' (Jamar, 2021: 284), even though they can prevent inclusion from transforming socio-political root causes of violence among other expected benefits.

Finally, resistance to inclusive peacebuilding is common: According to a noteworthy study by Esra Çuhadar (2020), different peacebuilding actors have varying political, economic and/or identity-based reasons for opposing inclusive peace processes. Especially for elite actors, these may include a reluctance to share power and a perceived or actual threat to economic privileges. For instance, in Nepal, political leaders of traditionally privileged groups succeeded in sabotaging an inclusive constitution-making process initiated in the wake of the 2006 peace agreement, reversing 'inclusion gains for women and low caste groups achieved during earlier negotiations' (Çuhadar, 2020: 20). Hence, resistance can de facto constrain, prevent and undo participatory gains, thereby questioning the extent to which inclusion can actually foster sustainable peace and democracy.

Overall, many critical accounts evidence that exclusion persists even in supposedly inclusive policy contexts, and political protagonists make selective and opportunistic use of inclusion discourses (De Waal, 2017: 4).<sup>5</sup> As a result, nominally inclusive policies can instrumentalise citizens for the pursuit of 'broader liberal peace and development agenda[s]' (Datzberger and Le Mat, 2015: 3), serving the interests of those in power and marginalising in the worst-case progressive struggles of war-affected community and civil society actors (Vélez-Torres et al., 2022). Yet, despite the longstanding problematisation of the poor implementation of participatory promises by disappointed communities, social organisations and critical participation scholars, a thorough investigation of whether and how limited forms of participation can prevent inclusion from promoting peacebuilding is still missing.

## Investigating the micro-politics of PAI in post-agreement Colombia

This article responds to this gap. In doing so, it adopts a micro-political perspective, which conceptually understands PAI as emerging from the dynamic, interactive and inherently political interplay of intra- and inter-stakeholder processes, actions and interactions, which take place within and in response to formal-institutional policy

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<sup>5</sup>Long before the inclusivity turn in the peacebuilding realm, critical participation scholars even discussed on similar grounds whether inclusion could be a new form of tyranny (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). In this article, 'exclusion is understood as any constraint on citizens' access to and influence and decision-making power over [particular] policies (cf. Cornwall, 2003b). These constraints are analysed in accordance with the methodology proposed by the Colombian Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) (2017a)' (Bachmann, 2022: 421). See next section.



implementation arrangements. Following the seminal work of Burns (1961), this article defines micro-politics as the mechanisms through which individuals influence formal structures and vice versa. ‘Micro-politics [thereby] depicts knowledge, power, trust, perceptions, understanding, social networks, [and] values (. . .) that arise as a result of individuals interacting within a group while working on a shared ideological goal’ (McAreavey, 2006: 87), such as PAI. Hence, it relates to processes and norms that underpin group relations (McAreavey, 2006: 87).

Micro-political analyses focus on political actors and their group behaviour, as well as the actions of their individual members to disentangle ‘the construction, reproduction, modification, and transformation of political policies, processes and structures in concrete situations’ (Willner, 2011: 158). In doing so, it is based on the premise ‘that formal rules, such as hierarchies and organizational aims, cannot determine actors’ behaviors completely. As a consequence, there are always “scopes of action” of one type or another’ (Willner, 2011: 160). Individuals and groups use these scopes of action in various ways, depending on their preferences, information, interests and knowledge, for example. Micro-political analyses help to enlighten the intricate dynamics of politics and decision-making processes that lead to PAI and other policies and can contribute to answering ‘macro- and meso-questions [regarding political processes] using discoveries on the micro-level’ (Willner, 2011: 158). Therefore, a micro-political research approach is particularly well-suited to overcome the one-sided emphasis on aggregate-level PAI determinants and outcomes in the literature that includes but goes beyond the PAI influence of citizen participation this article focuses on (Joshi, 2024: 89).

The empirical evidence underpinning this article stems from a long-term research project (2020–2024) on the consequences of inclusion for the implementation of participatory rural development programmes (PDETs) established under the Colombian 2016 peace agreement with the former FARC-EP guerrilla. The Colombian armed conflict<sup>6</sup> waged for more than five decades and numerous peace initiatives failed to bring about durable transformation. Thus, the signing of the peace agreement is remarkable in itself. More importantly, its inclusivity and innovative power, as well as structural reforms agreed upon therein raised hopes internationally that it could succeed in promoting the ‘stable and lasting peace’ it aims for (Colombia, 2016: 1; Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2017). Its promise of territorial peace particularly aspires to promote rural development and collective well-being in Colombia’s most war-affected areas and prioritises them in the implementation of the peace accords. The PDETs are the main policy tool by which territorial peace is supposed to be brought about and they involve unprecedented financial investments in rural development. Currently under implementation in Colombia’s 16 most war-affected regions, their objective is to ‘close urban-rural breaches and create conditions of well-being and living well for the rural population’ (Colombia, 2016: 7), which has disproportionately suffered from conflict-related violence and the absence or poor quality of public services. On paper, community representatives organised in

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<sup>6</sup>The terms ‘(internal) armed conflict’ and ‘civil war’ are used interchangeably in the Colombian context.



so-called coordinating groups decide on the kind of developmental interventions to be pursued with PDET resources, the respective mayoralties implement the selected projects, and the *Agencia de Renovación del Territorio* (ART, Agency of Territorial Renewal) ensures the coordination between all stakeholders on behalf of the Colombian state. Yet, the PDETs' implementation is delayed (Echavarría et al., 2025) and it faces significant practical constraints that 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, a lack of enforceable rights for citizens and their exclusion from key decision-making and financial processes, for example (Bachmann, 2023; Velásquez et al., 2021; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022). The PDETs are no exception: The overall implementation of the entire peace agreement is also delayed and scholars, citizens, and monitoring entities alike question its inclusivity (Echavarría et al., 2025; Foro Nacional por Colombia and Viva la Ciudadanía, 2023; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022). Poverty levels in PDET municipalities remain twice as high as the national average (ART, 2023: 9), and persistent armed conflicts additionally threaten the peace process (Echavarría et al., 2025: 17). Despite their prioritisation, regions historically most affected by Colombia's armed conflict are the most affected by present-day violence, insecurity and presence of armed groups as well. Significant approval of the agreement notwithstanding, it is therefore rather unsurprising that representative public opinion data demonstrates frustration and PAI disenchantment among PDET residents (Ferrer et al., 2022: 30–31).

The PDETs constitute a relevant case (Gerring, 2006) to examine the PAI impact of citizen participation. On the one hand, they represent the participatory flagship policy of a peace agreement that figures among the peace agreements with the most participatory commitments signed globally to date (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2017).<sup>7</sup> As such, they are a particularly relevant example of the inclusivity turn in the peacebuilding realm that has taken root among scholars (Bramsen, 2022) and policy-makers (Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019) around the world. On the other hand, however, they are also paradigmatic of persistent implementation gaps and resistance to inclusion (Bell, 2019; Çuhadar, 2020; Lederach, 2019), which allow to examine more thoroughly the peacebuilding consequences of participatory shortcomings and limitations. Considering that the PDETs also represent the first rural development programme established under a peace agreement, the insights of this article may be relevant for development scholars, practitioners and policy-makers as well.

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<sup>7</sup>While participatory commitments transcend the entire peace agreement, the PDETs alone incorporate almost 30 % of them (FIP, 2017b: 11). Citizens got involved in the first phase of the PDETs through a large-scale consultation process, during which 'more than 220,000 people' (Duque and Archila, 2021: 202) contributed to the development of a total of 33,007 initiatives (ART, 2024). Subsequently, the mode of participation transitioned to an indirect model based on delegated representation, with the coordinating groups mentioned above representing PDET communities.

Methodologically, three original surveys<sup>8</sup> conducted online via Google documents with coordinating groups ( $n=109$ , response rate 65.3 %), Victims' Boards<sup>9</sup> members ( $n=70$ , response rate 25.9 %) and regional ART officers<sup>10</sup> ( $n=21$ , response rate 100 %), interview, focus group, participant observation and countless informal exchanges underpin this article. These are the product of an iterative research process with residents of the 15 PDET municipalities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta-Serranía del Perijá (SNP) region<sup>11</sup> that involved long-term interactions and several research stays (2021–2024) on-site of in total 8 months length and allow elucidating the impact of citizen participation on PAI from a micro-political perspective.

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

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<sup>8</sup>The one-off surveys consist of 18 to 22 open, closed and semi-open items on participants' experiences, wishes and perceptions of the PDETs, as well as several questions on the respondents. These were adapted to fit the varying roles and competencies of the PDET stakeholders examined, though seeking to maximise their comparability. Three primary sources were consulted to develop these survey items: existing scholarship, data from initial exploratory research, as well as the *El Siriri* methodology proposed by the Colombian think tank Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP, 2017a), which proposes to evaluate the efficiency and quality of state-led spaces of citizen participation according to the process design, stakeholders involved, resources, independence, transparency, effectiveness, legitimacy, sustainability and implementation. Full questionnaires available upon request. The questionnaires were discussed with two colleagues based in the region and brought to the target groups' attention in-person and in written form, via WhatsApp, for instance.

<sup>9</sup>Victims' Boards (MdVs, *Mesas de Víctimas*) institutionally represent registered victims of the armed conflict vis-à-vis the Colombian state. Every 4 years, registered victims of the armed conflict democratically elect municipal MdV members who in turn elect the departmental and national MdVs. The participation of victims in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of all public policies for victims is legally mandatory (Colombia, 2011: Art. 14) and majority of PDET residents are victims (Erazo and Singer, 2018: 8). Therefore, municipal MdVs are allowed to delegate up to three of their members to the coordinating groups of the respective PDET municipalities.

<sup>10</sup>The ART manages the implementation of the PDETs on behalf of the Colombian state and it is responsible for their inclusivity. In addition to the Bogotá headquarters, 16 regional ART offices coordinate the PDET implementation in each PDET region. Regional ART officers in the SNP are based in the cities of Valledupar and Santa Marta and have professional backgrounds in finance, civil engineering, architecture, economics, agricultural engineering, public health, anthropology and law, for example.

<sup>11</sup>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 and UNDP/PRIO, 2020: 27), converting it into an intriguing case to examine exclusion as potential cause of PAI frustration.

several times to the data generation, storage and use. Consent was registered via the survey, orally as part of interview recordings, or in written form. Survey responses were analysed with Microsoft Excel and shared in an anonymised manner in the respective internal WhatsApp groups and with those respondents who had voluntarily registered their contacts as part of the survey. Contingent upon their voluntary and informed consent, interviews were recorded and all interviewees received full transcriptions of the recordings. Interview transcriptions, notes on countless personal and WhatsApp chats, as well as observations from PDET-related meetings were coded with NVivo and consistently triangulated with several, independent sources.

## **When citizen participation does not enhance PAI: evidence from Colombia**

The subsequent empirical analysis makes two main arguments: First, citizen participation often faces design and implementation shortcomings, which disappoint citizens and can prevent inclusion from enhancing PAI. The shape of these shortcomings varies depending on the case. However, an extensive body of literature documents the global persistence of exclusion despite inclusion rhetoric, underscoring the need for a thorough deconstruction of their consequences. Second, participatory preferences influence the behaviour of PAI actors, but do not automatically align with PAI. While this section deals with them separately for a better structuring of the analysis, they should not be understood as isolated from each other, but as mutually interrelated.

### ***Deceiving citizens' expectations***

The signing of a peace agreement frequently nurtures hope and expectations of a socio-economic peace dividend (Collier, 1995) the transition from war to peace will bring about for societies emerging from civil war. Beyond the economic realm, citizens' expectations permeate much of current peacebuilding scholarship. For example, Charles Call (2012) sustains in his influential study on civil war recurrence that 'the most sustainable processes of consolidating peace have emerged from consultative processes that mollified the main spoilers and simultaneously met the expectations of the members of broader society, including their desires for representation and participation (p. 245)'.

Despite a long history of poor experiences with state-led participation (Velásquez et al., 2020c), neglect, and deeply rooted distrust towards the state and politicians in Colombia's rural territories (Burnyeat, 2020a, 2020b; Niño, 2021; Oficina Regional Pares-Pacífico, 2021), the PDETs also raised expectations among their target groups. In total, 'more than 220,000 people' (Duque and Archila, 2021: 202) contributed in a mass consultation process to the diagnosis of core problems in each PDET region and formulated 33,007 initiatives they identify as solutions to these challenges. Held in the communities themselves, numerous PDET residents and their representatives, members of the so-called coordinating groups, highlighted to the author that the PDETs 'were the first time the state came to our territories to talk to us'. Many coordinating group members also praise the 2,135 initiatives that emerged from this process in the SNP (ART, 2024) as representative of their communities' needs (Interview with coordinating group

member, 2021b, 2021d, 2021e). The survey data equally supports the impression that a significant proportion of SNP coordinating group members interpreted the positive impression from the first PDET phase as sign that the Colombian state's inclusion promises would be more than rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> As such, a remarkably high figure of 69.4% of them indicates to have believed 'a lot' that their participatory expectations would be met at the onset of the implementation phase.

Yet, the PDET implementation does not give coordinating groups the expected and promised decision-making power. As such, they are excluded from key decision-making and financial processes and the implementation of PDET initiatives is entirely managed by the mayoralties. As a result, mayoralties *de facto* have the power to overrule coordinating group demands and decisions. In the SNP, this resulted in a one-sided focus on infrastructure projects while SNP residents' priority area of action health (Ferrer et al., 2022: 101)<sup>13</sup> has only received 1.8 % of the total PDET investment in the SNP to date (ART, 2025).<sup>14</sup> By design, the power inequalities embedded within the PDET implementation mean that community actors cannot further PAI without the political will of state entities. For Guatemala, Brett thereby shows that insufficient decision-making authority of citizens constrained PAI. These insights highlight the need for a more nuanced engagement with the PAI impact of citizen participation than is the rule in the inclusive peace-building literature. For instance, the literature highlights that citizens' involvement can enhance the commitment of other PAI stakeholders (Paffenholz, 2014: 74). In contrast, the case of the PDETs underscores that a lack of decision-making competencies can prevent citizens from fostering PAI against the opposition of relatively more powerful PAI actors, such as political or economic elites (Çuhadar, 2020).

Pervasive feelings of exploitation and of not being heard among SNP coordinating groups result from this status quo and nurture significant disenchantment (Focus group with coordinating group, 2022a, 2022b; Interview with coordinating group member, 2022a, 2022b). Emblematically, a coordinating group member received unanimous support by her fellow group members as she argues that

[t]hey were happy to use us for the work. We made the entire analysis and came up with the initiatives but at the time of prioritising and implementing, they excluded us yet again. (. . .) Right now, there is no participation. They only call us when they need a signature or a photo. (Focus group with coordinating group, 2022a)

In doing so, she criticises the merely symbolic participation of coordinating groups, reflecting the global observation of tokenistic forms of inclusion, which produce systems of 'participatory exclusion' (Agarwal, 2001) and nurture 'participatory frustration'

<sup>12</sup>This is not to say that there were no participatory flaws in the early PDET stages. Several studies (Velásquez et al., 2021; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022; Bachmann, 2023) suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, there exists a clear consensus on the ground about the positivity of the initial PDET stage.

<sup>13</sup>This figure stems from representative survey data and show that 46.3% of the SNP residents considers health to be a policy priority. The same figure is of 6.3% for infrastructure (Ferrer et al., 2022: 101).

<sup>14</sup>This refers to the completed initiatives.

(Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). The survey also corroborates that a shocking 82.4% of SNP coordinating group members believes that coordinating group decisions are never (46.3%) or only sometimes (36.1%) implemented. Across all SNP coordinating groups, the belief that mayoralties do not respect coordinating groups is highly prevalent: ‘Our mayor doesn’t even meet us, he always sends a substitute. (. . .) He is definitely not interested in listening to our proposals’ (Interview with coordinating group member, 2022e). In a similar vein, almost three out of four survey respondents report that state entities do not listen ‘at all’ or ‘not much’ to the coordinating groups. This finding is particularly troublesome considering government unresponsiveness and citizen distrust in the state in Colombia (Burnyeat, 2020a; FIP, 2017b; Rettberg, 2020) and post-war societies more generally (Call, 2012; Joshi and Quinn, 2017; Pospisil, 2019). The same percentage of them perceives a lack of recognition of the coordinating groups as well. As such, coordinating group members frequently claim to be ‘the pioneers of the PDETs but we do not even have an identification that confirms that we are part of the coordinating group’ (Focus group with coordinating group, 2022a). Correspondingly, more than three out of four of them feel their participatory expectations have not been met and can trigger behavioural responses that are not necessarily PAI-conducive either.<sup>15</sup>

The participatory obstacles of SNP Victims’ Boards (MdV) differ in some respect from those encountered by coordinating groups.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, a large majority of their members experiences similar feelings of disappointment. For instance, despite MdVs’ right to be represented in the coordinating groups, consistent enforcement of this policy did not occur in the SNP. Limited or no MdV representation in the coordinating groups hampers MdVs’ oversight capacity and diminishes their decision-making influence. This problem is not unique to the PDETs but exemplifies broader practical deficiencies in fulfilling strong legal guarantees for victims’ participation – guarantees that are cornerstones of the 2016 peace agreement and the Victims Law 1448 (Colombia, 2011). Besides, the lack of MdV PDET involvement restricts their access to information, effectively excluding them from key participation rights and activities. As one MdV member expressed,

How are we supposed to give our opinion when we don’t know what is going on? How are we supposed to monitor the implementation? How can we inform victims about the PDETs when we ourselves do not have that information? (Interview with MdV member, 2021a)

This example shows that citizen participation does not automatically lead to effective oversight, a factor that could promote PAI by fostering greater commitment among PAI actors (Paffenholz, 2014). Ultimately, the limited influence of MdVs is embedded in the design of the PDET implementation and the political will of relatively more powerful

<sup>15</sup>See later in this section.

<sup>16</sup>This is because their PDET role serves a different purpose: Coordinating groups represent all inhabitants of rural PDET communities and take decisions on their behalf. MdVs’ primary PDET task is to oversee the implementation to ensure that they meet the needs and desires of registered victims of the armed conflict. Please note that three out of four PDET inhabitants in the SNP are also victims (Erazo and Singer, 2018: 8). See previous section.

state entities moderates the PAI impact of their participation, reinforcing collective dissatisfaction and marginalisation. Reflecting this frustration, approximately 68.1% of surveyed MdV members now believe their participatory expectations have been disappointed, although over 75% initially believed that the PDETs could foster meaningful participation.

Overall, the PDET implementation to date has deceived the expectations of SNP coordinating group and MdV members. This has reinforced their (pre-existing) belief that the state remains disconnected from the realities and needs of rural PDET communities. Hence, the findings presented in this section align with numerous studies that highlight serious participation limitations (Vargas and Díaz, 2018; Velásquez et al., 2021; Vélez-Torres et al., 2022) and frequent mismatches between citizens' expectations and their actual peacebuilding experiences (Kohl, 2015; Lappin, 2019; Millar, 2010). Although the specific nature of these shortcomings is context-contingent, citizen participation and peacebuilding interventions are invariably permeated by power imbalances and often subject to interference by political actors whose interests differ from those of the participating citizens. As a result, participatory deficits are difficult to avoid in practice – though not impossible – and they provoke a wide range of reactions. For coordinating groups and MdVs, these include among other reactions rhetorical contestation, the dissemination of narratives of intentional exclusion, oversight and coordination efforts, as well as disengagement and inaction. Regional ART officers are aware of PDET implementation shortcomings and often respond with accountability-driven reporting and discretionary support to community actors, for example. The remainder of this section demonstrates that these reactions have significant PAI implications and influence its effectiveness, inclusivity, and legitimacy, for example. However, they can also inadvertently hinder PAI progress.

Rhetorical contestation is one of the simplest and most commonly used methods by which group members and MdV members challenge the status quo. Tensions between coordinating group members and state representatives often stem from allegations of exclusion, fraud, and poor implementation – issues observed in all but one of the 21 state-led PDET meetings I attended during this research. A SNP coordinating group member also garnered major attention after criticising in a national newspaper difficult access to PDET information and the disregard of the coordinating group shown by the respective mayoralty (Forero, 2021). Occasionally, such contestation results in short-term achievements that can improve the inclusivity of the PDETs. For instance, a coordinating group's threat to withdraw collectively from an ART-organised PDET meeting led to their first-time invitation to a meeting of so-called *mesas de impulso*, monthly working meetings between public entities and authorities involved in each PDET pillar.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, verbal criticisms and opposition do not necessarily foster greater responsiveness of public authorities and state officials. Besides, they can obstruct efficient and effective PDET management, among others. For example, coordinating group members frequently delay or crush meeting agendas with complaints about actual or alleged fraud and

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<sup>17</sup>Until 2023, community representatives could not participate in those meetings and were not informed about their outcomes.



corruption and the PDET meetings observed over the course of this research hardly ever managed to complete their envisaged tasks. Regional ART officers also affirm against this background that a core reason why ‘there are mayoralities, which do not really interact with the coordinating groups’ (Interview with ART officer, 2022c), are coordinating groups’ constant criticisms and accusations (Interview with ART officer, 2022f). Similarly, the above-mentioned critique in the media further hardened the fronts between municipal administration and coordinating group in the respective case and produced a comparable effect. This can indirectly hinder PAI progress because mayors of PDET municipalities hold significant PDET authority and can manipulate the PDET implementation or prevent it entirely.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove that mayoralities thwart the PDET implementation due to coordinating groups’ criticisms, even though the possibility cannot be ruled out.

### *Participatory preferences and PAI*

The preceding section has evidenced that power inequalities are embedded within the PDET implementation system and prevent citizen participation from furthering PAI. Furthermore, the expectations of SNP coordinating group and MdV members have been deceived to date, which triggers responses that can hinder citizen participation from advancing PAI. Adding to these insights, this section finds that empirically under-researched inclusion preferences and the actions resulting from them do not necessarily facilitate PAI. This is partly because participatory preferences do not align with PAI goals, and because diverging preferences or misinterpretation of citizens’ preferences by state officials trigger conflicts, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the PAI process.

There is no guarantee that inclusion priorities align with PAI. Interestingly, among the examined PDET stakeholders in the SNP, the identification of priorities reveals that, for example, more than 60% of coordinating group and MdV members do not consider easy access to information a priority. This is remarkable because poor information availability is one of their main criticisms, and ‘informed participation and deliberation are impossible (. . .) [w]ithout access to adequate and appropriate information’ (Jaeger, 2007: 843). Similarly, the survey data shows that little more than half of SNP coordinating group (53.7%) and MdV (52.2%) members actually care about monitoring the work of state entities. While research in other contexts has evidenced that citizens’ interest in overseeing politicians’ or bureaucrats’ performance can be low (Olken, 2007; Raffler et al., 2019), this is rather counter-intuitive in the case of the PDETs given the coordinating groups and MdVs’ distrust, serious allegations towards elected authorities and state officials, and the widespread belief in corruption among coordinating groups and MdVs – as well as actual corruption scandals.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>See earlier in this section.

<sup>19</sup>The literature highlights the costs of engaging in oversight (Olken, 2007; Raffler, 2022; Raffler et al., 2019). However, this explanation appears little plausible here because coordinating group members fear reputational damage in their communities if the PDET implementation does not meet their expectations. Besides, it does not convincingly explain why they are willing to assume the time-intensive and non-renumerated cost of participating in the coordinating groups but do not monitor state entities – one of the main bottlenecks of the PDET implementation for many of them.



Besides, it is particularly noteworthy that competency distribution is not a priority. This survey finding is surprising because evidence from around the world indicates that mere inclusion discourses do not guarantee citizens decision-making power or lead to actual transformations (cf. Cornwall, 2003a, 2003b). It is also surprising because the exclusion of coordinating groups from key decision-making and financial processes lies at the heart of their criticisms of the lack of inclusivity of the PDET implementation. In addition, a majority of SNP coordinating group members (53.5%) do not wish to exclude state entities from PDET decision-making, despite frequent characterisations of ‘the state’ as absent and inattentive to Colombia’s rural communities (cf. Ramírez, 2015; Serje, 2011). In fact, there appears to be a preference for joint decision-making with visible, engaged state entities rather than decoupling and autonomous self-governance. Hence, the survey data reaffirms Velásquez et al.’s (2020b) finding that ‘in [Colombian] citizens’ imagination, the exercise of participation includes a relationship component with the state’ (p. 150). The following example illustrates the ongoing importance of the state as a reference point: On the eve of an exchange with the mayor of an SNP PDET municipality, a coordinating group member strongly criticises the mayor for allegedly modifying a proposed initiative, which no longer benefits the community as originally intended by the coordinating group. When asked what should be done about this, he responds: ‘I don’t know. I just want the mayor to listen. I want to tell him this in his face, that’s all’. This longing for attention resonates with Tate’s (2015) concept of the aspirational state – one that citizens hope for despite frequent disappointments – and shapes community actors’ participation in the PDET implementation.

However, neither subjective feelings of recognition nor direct interactions with state representatives – both of which coordinating groups and MdVs strongly desire – can address the structural limitations of the PDET implementation and its poor progress. Sometimes, such interactions can even hinder PAI. For example, the coordinating group member mentioned above uses the exchange with the mayor to voice complaints. These complaints, however, do not lead to any concrete agreements. Furthermore, they disrupt the tight meeting schedule and effectively result in the cancellation of the mayor’s report on the status of PDET implementation in the municipality. Consequently, the exchange fails to fulfil its intended accountability function and has no noticeable impact on the mayor, despite his involvement in a major corruption scandal and the lack of PDET progress. This example demonstrates that inclusion and PAI priorities are not inherently aligned. It also shows how such misalignments can undermine the effectiveness of PAI efforts, among other consequences.

There are similar divergences and misunderstandings regarding specific inclusion preferences. For example, the survey indicates a strong group-level desire among regional ART officers to be held accountable. Complaints of coordinating group and MdV members about corruption and institutional neglect reinforce ART officers’ belief that accountability matters to them (Interview with regional ART officer, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d). Regional ART officers also consider meetings a participatory priority<sup>20</sup> because they provide opportunities ‘[t]o show that we are working’ (Interview with regional ART officer, 2021c). In contrast, the survey shows that most coordinating group and MdV

<sup>20</sup>61.9% of them say so. This means that regional ART officers prioritise meetings more than decision-making structures and communication.

members do not particularly value oversight.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they see meetings primarily as opportunities to be heard. In this vein, a SNP coordinating group questions the ART's decision to invite a representative from the departmental *contraloría*<sup>22</sup> to a PDET meeting for a presentation on oversight mechanisms, arguing that 'they only want to reduce the time we have to speak up'. For SNP ART officers, the risk of such misinterpretations is high because most believe, according to the survey data, that their own and coordinating group members' preferences largely align. Interestingly, a similar pattern is observed in a study by García-Sánchez et al. (2023), which finds that Colombian congress members 'systematically underestimate citizen support for a key provision of the peace agreement' (p. 893). This suggests that even when state officials or politicians aim to act in accordance with citizens' preferences, misinterpretations can limit their responsiveness.

Information gaps often lead to such misinterpretations and hinder effective collaboration between state and community actors. In the SNP, divergent expectations and preferences are rarely recognised because of them, which fosters fundamentally different perceptions and experiences of the PDET implementation. For example, three out of four SNP ART officers report being generally satisfied with the PDETs' inclusivity. In contrast, roughly the same percentage of coordinating group and MdV members report the exact opposite, although the survey demonstrates that they identify similar inclusion barriers. ART officers also described meetings as 'beautiful' and 'productive', while coordinating group members dismissed the same meetings as 'pointless' or even 're-victimising'. These diverging perceptions contribute to the conflicts repeatedly highlighted in this article. Micro-scale conflict can be 'a dynamic ingredient that can be managed to shape policy outcomes of collaborative governance' (Ulibarri, 2023). However, structural limitations in the PDETs' inclusivity and the failure of SNP PDET actors to recognise easily resolvable misunderstandings perpetuate cycles of confrontation. As a result, the management of conflicts in the PDET implementation in the SNP often falls short of this ideal. Under these conditions, citizen participation tends to constrain rather than promote PAI, because it undermines its efficiency and constrains the collaboration between the involved parties – both of which are crucial for successful policy implementation.

## Conclusion

This article revisits a key issue in contemporary peacebuilding research and practice: the peacebuilding benefits of inclusion and, more specifically, its impact on PAI. While existing large-n analyses suggest that citizen participation promotes PAI, this article uses complementary qualitative and survey data from Colombia to disentangle the influence of citizens' involvement on PAI. In doing so, it adopts a micro-political perspective that empirically interrogates sub-national PAI dynamics through the actions and interactions of its protagonists.

This study evidences that citizen participation is not inherently PAI-conducive and sheds light on the peacebuilding consequences of poor inclusivity practices. For the particular case of the Colombian PDETs, it shows that those involved in their implementation

<sup>21</sup>See above.

<sup>22</sup>The *contraloría* is in charge of fiscal control of the Colombian state and its public entities.

perceive their actual inclusivity as poor, which in turn affects their attitudes and behaviours. More specifically, limited forms of citizen participation are built into the design of the PDETs and they disappoint citizens' expectations nurtured by the promise of exclusive decision-making powers for PDET communities. Limited forms of citizen participation also fail to foster PAI progress because they restrict the efficiency of PAI processes and do not facilitate oversight that ensures accountability and the implementation commitment of key PAI stakeholders, among other reasons. To this adds that (perceived) participatory preferences do not necessarily align with PAI, as well as the misinterpretation of citizens' preferences on behalf of state representatives. These insights are of particular policy relevance because they help to understand why peacebuilding in Colombia after 2016 has neither achieved 'the stable and lasting peace' (Colombia, 2016) envisioned in the peace agreement nor reduced the widespread 'distrust in politicians, corruption and [the] perceived distance between citizens' demands and the State's answers' (FIP, 2017b: 8; cf. Jaramillo et al., 2023).

Citizen participation is no guarantee for sustainable peace as such, and inclusion rhetoric can also backfire. From this follows that inclusive peacebuilding scholars, practitioners and policy-makers must pay greater attention to the unintended consequences of inclusion discourses. Bell (2019) correctly argues that '[i]nclusion mantras tend to hurt rather than help the underlying inclusion projects that they seek to serve if not accompanied by practical strategies for meaningful inclusion' (p. 15). This study further substantiates this argument by deconstructing how they can even constrain PAI. Second, the study underscores the need for greater investigation of PAI as a dynamic public administration process. In doing so, it directly responds to Joshi's (2024) call for greater attention to the disaggregate, local-level dynamics of PAI and paves the avenue for additional PAI research beyond large-n analyses that have prevailed to date. More specifically, future research should examine the manifold ways in which peacebuilding actors and their individual members perceive, contest and use institutional PAI arrangements, as well as their policy consequences. This can also stimulate additional insights into (alternative) pathways for citizens to exert PAI influence. Finally, this article demonstrates the need of grounding the 'inclusion hype' (Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019) in realities on the ground. Involving citizens in peace processes is desirable for many reasons (cf. Donais and McCandless, 2017). However, this article stresses that inclusion rhetoric alone cannot solve the serious challenges peacebuilding faces around the world, not just in Colombia. It 'mean[s] different things to different actors' (Donais and McCandless, 2017: 305), its implementation usually faces obstacles or resistance (Çuhadar, 2020), often does not satisfy citizens' expectations and desires (Vélez-Torres et al., 2022), and does not automatically promote PAI. Hence, rather than general calls for (more) inclusion, context-sensitive evidence on citizens' expectations and greater care of actual inclusion practices should be a priority for inclusive peacebuilding researchers, policy-makers and practitioners.

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## ORCID iD

Theresa Bachmann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2009-5073>

## Ethical Considerations

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## Consent to Participate

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. Consent was registered via the survey, orally as part of interview recordings, or in written form.

## Consent for Publication

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## Data Availability Statement

The data body underpinning this research remains confidential due to Colombian and UK data protection legislation, as well as security considerations. Survey questionnaires are available upon request.

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## Author biography

**Dr. Theresa Bachmann** is a peace and conflict scholar specialising in Colombia, with a PhD in International Conflict Analysis from the University of Kent. Her research focuses on inclusive peacebuilding, peace agreement implementation, and rural development, and has appeared in the *Bulletin of Latin American Research* and the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*. She currently works at KfW Development Bank in Frankfurt, Germany.