

Research Article

Between the Trench and the Law: Collective Reincorporation in Colombia as Political Resistance and the Belated Adaptation of State Institutions (2016– 2025)

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This article examines the conceptual and operational divergence between Colombia's institutional design for reincorporation, initially conceived under an individualised, technocratic DDR model, and the lived practices of peace signatories in the former Territorial Training and Reincorporation Areas (ETCRs), characterised by collective resistance and self-management. Drawing on a triangulated analysis that contrasts testimonies from ex-combatants and cooperation actors collected in 2023 with regulations issued by the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation (ARN) and UNDP guidelines published between 2024 and 2025, the article argues that the relative success of community-based reincorporation is not the outcome of original state planning, but of the political agency of collectives that de facto corrected the flaws of the institutional design. The analysis engages recent academic literature (2023–2024) that validates concepts such as "Comunidad Fariana"¹, "Festival del Chaleco" and the transition from cantonments to settlements. It concludes that the recent adoption of instruments such as Decree 1048 of^[1] and Resolution 2319 of^[2] represents a victory of community resistance, which forced the state to adapt its bureaucracy to the territorial reality constructed by the peace signatories.

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I. Introduction: The Clash of Two Models

The signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian state and the FARC-EP marked not only the end of armed confrontation but also the beginning of a conceptual and territorial dispute over the meaning of peace. In the original implementation design, the former Pre-Grouping Points and Transitional Rural Normalisation Zones (ZVTN), which would later become the Territorial Training and Reincorporation Areas (ETCRs), were conceived by state institutions as short-lived transit sites.

State and international cooperation logics operated under the classical DDR paradigm, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, understood as a technical sequence aimed at processing individuals and facilitating their reintegration into civilian life^{[3][4][5]}. This approach, widely criticised for its technocratic character and limited sensitivity to local social and political dynamics^[6], conceives reintegration as a bounded and linear phase within the peace cycle. Subsequent studies, however, have shown that life after DDR rarely fits this sequential template: ex-combatants' trajectories are multiple, negotiated and open-ended over time, so that "reintegration" is better understood as a socially situated and contested process rather than a closed final stage^[7]. In Colombia, this tension became visible from the outset, when ETCRs, originally designed as temporary devices for individualised reintegration, were transformed into spaces of community-based reincorporation driven from below by the ex-combatants themselves.

This technocratic vision collided immediately with the insurgency's collective political identity. For the peace signatories, the transition was not a dissolution but a transformation. Interviews with former combatants in the Tierra Grata ETCR reveal a sharp divergence between their understanding of disarmament and that of international organisations: they insist on naming the process "reincorporation" rather than mere "reintegration" and describe it as a transformation that explicitly exceeds a narrow, technical or depoliticised frame.

Although the state promoted a markedly individualised logic of reintegration, closer to "reinsertion" than to genuine reincorporation, and oriented towards dissolving ex-combatants into a pre-existing normality, a different response emerged in the territories. Rather than fragmenting, collectives chose to maintain their unity, aware that their political and existential continuity depended precisely on remaining cohesive. This article argues that the community-based reincorporation processes that eventually consolidated in the ETCRs did not stem from the initial institutional design or international cooperation schemes but emerged from collective resistance prompted by the gaps in public policies

aimed at dissolving insurgent social fabrics. Drawing on testimonies collected during fieldwork in 2023 in the Tierra Grata ETCR, specialised literature on community-based reincorporation, and the subsequent regulatory adaptations observed in 2024, it contends that this community trench, unforeseen in the state's script, ultimately shaped and, in some cases, rewrote the institutional framework.

In this sense, the Colombian case is not only about the design of a reincorporation policy but about a deeper struggle over what counts as "community." Early policy instruments such as CONPES 3931 framed community largely as an abstract counterpart to former combatants, associated with reconciliation workshops and social cohesion among civilians. By contrast, ex-combatant collectives insisted that they had never been outside the community, and that their own social fabric, families, and allied organisations were part of the same territorial communities that the state now sought to protect. The later Programme for Integral Reincorporation (PRI) partially acknowledges this tension by broadening the community dimension beyond coexistence to include support for collective organising, political participation, and local citizenship practices. This Perspective takes that dispute over the meaning of community as a privileged standpoint from which to analyse how bottom-up practices of collective reincorporation have gradually forced the Colombian state to reconfigure its own administrative categories.

II. Conceptual Resistance: From Reinsertion to Reincorporation

For state institutions, the success of reintegration into society was measured by the capacity to dissolve the former combatant into the undifferentiated citizenry; for the peace signatories, success lay in maintaining their cohesion as a political subject. This tension is expressed in an "identity-based resistance" which, insofar as it is enacted through discrete, everyday tactics, can be read as a form of everyday resistance in Scott's sense^[8]: informal, often barely visible practices through which subordinated actors preserve margins of autonomy vis-à-vis dominant structures, as the collective refuses to be treated as passive beneficiaries of external tutelage. Former combatants repeatedly criticised cooperation programmes that treated them as passive beneficiaries lacking basic organisational skills, arguing that much of the external support underestimated pre-existing capacities and reproduced paternalistic assumptions about what they were able to do by themselves.

This defence of autonomy is also ideological. Several interviewees interpreted the early insistence on individualised schemes as a deliberate attempt to prevent the emergence of cohesive political subjects: in their view, allowing collective reincorporation would have signalled state endorsement of large,

organised groups of former insurgents, perceived by the authorities as a direct challenge to the prevailing DDR doctrine.

Under the DDR logic, the state sought to demobilise not only weapons but also ideas and organisation. This reading is supported by recent studies by Oviedo and Pungo^[9], who theorise that the success of cohesion in places such as Caldono (ETCR Los Monos) is due to the persistence of the “Comunidad Fariana”, a sociological category that transcends the individual and acts as a system of shared values that protects subjects in the face of external uncertainty. From this perspective, the signatories’ insistence on grouping themselves into cooperatives and settlements constituted a counter-hegemonic manoeuvre to avoid their political disappearance, aligning with debates on the “local turn” and hybrid and everyday forms of peace, in which local actors not only resist but also reconfigure intervention frameworks from below^{[10][11]}.

The appropriation of space also reflected a symbolic resistance. ETCRs were initially conceived as temporary camps with a short-term closure horizon. However, collective investment and self-managed infrastructure by the signatories transformed these sites into permanent settlements. This act of materially constructing permanence redefined the territory: Pach & Bastidas Meneses^[12] document how murals in the Tierra Grata ETCR functioned as “communicative genres” that marked the territory not as a refugee camp, but as a place of memory and of the community’s own political projection.

The result of this resistance was the creation of a habitat that, paradoxically, ended up offering better living conditions than the surrounding civilian environment. Far from being a “ghetto” of marginalised people, the ETCR is perceived by its inhabitants as a superior social model. Residents in Tierra Grata describe the settlement in aspirational terms, portraying it as an attempt to build “a different kind of village” and explicitly contrasting their access to housing with the precarious prospects faced by younger generations outside the ETCR; for them, collective reincorporation is not only an ideological trench, but also a material guarantee of dignity in a context where homeownership remains out of reach for many civilians.

III. The Industry of Indicators and “Action with Harm”

If political resistance was the first barrier, the technical shortcomings of external assistance were the second major obstacle. The implementation of peace in Colombia brought with it a massive influx of international cooperation and state agencies. Fieldwork in Tierra Grata also pointed to what local actors

described as an “industry of indicators”. This dynamic echoes the classical critique of the depoliticisation of development, in which complex interventions are reduced to technical metrics, operating as an anti-politics machine that reframes structural conflicts as administrative problems and, at the same time, expands bureaucratic power in the territory^[13].

In a similar vein, ^[14] shows how social problems are *rendered technical*: delimited and formulated in such a way that they can be managed by experts and project devices, which facilitates their bureaucratic handling but restricts the possibility of transforming their root causes. Interviewees from Tierra Grata argued that, in the territory, this logic translated into interventions primarily oriented towards meeting quantitative targets for donors, at the expense of real transformations in people’s lives. Hence their notion of “Action with Harm”, which denounces poorly designed programmes that “impact” twenty people in reports but leave behind frustration and misallocated resources in the name of indicator movement.

This saturation resonates with recent literature on reincorporation. Jaramillo Contreras^[15] uses the expression “Festival del Chaleco” (Waistcoat Festival) to characterise the massive arrival of officials and organisations in the territory, a presence that can generate friction with the social worlds of peace signatories and with local forms of agency. One example of this disconnection was the training on offer. In the Tierra Grata ETCR, one-month online accounting courses were delivered to rural ex-combatants, with the stated aim of building administrative capacities for their cooperatives. The result, according to testimonies, was a training simulation that left organisations without actual accountants and with incomplete administrative processes.

IV. Pragmatic Sustainability: Care-Based Leadership

In the face of bureaucratic paralysis and the insufficiency of external indicators, the sustainability of reincorporation fell to an internal leadership structure that shifted from military to pragmatic logics. The survival of the collective was not guaranteed by government administrative guidelines, but by the day-to-day management of unmet basic needs. Interviewees emphasised that post-war leadership is no longer based on military rank but on the ability to deliver concrete results: those who coordinate today’s community structures are recognised because they take responsibility, manage everyday problems and “look after” the collective, rather than because they held command positions during the conflict.

This self-managed provision of public services unexpectedly became a powerful tool for territorial reconciliation. While public policy debated theoretical frameworks around “stigmatisation,” the community of Tierra Grata addressed the mistrust of its neighbours through the practical sharing of resources.

The potable water project, funded with IOM resources but implemented by the signatories, extended its reach beyond the ETCR perimeter. Accounts from Tierra Grata highlight that basic service projects were deliberately designed to reach neighbouring villages such as El Mirador, which also suffered from water scarcity; by extending piped water beyond the former ETCR, ex-combatants strengthened local infrastructure, created shared “installed capacities” and opened channels for ongoing mediation and dialogue with surrounding communities. This dynamic is consistent with Lopera-Arbeláez et al.^[16], who argue that collective productive projects grounded in social and solidarity economies can function as strategies of resistance against socio-economic exclusion and as mechanisms for fostering social cohesion beyond the ex-combatant group. Such initiatives can be understood as forms of collective provision of goods that resonate with commons-like governance dynamics^[17] and the generation of social capital, both bonding within the ex-combatant community and bridging towards neighbouring communities^[18].

In this way, practice showed what policy manuals took years to acknowledge: successful reincorporation is not a process of protected isolation, but of functional integration. By providing public goods (water, electricity, health campaigns) where the state was absent, ex-combatants moved from being perceived as a security threat to becoming indispensable assets for regional development, thus grounding a peace based on interdependence rather than merely on a signed agreement.

V. The Central Contrast: The Victory of the Grassroots over the Norm (2023 vs. 2024)

The clearest evidence that community-based reincorporation has been an exercise in political resistance, rather than a product of the original institutional design, lies in the drastic regulatory evolution observed between 2023 and 2024. An analysis of territorial testimonies collected in 2023 reveals a persistent tension between the state’s vision and that of the population in reincorporation: interviewees reported that institutions systematically pushed to dismantle group projects in favour of one-off individual cash disbursements (see Table 1), a strategy that often resulted in the rapid depletion of resources and the

financial fragility of those who accepted it. However, the adoption of the Programme for Integral Reincorporation (PRI) and Resolution 2319 of 2024 marked a historic turning point: the ARN not only abandoned exclusively individual rhetoric but also institutionalised the “Collective Reincorporation Plan” as a formal public policy instrument.

This normative shift is not a gratuitous concession; it is the state’s belated recognition and can be understood as a process of reconfiguring governmentality, in which governmental rationalities and techniques are redefined in dialogue and tension with previously consolidated social practices^{[19][20]}. In this sense, public policy does not precede territorial reality; it follows it, retrospectively incorporating organisational forms that emerged outside the original institutional design.

This dynamic of forced adjustment was equally evident in the territorial dimension. In 2023, legal uncertainty over land tenure was the main source of anxiety for peace signatories, who had built entire settlements on plots whose legal status remained unclear. Interviewees described a bureaucratic paradox that effectively paralysed state investment: if the land continued to be classified as “*baldío*” (state wasteland), public agencies were formally prohibited from investing resources there, even though infrastructure had already been financed and constructed on those very plots. While the regulations in force at the time prevented these settlements from being legally consolidated, continuing to treat them as temporary camps, communities nonetheless kept expanding long-term infrastructure on the ground (see Table 1).

Recent scholarly work confirms that this anxiety was existential. Barrios Sabogal^[21] shows, by comparing the success of La Montañita (ETCR Agua Bonita) with the failure of Mesetas (ETCR Mariana Páez), that land ownership and security were the decisive variables for a “cantonment” (temporary camp) to evolve into a “settlement” (permanent community). The institutional response finally arrived with Decree 1048 of 2024, which created the Special Areas for Collective Reincorporation (AERC). This legal figure was not a proactive state initiative to plan new settlements, but the reactive legal validation of the only strategy that, as Barrios Sabogal demonstrates, worked empirically to prevent dispersion and a return to violence.

These legal shifts can be better understood when we look at how specific former ETCRs evolved on the ground. The transformation of former Territorial Training and Reincorporation Areas (ETCRs) into recognised settlements illustrates this bottom-up correction of policy particularly well. In several emblematic cases, such as Agua Bonita/Héctor Ramírez, San José de León, and Tierra Grata, ex-combatant collectives treated the ETCR from the outset not as a temporary cantonment, but as the

nucleus of a future village: they brought their families, invested in housing, and forged economic and social ties with neighbouring communities. For years, these practices unfolded in a legal grey zone marked by precarious land tenure and the formal expiration of the ETCR figure.

Recent instruments such as Decree 1048 of 2024, which creates the Special Areas for Collective Reincorporation (AERC), do not inaugurate these settlements; they retrospectively legalise a territorial reality already produced by ex-combatant agency and local negotiation. As Barrios Sabogal shows, secure land tenure and recognition as populated centres were decisive for the evolution from “cantonment” to “settlement,” underscoring that the law followed, rather than led, the consolidation of collective reincorporation.

Finally, the social dimension reveals a similar convergence between local intuition and belated international guidance. While traditional approaches to reincorporation tended to focus resources exclusively on ex-combatants, often generating resentment among vulnerable neighbours who received no support, practice on the ground had already overflowed those limits long before the new regulations were issued.

Civil-society allies involved in Tierra Grata’s process conceptualised reincorporation as a “50–50” exercise of shared responsibility between ex-combatants and their neighbours, stressing that investments in basic services, most notably the potable water system, were never confined to the perimeter of the former ETCR but deliberately extended to surrounding communities, so that the benefits would not be exclusive to those in the reincorporation programme (see Table 1). This survival strategy, born of the need to avoid isolation, now aligns closely with UNDP’s *Guidance Note on Supporting Community-Based Reintegration*^[22], which establishes as a core guiding principle that support should benefit both ex-combatants and the wider community, thereby avoiding the creation of privileged groups. Thus, the recent institutionalisation of Territorial Reincorporation Councils (CTR) by the ARN does not inaugurate community integration; rather, it formalises a social fabric that had already been autonomously woven by peace signatories and their neighbours.

The following contrast summarises this corrective mechanism, showing how grassroots demands (2023) translated into the state’s belated regulatory response (2024–2025):

Grassroots demand / critique (2023)	Regulatory / institutional response (2024–2025)	Thesis of policy correction
Land in limbo: Legal uncertainty and the impossibility of investing in “baldíos” (state wasteland).	Decree 1048 of 2024: Creates the Special Areas for Collective Reincorporation (AERC).	The physical permanence of signatories forced the creation of a new legal figure that could legitimise the settlements.
Individual vs. collective: Struggle against the atomisation of resources. Institutional pressure for individual disbursements over collective projects.	Resolution 2319 of 2024 (PRI): Explicitly defines and regulates the “Collective Reincorporation Plan”.	Collective resistance was institutionalised as a legitimate public policy, abandoning the aim of dissolving group structures.
Isolation vs. integration: Need for a “50–50” process (signatories and civil society).	UNDP^[22] / CONPES approach: Strengthening of Territorial Reincorporation Councils (CTR).	It confirms the thesis that successful reincorporation is territorial and symbiotic, not a supported ghetto.

Table 1. Demands versus Regulatory Response

Source: Prepared by the author.

VI. Conclusions, Future Agenda and Conceptual Implications

This Perspective, grounded in community-based reincorporation experiences in former Territorial Training and Reincorporation Areas (ETCRs) such as Tierra Grata and related cases, suggests that Colombia’s model of “reintegrating into a peaceful society” is being built from the bottom up rather than engineered from the top down.

The original, individual-focused DDR design has proven insufficient to contain the complexity of this transition, as it is narrowly technical and centred on individual ex-combatants as ‘spoilers’^[6]. The relative success of community-based reincorporation stems instead from collective resistance that has operated as a de facto mechanism for correcting public policy. Reincorporation can therefore not be understood as a technical phase of “repairing individuals,” but as the gradual construction of a new political and social actor, aligning with scholarship that contests linear DDR templates and conceptualises reintegration as a negotiated, socially embedded and open-ended process^[2].

At the same time, the normative validation of collective reincorporation through instruments such as Decree 1048 and Resolution 2319 of 2024 does not immunise the process against new internal risks. Peace remains a task of co-responsibility that requires civil society and the state not only to “receive” ex-combatants, but to transform with them. The long-term sustainability of peace in Colombia will ultimately depend on whether future public policies continue to listen to territorial realities before attempting to order them by decree.

Conceptual implications and future research

Building on these findings, Colombia contributes to a situated, fourth-generation understanding of DDR that moves beyond earlier programmatic frameworks. Rather than adding another checklist of best practices, this article foregrounds how collective agency, territorial settlements and bureaucratic practices co-produce the very meaning of reincorporation. In doing so, it extends generational approaches to DDR^[6] and post-DDR scholarship on reintegration as open-ended transformation^[7] by showing how ex-combatant collectives do not simply pass through DDR programmes, but reshape the categories, instruments and temporalities through which DDR itself is defined.

From this standpoint, ETCRs and their evolution into recognised settlements, and later into Special Areas for Collective Reincorporation (AERC), appear not as neutral implementation sites, but as arenas in which state rationalities and insurgent projects negotiate new forms of co-existence. Administrative categories such as “community”, “former ETCR” or “AERC” emerge as sedimented compromises between state logics and collective projects from below, illustrating that “next-generation” DDR must take seriously the capacity of ex-combatants and their neighbours to redefine what counts as reintegration, who belongs to the community, and which territorial forms become thinkable as spaces of peace.

A review of policy documents, implementation routines and local negotiations reveals that what appears as a coherent legal architecture is, in fact, the delayed recognition of insurgent agency and community-building from below. Future research should explore comparatively how figures such as the AERC travel to, or remain specific to, the Colombian context; under what political and institutional conditions similar bottom-up corrections of DDR templates occur in other asymmetric peace processes; and how international guidance on community-based reintegration can better incorporate these dynamics of co-production between law and territorial practice.

Internal risks and economic stratification remain critical. The consolidation of collective reincorporation generates new fault lines, as emerging income hierarchies introduce market logics that may erode the

solidarity that sustained these communities during the war. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how economic differentiation and labour dynamics reshape collective identities such as the “Comunidad Fariana,” and under what conditions these transformations weaken or reconfigure the social fabric underpinning community-based reincorporation. In short, between the trench and the law, the sustainability of the process will depend on keeping open this capacity for bottom-up correction.

Footnotes

¹ The “Comunidad Fariana” refers to a socio-political and cultural category that transcends individual membership in the former FARC-EP. It implies the persistence of a collective identity, a code of solidarity, and an internal post-demobilisation governance structure that operates as a mechanism of protection and cohesion in the face of uncertainty and external stigmatisation (see [\[9\]](#)).

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