



Catatumbo: socioeconomic impact and humanitarian crisis in a region affected by the armed conflict

Catatumbo: impacto socioeconómico y crisis humanitaria en una región afectada por el conflicto armado

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Abstract

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This study focuses on the social, economic, and humanitarian effects of the armed conflict in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander. This area has a history of violence, illegal armed groups, and little help from the government. The objective was to identify the elements that have intensified the humanitarian crisis, focusing specifically on forced displacement, dependence on illicit economies, and infringements of fundamental rights. Two Likert-scale surveys were administered to victims of the armed conflict and to officials from the Ocaña Mayor's Office, using a quantitative, descriptive methodology. A group of 95 people was selected to participate in the surveys using a probabilistic sampling method. The results show that many people have been attacked, made to move, and lost access to important services. This has had a big effect on their living conditions and social stability. People also rely heavily on illegal activities because there are not many legal job openings. The conflict has caused a cycle of violence, poverty, and violations of human rights that has had a big impact on the region's economic growth. The research offers a comprehensive examination of the humanitarian crisis from the perspectives of local stakeholders and victims, emphasizing the critical need for a long-term, comprehensive state intervention that encompasses economic and administrative strategies for the region's sustainable development and reconstruction.

Keywords: Armed conflict, Catatumbo, humanitarian crisis, forced displacement, illicit economies, socioeconomic development.

Resumen

Se administraron dos encuestas con escala Likert a víctimas del conflicto armado y a funcionarios de la Alcaldía de Ocaña, mediante una metodología cuantitativa y descriptiva. Se seleccionó un grupo de 95 personas para participar en las encuestas mediante un muestreo probabilístico. Los resultados muestran que muchas personas han sido atacadas y desplazadas y han perdido el acceso a servicios esenciales. Esto ha tenido un gran impacto en sus condiciones de vida y en su estabilidad social. Además, muchas personas recurren a actividades ilegales debido a la escasez de empleos legales. El conflicto ha generado un ciclo de violencia, pobreza y violaciones de derechos humanos que ha afectado gravemente el crecimiento económico de la región. La investigación ofrece un análisis exhaustivo de la crisis humanitaria desde la perspectiva de los actores locales y las víctimas, destacando la necesidad crítica de una intervención estatal integral y a largo plazo que abarque estrategias económicas y administrativas para el desarrollo y la reconstrucción sostenibles de la región.

Palabras clave: conflicto armado, Catatumbo, crisis humanitaria, desplazamiento forzado, economías ilícitas, desarrollo socioeconómico.

INTRODUCTION

The Catatumbo region is located in eastern Colombia, in the department of Norte de Santander. This region, which is characterized by its geographical complexity and natural wealth, has suffered for many years from the ravages of war. This fact has resulted in the existence of thousands of victims (Casadiegos, 2020). For more than five decades, this region, characterized by its richness in natural resources, has suffered from constant conflict, where guerrillas, paramilitaries, the National Army, and groups dedicated to drug trafficking have disputed its control, making it one of the areas most affected by violence in the country. According to Villanueva. (2020), it is necessary to go back to the 1970s and 1980s in each of the villages, townships, and municipalities of the region to glimpse the first displacements and massacres during the so-called “war of colors”, the famous bipartisan confrontation.

Since the late 1970s, the guerrillas of the ELN (National Liberation Army), the EPL (Popular Liberation Army), and, later, the FARC (Revolutionary Forces of Colombia), have been present in the territory of Catatumbo, where its inhabitants remember how these guerrillas have carried out actions such as town takeovers, extortion, and kidnappings. Therefore, Catatumbo, comprising municipalities such as Convención, El Carmen, El Tarra, Hacarí, San Calixto, Sardinata, Teorama, and Tibú, has historically been a strategic epicenter due to its vast coca crops and natural resources, such as oil and coal (Defensoria del pueblo 2025). In addition, according to official figures, Catatumbo is home to about 3,974 indigenous people and 10,536 Afro-Colombians, representing 4% of the region’s total population (Jaimes. 2021), highlighting the place’s ethnic diversity.

According to the above, forced displacement is a social scourge that has occurred as a result of the armed conflict, forcing people to break social, cultural, and material ties, causing them to leave their homes in search of security and well-being (Mora. (2021). According to bulletin #23 of the Victims Unit. (2025), the data reveal that at the beginning of the year, the humanitarian crisis in Catatumbo was particularly alarming; of a total of 9,786 documented events, 5,396 occurred in this region. Likewise, displaced peasants in Catatumbo face difficult social and family conditions that leave them exposed to the disregard of their rights by the illegal armed groups, the civilian population, and the State (Mora. 2021). Thus, the crisis in Catatumbo underscores the urgent need for an intervention that addresses the conflict’s underlying causes.

The fight between the ELN and dissident groups had very bad effects on people, society, and institutions. The civilian population was caught in the middle of the armed conflict, which brought back memories of the violence that happened in 2018 when the ELN fought the so-called “Pelusos.” However, this time it was much worse and happened much faster. This new wave of violence not only made people leave their homes and made communities less safe, but it also tore apart the organizational and community fabric of the Catatumbo region, leaving structural scars on social processes that had been built up over the years. It also made people

less trusting of government institutions because they could not stop or respond to the armed attack. It is especially worrying that most of the violence was directed at civilians instead of the armed conflict.

The ELN tried to justify its actions by saying that the people who lived there were collaborators, which made it hard to tell the difference between civilians and combatants, which is a basic rule of International Humanitarian Law. The Ombudsman’s Office has also said that there are currently 11 humanitarian emergencies in the country. The fact that different illegal armed groups are fighting each other shows how complicated the conflict is. The National Liberation Army (ELN) and various former FARC dissidents are becoming more active, as are local criminal groups and groups that follow the rules of paramilitarism, like the Clan del Golfo and the Conquistadores de la Sierra. The actions of these groups have a direct and devastating impact on the populations living in these territories, hindering their access to basic services and increasing the risk of forced displacement.

Table 1. Victimizing events

Victimizing event	Total Events
Forced displacement	5932
Threat	2355
Abandonment or Forced Dispossession of Land	703
Terrorist acts / Attacks / Combat / Clashes / Harassments	452
Abduction	101
Homicide	97
Crimes against sexual freedom and integrity during the armed conflict	58
Involvement of Children and Adolescents in Activities Related to Armed Groups	30
Enforced disappearance	28
Torture	18
Loss of Movable or Immovable Property	8
Anti-Personnel Mines, Unexploded Ordnance, and Improvised Explosive Devices	4
Total	9786

Source: Defensoria del pueblo (2025)

In particular, 54.4% of the events occurred in week 3 (January 13 to 19) and have decreased gradually since then. These data are preliminary and based on statements collected online. 45.2% of the events have occurred in Tibú, 16.1% in Teorama, and 14.6% in El Tarra.

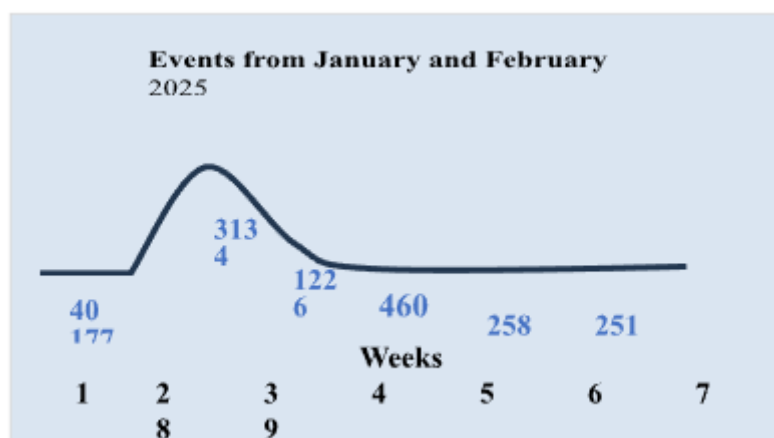


Figure 1. Events from January and February 2025

Table 2. Events Occurred In January/February Of 5,760 In The Catatumbo Subregion

Municipality-Siniestro	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Total weekly events
Abrego	1	3	65	32	30	15	1	1		148
Convention	5	1	249	110	25	18	7	18	5	438
El Carmen	1	2	24	16	12	7	1			63
El Tarra	4	17	515	172	77	29	18	7		839
Hacati	2		156	30	13	6	6			213
La Playa	1	2	8	9	3	2	2			27
Ocaña	1	3	14	33	8	9	1			69
San Calixto	7	11	162	82	31	8		8		309
Sardinata		4	45	36	9	14	7	6		121
Teorama	3	4	596	188	54	33	30	19		927
Tibú	15	70	1300	518	198	217	176	102	8	2606
Total	40	117	3134	1226	460	251	251	161	13	5760
Total previous cut-off	39	117	3065	1196	448	238	238	149	0	5592
Change	1	0	69	30	12	13	13	12	13	168

Own elaboration 2025

Table 2 lists all reports and events that occurred in Catatumbo during the first two months of 2025, when, due to disputes among illegal armed groups, the region was again affected. The increase in these events is also evident in the third week of January (January 13-19), with Tibú, Teorama, and El Tarra as the main areas affected.

In sum, some data provided in the bulletin of the Victims Unit. (2025) show an alarming percentage of 64.3% of forced displacement, along with 16.7% of threats and 11.1% of forced abandonment or dispossession of land, which is a negative indicator full of consequences for the inhabitants of the region.

The Catatumbo region, once known as the “House of Thunder,” has been shaped by ongoing patterns of armed violence, which has given it a reputation as a place only known for conflict and illegal economies. However, this interpretation is insufficient without a structural analysis of its causes, dynamics, and consequences. From a causal perspective, the Catatumbo crisis stems from multiple factors:

insufficient institutional presence, historical social exclusion, inadequate productive infrastructure, and the ongoing absence of comprehensive rural development policies. These structural conditions have caused illegal armed groups to grow. They fight for control of land and key economies, especially those involved in illegal crops, smuggling, and other informal extractive activities.

In this situation, many farmers do not choose to grow illegal crops because they believe in them; they do so to stay alive because they have no other good options.

In terms of how the conflict works, the territorial dispute between guerrillas, post-paramilitary groups, and drug trafficking organizations has caused cycles of violence that directly affect civilians. Forced displacement is now the most common way that people are hurt in the area. As [Casadiegos et. al. \(2020\)](#) note, this event has had a structural effect, making thousands of families leave their homes, community networks, and plans for the future. As a receiving center, the municipality of Ocaña has taken in more than 42,509 people who were forced to leave their homes between 1985 and 2018. This shows that the problem is still very serious. This forced migration alters the region's demographics, disrupts the social fabric, and undermines the effectiveness of community organizations.

The effects of this reality are strong and long-lasting. People are more likely to be unemployed, work informally, and be poor if they are moved around a lot, especially in places where the local economy depends on illegal activities that are easy to shut down or get caught up in armed conflict. People are more likely to turn to illegal economies when formal commerce fails and production is unstable. This keeps the cycle of violence going. People do not trust the government because they think it is corrupt and has abandoned them. This hurts the government's legitimacy.

Health and education, important areas, are also badly affected. Low investment in infrastructure, service interruptions, and high school dropout rates resulting from forced relocation or military service all hurt long-term human development. Organized crime is growing because of unstable structures, illegal economies, and a weak government. This is shown by more drug trafficking, extortion, and violence.

To put it simply, armed groups do not just cause the Catatumbo crisis; it is also a sign that territorial integration, rural development, and the effective protection of rights are not working. Without big changes that link security, economic growth, and stronger institutions, the cycle of violence and displacement is likely to continue. This widens the gaps in inequality and social exclusion.

It is necessary to mention that violence has not been alien to the region throughout history. However, a key idea is to recognize that the practices of the groups that are present in the territory have adapted to the new realities, which are derived from the inability of the State to reach the municipalities (especially in the rural sector, in the townships and villages), the crisis in Venezuela (the country with which the region borders) and a focus of the armed actors on the illegal economy. However, what really angered the families of Catatumbo was that the national government, rather than heeding the recommendations of the Ombudsman's Office, dismantled

several special commands that had been trained precisely for such situations (Moreno. 2025).

In this regard, the Colombian government decided to suspend peace talks with the ELN on January 17, accusing the armed group of committing war crimes. This measure was accompanied by the declaration of internal commotion, a constitutional mechanism that had not been applied for 17 years and which grants special powers to the Executive. Despite these actions, violence in Catatumbo persists, and the civilian population continues to be the most affected.

The contribution of this research to the field of study on armed conflict and territorial development is to offer an empirical approach to the analysis of the socioeconomic and humanitarian impacts, particularly pronounced in the Catatumbo region of the Norte de Santander department. During the research implementation phase, based on the collection and analysis of information, I systematically highlighted the structural dynamics that perpetuate the humanitarian crisis in the region, including forced displacement, the presence of illegal armed groups, institutional weakness, and dependence on illicit economies. In this regard, the research expands the academic understanding of the relationship between structural violence, violations of fundamental rights, and the deterioration of living conditions in rural communities affected by the armed conflict.

The findings also help identify factors of vulnerability and insecurity that affect the population's quality of life, thereby enabling targeted recommendations to strengthen state capacities, implement sustainable rural development strategies, and gradually replace illicit economies. In this context, the research not only contributes to the academic debate on the effects of armed conflict in rural regions of Colombia but also provides relevant inputs for the design of public policies and development-oriented programs that promote the reconstruction of the social fabric, guarantee rights, and foster sustainable socioeconomic development in territories affected by violence in Colombia. Given the above analysis, it is clear that there is a need to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these structural conditions affect the humanitarian crisis in the aforementioned territories and of their main implications for regional development. Consequently, this research seeks to answer the following question: What are the socioeconomic impacts of the persistent armed conflict in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander, and how do these contribute to the worsening of the humanitarian crisis characterized by forced displacement, dependence on illicit economies, and the violation of fundamental rights?

LITERARY AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Armed conflicts affect human development both directly and indirectly, with impacts felt at the individual, family, and societal levels (Vesco. 2025). Conflicts can affect the infant mortality rate (IMR) by destroying health services, restricting mobility, and impairing access to clean water and food. Violence can also have lasting effects on the IMR (Wagner et al., 2018) through combined impacts on economic

growth, income equality, and illiteracy among young women, the three strongest predictors of IMR change (Schell et al., 2007).

According to the above, destruction encompasses all damage to people and capital, while deterioration refers to the decline in the availability and quality of resources resulting from conflict. These processes affect all dimensions of people's well-being and development: health, education, and livelihoods. Soldiers and civilians are killed and maimed, property, agricultural production, and livestock are stolen and destroyed, and people are forced to flee. Violence reduces access to clean water and food, impairs the provision of education and healthcare, and impairs work and productivity.

In line with Ralf Dahrendorf. (1959), social conflict theory holds that society is composed of groups with conflicting interests. These groups fight for control of resources and power, thus focusing on the class struggle between opposing groups in society, such as the rich and the poor, blacks and whites, men and women, etc. Thus, for Parsons (2013), social conflict is a process of segregation that affects the functionality of the social system, as it introduces entropy-generating systemic integration problems and, therefore, alters the status and roles assumed by the different social agents. However, despite the apparent dysfunction that conflict brings, Coser points out that social conflict “can have important latent functional consequences”. Thus, citing Dahrendorf. (1959), conflict is the creative and driving energy of all change, since social conflict within a well-integrated society is part of a process of systemic adjustment, i.e., conflict functions as a mechanism of social evolution, where quantitative changes are introduced into power relations, but without affecting the systemic quality.

On the other hand, the theory of human rights by Contró M & Ugalde P is framed within a theoretical current also known as “constitutionalism”, starting from the point that modern constitutionalism is the complex reworking of an ancient ideal: the “government of laws”. The dilemma is of classical origin: which is better, a government in which the ruler decides based on his arbitrary will or a government in which the ruler is a servant of the law rather than its patron? The government of men vs. the government of laws (Contró & Ugalde s.f.). It should be noted that, according to Contró & Ugalde (s.f.) as a result of constitutionalism, different generations of rights emerge, where the first of them aims to limit the power of the State and recognizes freedom as the fundamental value, thus creating “the four great freedoms of modern people”: personal freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. On the other hand, the second generation enshrines the so-called economic, social, and cultural rights, upholds the value of equality, and aims to ensure that everyone has the conditions to exercise and realize the rights of the first generation. Among the main rights of this type are the rights to health, education, housing, and work.

Likewise, in the Structural Theory of Violence, Galtung (1969) argues that violence can occur when disagreement is high. This is a very complex problem in

which social groups, institutions, or the government itself intervene. Although violence in these conflicts is often not observable, that does not mean it is absent; as [Zamora \(2018\)](#) notes, modern societies see themselves as civilized, pacified societies and, inwardly, as free of violence. However, violence is omnipresent and grows incessantly, because civil wars are punctual and extraordinary phenomena.

Having said the above, according to [Polarization 2019](#), Johan Galtung identifies 3 types of violence. Firstly, direct violence is that which is exercised directly by an actor; this is visible physically or psychologically, such as torture, murder, physical or psychological abuse, discrimination, etc. The second is of the structural type, reflected in social injustice and in the structures that promote it, such as poverty and degrading living conditions. Finally, cultural or symbolic violence refers to the aspects of a culture that allow the use of violence through attitudes such as racism, sexism, fascism, etc.

In this sense, an armed conflict is a violent confrontation between two sides or large human groups that generates death and material destruction. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) distinguishes between two types: those involving belligerents within a single State (non-international armed conflicts) and those involving armed forces of two or more States (international armed conflicts). Armed conflicts are a setting in which several human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law can occur. These include deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, the use of inherently indiscriminate weapons (such as landmines), and the recruitment of child soldiers ([Amnesty International. 2023](#)).

In addition, notes the [World Bank Group \(2016\)](#), forced displacement refers to the situation of people who leave their homes or flee due to conflict, violence, persecution, and human rights violations. Currently, almost 60 million people have been forcibly displaced in the world, becoming refugees (19.5 million), internally displaced persons (38.2 million), or asylum seekers, and this is the highest number since World War II. Thus, with no end in sight to the conflicts that drive displacement, this crisis is expected to worsen. As a result, displacement causes tremendous human suffering and is undoubtedly a humanitarian problem since care and maintenance are often immediate priorities. It is also recognized as a development issue, particularly in protracted situations, due to the significant socio-economic impact it has on forcibly displaced persons, host communities and countries, and places of origin.

Respecting, an illegal armed group, also known as an “organized armed group outside the law,” is an armed group that operates outside the legal and constitutional system, has a responsible command, and has maintained a presence in a territory, with the capacity to carry out sustained armed actions ([Ocha 2014](#)). In other words, according to [Cárdenas \(2022\)](#), an organized armed group outside the law is understood as a guerrilla or self-defense group, or a significant and integral part thereof, such as blocs, fronts, or other modalities of these same organizations that, under the direction of a responsible command, exercise control over a part of the

territory. The civilian population in the regions affected by the armed confrontations in Colombia continues to be exposed to acts of violence such as homicides, direct attacks, kidnappings, and forced recruitments; as a result, many people are forced to flee and abandon their belongings.

From the above perspective, humanitarian crises, such as conflicts, natural disasters, and pandemics, often raise human rights concerns. The deterioration of the human rights situation can also trigger crises and heighten humanitarian needs among affected populations. Thus, protecting human rights is a key element of humanitarian action in responding to a humanitarian crisis. It is also crucial, before implementation, through preparedness and prevention, and afterwards, to strengthen resilience and sustain peace. Moreover, if human rights violations are not adequately addressed, the result can lead to a spiral of injustices and atrocities that exacerbate humanitarian needs, fuel existing tensions, and worsen the crisis (UN 2024).

The following sections also review the existing evidence on how the impacts of conflict on a given development dimension intersect with those on other dimensions, and identify critical gaps in existing knowledge.

Impacts of conflict on health

The destruction caused by war has immediate and devastating effects on people's health and lives, causing death, injury, and disability. Several studies show that armed conflict is associated with increased maternal, infant, and overall mortality. The intensity of the conflict, rather than the actors involved, is the main determinant of mortality (Jawad et al. 2021).

In this regard, the deterioration and disruption of health infrastructure and services, together with the diversion of resources intended for medical care, are other significant causes of morbidity and mortality (Garry & Checchi 2020). Conflict therefore disrupts the provision of and access to medical care, reducing the use of health services as the frequency and intensity of fighting increase (Ekzayez et al. 2021). The suspension of prenatal and maternal services increases the risk of complications during pregnancy and of both maternal and infant mortality. Numerous studies have documented a decline in the use of childbirth, prenatal care, and child health services in war contexts.

Furthermore, interrupted treatments and delayed diagnoses in conflict settings exacerbate cancer, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Places exposed to conflict are associated with increased mortality from chronic or noncommunicable diseases (Aebischer Perone et al. 2017), as wars “increase the civilian population's exposure to conditions that increase the risk of disease, injury, and death” (Ghobarah et al. 2003, p192). Other health protection factors are further disrupted, including access to safe drinking water, electricity, financial stability, and routine vaccination services (Bendavid et al. 2021).

Impacts of conflict on schooling and education

Armed conflicts have profoundly negative effects on education, affecting access, quality, and learning outcomes. Empirical evidence shows that violence reduces enrollment rates (Bertoni et al. 2019), literacy, school attendance, and academic performance. Exposure to conflict also decreases the likelihood of passing final exams and accessing higher education (Brück et al. 2019). In addition, the destruction of schools, homes, and property caused by war is a determining factor in the loss of educational capital (Ito et al. 2024). However, Štambuk et al., (2020) found that, in the case of Bosnia, violence had a limited direct effect on education because it damaged school buildings. Even when schools are not destroyed, their infrastructure and services deteriorate significantly.

Conflict also makes it hard for schools to operate, shortens school days, and causes both students and teachers to miss more school. These interruptions make it harder for students to keep learning and to learn. However, the lack of reliable data underscores the need for caution when interpreting these results (Brück et al. 2019). Additionally, the psychological consequences of violence, including acute stress and trauma, impair students' cognitive and emotional capacities, thereby hindering their academic performance. This decline in psychological well-being may elucidate the immediate effects of conflict on education, particularly regarding test outcomes (Michaelsen & Salardi 2020).

Impacts of conflict on income and livelihoods

The arguments of Naudé et al. (2024) and Kaila & Azad (2023) help us understand that armed conflicts not only cause visible damage through direct violence but also alter how local economies operate and how people live. The destruction of microenterprises, the looting of productive assets, and the loss of livestock are not only material losses; they also dismantle capital accumulated over years, complicating families' ability to sustain themselves independently. This is how conflict can hurt the economy. When productive assets are damaged, and access to financial and logistical resources is limited, business productivity drops, and the normal flow of the market is disrupted. This economic downturn affects business owners, workers, suppliers, and business networks. This is bad for jobs and family income. Some research indicates that these effects may lessen after the cessation of hostilities; however, the damage's temporary nature does not diminish its significance.

. Immediate losses often lead to debt, forced migration, informal work, and a greater risk of social problems. Also, when assets lose value, and people are unsure about the future, they are less likely to invest, which slows the economy's recovery and makes it harder for the productive sector to rebuild.

These effects go beyond the economy when viewed in the broader context of human development. Less money makes it harder to get an education, see a doctor, and eat well, which keeps the cycle of poverty going from one generation to the next. So, conflict not only destroys physical capital but also social and human capital, making

communities less cohesive and less able to bounce back. It is important to remember that moving capital and labor worsens economic effects. Many businesspeople withdraw their money from war zones (Naudé et al. (2024), and workers are moved around in ways that make little sense. In these situations, total labor participation goes down, and the way people work changes. As many men who work primarily in agriculture move to safer urban areas, where women often do domestic and service work (Bozzoli et al. 2013), the number of women working tends to rise relative to the number of men working. These labor market disruptions impede structural transformation processes and exert enduring impacts on long-term income and productivity. Evidence from Colombia shows that long-term exposure to violence makes it harder for workers to move into more productive sectors, even after the conflict ends (Fergusson, Ibáñez, & Riaño 2020).

Violence within the family necessitates reallocation of resources toward basic survival strategies. During extended periods of warfare, families engage in perilous subsistence strategies, including incurring debt, liquidating assets, accepting hazardous employment, or employing child labor (Churchill et al. 2022). These strategies, while transient, undermine the welfare and economic stability of families, exacerbating social vulnerability and entrenched poverty in impacted communities.

Finally, victims of the conflict, according to Gutiérrez. (2021), in Colombia, the concept of “victim” is emotionally, semantically, politically, and legally charged. Therefore, conflict is inherent to human nature. Every day of our lives, we are forced to make decisions to solve our daily needs. The same is true in our societies. Like us, other social groups also have worldviews that guide their decisions in the interests of the majority of the population. However, these decisions are not always the result of debate and consensual decision-making characteristic of modern democracies. In many cases, these internal tensions lead to the use of violence, which not only destroys democratic institutions but also the social fabric of a society (Singh. (2021).

Table 3. Integration of Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks of the Study

Theoretical / Conceptual Approach	Author(s) or Reference	Central Concept	Relation to the Armed Conflict	Relation to Forced Displacement	Relation to Socioeconomic Impact	Contribution to the Purpose of the Study
Theory of Structural Violence	Johan Galtung	Violence can be direct, structural, or cultural and is expressed through social and institutional inequalities.	The armed conflict reflects forms of direct and structural violence within the territory.	Conditions of exclusion, poverty, and weak institutions contribute to forced displacement.	Inequality and lack of economic opportunities perpetuate cycles of poverty.	It allows the conflict to be analyzed beyond physical violence by considering structural factors.
Human Rights and Constitutionalism Approach	Contró Ugalde &	The State must guarantee fundamental rights and limit the arbitrary exercise of power.	The armed conflict generates systematic violations of human rights.	Displacement implies the violation of rights, including the rights to housing, health, education, and security.	The lack of institutional guarantees undermines well-being and social development.	It provides the basis for analyzing the humanitarian crisis from a human rights perspective.
Forced Displacement Approach	World Bank Group; Mora (2021)	Forced displacement occurs when people abandon their homes due to violence, persecution, or conflict.	Armed violence forces communities to abandon their territories.	It constitutes one of the main consequences of the armed conflict in Catatumbo.	It generates loss of livelihoods, poverty, and the breakdown of the social fabric.	It helps explain the humanitarian consequences of the conflict in the region.
Socioeconomic Development in Conflict Contexts	Naudé et al.; Fergusson, Ibañez & Riaño	Conflicts affect productivity, employment, and economic opportunities.	Violence disrupts markets and productive activity.	Displacement reduces the productive capacity of families and communities.	It generates unemployment, informality, and dependence on illicit economies.	It allows analysis of how conflict impacts regional economic development.
Humanitarian and Crisis Approach	United Nations; OCHA	Humanitarian crises arise when conflicts or disasters generate urgent needs for protection and assistance.	The armed conflict produces humanitarian emergencies in affected territories.	Mass displacement increases the humanitarian needs of the population.	Communities face deterioration of basic services and living conditions.	It helps contextualize the humanitarian crisis in Catatumbo.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the cited (1966), Parsons (2013), Galtung (1969), Zamora (2018), Contró & Ugalde (s.f.), Mora. (2021), Word Bank Group (2016), Casadiegos et al. (2020), Cárdenas. (2022), Fergusson et al. (2020), Naudé et al. (2024), Ocha (2014), United Nations. (2024), (Lara Romero et al. 2025).

Table 3 provides an opportunity to analyze three relevant variables: forced displacement, armed conflict, and socioeconomic impact. About armed conflict, it is an integral factor that influences the emergence of violence, territorial control, and competition for strategic resources in areas where the state's presence is limited. These circumstances give rise to threats, clashes with armed groups, and systematic violations of the basic human rights of the civilian population.

In such circumstances, forced migration is a direct consequence of the conflict, as communities are compelled to leave their territories to protect their lives and safety. From the perspective of social conflict theory and structural violence, these dynamics reveal more than just armed confrontations. In areas such as Catatumbo, they also reveal historical inequalities and the absence of institutional frameworks that perpetuate conditions of vulnerability and exclusion.

At the same time, forced displacement brings about significant changes in the social and economic conditions of affected communities, resulting in a notable socioeconomic impact on both the communities from which displaced persons originate and those that receive them. The strain on basic services in shelters exacerbates the situation of socially vulnerable individuals; meanwhile, the loss of land, livelihoods, and community networks reduces families' productive capacity, increases poverty, and drives the growth of informal employment. In this sense, the relationship between armed violence, forced displacement, and socioeconomic consequences takes the form of a process in which armed violence causes massive forced displacement and, in turn, widens the gap of underdevelopment and leads to the collapse of the local economy. Together, this generates a cycle of humanitarian crisis and underdevelopment in a region. In territories where violence has historically played a prominent role, such as Catatumbo, the relationship between forced displacement, armed conflict, and the social and economic consequences manifests in a particular way. The presence of illegal armed groups, conflicts over territorial control, and the existence of illicit economies have created an environment of great institutional and social instability in this region.

In describing the Framework of Civil Insecurity, the authors report a prevailing tendency toward violence in social, economic, and political systems, where violence can escalate into armed conflict, and social control can turn into violence in rural communities, leading to social violence in the form of social control, restrictions on movement, and intimidation. Forced displacement becomes one of the most serious and long-lasting consequences of the war in the region. Rural families are forced to abandon their lands due to threats, clashes, or the possibility of being recruited. This phenomenon creates a humanitarian crisis; more than a crisis, it creates a process of socio-territorial breakdown that undermines the demographic, cultural, and economic fabric of the affected community. In the humanitarian crisis, forced displacement, from a human rights perspective, involves the violation of the right to a home, to a standard of living that includes the rights to health and education, and to security. This increases the displaced's vulnerability.

The integration of various theoretical approaches enables a comprehensive examination of the complexity of armed conflict, forced displacement, and their socioeconomic impacts in regions such as Catatumbo. From the perspective of Galtung's theory of structural violence [Galtung. \(1969\)](#), armed conflict manifests itself not only through physical violence but also through structural and cultural inequalities that perpetuate exclusion and poverty ([Zamora 2018](#)). This perspective

facilitates understanding of the conflict beyond mere confrontations, acknowledging the underlying vulnerabilities that affect the civilian population. The human rights and constitutionalism approach proposed by Contró and Ugalde holds that the State must protect fundamental rights, thereby constraining the arbitrary exercise of power. In armed conflict situations, as [Contró & Ugalde \(s.f.\)](#) point out, systematic violations of human rights and forced displacement show how weak institutions are and how little protection there is, which makes communities more vulnerable. On the other hand, the forced displacement approach ([Word Bank Group 2016](#); [Mora, 2021](#)) conceptualizes this phenomenon as a direct consequence of violence, persecution, or conflicts that compel individuals to leave their homes. In Catatumbo, this approach makes it easier to grasp the scale of the humanitarian crisis and the breakdown of the social fabric, as [Casadiegos et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasise. The socioeconomic development approach in conflict contexts ([Naudé et al. 2024](#); [Fergusson Ibáñez & Riaño 2020](#)) illustrates how violence impacts productivity, employment, and economic opportunities. Regional economic decline is evident in land loss, rising informal employment, and dependence on illicit economies, as highlighted by [Abdala \(2014\)](#) and [Fergusson et al. \(2020\)](#).

The articulation of these approaches illustrates a sequential and causal relationship: armed conflict ([Galtung, \(1969\)](#)) engenders violence that leads to forced displacement ([Word Bank Group 2016](#)), which in turn results in significant socioeconomic impacts ([Naudé et al. \(2024\)](#)) and humanitarian crises ([OCHA, 2014](#)). The analytical model resulting from this integration provides a valuable interpretative framework for the formulation of public policies aimed at social and economic reconstruction ([Fergusson et al. \(2020\)](#)) and for the development of strategies that foster livelihood recovery, rights restoration, and institutional strengthening in vulnerable regions such as Catatumbo ([United Nations. 2024](#)).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Data and sample

The study was conducted using a quantitative, empirical-analytical approach, with a non-experimental, descriptive design and short-term longitudinal measurement (baseline and follow-up in 2025). The objective was to identify the factors that have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, with a focus on forced displacement, dependence on illicit economies, and violations of fundamental rights. The target population consisted of households residing in the municipalities of Teorama, Tarra, San Calixto, Convención, and Hacarí, as well as residents of shelters in Ocaña. A probability-proportionate-to-size sampling method was used to ensure territorial and rural-urban representativeness (80% rural and 20% urban, in accordance with the regional population distribution). Households with at least one female resident between 18 and 59 years of age were eligible.

Data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire administered to the head of household. The instrument gathered demographic, economic, educational,

and health information, as well as data on migration status and experiences related to the armed conflict. Prior to its implementation, content validation was conducted through expert review and a pilot test to assess the clarity and relevance of the questions. During the instrument's application, the vulnerability of the displaced population was taken into account, as there was initial reluctance to participate in the study due to the perception that the interviewers might be linked to the intelligence activities of armed actors. Subsequently, data cleaning and consistency procedures were applied to the database, including outlier verification, handling missing data, and sample weighting, to improve the representativeness of the collected information.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency) were used to characterize the sociodemographic and socioeconomic conditions of the study population and experiences related to the armed conflict from exposure variables and outcomes in quality of life and education, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics such as age, sex, educational level, and household employment status. Given the non-experimental, observational nature of the research design, the results were interpreted as statistical associations rather than definitive causal relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey successfully interviewed approximately 94% of the households. These were conducted in the study participants' homes in Ocaña using a survey instrument and a protocol approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the Comfanorte Foundation for Higher Studies. According to the Public Prosecutor's Office, 10,261 displaced persons have arrived in Ocaña, coming from 45 villages in different municipalities of Catatumbo. Of this number, 5,333 are women, 4,928 are men, and more than 4,000 are children. In addition, 1,732 mothers who are heads of households, 543 older adults, 176 people with disabilities, and 142 nursing mothers were identified, providing key data for targeting aid and resources. Thus, the population taken was the total registered in the municipality of Ocaña, Norte de Santander.

Consequently, 52.4% of the surveyed farmers fall within the 18 to 25 years age group, indicating that most participants are young adults who have probably experienced the conflict directly or in their families. The second most represented group is 45 to 60 years old, at 19%, reflecting the participation of people with more experience in the territory, possibly community leaders or heads of households. The 25 to 35 and 35 to 45 age groups have an equal representation of 14.3%, suggesting an intermediate participation of young and mature adults who have also been affected by the armed conflict; it is worth noting that sixty-seven percent identified with the female gender, while thirty-three percent identified with the male gender.

In the words of OCHA (2020), the continuous armed actions, victims of mine contamination, and attacks against civilians by illegal armed groups present in

the region (EPL, FARC-EP dissidence, cross-border armed groups, etc.) trigger not only humanitarian effects but also violations of the economic, social, and cultural rights of the communities. Thus, 57.1% stated that they were victims of threats, which reveals that more than half have directly experienced some violence by illegal armed actors. This figure is alarming and confirms the seriousness of the security context in the region, where peasant communities are at constant risk. On the other hand, 38.1% responded neutrally, which could reflect fear of expressing their true situation, mistrust of the complaint mechanisms, or an ambiguous position due to indirect or difficult-to-classify experiences. Only 4.8% expressed disagreement, that is, that they have not been victims of this type of violence.

In this regard, citing [Abdala \(2014\)](#), the entry of illegal armed groups increases conflicts over land for coca cultivation, the establishment of corridors for its commercialization, and the entry of inputs for its production. Among its consequences are human rights violations, massacres and subsequent displacements, forced abandonment and land dispossession. In this sense, the survey showed that 85.7% of the respondents said they agreed with the high presence of illegal groups near their homes, which reveals an alarming situation of territorial control and permanence of armed actors in the area. This data not only confirms the reality of insecurity experienced by the rural communities of Catatumbo, but also the lack of institutional guarantees and the State's weak presence in these territories. This has a direct impact on their quality of life, mobility, rights, and the possibility of living in peace.

In addition, 85.7% testified to having been forced to leave their homes because of the armed conflict. This data strongly reflects the direct and devastating impact that the confrontations and the presence of illegal armed groups have had on the lives of these rural communities; likewise, forced displacement not only implies the loss of the home, but also uprooting, the rupture of the social fabric, and the violation of fundamental rights. On the other hand, [Sotelo. \(2025\)](#) points out that, in various interviews with peasants who have been victims of insecurity thanks to illegal groups. Pablo Téllez gave his statement, "I arrived at the sidewalk on 92, and there I met a guy I knew. He told me there was an Elenos checkpoint up there and that someone from the region was in charge of it. At that moment, I was very scared. I left the motorcycle in a coca field and went into the bush. I went to an acquaintance who could not hide me. Moreover, that is where I had to stay until January 19.

The study shows that 47.6% of people living in Catatumbo feel unsafe in their village or community. This shows that they think there is a lot of risk in the area around them. This number is especially concerning because living in constant fear affects not only the quality of life but also mental health and the chance for community growth.

It is important to remember that coca farming has a significant impact on the local economy. The most recent United Nations report states that Catatumbo

covers at least 56,933 hectares, making it one of the largest areas in this part of the world. Everyone who lives in these shelters agrees that the lack of jobs and limited government support are two of the main reasons why so many people have to rely on the illegal economy. This unanimous agreement shows that everyone strongly believes in the link between economic instability and illegal activity. In places like Catatumbo, where there are few formal jobs and the government is not very strong, the illegal economy is how many families make ends meet.

In that sense, 90% “Agree” that the harm it generates in the region underscores a clear awareness of how illegality undermines the region’s economic fabric. This high percentage suggests that although some illicit economies may generate temporary income for certain individuals, the general population recognizes that the net and long-term impacts are detrimental to the formal economy and sustainable development. In addition, the [United Nations \(2024\)](#) expressed its deep concern about the very serious situation in Catatumbo. The results are overwhelming and reflect the harsh reality of the affected population: seventy-six percent (76%) of the displaced have had their fundamental rights (health, education, housing) violated. This high percentage underscores the direct and devastating impact of the armed conflict on the daily lives of the people, who have suffered the interruption or deprivation of essential services and access to decent living conditions, a key factor in their decision to be displaced.

The goal of finding out how forced displacement and violence affect the quality of life in Catatumbo communities has been met. The results show that many people have been direct victims of forced displacement, which has had a big effect on their living conditions, such as losing their homes, being uprooted socially, and being economically unstable. Their fundamental rights, including health, education, and housing, are perceived to have been infringed upon, indicative of the severe humanitarian decline in the region. Also, the feeling of insecurity is strong; many farmers feel unsafe in their villages, which shows that their physical and mental health is always at risk.

For this reason, guaranteeing the security of the population is of paramount importance. After a conflict, the population becomes vulnerable, and economic instability and extreme poverty set in. Considering that armed conflict is a fundamental social determinant of health, ending the conflict implies restoring peace to the population. To revitalize the population, food security will be the starting point, followed by systematically addressing other needs. Moreover, the resettlement of the displaced through peaceful, planned repatriation to their country of origin will gradually restore the economy. This must be done when there is every assurance that the displaced will return to a peaceful environment, one that is better than the one they left behind.

Within this theoretical framework, an analytical approach is presented; the study’s variable allows for the identification of a relationship in which armed conflict acts as a triggering variable, the dynamics of violence lead to forced displacement,

and the socioeconomic impact emerges as a structural effect of such territorial and social changes. This perspective helps us understand how violence and displacement reduce local productivity, erode the social fabric, and lead to the loss of human capital as factors that significantly impact regional development. Similarly, the model demonstrates that humanitarian crises stemming from conflict not only have immediate impacts on protection and security but also have long-term consequences for the creation of economic opportunities, social cohesion, and the capacity of institutions to drive sustainable territorial development.

Ultimately, these analytical and theoretical contributions provide essential insights for the design of public policies aimed at the social and economic reconstruction of areas affected by armed conflict. Understanding the connection between displacement, violence, and socioeconomic development enables the creation of comprehensive strategies that not only address humanitarian crises but also promote the restoration of livelihoods, the reestablishment of rights, and institutional strengthening in the most vulnerable areas. Thus, the research's analytical model helps create an interpretive framework that enables the study of the dynamics of armed conflict and its impacts on territorial progress. Furthermore, it provides conceptual foundations for future research and for developing policies to strengthen peace and promote sustainable development in Catatumbo.

CONCLUSIONS

Armed conflicts are an evil that threatens human existence on Earth and provides little protection, unlike some recently enacted laws that apparently prioritize animal rights over human rights. The main causes of armed conflict are poor governance, real or perceived, and the intention to propagate an ideology and force its acceptance by the entire population. Armed conflicts lead to forced migration and generate internally displaced persons and refugees, challenging the economies of host countries. Armed conflicts can cripple entire health systems and sink a country's economy.

The analyses show that the violence and lack of safety in the Catatumbo region have caused schools to close, students to drop out, and limited educational continuity, especially in rural areas. The respondents' reports of low levels of education confirm that the conflict has disrupted educational processes and continued the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The objective was to identify the factors that have intensified the humanitarian crisis, focusing on forced displacement, dependence on illicit economies, and violations of fundamental rights. The findings indicate that the persistent presence of illegal armed groups, the entrenchment of illicit economies as a means of survival amid unstable employment, and the limited institutional capacity of the State create a structural framework that perpetuates chronic vulnerability in the region. The concordance between victims' testimonies and public officials' perceptions suggests that these factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they mutually reinforce one

another, obstructing effective access to fundamental rights and compromising the ongoing implementation of development and social protection policies.

The current study provides empirical evidence on the socioeconomic and humanitarian repercussions of the armed conflict in the Catatumbo region, as perceived by local institutional actors and victims. Nevertheless, the findings necessitate interpretation within the framework of specific methodological and contextual constraints inherent to research conducted in regions affected by violence. At first, the sample size (95 participants) and the fact that it was mostly from the Alcalde de Ocaña's institutional environment may limit the extent to which the entire Catatumbo subregion is represented, since it is very diverse in terms of both geography and society. Furthermore, the security situation in the region, due to the ongoing presence of illegal armed groups, limited access to certain rural areas and isolated communities, potentially leads to an inadvertent bias in participant selection. Moreover, the difficulty of obtaining systematic and up-to-date institutional information on displacement, informal economies, and human rights vulnerabilities is exacerbated by administrative constraints and the political and security sensitivity of this data.

These results, however, must be interpreted within the framework of particular limitations. The study used a quantitative, descriptive, and non-experimental methodological design. This means it could identify important trends and links between variables, but could not prove that one variable caused the other. The study was also conducted in a short time frame, which meant it was not possible to observe how the dynamics of the conflict and humanitarian crisis changed over time. The perceptions derived from Likert-scale surveys accurately reflect participants' experiences and assessments at a given moment; however, they do not inherently indicate structural changes or extensive territorial shifts. In this context, forthcoming research could expand the methodological framework by integrating mixed-methods approaches that fuse quantitative instruments with comprehensive interviews, case studies, and ethnographic investigations, facilitating a more nuanced comprehension of the social mechanisms that perpetuate violence, reliance on illicit economies, and institutional fragility; Likewise, It is essential to transition to longitudinal designs with extended timeframes, incorporate multilevel analyses that integrate territorial and institutional variables, and enhance the quantitative approach with qualitative methodologies that explore the causal mechanisms connecting violence, illicit economies, and state fragility. We can help people better understand why the crisis persists and inform public interventions grounded in strong empirical evidence.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a significant contribution on three levels. In the academic realm, it enhances the ongoing discourse on territorial development amid protracted conflict by offering recent empirical evidence concerning the interplay between armed conflict, informal economies, and social vulnerability in one of Colombia's most violent regions. The empirical approach

collects direct information from victims and local workers to document the living conditions of Catatumbo communities, problems with education, and limited access to basic services. Ultimately, the findings yield significant insights for formulating comprehensive state interventions to alleviate poverty, fortify institutions, and create lawful economic alternatives that facilitate the disruption of the cycle of violence and exclusion within the public policy framework. Consequently, the forthcoming research agenda ought to concentrate on comparative territorial studies, assess the influence of rural development policies and the substitution of illicit economies, and examine the function of local governance in the reconstruction of the social fabric and the creation of enduring peace scenarios in the region.

DECLARATION OF AUTORSHIP

JIMÉNEZ RODRÍGUEZ: Supervision, Writing, Drafting, Visualization, Investigation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation; GARCÍA MOGOLLÓN: Writing, Drafting – Original draft preparation, Visualization; VARGAS ORTEGÓN: Supervision, Writing, Review.

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Los autores no declaran ningún conflicto de interés.

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