



Local Leadership in Crisis Response in Colombia

Executive Summary for Local Stakeholders

March 2026

1. Why this document?

This summary presents the main findings of research carried out between 2024 and 2026 by five Colombian organisations – CINEP-PPP, COVIJUPA - Diocese of Quibdó Social Ministry, PDPMM, SNPS-Caritas Colombia and CODACOP¹ – with the support of CAFOD. The aim was to document our own experiences of responding to crises, identify what works in local leadership, and propose concrete changes to enable the national and international humanitarian system to better recognise and support us.

“When the crisis begins, we are already there; we activate the alerts, we know who has fled, who is still in hiding, and we remain there throughout the crisis.”

This document comes at a critical moment. Global aid cuts, particularly from the United States, and the possible reduction of OCHA's presence in Colombia mean that local leadership is not merely an aspiration, but a condition for the humanitarian response by local actors in Colombia to survive. The international system is changing; we are already here. What is more: we have been working holistically on the Humanitarian–Development–Peace nexus since before the concept of the ‘triple nexus’ even existed.

¹ CINEP-PPP: Centre for Research and Popular Education - Peace Programme; COVIJUPA: Commission for Life, Justice and Peace; PDPMM: Magdalena Medio Development and Peace Programme; SNPS-CC: National Secretariat of Social Ministries – Caritas Colombia; CODACOP: the Corporation for the Support of Popular Communities

2. A key idea: beyond 'localisation'

Throughout this collaborative process, we have set out to reframe the debate on localisation. This conversation has often focused on categories or labels applied to the recipients of localisation: the so-called 'local actor' or 'humanitarian', which do not always reflect how responses actually function on the ground. We therefore propose talking about local leadership in the crisis response, an approach that recognises that:

- Instead of 'localisation', we speak of 'local leadership' from the perspective of local and national actors. They are the ones who know the territory, have roots there and have territorial legitimacy yet are often excluded from crisis response decision-making.
- Instead of 'humanitarian response', we speak of 'crisis response'. Beyond the immediate and short-term emergency, this incorporates an understanding of the causes, of the crisis and a continued response alongside the defence of rights, recovery and peace.
- Grassroots organisations (first responders) and intermediary companion actors (such as us) have complementary roles based on shared responsibility, not competition. Our intervention is part of a cascading local leadership process that seeks to strengthen and empower grassroots organisations under the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity.
- Faith-based and human rights organisations are not exclusively humanitarian, which is why we are often sidelined in many debates on localisation. However, we bring legitimacy and territorial reach, community trust and a sustained presence on the ground, as well as a holistic approach linked to the triple nexus, in line with humanitarian principles. In practice, these principles are linked to human rights frameworks, meaning that humanitarian assistance goes hand in hand with supporting communities, documenting risks and, when necessary for their protection, reporting violations – understood not as a denial of these humanitarian principles, but as part of a response that seeks to strengthen the protection of affected populations.

3. What we do well: strengths of local leadership

Strength	What does this mean in practice?
Knowledge of the territory	We understand the dynamics of the territory; we know who is where, which routes are safe, and what the communities' priority needs are.
Legitimacy for access	The trust built with communities facilitates access to territories and creates safe conditions for humanitarian action. In some cases, we can act as guarantors, but it is the legitimacy granted by the communities themselves that makes this access possible.

Comprehensive response (de facto triple nexus)	Crisis response is not limited to the immediate emergency. We link humanitarian assistance with the defence of rights, the restoration of livelihoods and peace-building processes.
Our own local coordination	We promote spaces for coordination and response within the territory, including coordination committees, humanitarian missions or agreements between actors when formal mechanisms do not work or are insufficient.
Sustained presence and deep roots	We maintain a sustained presence in the territories and support community processes over long periods, even when other actors withdraw.
Intermediary role	We connect grassroots organisations with national and international actors without replacing their leadership. We facilitate standards, open spaces for dialogue and feed back lessons learnt and knowledge to the local area.

What sets us apart as local leaders? We do not implement projects designed from outside. The affected communities define the priorities; we ensure those priorities are linked to resources and advocacy, and we ensure that knowledge and capacity remain within the community.

4. The triple nexus: how we exercise local leadership in practice

A central feature of our leadership is holistic work. In the field, crises do not occur in separate categories: when an emergency strikes, we must simultaneously protect communities, provide assistance, restore livelihoods and rebuild relationships for peace. This approach has been part of our practice for years. What is now referred to as the 'triple nexus' has, for us, been the natural way of responding to the realities on the ground.

What do we do?	A concrete example
Assistance + protection + rights	COVIJUPA: support for displaced people through humanitarian aid, accompanied by legal advice and the promotion of spaces for dialogue between communities and ethnic authorities to address conflicts and protection risks.
Humanitarian response + community strengthening	PDPMM: during the humanitarian emergency in La Ye, efforts focused on immediate care to the affected population, while simultaneously strengthening the Community Action Boards and the Community Training School, so that the community itself could take the lead in land management, advocacy with institutions and the prevention of new crises.

Assistance + recovery + peace + strengthening	SNPS–CC: the crisis response is structured around processes to strengthen local partners. Humanitarian assistance (food and non-food) is integrated with livelihood recovery processes and psychosocial support in communities affected by the crisis, within a single intervention protocol that seeks to strengthen the social fabric and contribute to reconciliation processes in the area.
Documentation + advocacy + protection	CINEP-PPP: the documentation of violations and the production of territorial analysis inform early warning systems and national and international advocacy initiatives, whilst protection funds and humanitarian support are implemented in coordination with multilateral organisations and relevant institutions.
Assistance + Development + Peace	CODACOP: humanitarian responses are adapted to the knowledge and organisational structures of ethnic communities, strengthening local capacities and promoting leadership processes, particularly among women, in community initiatives focused on development and peacebuilding.

5. The obstacles we face

Despite these strengths, local organisations face a series of structural obstacles that limit their ability to fully exercise leadership in crisis response. These challenges relate mainly to access to funding, the fragmentation of the international cooperation system, unequal relationships with international actors, and certain institutional barriers that hinder the effective participation of local organisations.

Problem	Consequence for local leadership and the triple nexus
Limited access to direct funding for local actors	Local organisations continue to have few avenues for direct funding. Even mechanisms designed to strengthen localisation have limited scope given the number of organisations active in the territory, which restricts the capacity to sustain comprehensive responses over time.
Fragmented and rigid funding	Resources remain divided between humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding, with distinct requirements and cycles. This forces the fragmentation of interventions that, in practice, are intertwined and makes it difficult to respond coherently to protracted crises.
Short funding cycles	Territorial crises require sustained interventions over several years, but annual funding cycles force continual replanning, interrupting the continuity of protection, recovery and peacebuilding processes.

Unequal relationships with international actors	Many partnerships operate under subcontracting arrangements in which local organisations have little influence over programme design, budget setting or public visibility, which limits the development of genuine local leadership.
‘Localisation’ turned into a competition	Some international agencies ‘nationalise’ themselves or create their own localisation initiatives to maintain access to funds intended for local actors, without actually transferring decision-making power or strengthening existing structures in the territories.
Lack of harmonisation within the United Nations system	Each agency applies different eligibility criteria, formats and evaluation processes. The same organisation may be accepted by one agency and rejected by another, leading to an administrative burden, a lack of transparency and institutional attrition.
Barriers to public procurement and institutional weakness of the state	Although procurement mechanisms with civil society organisations have been expanded, the rules of the public system remain designed primarily for businesses and involve high administrative requirements. This limits local organisations’ access to state resources and, where sufficient institutional capacity is lacking, can create risks in the implementation of responses.
Insufficient protection for community leaders and human rights defenders	The persistence of threats and attacks against social leaders weakens local response capacities and limits the role these organisations can play in protecting communities and building peace.

6. Where do we want to go: priority recommendations

a. For ourselves (local actors)

- 1. Develop a Colombian framework for local leadership:** Jointly define what local leadership means in our context, rather than employing international jargon.
- 2. Create our own coordination spaces (PAHNAL,² NRG,³ consortia):** Advocate in a coordinated manner without losing autonomy or diversity; amplify the voices of those working holistically on the ground.
- 3. Document and systematise our experiences:** Generate evidence demonstrating that a holistic approach reduces violence and improves sustainability.
- 4. Strengthen links with Colombian society:** Expand our support base beyond international cooperation; mobilise internal solidarity.

² National Humanitarian Action Platform

³ National Reference Group

b. For the Colombian state:

- 1. Special procurement regime for emergencies:** Eliminate the 30% co-financing requirement, simplify the Colombian public procurement system (SECOP) for contracts under \$100,000, and extend implementation periods to 18–24-months to allow for full recovery cycles.
- 2. Colombian Humanitarian Response Fund:** State investment of \$10–20 million annually, with shared governance (state + civil society + international observers), prioritising local organisations. This is not just about more resources, but about recognising the state as a guarantor of rights and civil society as a strategic partner, not as a contractor.
- 3. Effective protection for defenders:** Increase the UNP's budget, prioritise investigations into attacks on leaders, and establish collective protection mechanisms led by human rights platforms.

c. For donors and international agencies:

- 1. Direct funding:** Progressively increase the proportion of the humanitarian portfolio allocated to local actors to 30% within 24 months, with quarterly monitoring.
- 2. Flexible and multi-year funds:** 3–5-year mechanisms allowing resources to be moved between humanitarian, development and peace sectors depending on the context, with rapid reallocation (5 working days).
- 3. Equitable partnership:** Sharing of overhead costs (minimum 7–10%), involvement of local partners in design and decision-making, risk-sharing, shared visibility.
- 4. Harmonisation:** Common due diligence criteria, standardised formats, mutual recognition; reducing the administrative burden by 40–60%. This includes reframing the debate on localisation at a global level.
- 5. Support for intermediary companion actors:** Core funding for organisations such as ours, not just for one-off projects; recognising our role in strengthening the most local level.
- 6. Expand the OCHA Colombia Humanitarian Fund:** The only global mechanism exclusively for local actors; ensure its continuity in the face of OCHA's downsizing and replicate it in other countries.
- 7. Humanitarian diplomacy:** Greater presence and support from diplomatic delegations in areas most affected by crises; coordination with international networks to highlight human rights violations; use of United Nations mechanisms to protect human rights defenders.