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A Pathway to Systemic Stability

Applying Motive's Transforming
Crisis Systems (TCS) to Colombia's
Venezuelan Migrant Crisis

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Applying Motive's Transforming Crisis Systems (TCS) to Colombia's Venezuelan Migrant Crisis

A System in Crisis -- The current mass exodus of Venezuelans fleeing violence, economic collapse, and political instability in their home country is the largest migratory movement in Latin American history.¹ According to the United Nations, more than 4 million Venezuelans have fled since 2015, with Colombia being the recipient of the largest number of migrants.² Already grappling with an estimated 7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their country (stemming from conflicts with the Leftist FARC rebel group), Colombia is overwhelmed by this influx of Venezuelan migrants (VM).^{3,4} As the stability, economy, and social fabric of this strategic U.S. ally have been strained, Colombian and U.S. bilateral responses have focused mainly on humanitarian assistance and defense programming aimed at transnational crime that spurs, and is exacerbated by, mass displacements.

By overlooking systemic patterns and nuanced stakeholder positions, however, these responses do not sufficiently address the complexity of Colombia's Venezuelan migrant crisis, and instead risk stoking competitions over aid, over-militarizing the situation, or wasting public resources with "fixes that fail."

Motive's Transforming Crisis Systems Approach

Desperate to identify more effective and holistic policy and programmatic options, stakeholders from the U.S. State Department, USAID, Colombian national and local governments, and



Venezuelans cross the border between Ecuador and Colombia in search of new opportunities. Photo: Voice of America

and civil society groups in the region have expressed a need for a systems-level analysis of the Venezuelan migrant crisis in Colombia to inform better strategies. This need inspired our team to conduct desk-based and in-country research relying on the rigorous and participatory Transforming Crisis Systems (TCS) approach. Developed and applied throughout the world by Motive -- a conflict and stability-focused social enterprise- TCS features six innovative tools & methods for complex conflict or crises analysis, planning, and monitoring & evaluation (M&E), rooted in the principles of systems and design thinking. The six tools & methods, designed to be applied in an iterative end-to-end process, are as follows:

1. Adapted Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (Adapted ICAF)– A tool that operationalizes the U.S. State Department’s conflict assessment model into a “toolified” matrix for factor analysis that yields concise conflict dynamic statements.

2. Upstream/Downstream– A method that deconstructs conflict dynamics yielded in the previous step into enabling/driving or “upstream” factors on the one hand, and resulting/consequential or “downstream” factors on the other.

3. Causal Looping – A systems thinking method that arranges factors from the previous step in relationship to one another by ordering them into feedback loops that reveal not just isolated observations about a conflict or crisis, but the repeating patterns that allow problems to persist, and the system “nodes” that must be targeted to catalyze lasting systemic change.

4. Empathy Mapping – A tool that operationalizes the principles of design thinking to capture the experience of stakeholders closest to a problem in the form of what they “say-do-think-feel,” helping test assumptions, refine analysis, and harness insights on stakeholder motives and likely responses to potential interventions that target crisis “nodes.”

5. Theory of Change (ToC) – A widely-used method that applies the rules of logic to develop an explicit hypothesis articulating the necessary and sufficient steps to move from the current state of node(s) in a conflict or crisis to a desired state.

6. Types & Targets of Change (T2Delta) – A tool that classifies the “type” of change (i.e. behavior, perception, relationship) and the “target” of change (i.e. an individual, a small group, a specific institution) at each step of a ToC to produce precision indicators and metrics for tracking progress and measuring results at the input, output, outcome, high-level outcome and impact levels.

The following sections summarize our team’s process and findings applying each step during desk-based research and in-country stakeholder engagement conducted in Washington, DC and Bogota, Colombia from December 2018 to June 2019.

Competition for economic resources between economically disadvantaged Colombians and Venezuelan migrants is contributing to an elevated risk of communal violence and xenophobia

Adapted ICAF

Relying on desk-based research and key informant interviews, we began our research by producing an Adapted ICAF matrix.

We examined more than a dozen key actors in Colombia’s Venezuelan migrant crisis and analyzed data to produce a matrix that captured their respective means, motives, strategies, and time-bound windows of opportunity for maintaining or altering their position or decision-making relative to the crisis. This approach enabled us to hone-in on two key conflict dynamics (read: perceived incompatibilities of goals between two or more key actors) that describe recurrent dimensions of the crisis:

Conflict Dynamic #1: The competition for economic resources between economically disadvantaged Colombians and Venezuelan migrants is contributing to an elevated risk of communal violence and xenophobia, which may increase as additional aid is introduced, despite the need for these resources.

Conflict Dynamic #2: Colombian government agencies and citizens are reluctant to waive the legal residence status requirement for Venezuelan migrants to access essential services or to reform laws & policies that would extend services to “irregular” migrants, despite migrants’ need to access these services and widespread realization among Colombians that excluding migrants from socio-economic resources exacerbates social crises.

An official at the Bogotá District Office for Social Integration revealed that “irregular” VM students are largely unable to obtain formal diplomas or certificates upon graduation. Seeing this factor captured on a sticky note prompted several stakeholders to identify an important downstream, structural consequence: Intense restrictions for VMs to enter the formal economy.

Upstream/Downstream

Through in-country workshops with a wide range of stakeholders including everyone from the Mayor of Bogota to vulnerable migrants, we facilitated hands-on analytic sessions to apply the upstream/downstream step in the TCS process. These sessions enabled key actors to identify upstream drivers that allow each of the above conflict dynamics to be true, and downstream consequences that result because each conflict dynamic is true. In a mix of one-on-one and group sessions, we invited stakeholders to use sticky notes to write down each factor that came to mind.

Throughout these sessions we prompted participants to consider a mix of Structural, Attitudinal, and Transactional (SAT) factors to ensure comprehensive analysis. This hands-on technique enabled people closest to the crisis to physically shape our analysis. The result was a comprehensive set of factors that other methods would have been unlikely to produce.

An example of an insight we gained in this step occurred when we met with an official at the Bogotá District Office for Social Integration. This official revealed that while their office is committed to making it possible for VM children to attend public schools, “irregular” VM students are largely unable to obtain formal diplomas or certificates upon graduation. This information was an upstream, transactional factor of Conflict Dynamic #2. Seeing this factor captured on a sticky note prompted several stakeholders to identify an important downstream, structural consequence: Intense restrictions for VMs to enter the formal economy.

Fig. 1 illustrates a selection of upstream/downstream factors for our two primary conflict dynamics that we identified in collaboration with stakeholders using this TCS step.

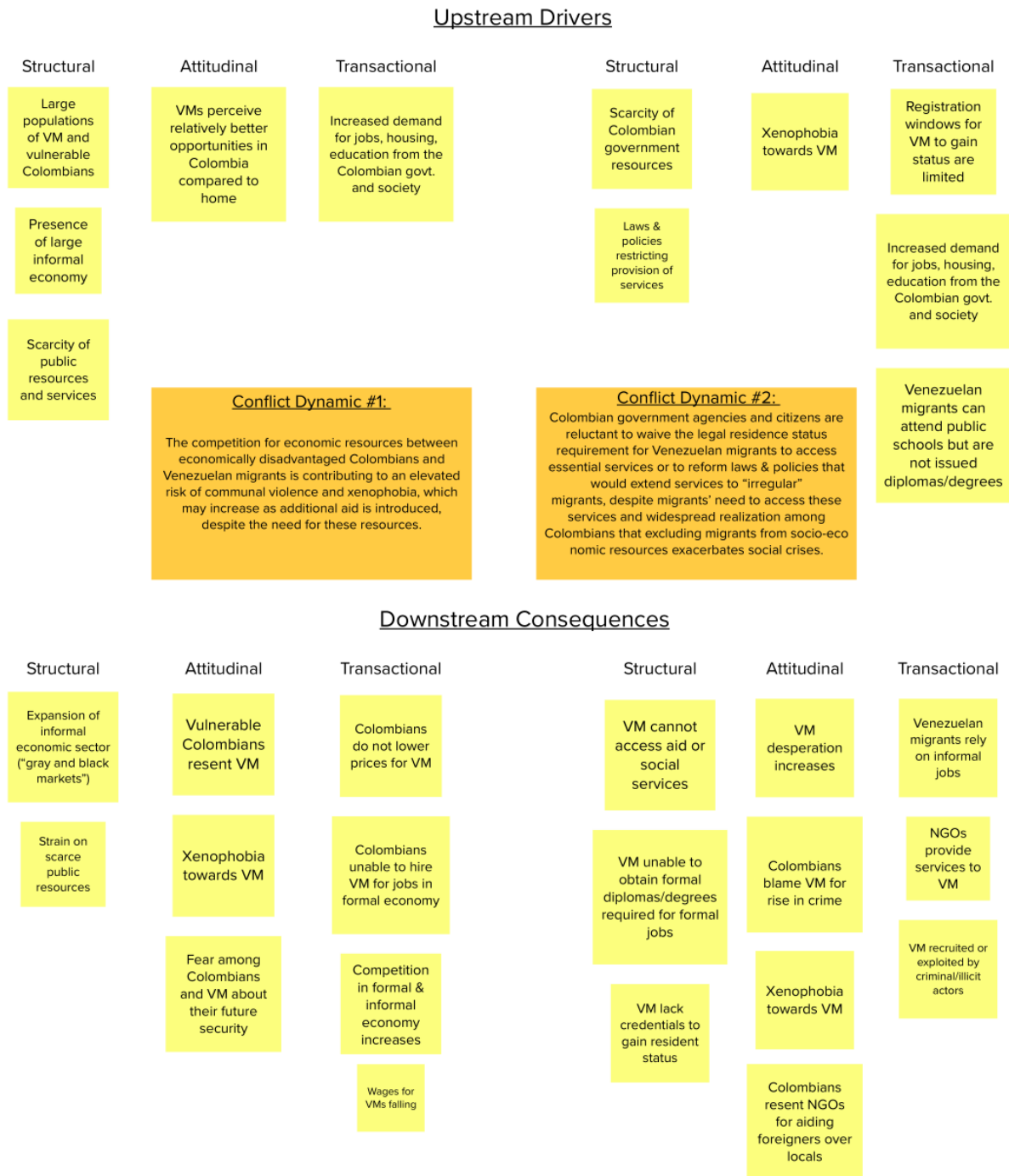


Fig. 1. A roll-up of upstream downstream factor analysis on two dynamics in Colombia's VM conflict systems

Causal Looping

In the third step of TCS, we sought to arrange factors identified in the previous step into logical feedback loops, whereby factors relate to one another as follows: Factor X leads to Factor Y, Factor Y leads to Factor Z, and in turn, Factor Z leads back to Factor X in a repeating pattern or “causal loop.” Arranging factors in this way reveals the relationship between elements of a complex crisis and yields visual depictions of conflict patterns, as opposed to a less meaningful list of isolated factors.

To complete this step, we again relied on hands-on analytic sessions with stakeholders in Colombia. We asked informants to physically move the sticky notes from the previous step into circular patterns. This reorganization resulted in several loops, including the two highlighted in Fig. 2, which intersected at the common factor or “node”: VM reliance on the informal economy. This particular factor occurred in several loops, suggesting it is a central factor that enables multiple systemic patterns of the crisis to perpetuate.

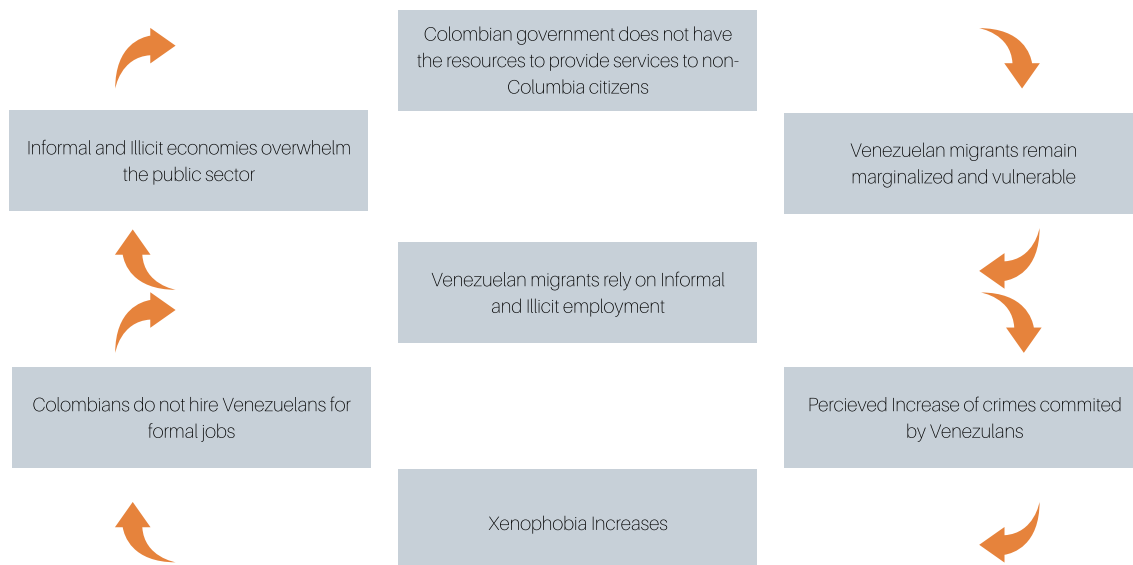


Fig. 2. Two Causal Loops arranging upstream/downstream factors into feedback loops depicting perpetuating patterns of the crisis

Empathy Mapping

Having honed-in on at least one key node of Colombia’s VM crisis -- VM reliance on the informal economy -- we now shifted from analysis to problem solving. But instead of relying on our own interpretation of data or being guided by our own outsider biases to inform problem solving, we employed the important TCS step of empathy mapping. This tool is merely a quadrant that captures what individual or archetypal stakeholders “say, do, think and feel” in the form of direct quotes, observable behaviors (immediate or habitual), and inferred thoughts and feelings in each respective quadrant of what is then called an empathy map. Importantly, we employed the design thinking technique of identifying “say-do gaps,” or discrepancies between a stakeholder’s stated position and their actions, which typically reveals tensions between their intellectual and emotional position on an issue and can be invaluable for inferring often-nuanced thoughts and feelings. Importantly, empathy maps can be aggregated and anonymized into “personas” that call out likely motives and responses of stakeholder groups to potential interventions, offering a routinized way to consider unintended outcomes of possible “solutions” to a problem from other points of view – a step often skipped in policy or intervention planning.

In practical application, we conducted this TCS step by circling back to key informants, presenting our original conflict dynamics, causal loops, and identified node(s), and asking stakeholders to react.

Fig. 3 features a snapshot of one empathy map we created, while a list of key insights we gained in this step are summarized below.

Key Insights:

➤ Several Colombians we spoke with sympathetically commented that few VMs have jobs, making them vulnerable to human trafficking and criminal exploitation. But these same informants acknowledged their own unwillingness to hire VMs over their fellow countrymen. Direct statements and inferred sentiments confirmed that Colombians are conflicted between moral and practical impulses to integrate VMs on the one hand, and feelings of loyalty and fear on the other.

➤ In more than one empathy mapping session, we identified both explicit and inferred references to xenophobia, such as in comments about VMs “stealing jobs away from people who actually belong in Colombia,” to fears of VMs being ‘lynched’ by angry locals.

➤ Several Colombian officials we mapped commented on the communication breakdown between national, department, and municipal agencies when it came to policies and procedures for VM social services, though few provided examples of actions they’d taken to overcome this. When pressed, several officials said the U.S. government could play a role in coordinating or mediating between Colombian agencies. The officials' sentiments suggested feelings of low trust in local institutions, but the thought that the U.S. could play a role in problem-solving in a manner that demands few if any foreign assistance dollars.



Fig. 3. A snapshot of an empathy map produced during stakeholder interviews as part of TCS analysis in Colombia

➤ Empathy maps for a variety of stakeholders revealed the centrality of school, jobs, and housing as domains in which competition between VMs and disadvantaged Colombians was greatest. Many made passing comments about legal and regulatory dilemmas in these domains, but by aggregating numerous empathy maps we were able to capture and make sense of stakeholder positions in a way that had relevance for specific policy reforms.

Theory of Change (ToC) & Types & Targets of Change (T2Delta)

Multiple TCS steps suggested -- and our causal loop analysis visually revealed -- that VM reliance on the informal economy is a key node that perpetuates conflict dynamics in Colombia's Venezuelan migrant crisis. Starting with this factor, we identified the necessary and sufficient steps required to achieve greater VM participation in the formal economy in a way likely to be acceptable to a diverse set of stakeholders, given what we learned through empathy mapping. Participatory sessions enabled us to identify reforms in education policy that waive citizenship or residence requirements as a necessary and arguably sufficient precursor to VM participation in the formal economy. More than just enabling VM access to jobs, we hypothesized that the initial output of this policy reform could spur a more consequential and transformative sequence of events, depicted in our Theory of Change (ToC) below.

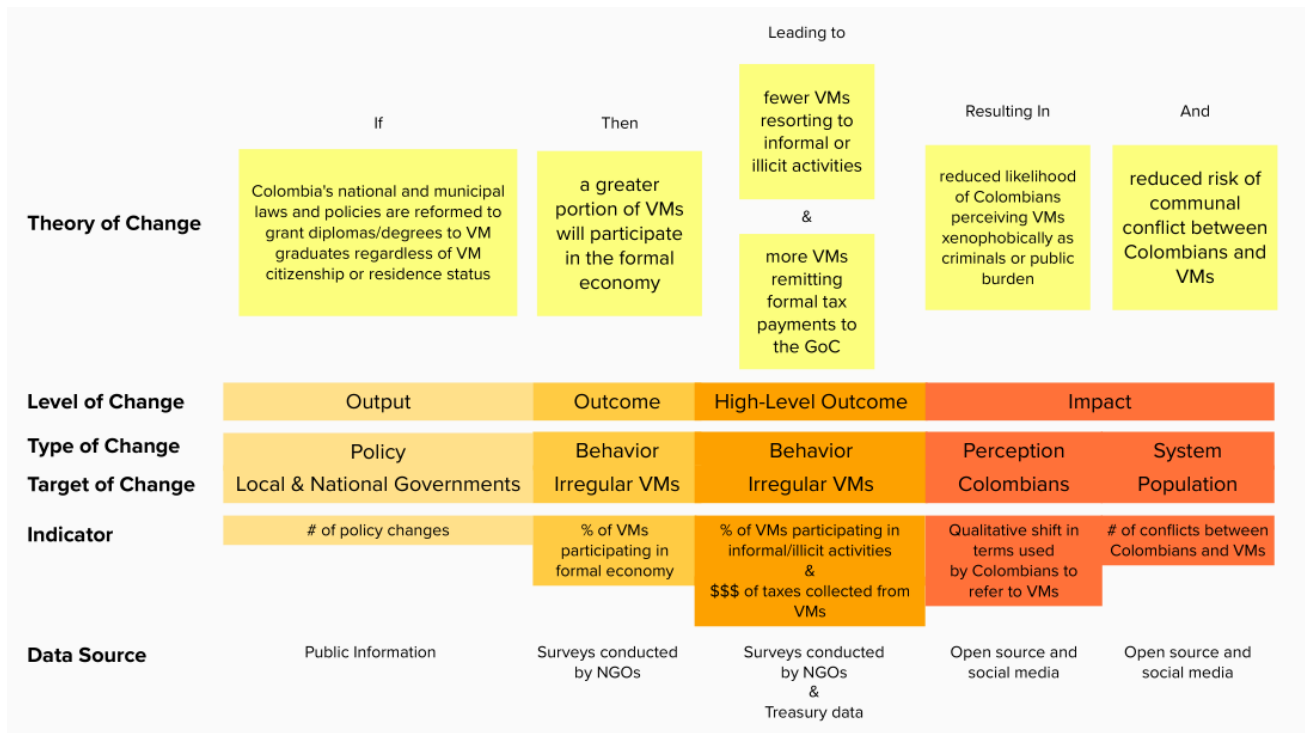


Fig. 4. A Theory of Change and Types & Targets of Change proposal for Colombia

Once we had a draft ToC, we applied the T2Delta step of TCS to articulate the specific type (nature) & target (actor) of change required for each intermediary change, then identified indicators and data sources appropriate for each T2Delta. Fig. 4 presents our final, analytically informed, systems-level ToC, along with an M&E framework to test and measure expected results from the input to impact levels.



Marcos Camacaro, originally from Barquisimeto, Venezuela, sells coffee at the Rumichaca international bridge, on the border between Colombia and Ecuador, to the hundreds of passers-by. Photo: Voice of America

Recommendations

We recommend that the Government of Colombia, potentially with coordination support or technical assistance from the U.S., implement education policy reforms in line with the ToC outlined above. Concurrent with the policy reform process, municipal and/or central government agencies should conduct or facilitate mobile “information and registration drives” in VM communities to make VMs aware of reforms and complete practical public administration processes such as registering VM children in schools with assurance they will be awarded certificates or diplomas upon graduation, or even retroactively awarding diplomas to VM graduates.

An additional step could involve linking newly-credentialed VMs with job opportunities through hiring fairs, matchmaking, or targeted job skill training.

Civil society actors could support key elements in our proposed ToC through advocacy to expedite legislative or regulatory reforms, assisting with outreach described above, and by spearheading public awareness campaigns highlighting VMs qualifications for, and contributions to, the formal economy. NGOs with resources to conduct surveys and track public sentiments should focus on collecting data specifically aligned to VM economic participation and levels of xenophobia among Colombians, ensuring findings are made public. If data does not validate the hypothesis laid out in the ToC, we recommend conducting additional participatory analysis to understand why.

The U.S. should continue to bolster the Government of Colombia’s (GoC) ability to meet the urgent needs of VMs through humanitarian assistance and foreign aid. But additionally, the U.S. should leverage its influence to encourage policy reforms in Colombia that ensure VM access to services, education, and jobs in a manner not contingent upon citizenship or residence status. USAID in particular can expand or launch programming to support civil society organizations’ involvement in targeted policy advocacy and VM outreach, while also funding technical assistance for GoC agencies at the center of our proposed policy reforms. Supporting Colombian-led efforts to extend essential services to VMs and encourage regularization of this vulnerable population’s legal status at the scale and timetable required to avoid civil conflict is consistent with U.S.-Colombian bilateral interests.

Conclusion

We believe the results of our applied TCS research, if actioned, can help transform a system in crisis to a system that self-propels towards stability. Applying TCS tools and methods validated, challenged, and expanded prevailing understandings of this complex conflict, and yielded an actionable proposal with a built-in M&E framework. Significantly, the TCS method proved effective at engaging a diverse array of stakeholders that included U.S. diplomats, Colombian officials, civil society actors-- and vulnerable Venezuelans whose perspectives are often excluded from the analysis and policymaking process. This effort revealed an otherwise overlooked entry point (in this case, targeted policy reforms) and a clear and measurable path out of the fog of crisis, demonstrating the relevance of the TCS approach for complex problem-solving in Colombia and beyond.

[1] *Ibid.*

[2] Kennedy, Merrit. *U.N. Says More Than 4 Million People Have Left Venezuela*. NPR. June 7, 2019.

[3] Miroff, Nick. *Colombia's war has displaced 7 million. With peace, will they go home?* *The Americas*. *The Washington Post*. September 5, 2016.

[4] Fernandez-Aponte, Andrea. *Peace Accord Implementation in Colombia: Urgent Need to Adhere to the Spirit of the Accords*. *Latin America Working Group*. March 12, 2019

Each year, as part of our Emerging Leaders Impact Initiative, Motive sponsors Global Capstone graduate student projects from the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Motive's role in these projects is to guide students to examine complex international problems and provide actionable policy solutions through the application of our signature tools and methods. In service to our mission to enhance stability and mitigate conflict, we select student teams whose proposed work we believe has the potential to initiate a substantive long-term impact, beyond the realm of hypothetical academic consideration.



Since the conclusion of their Capstone research in 2019, the authors, David Sanchez Bornstein, Rachel Brown, and Maxwell Schriener were all awarded Master's degrees from George Washington University's Elliott School. Mr. Bornstein's degree is in International Affairs with focus on International Securities Studies and Latin American Affairs. Ms. Brown's degree is in International Affairs with a focus on U.S. Foreign Policy and International Security. Mr. Schriener's degree is in Latin American and Hemispheric Studies.

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