



Palmira

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PAZOS - Peace and opportunities strategy

- DURATION

Started 2020. Completed

- POPULATION 2024

361.375 (growth rate 1,1%)

- URA SCOPE

SOCIETY. Staying Human

- TOPICS

EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION,
REDUCED SUBSTANCE USE, REDUCE
HOMICIDE, DIALOGUE

- MAIN ACTORS

Palmira Mayor's Office
Sidoc Foundation
Pastoral Social Palmira
WRI Colombia
Espacio Foundation

In the vibrant municipality of Palmira, nestled in southwestern Colombia, opportunity abounded. With a diverse economy, strong growth potential, and efficient transport networks, the city was primed for success under forward-thinking leadership. Yet beneath this promising facade lurked a harsh reality. In 2011, Palmira's homicide rate soared to a staggering 98.1 per 100,000 inhabitants—nearly triple the national average. The violence, fueled by brutal territorial clashes among criminal organizations and gangs, earned Palmira the grim distinction of being one of the 50 most violent cities in the world.

Determined to rewrite this narrative, Palmira's leaders launched the *PAZOS strategy*—a bold, comprehensive response aimed not just at reducing violence but at uprooting its causes. Unlike traditional punitive measures, which often reinforced cycles of bloodshed, PAZOS sought to foster peace through social investment, community engagement, and the creation of opportunities in the city's most affected areas.

Using rigorous analysis, officials identified the 15 neighborhoods with the highest rates of violence in 2018 and 2019, organizing them into nine clusters that shared geographical and socio-violent characteristics. These clusters became the focal points of the intervention.

Youth was central to the strategy. Recognizing that they were often both the victims and the perpetrators of violence, PAZOS tailored its programs to address their specific needs. By integrating municipal economic and social initiatives with the expertise of partner organizations, the strategy delivered highly targeted, community-specific interventions.

PAZOS redefined how the state interacted with its people. It focused not on punishment but on support—providing resources such as education, job opportunities, and social services in neighborhoods long abandoned by development. By addressing the root causes of violence, the strategy shifted public perceptions of the state from an enforcer to an ally.

The results have been profound. PAZOS has become a symbol of transformation in Palmira, not only reducing violence but fostering trust and hope among its residents. The holistic approach, emphasizing prevention and legitimacy, offers a powerful blueprint for cities across the region and beyond.

In Palmira, a city once overshadowed by violence, the PAZOS strategy stands as a testament to resilience, proving that even in the darkest times, communities can come together to reclaim their future.





Impact

The inter-institutional coordination in Palmira has achieved significant local and international recognition for its progress in reducing violence and promoting peacebuilding. Locally, Palmira recorded the lowest homicide rate in 17 years, a milestone that has drawn attention from the international community. This achievement earned the city the 2022 UCLG Peace Prize for its comprehensive and innovative approach to youth violence prevention.

An evaluation by Javeriana University of Cali in 2022, highlighted the success of public-private collaboration in Palmira, particularly between the municipal government and the SIDOC Foundation. This partnership, supported by municipal Coexistence Managers operating prior to the *Forjar Oportunidades* program, fostered trust and legitimacy. Additionally, collaboration with the Department of Social Prosperity (DPS), which funded conditional scholarships for participants, was instrumental in ensuring program impact, showing the importance of coordinated efforts in driving meaningful social change. This study confirmed a causal link between the homicide reduction and the implementation of the PAZOS strategy, particularly its *Forjar Oportunidades* program. This program, executed by the Sidoc Foundation with financial support from the national government and the *Compromiso Valle* business collective, has delivered transformative results

Employment Preparation: 86% of participants have prepared resumes, and 67% have participated in job applications.

Reduced Substance Use: Among beneficiaries who reported psychoactive substance use, 85% now consume less frequently.

High Satisfaction and Retention: The strategy enjoys strong support, with a remarkably low dropout rate of just 3%.

These outcomes highlight the strategy's ability to provide meaningful opportunities for at-risk youth, addressing underlying causes of violence while fostering social reintegration. By combining government, private sector, and community efforts, Palmira has set a benchmark in sustainable peacebuilding. The recognition and measurable impact underline the potential for replicating this model in other conflict-affected regions worldwide.

The Challenge

Palmira, a key municipality in southwestern Colombia, has faced profound challenges rooted in youth violence, territorial disputes among criminal organizations, and limited social cohesion. In 2011, the city's homicide rate reached a staggering 98.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest globally, highlighting the severe impact of violence on its communities. Young people, disproportionately affected as both victims and perpetrators, are central to this crisis.

Compounding the issue, a significant number of Palmira's youth struggle with the consumption of psychoactive substances, further entrenching cycles of violence and social instability. Many face barriers to entering the labour market, with limited access to education, training, and employment opportunities. This lack of economic integration exacerbates feelings of exclusion and vulnerability, creating fertile ground for recruitment into illicit activities.

Another pressing challenge is the absence of meaningful dialogue and collaboration between diverse community groups, perpetuating mistrust and hindering collective action. Addressing these interlinked issues requires innovative, comprehensive strategies to break cycles of violence and foster inclusion, opportunity, and resilience.

Solution Proposed

The PAZOS Strategy is an innovative initiative by the Mayor's Office of Palmira to tackle the root causes of violence through coordinated action with diverse actors, programs, and methodologies. Recognizing violence as a multifaceted issue, the strategy serves as an umbrella framework encompassing five key components:

Interruption: Focuses on halting active and potential conflicts, emphasizing breaking the cycle of violence in situations at risk of escalating to homicide.

Intervention: Supports the creation of life projects aligned with legality and opportunities for personal development.

Prevention: Cultivates skills to deter violence and encourages peaceful conflict resolution.

Safe Environments: Reclaims areas impacted by violence, transforming them into communal spaces for positive use.

Access to Justice: Promotes alternative practices for conflict resolution, with a focus on restorative juvenile justice.

The strategy is powered by partnerships with over 15 entities, including private sector stakeholders, international organizations, public institutions, and community groups. This collaboration has enabled PAZOS to effectively transform the lives of thousands of young people, fostering inclusion, opportunities, and safer communities.

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