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**Local Peacebuilding in the Darien Gap: Indigenous  
Communities and Migrants As Agents of Change**

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## I. Introduction

The Darién Gap, a roadless stretch of rainforest straddling the Panamanian and Colombian border, currently exists as the only overland path connecting South America with Central America (Roy, 2024). Once considered impenetrable, this 60 mile stretch of steep terrain, treacherous swamp, and dense jungle has become a leading transit point for migrants attempting to reach the US-Mexico border. Where less than a decade ago only a few thousand migrants crossed annually, in 2023 alone over 520,000 risked the journey (Runde & Bryja, 2024). These numbers provide a small glimpse into the political unrest across South America, where catastrophic combinations of economic collapse, dysfunction, and violent crime have forced thousands to flee. Migrants endure extreme dangers in the Darién Gap - deadly terrain, disease, starvation, and rampant violence including sexual assault. Without state oversight, criminal groups like paramilitaries and drug traffickers dominate the region, turning human desperation into profit. The lack of infrastructure and absence of state control within the jungle has created the perfect storm of inhospitable conditions.

This crisis not only puts migrants directly into harm's path, but also local Indigenous communities, whose traditional ways of life are being destroyed alongside one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems. Indigenous towns, overrun with an influx of migrants, face major resource constraints and precarious power struggles between contemporary authorities and criminal gangs who oversee the Darién. Such political turmoil creates vulnerabilities across multiple sectors—from public health and education to environmental conservation and economic security—leaving communities trapped in a cycle of instability.

While international efforts to protect migrants and communities bordering the Darién exist, their fragmented implementation has created limited and disjointed responses. Utilizing an analysis of the traditional peacebuilding initiatives undertaken by state powers to de-escalate the crisis at the Darien, this paper aims to highlight how sustainable peace in the Darién Gap requires a shift from international interventions to community-led peacebuilding, centering Indigenous knowledge and migrant experiences as essential components of conflict resolution.

## II. Understanding Peace Building

Broadly defined, peacebuilding incorporates a complex web of international, national, and subnational efforts to re-stabilize societies post conflict. The concept originated over 45 years ago through the work of Johan Galtung, who emphasized structural solutions to address root causes of violent conflict (Cheng-Hopkins, 2010). Over the years, the conventional use of the term peacebuilding has referred to external actors addressing causes of violence and attempting to ‘build peace’ in war-torn societies. However, this convention fails in instances of internal, non-traditional conflict on three fronts. First, through statist bias, which prioritizes interstate conflicts over transnational crises such as displacement. Second, through the tendency of states and NGOs to treat migration as solely a humanitarian issue rather than a peacebuilding imperative. Lastly, through the utilization of top-down frameworks, consisting of supranational intervention which often marginalizes local epistemologies. This section analyzes why utilizing external actors as predominant peacebuilding forces often falls short when attempting to synthesize a community with long lasting peace.

Statist bias manifests in peacebuilding's disproportionate focus on formal state institutions and interstate diplomacy, while neglecting transnational flows of people, goods, and

violence that increasingly define modern conflicts. When international actors such as NGOs, multilateral institutions, and donor governments prioritize conventional instances of conflict—such as multistate war—they inadvertently trivialize conflicts like migration that disproportionately affect stateless, displaced, and marginalized local populations. Not only does trivializing such conflicts lead to a continuance of unrest in these localities, but it also excludes citizens of said localities from having input on conflict resolution.

Although peacebuilders recognize the relationship between sustainable migration and conflict resolution, this connection remains unexplored in practice. Current peacebuilding frameworks categorize migration as a humanitarian issue rather than a peacebuilding priority (Peace Direct, 2022). Given the intertwined nature of global challenges such as violent conflict, state fragility, displacement, and mass migration—analyzing global migration through the lens of conflict identifies entry points for peacebuilders to reduce the violence that migrants and locals may face. The spread of conflict, or its potential, remains a threat to peace on all fronts.

When international involvement, primarily focused on elite-level negotiations, becomes the primary course of peacebuilding, the needs and priorities of locals become overrun by distant state actors who lack nuanced understanding of cultural, economic, and political complexities embedded in daily survival. When investigating the relationship between "top-down" actors, such as the United Nations and foreign governments, with "bottom up" actors, such as villagers in remote areas of Colombia, issues of scale and representation arise. While international bodies operate through standardized frameworks designed for macro-level conflict resolution, hyperlocal experiences of violence demand place-specific solutions that resist generalization. Various levels of government competing for the fulfillment of their own priorities, leads international and state actors to synthesize a technocratic, generalized effort to peacebuilding,

which often prioritizes bureaucratic efficiency over contextual relevance. While international actors may have traditional diplomatic ‘expertise’, locals possess the contextual awareness for conflict resolution. The transnational dimensions of internal conflict, such as migration through the Darien, demand coordinated, multi-level approaches. Frontline communities embody the human reality behind conflict statistics; their lived experience offers something no external analysis can replicate. Rather than imposing supranational templates for conflict resolution, transformative peacebuilding must center this place-based knowledge as its most vital yet underutilized resource. One frontrunner on peacebuilding research, Dr. Pamina Firchow, synthesized this narrative flawlessly: “In the context of sustained violence, only by closely listening to and taking seriously the narratives, contradictions, and understandings of everyday life told by those most directly affected by violence can we begin to recognize the complicated everyday reality of human experience in political conflict.” (Firchow, 2020).

### III. Contextualizing the Darién Gap

For communities bordering the Darién Gap, violent conflict stemming from multiple fronts has plagued their once-peaceful lives. What was once a region rich in tourism and a subsistence agriculture economy has now been replaced with towns and villages reliant on migration-related activities as a main source of income (Runde & Bryja, 2024). As migrant numbers have soared, so too have earnings from residents selling their familiarity with the wilderness. This economic shift masks deeper systemic failures: crumbling infrastructure, nonexistent healthcare systems, and chronic underdevelopment that force communities into dangerous dependencies. Understanding the context of these native communities—the social, economic, and health challenges faced by members of the community—is crucial to addressing the broader issues of peace. This section provides insight into the deteriorated socio-economic

state which not only fuels migration but a devolution of political welfare amongst indigenous communities bordering the Darién.

The Gaitanistas of Colombia, also known as the Gulf Clan is the country's largest drug cartel and neo-paramilitary group, and has been the main overseer of a thriving migrant smuggling racket (Pappier, 2024). The Gaitanistas engage in predatory behavior towards indigenous tribes, systematically exploiting these communities through extortion and coercion. The three major indigenous tribes of the area, the Emberá, Wounaan, and Guna peoples, have become deeply entangled in the migrant economy, compelled by economic necessity and now dependent on these illicit networks for survival (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Gulf Clan leverages indigenous communities' knowledge of the rainforest to facilitate drug and human trafficking, forcing locals to serve as guides through perilous terrain, transport illicit goods, and harvest timber. Communities face constant pressure to provide shelter, supplies, and logistical support—sometimes through voluntary transactions, but often under threat. What were once self-sufficient villages practicing traditional agriculture have transformed into hubs of organized crime, with generations-old livelihoods replaced by dangerous dependencies on smuggling networks. This vicious cycle drives communities further and further from sustainable autonomy, binding them to violent criminal structures.

Further complicating the Darién humanitarian crisis are the figures of migrants who attempt to cross it. The number of children in transit is growing five-times faster than the number of adults. According to UNICEF, children migrating through the jungle has become a protracted crisis, with a 40% uptick between the year 2023 and the year 2024. During this time period, over 30,000 children traversed the Darien Gap, 2,000 of them being unaccompanied (UNICEF For Every Child, 2024). Additionally, in the years 2021-2023, the International Organization of

Migration (IOM) reported 312 migrants missing or dead, 229 disappearances, and 676 victims of sexual assault (Runde & Bryja, 2024). The true scale of suffering remains obscured by underreporting, as incidents are only recorded when survivors emerge from the rainforest. Humanitarian organizations estimate the actual numbers of gender-based violence cases to be three to five times higher, with countless victims disappearing without trace in the dense jungle (Mohor, 2024). Many deaths go unverified as bodies decompose rapidly in the tropical climate or become lost in remote areas beyond search teams' reach. The complete vacuum of state authority has enabled criminal enterprises to institutionalize violence, transforming migration routes into corridors of calculated cruelty.

Although there have been efforts to alleviate suffering that accompanies the migration crisis, few direct efforts address the complexities of social welfare, which has been increasingly complicated by the lack of connection, educational and health services in local communities. Any effort to police criminal groups and create a safe, legal pathway through or around the Darién therefore requires collaboration with locals, offering them input into developmental peacebuilding provisions— not merely empty promises —of restoring peace.

#### IV. Current Conflict-Resolution Efforts.

Addressing the socio-economic circumstances which have escalated the crisis at the Darién Gap serves as a baseline for recognizing policy in need of changes. This section identifies the current governmental initiatives taken to mitigate the escalating migration crisis amongst the Americas, recognizing long-standing policy patterns that have contributed to the migration surge across the Darién.

Currently, the fact that the perils of the Darien Gap are no longer a deterrent to mass migration is revealing of the conditions that migrants are fleeing and the shrinking options available to them (Runde & Bryja, 2024). At the heart of this crisis lies a fundamental lack of safe, legal migration channels that could distribute displacement humanely across the region. Venezuelan, Haitian, and Ecuadorian refugees endure xenophobic hostility, systemic exclusion from labor markets, and bureaucratic barriers to legal status in countries like Brazil and Chile (Roy, 2024). South America's failing integration policies have fueled the movement across the Darien. Paradoxically, since the spike in border crossings in 2021, the Panamanian and Colombian governmental response of tightening immigration policies, has only resulted in a correlated increase in Darién Gap crossing (Runde & Bryja, 2024). The strictly enforced blocking of migration methods via water and air travel has forced migrants to resort to the land passage in massive numbers.

Neither Panama nor Colombia has sufficient resources or the political will to permanently resettle or temporarily accommodate the vast number of arrivals who would accumulate in their countries. Panamanian leaders have repeatedly criticized the Colombian government's inability to secure the Darién, claiming Colombia has failed to prevent migrants from entering the gap and penalizing those who assist migrants in their travel (Mohor, 2024). The firm grip of criminal organizations on border communities, whose residents have become economically dependent on migrant smuggling, is a significant obstacle. Observers and "coyotes" have warned that if governments take greater measures to close the existing pathways, human smugglers will seek out more clandestine— and more dangerous —routes (Runde & Bryja, 2024). These coordination issues have spiked interstate tension and as a result peacebuilding efforts in the Darién have

looked to outward entities to solve the crisis to prevent an outbreak of politicized humanitarian collapse.

Panamanian, Colombian, and US officials have initiated coordinated efforts to address the escalating crisis. Colombia's Operation Darién deployed 3,000 security forces to dismantle Gulf Clan strongholds along the border. Panama followed with Operation Choco—dedicating 1,200 immigration agents, border police, and naval air service members to confront transnational organized crime 'head on' (Runde & Bryja, 2024). These militarized measures coincide with broader policy frameworks, particularly the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, a landmark transnational agreement, reframing migration as a shared hemispheric responsibility. The declaration has sought to re-establish safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration, developing lawful pathways, strengthening enforcement, mobilizing resources to assist recipient countries, helping migrants gain access to employment and essential services and coordinating responses to disasters (Pappier, 2024). Under the Biden Administration, the United States began implementing Safe Mobility Offices, which offer informational counseling on humanitarian parole, family reunification, and labor pathways. Additionally, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and IOM established the regional interagency coordination platform for refugees and migrants from Venezuela and a regional refugee and migrant response plan (Runde & Bryja, 2024).

## V. Policy Analysis

Several policies and programs have been implemented to address the issues that the unmonitored migration in the Darién Gap has caused. This section analyzes the actions undertaken by the nation states of Colombia, Panama, and the US, determining the effectiveness

of technocratic programs and identifying new peacebuilding tools which may enable a focused approach to achieving peace.

While these first steps seem promising, they have mixed impacts overall. The heavy reliance on militarized policing has proven to be destabilizing. Criminal syndicates like the Gulf Clan simply adapt with more violent tactics, while border communities bear the brunt of retaliatory attacks and migrant overflow. While Operations Darién and Chocó temporarily disrupt smuggling routes, they ignore the economic incentives driving Indigenous participation. Without addressing these root causes, militarization merely displaces violence. Similarly while the Los Angeles Declaration recognizing migration as a shared challenge marks symbolic progress, this soft law framework lacks teeth to translate rhetoric into local impact. Affirming a crisis on paper does little for migrants sleeping in jungle encampments or locals coerced into smuggling networks. Additionally, the SMOs have a limited presence in the region and struggle to cope with the overwhelming number of applications; some of them have raised concerns about accessibility, citing obstacles such as private locations of offices, strict eligibility requirements, and the need to register through an online portal. The SMO's work to mitigate the conflict felt by both migrants and indigenous peoples in the adjacent communities, but they are crafted from a standpoint too distant from the community itself. Such dynamic policy tools will remain ineffective without more substantial regional coordination and domestic capacity building.

Turning to locally defined indicators of peace and conflict, stands as a more accurate basis for identifying areas of improvement within conflict-ridden societies. Such local indicators underscore the importance of perception—what locals perceive as being important to them in a conflict can have enormous consequences for de-escalation and peacebuilding. In order to truly build peace in a conflict-plagued region, peacebuilders need a comprehensive understanding of

how these communities currently live and what they identify as peace. The Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) initiative, a grassroots methodology for mapping hyperlocal security perceptions, reaches out to interview a broad range of locals from around the world. EPI works to critique systematic peacebuilding, highlighting how standardized metrics like "reduced homicide rates" often ignore what actually makes communities feel safe. By recording what locals identify as 'peace', policy makers can craft to actualize community oriented goals, amplifying the voice of locals.

While EPI's research in Colombia has yet to focus on the Darién specifically, its findings from other conflict zones reveal a universal truth: peace is defined in hyperlocal terms. In the surveyed indigenous regions, residents described peace not through abstract concepts but through tangible absences. One community member, when asked what 'peace' looked like, told EPI "The Guerilla does not ask for contributions to finance its activities," and another said "The community sleeps peacefully without fear that relatives will be killed by illegal armed actors," (EPI, 2021). These granular diagnoses—emerging from communal experience rather than external datasets—hold more transformative potential than any top-down needs assessment. Where satellite imagery sees "improved security" through increased policing, locals might identify lingering fears of state repression. This disconnect explains why international interventions consistently fail: they prioritize measurable outcomes over meaningful safety.

For the indigenous tribes bordering the Darién Gap, their identification of what disturbs their peace, and how those forces function to disrupt traditional life, speaks volumes more about how to repair conflict in that locality than any number of generated data could. Such local indicators in these communities might include "migrants pass through without requiring aid we cannot afford to give," or "our children can walk to school without seeing bodies in the river."

Applying EPI in the Darién would not only give voice to Indigenous groups but also capture the perspectives of migrants, whose transitory position often excludes them from standard peacebuilding processes. In a region governed more by informal authority than by formal institutions, these lived experiences offer a more precise diagnostic of conflict than external assessments can produce.

## VII. Broader Implications

Integrating local voices to traditional peacebuilding frameworks has profound societal benefits. Localized peacebuilding can look like many things, whether that be communities implementing policy changes or amplifying voices of community members who may remember the socio-economic circumstances contributing to conflict. The common ground in this peace process is the shift of societal norms and attitudes toward local needs, allowing citizens to set the stage for their own communities. By building a society whose foundation is set on keeping the integrity of local communities, providing a remedy for conflict, and implementing proactive conflict prevention, localized peacebuilding helps promote long lasting peace. Addressing the need to center local voices when building peace in localities such as the Darién has broader implications for regions impacted by conflict. This section explores additional contexts where peacebuilding through local incorporation has succeeded as well as the wide-ranging benefits of integrating local voices to political changes.

When Indigenous communities and migrants become architects rather than subjects of conflict resolution, they demonstrate how sustainable peace must be cultivated from within rather than imposed from without. This localized approach offers transformative possibilities for addressing violence across diverse contexts, challenging the prevailing paradigm of external

intervention. Liberia's post-civil war experience exemplifies this principle in action— a country whose peace processes have been described as a prototype for successful international support in peace building (Ruppel and Lieb, 2022). Throughout the history of Liberia, dominant groups ruled the entire political system and accumulated wealth and land, often under the rule of a single powerful elite who misused their power over the local population (Forti and Connolly, 2018). The civil war led to a shake-up of the elite system and new distributions of power, to varying extents across the country. During peace recovery, traditional community leaders were centered in community structures, their closeness to communities seen as a great strength. In the midst of a post-war reconstruction era, citizens had no choice but to refer to existing structures for peace, security, and justice, which led to these leaders playing major roles as front-running community voices and integrators. Liberia's "Palava Hut" tribunals, traditional community-led forums where victims confronted perpetrators publicly, enabled reconciliation by rooting justice in local norms of accountability and restitution. Since Liberia's local-international peacebuilding cooperation, the country has seen an enormous reduction in violence and armed conflict, held successful democratic elections, and witnessed the end of UN-missions (Ruppel and Lieb, 2022). The parallel to the Darién Gap is striking. Just as Liberians reclaimed agency over their peace process, Indigenous and migrant communities in the Darién possess the cultural frameworks and territorial knowledge to develop solutions that external actors cannot envision. The lesson from Liberia is clear: international actors should treat marginalized groups as co-designers of solutions, not beneficiaries.

This model's applicability extends far beyond these specific cases. The common thread is not particular cultural practices but rather the fundamental recognition that those who live with conflict daily understand its nuances in ways distant policymakers cannot. When international

actors recognize and reinforce these existing systems rather than attempting to replace them, they create possibilities for true, long-lasting peace. The policy implications of this shift are profound. It requires moving toward trans-governmental power-sharing in peace processes. It demands that funding mechanisms become more flexible to support locally-designed initiatives rather than predetermined program models. Most importantly, it necessitates a redefinition of what constitutes peace building expertise— one that values ancestral knowledge and lived experience as highly technical credentials.

### VIII. Conclusion

Boosting local, community-based voices and allowing the experiences of individuals— both migrant and indigenous —who occupy or traverse the region to identify their qualms with unmitigated conflict allows these people to have a say in the policy that is implemented into their community. When affected communities identify their most pressing conflicts and needs, they transform from policy subjects to active participants in solutions. The Darién crisis demonstrates that effective peacebuilding must bridge local realities with international responses. Current approaches fail to recognize this interdependence. As armed conflicts increasingly transcend borders while devastating specific communities, the artificial divide between local and global peacebuilding grows more dangerous. Meaningful progress demands prioritizing community knowledge alongside technical expertise, aligning international resources with locally-designed solutions, and addressing migrant protection and Indigenous rights as interconnected issues. Peacebuilding succeeds when institutions recognize lived experience as expertise. Potential solutions to the crisis at the Darién Gap will emerge most clearly through the perspectives of those navigating its dangers daily. Their insights offer not just complaints, but blueprints for effective action where abstract policies continue to fail.

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