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# The meanings of 'recovery': grassroots perspectives from Colombia and Peru in the aftermath of the pandemic

**Roger Few, Hellen Cristancho Garrido, Abdul Trelles, Maria Eugenia Ulfe, Mark G. L. Tebboth**

Roger Few, University of East Anglia, UK
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6653-1400
r.few@uea.ac.uk

Hellen Cristancho Garrido , Universidad de Caldas, Colombia,
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2640-1369
hellen.cristancho@ucaldas.edu.co

María Eugenia Ulfe, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2749-1036
mulfe@pucp.edu.pe

Abdul Trelles, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8722-6865
abdul.trelles@pucp.edu.pe

Mark G. L. Tebboth, University of East Anglia, UK
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1193-8080
m.tebboth@uea.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

This article presents a critical reflection on the meaning of crisis recovery, as experienced from the grassroots. It draws insights from a programme of research with indigenous and campesino communities in Colombia and Peru, undertaken in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a flexible, qualitative approach, the teams engaged in broad-ranging discussions about people's concerns and aspirations. These exchanges revealed how people's pandemic stories were inherently interconnected with other, ongoing and everyday risks associated with conflict, marginalization, poverty, displacement and environmental degradation. They also underlined how misconceived it can be to view the pandemic experience as some form of break from 'normality', externalizing the notion of crisis in a way that fails to acknowledge the historic and structural roots of risk and vulnerability. On the other hand, we also saw how capacities for coping with the crisis were already embedded in communities, partly as a consequence of long-faced injustices, reflected for example in the resurgence of communal care and indigenous practices. These perspectives conveyed a conception of recovery not as a linear or individualized trajectory, but as a multifaceted collective process that seeks to confront the dynamics of ongoing risks and injustices.

**Keywords:** Recovery, Crisis, Pandemic, Community, Marginalization, Voice, Meaning

## Introduction

In the wake of a crisis, there is inevitably talk of recovery. The idea of society moving on, repairing, restoring from a damaging event is typically embedded in the language of governments, international agencies and many other actors engaged in supporting populations to manage the long-term impacts of humanitarian and other crises. Recovery, as a goal, is surely a positive idea? But the notion of recovery is increasingly recognized as a far from neutral concept: it is fundamentally political in its meaning and contested in its representation, as well as profoundly differentiated in its trajectories. It is important therefore that we ask what does it mean, what are the implications of this, and for whom? Equally, we must also consider what is not said, or sidelined, in the ways that the term is deployed, and the consequences of these omissions. In relation to globalized discourses of recovery, it is also important to consider how the term translates across social and cultural contexts.

In this article, we make a critical reflection on the meaning of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw our insights from a programme of research with indigenous and campesino communities in Peru and Colombia undertaken since 2022 in the period following the profound social disruption of lockdowns and other disease control measures. This research was undertaken in response to an international funding call on pandemic recovery, work that enabled the team to

engage in broad-ranging discussions about people's experiences, concerns and aspirations relating to times before, during and after the main period of the pandemic. Bringing together their insights, we take a critical look at what 'recovery' might mean, from a grassroots perspective. In particular, we re-assess the meaning and usefulness of the concept when applied to the post-pandemic experiences and perspectives of communities facing multiple issues and threats that both pre-date and post-date the emergence of COVID-19.

We start with a brief global literature review and a note about the research work, then present summary accounts of how the pandemic was, and is, experienced across the case study communities, and build from these to offer critical reflections on the meaning of recovery, specifically in relation to the pandemic and more generally in relation to how crises are often portrayed and managed.

## Recovery – What's in the word?

How 'recovery' is articulated is of key importance in society's responses to risks and crises. It shapes priorities and interests, actions by those affected and interventions by external actors, and the ways in which the needs of those affected become reflected, or obscured, in the narratives generated when a crisis hits (Neuhauser, 2018; Ramos Torre, 2016; Sou, 2019; Carmenta et al, in press). For example, research with communities affected by major climatic and geophysical hazards has shown how people tend to have much broader understandings of recovery than the

economic and reconstruction priorities typically revealed by government responses (Bornstein et al., 2013; Fernandez and Ahmed, 2019; Zhang, 2016). This more holistic conception includes aspects such as restoring the community's social fabric and cohesion, rehabilitating green spaces, adjusting to a shaken relationship with nature, and taking a longer-term view of how recovery will support the community as a whole to move forward (Few et al., 2023). This difference is not merely semantics, although, as shown later in the article, when the term *recuperación* was introduced into discussions in many of the study communities, different interpretations of the word spontaneously emerged.

Part of the problem with the concept and language of recovery, in relation to societal crises, is that it is a rather 'slippery' term. A standard dictionary definition of recovery will refer to the act of regaining something lost or of getting back to some kind of normal state. This arguably works well when speaking about someone's recovery from an illness or a business getting back up-and-running after making financial losses. But when definitions are applied to the kinds of societal disruptions with which this article is concerned, they tend to raise more questions than they address (O'Grady and Shaw, 2023). One result is that the term is often not explicitly defined, even when it is the subject of a research call. For example, the UN Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery (United Nations, 2020), which sets out a science agenda for pandemic recovery, does not offer a definition. Notably, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction does feature it within its

terminology list. The definition starts simply with 'The restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society,' but begins to acknowledge that all is not so simple by adding the clauses 'aligning with the principles of sustainable development and "build back better", to avoid or reduce future disaster risk' (UNDRR, 2017). Indeed, the value considerations inherent in how the term is used stretch somewhat beyond these additions.

First, it is important to recognize that recovery from a disruptive event is never a process operating in isolation. When recovery is framed in relation to a specific crisis, this broader context can become obscured (Moulton and Machado, 2019). Yet, in most situations, its progress will be fundamentally entwined with other social, economic, environmental and political issues and risks that may be ongoing or coincident in time (Leach et al., 2020; O'Grady and Shaw, 2023; Valencia et al., 2021; Vigh, 2008). As research on disasters has prominently shown, they are likely also to generate highly unequal livelihood trajectories across societies following any single crisis event (Chhotray and Few, 2012; Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012).

A second key critique lies in the tendency to express recovery as a corrective response to an aberrant, non-normal situation. This implies a crisis being some form of time-bounded event that represents a break from 'normality', after which the goal

is to return to that pre-crisis state. But this view of crises as having a clearly defined start and end, followed by a distinct phase of recovery, is roundly critiqued. Not only is the process of change distinctly non-linear in practice, with typically many twists and reverses over time (Van Dijkhorst, 2013), but it also externalises the notion of crisis in a way that fails to acknowledge the systemic and ongoing societal roots of risk and vulnerability (Dimitrakou and Ren, 2025; Wisner et al, 2004). Social inequality once again lies at the core in how underlying vulnerabilities shape impacts, including during and after pandemics (Alcántara-Ayala et al., 2021; Cuesta and Pico, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2021).

Because the term 'recovery' is an inherently positive one, therefore, there is a danger of implying that recovery entails a linear, rehabilitative process – rather than the inevitably non-linear, uneven, socially differentiated progress typically experienced by populations for which the conditions of crisis are socially embedded (Tierney and Oliver-Smith, 2012). In addition, the nature of what we speak of as recovery is subject to more discursive and more radical critiques

The way in which recovery in any given situation is interpreted, articulated and promoted is essentially a representational act, underwritten in its effect by power relations (Sovacool et al., 2018). Research after natural hazard events in India, for example, has underlined how the needs, capacities and aspirations of those most deeply affected often become obscured by the dominant narratives of recovery

created within wider public and political arenas (Few et al., 2021; Nalla et al., 2021). Unless they offer something different/transformative, such narratives may also lead to actions that reproduce the very same endemic conditions that elevated crises in the first place (Alcántara-Ayala et al., 2021). What kind of recovery do we have if people still struggle to meet their basic needs, or if little is done to reduce the chances of the next trigger of cascading impacts?

Yet, contestation of this take on recovery is possible, and some critical authors see the potential to break the cycle precisely because of the social disruptions that disasters and similar crises entail (Cretney and White, 2025; Slater, 2014). The recovery space in this sense is one in which the urgent actions people themselves must take to cope and manage the crisis make visible the potential for communities and activists to 'challenge the dominant norms and values of society and to experiment with different relationships and networks.' (Cretney, 2017, p8). We return to these themes and arguments in the discussion section, in reflecting on the findings from our research work.

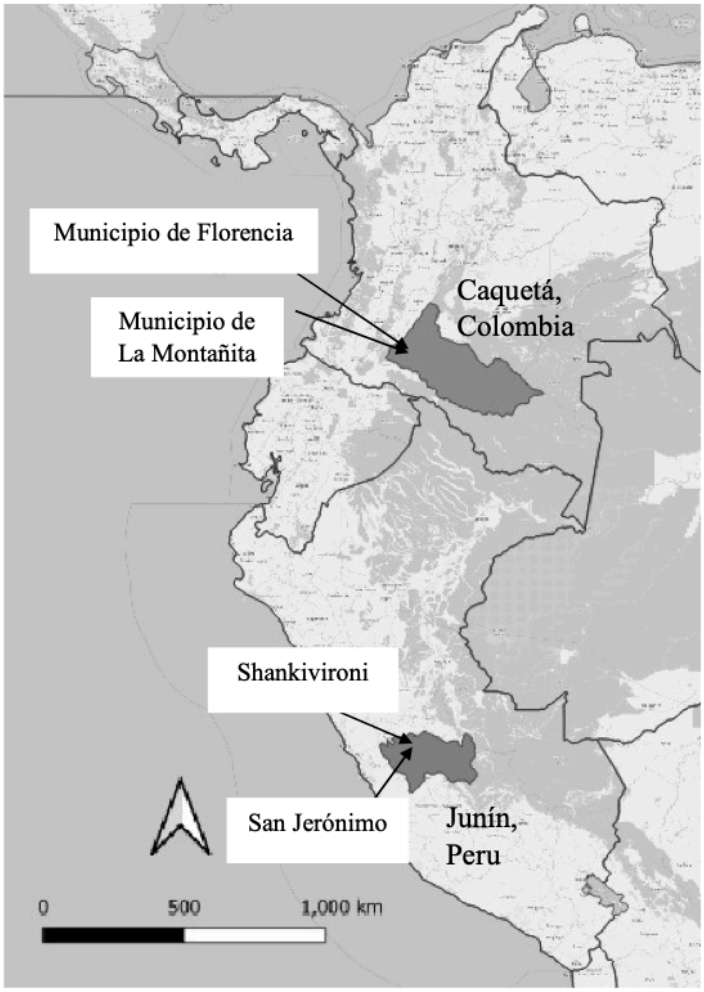
## Research approach

The accounts in this article draw primarily on discussions and interactions at grassroots scale in Peru and Colombia, as part of the interdisciplinary project 'Voices of Recovery' (see Acknowledgements for details). The project involved detailed work in multiple case study sites in Brazil, Colombia and Peru, and the

insights and arguments developed here reflect findings from across those sites. However, to do justice to the richness of the cases, we focus here on two areas, located in the fringes of the Amazon basin (Figure 1). In both settings, research teams have undertaken a programme of work since 2022 intended to support the needs, concerns and voices of communities as they emerged from the post-pandemic period. The project was designed from the outset as flexible and responsive, using qualitative methodologies that themselves would be tailored in scope to the particular context on the ground, to the challenges of fieldwork amid ongoing risks and to the preferences of the communities with which each team worked. Though such an approach does not yield a standardized research method, it enabled the teams to build trust and work with people on their own terms – a methodology that we argue is crucial given the historical injustices and continuing precarity under which many of the project participants live. Moreover, in the process it enabled the teams to build rich and varied insights into notions of pandemic 'recovery' as articulated by people themselves through multiple instances and forms of knowledge exchange.

For Peru, we focus on the Asháninka indigenous communities of San Jerónimo and Shankivironi, located in the district of Perené in the Junín region. Both communities are located on the 'Via Marginal de la Selva' highway, the main route that connects the central Amazon with the national road network. The Marginal crosses the valley of the Perené, Satipo and Ene rivers. As is common among indigenous communities

*Figure 1. Research sites featured in the article*




in the region, their populations face chronic issues of risk, poverty and exclusion, and vulnerability is also expressed in the precariousness of housing and infrastructure, with minimal access to basic services such as health services. San Jerónimo is home to approximately 80 families and Shankivironi has around 200

families. In Junin region as a whole, 3.7% of the censused population over 12 years of age self-identifies as native or indigenous (35750 people) (INEI, 2018).

Our ethnographic work in the two communities was possible with the support of the regional Organización de Mujeres Indígenas Asháninkas de la Selva Central (OMIAASEC) and the Organización Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas Andinas y Amazónicas del Perú (ONAMIAP), with which the research team had an established track record. With ONAMIAP and OMIAASEC we held initial meetings in 2022 to present the project objectives, identify case study sites and request permission to reach the communities. This was followed by initial visits to the community leadership to present the research team, request authorization to conduct the project, and undertake a preliminary identification of key problems that have affected the communities, both historically and during/after the COVID-19 pandemic. The second phase of fieldwork consisted of collaborative workshops, in which we presented in each of the communities the problems identified in the first visit, contrasted and verified the information, and opened a space to reflect on personal experiences based on the problems identified, their histories as a community and their expectations for the future. These discussions guided the third phase of field engagement, in which we collected the testimonies of 21 people from both communities in which we sought to learn about the story of the communities from their personal experiences and the processes of violence they lived through. Finally, in 2024, we conducted collaborative workshops, in which we collected and

contrasted the experiences of violence, impact and expectations for the future in participatory timelines and cartographies. All these interactions, in-depth interviews and workshops were recorded as transcripts. The data in each transcript was thematically coded using a common coding scheme, and the information across the data sources compiled into a thematic database.

For Colombia, we focus on the the adjacent municipalities of Florencia and La Montañita, in the department of Caquetá. These areas share high levels of multidimensional poverty, especially in rural areas, and far-reaching effects of five decades of armed conflict, including environmental degradation. Florencia is the departmental capital and the most populous municipality in the Amazon region, with a population of 178,640, mostly concentrated in urban areas, and nearly half (45.2%) of the inhabitants are registered officially as victims of Colombia's armed conflict (according to the Single Registry of Victims - RUV, 2025). La Montañita has a rural population of 15,621 inhabitants, of which 63.7% are registered victims (DNP, 2025; RUV, 2025).

Building on previous work by the research team in the area, we worked mainly with three social groups – rural women, people who are victims and survivors of the armed conflict, and young people – drawing on members of four grassroots associations: Fundacion de Mujeres Campesinas sin Tierra Victimas del Conflicto; Asociación Fusión Tropical de la Amazonía; Asociación Nacional por el Desarrollo y

el Emprendimiento de la Mujer Rural; and Plataforma Municipal de Juventud of La Montañita. In all, we worked with 50 community representatives. The research process was carried out using a participatory and collaborative action-research approach, grounded in the building of trust-based relationships with the communities. It involved a continuous presence in the territories over a two-year period, creating spaces for dialogue and active listening to understand community narratives, especially around the impact and aftermath of COVID-19. The interactions were carried out through both individual interviews and through collective in-person gatherings—including thematic workshops, memory exercises, social mapping, body mapping (corpographies), as well as community and commemorative cultural events. Finally, community recovery initiatives were co-created, integrating local knowledge with narrative and artistic methodologies. All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and compiled into a total of 57 documents, which were subsequently analyzed through an open coding process using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti*.

## Roots of vulnerability

As hinted above, the people we worked with in both these case study areas have long faced deep-seated problems of insecurity and various forms of marginalization that have generated conditions of multidimensional poverty for many. Recognising this does not overlook their often-remarkable capacities for resistance and resilience

– something we return to later – but it is important here first to summarize these antecedent sources of vulnerability, context by context.

### *Junín (San Jerónimo and Shankivironi)*

San Jerónimo and Shankivironi are indigenous communities, mainly Asháninka, located 40 and 20 minutes, respectively, from the urban centre of Pichanaki. The creation of these two communities is linked to the historical presence of the Peruvian Corporation in their territory. In 1890, the corporation received 453,293 hectares of land from the Peruvian government, to use for agricultural development and to initiate colonization processes. The Peruvian Corporation decided to focus on the cultivation of coffee. For more than 60 years it maintained a regime of labour exploitation of Asháninka people in the area, to whom it promised to cede land in exchange for work (Santos Granero and Barclay, 1995). It is in this context that the stories of the communities emerge. We were told how the founders of San Jerónimo, the grandparents of people we spoke with, had been forced to work in the coffee plantations without being paid—in exchange for land that had been appropriated from the Asháninka: 'Our grandparents paid [for their land] with 10 years' work to be given this space that Peruvian took over'[1]. People from Shankivironi recounted to us a similar story. The founding families, who also had members who worked for the company under such conditions of exploitation, were ceded plots of land that were part of the corporation's estate.

[1] Community member, San Jerónimo, 2024

At both communities, hopes for security and peaceful existence were raised with the issuing of Supreme Decree 03 by the national government in 1957, which established land use rights for indigenous groups. The Decree recognized the right to usufruct, but not ownership, of lands that had been or were beginning to be inhabited and colonized by indigenous people; in short, a new land reserve regime (Santos Granero and Barclay, 1995). This regime is one that the current communities refer to by the term 'indigenous reserves'. Its establishment was seen as the first step toward the titling of their lands, and, with this, they assumed that they had secure rights to their territories. However, since then, the communities have had multiple difficult periods of crisis and violence. Indeed, in the agrarian reforms of 1963 and 1969, the State titled land to migrants from the Andes, land that had previously been part of the reserves. In this context, in which they saw how large areas of land were taken away from them, the families of each area decided to unite and become recognized as an indigenous community, which they finally achieved in 1974 and 1975. Yet soon after came the period of armed conflict between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, during which many members of the communities disappeared, others had to migrate, and many of those who remained suffered violence from the Armed Forces and subversive groups. A military base was installed in San Jeronimo and the place where it was built is remembered to this day as a place where violence was exercised against the community.

The end of the political violence promoted the return to their communities and a long process of re-establishment. However, at the same time, a process of development and urbanization promoted by the State was advancing in the region, which, once again, disrupted the livelihoods and wellbeing of the communities. The increase in regional population, combined with the State's lack of support for indigenous communities in favour of the creation of new urban centres, has led people in both communities to experience a situation of intensified marginalization and exclusion. It is in this context, in communities that have high poverty rates, poor connection to markets and minimal State presence, that the pandemic arrived.

### *Caquetá (Florencia and La Montañita)*

Florencia and La Montañita share a socio-territorial history deeply shaped by colonization processes directed toward the Andean-Amazonian foothills since the mid-20th century. This settlement process was driven by state policies aimed at expanding the agricultural frontier, agrarian crises in the Andean regions, and lack of access to land in central Colombia, which prompted landless peasants to migrate southward. Colonization led to a disordered occupation of the territory, characterized by weak institutions and limited state presence, which facilitated the emergence of extractive economies – such as rubber and timber exploitation – and later illicit crop cultivation, as well as the establishment of clientelist networks and armed control (González, 2014). The absence of land titling guarantees and basic

services created conditions conducive to land dispossession and the proliferation of conflicts over land use and ownership (Fajardo, 2014).

In this context, the presence of armed actors – including the former FARC-EP and, more recently, their dissident groups – is explained by factors such as institutional fragility, the strategic importance of trafficking routes, and the existence of a historically excluded social base with unresolved demands for social justice (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). Although both municipalities have been included in national policies such as the Development Programs with a Territorial Focus (PDET) and the Comprehensive Rural Reform, structural conditions of poverty, inadequate public services, unemployment, informality, and weak civic participation remain persistent obstacles to peacebuilding. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these conditions, particularly in marginalized urban areas and dispersed rural zones with limited state presence, deepening pre-existing vulnerabilities in both municipalities.

Testimonies from the people we worked with in Caquetá reflect the deep wounds left by the armed conflict, including displacement, violence, discrimination, and lack of opportunity – especially for rural women and single mothers. Recurrent references to forced displacement, struggles for land, and fear of ongoing violence from armed groups illustrate the persistent threats they face: '…the animals, the land, the plot, the birds, clothes, everything was left behind. Years of work that you

can never get back, but also human lives; the hardest thing for me is the human lives, where they killed leaders, where I also lost my freedom, where I was kidnapped'.[2]

Social leaders endure constant stress and threats as they carry out their work in communities, operating in an environment of insecurity and minimal institutional backing. Widespread distrust of authorities is evident, fueled by corruption and the inequitable distribution of aid, which benefits those with political connections while excluding those most in need.

## Experiences of the pandemic period

In this section, we describe how the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was, and is, experienced across the case studies in Peru and Colombia, drawing from people's own narratives of impact and response. What we focus on here is not the medical effects of contracting the disease, but on the much broader and more universally experienced social, economic and cultural effects (positive as well as negative) of the restrictions imposed by lockdowns and other public health measures.

Although incidence of COVID-19 may have been relatively low in some of the study communities, especially the more rural sites, poverty and weak access to health services increased vulnerability to the disease and therefore the perceived threat.

[2] Local leader, Florencia, 2023

When the beginning of the confinement in Peru was announced, the first actions to avoid the disease in San Jerónimo and Shankivironi came from the communities themselves. We were told how the families set up controls to prevent the entry of outsiders into the territory. Residents who were outside and returned had to undergo a quarantine. However, after the State militarized the area, for many, returning to their homes was not an option. In their words, the military was threatening that if they did not comply with the orders, they were going to "punish" them. This had the effect that many families were separated for long periods, communicating only remotely. The situation also sowed mistrust and raised fears of renewed oppression by the State: 'We had a very strict control imposed on us. We were not allowed to shop for food, right? There were also no buyers and no transportation to sell our products. At that time, we didn't really understand if it was the pandemic or if it was the government that was acting that way'.[3]

In Florencia, the perception of risk regarding COVID-19 was heightened by the precarious state of the healthcare system, road closures, and widespread uncertainty about the virus's spread. Although infection rates may have been low in some rural areas, fear of contagion in many cases led to isolation and distrust. At the same time, the restrictions on movement and access to markets deeply affected community and economic dynamics. 'Look, believe me, during the pandemic, it was very hard for us, my family here, because imagine everything that comes from the

[3] Local leader, San Jerónimo, 2024

rivers, comes from the countryside, the roads were closed, there was no transportation, the markets were closed, everything was closed'.[4]

Restrictions on movement rapidly impacted on household incomes, exacerbating economic inequalities for those with limited resources to cope with the crisis, and with generally little state support available. Both communities in Junín are agricultural, and household income comes mainly from selling their products in the local market and from temporary jobs. With the pandemic, temporary jobs disappeared and local markets closed. When there was a chance to work or sell, people often did not do so for fear of becoming infected. Though families could harvest their crops for subsistence, this was not nutritionally sufficient and led to food vulnerability. In Florencia, mobility restrictions, the closure of public spaces, and the suspension of productive activities affected not only those who lost their jobs, but also those many in the informal sector who were unable to work. Meanwhile, the closure of markets and the collapse of transportation led to a sharp rise in the prices of basic goods. 'Another thing is that the cost of basic goods shot up enormously, we all felt that. There was a lot of unemployment, a lot of scarcity of everything'[5].

[4] Community member, Florencia, 2023

[5] Community member, Florencia, 2023

Although individuals often conveyed conflicting narratives about the presence or not of COVID-19 in their communities, most recognized the disease at least as a threat and were fearful of the effects of contagion. In Junín, accessing health facilities at that time was not only difficult, but also perceived to be a risk. Moreover, some people were averse to following the treatment given by the State. To cope both with the disease and with other health issues, within the study communities many people therefore decided to revert to customary remedies: 'They cured themselves with garlic, onion, ginger and medicinal herbs from the mountains... they made steam with herbs'.[6] Such practices, often administered by traditional medicine specialists, had been on a trend of decline prior to the pandemic. Similar experiences were reported for Caquetá, where mistrust in the healthcare system and official narratives fueled conspiracy theories and reinforced the use of natural remedies.

In both countries, community members discussed the impact of the pandemic in terms of fear, loss and longer-term psychosocial impacts. While there was reference to some sense of tranquillity associated with the suspension of transport, people in Junín spoke to us of major uncertainty and anxiety about the future amid the economic and educational crisis that the lockdown was causing. Heightened stress was clearly described in Caquetá, with the pandemic defined as a period marked by isolation, uncertainty, distance from loved ones and economic hardship.

[6] Community member, Shankivironi, 2024

> For me, the pandemic was hard because I had to live through confinement, and before I used to work, but I was fired because it wasn't possible to keep working. I do cleaning work, and I lost my job, and I had to get used to Hell, and as they say, 'just keep folding clothes and stay quiet,' because the hunger was really hard.[7]

The disruption of schooling presented further hardships, exacerbated by the economic status of most members of these communities. The closure of schools in San Jerónimo and Shankivironi had a double effect: on the one hand, it disrupted the learning cycle of the students and, on the other hand, they stopped receiving free food provided by the schools. Though the Peruvian Ministry of Education launched the *Aprendo en Casa* (I Learn at Home) program, in which classes were taught via the Internet, radio and television, young people of both communities were severely disadvantaged because few families had smartphones or televisions. In Caquetá, education was similarly disrupted, education shifted to a virtual format that proved ineffective and inaccessible for many students.

However, young people's experiences varied significantly between urban and rural areas. In the urban area of La Montañita, for example, strict lockdown limited social

[7] Community member, Florencia, 2023

interaction. In contrast, in nearby rural areas, many young people maintained almost normal social lives, continued physical activities despite restrictions: 'We held sports matches, I mean, so it was normal there because the national police were not present, only the army'.[8] And some found opportunities during the pandemic to strengthen family and community ties. Although schools were closed, activities such as organizing fishing trips and planting home gardens became positive alternatives during this period.

Despite the profound difficulties, people commonly spoke of how they found resilience in family support, faith, and community work. The women we worked with spoke of how they collectively helped one another work through this adversity – how they strengthened their rural and community identity, promoting networks of mutual support and collective care. In Shankivironi, communal care was reflected in the way women shared and promoted knowledge on medicinal plants to alleviate discomfort (Ulfe et al., 2025). In Caquetá, throughout the pandemic, food bartering activities were common in neighborhoods and rural areas, along with the formation of support and care networks among family members and neighbors through phone calls, video calls, and messages of encouragement. 'During the pandemic, another thing that came out of it was that we learned to barter. Since I didn't have my job

[8] Young person, La Montañita, 2023

and there was no money, I would work for someone and they'd pay me with groceries, or I would trade the crafts I made for food'.[9]

## Into the post-pandemic: Interconnection of crises and responses

The foregoing sections indicate both the breadth of effects experienced during the pandemic and their inherent interconnection with antecedent conditions in the communities. Indeed, in all the project settings, the impacts of the pandemic overlaid on other, pre-existing risks and crises, most of which are still in existence – and some have magnified still further since the public health controls were stood down. Despite these adversities, there remains a strong commitment to social reconstruction, collective organization, and the defense of rights. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded into a post-pandemic period, we also heard about the evolution of people's responses and how new forms of resilience emerged from the dynamic situation they faced.

In Junín, the pandemic was seen as a crisis integrated into the histories of violence and conflict suffered by the communities. But it was also seen as something that brought about a new convergence of economic, social and political threats. Thus, the pandemic is understood today as a moment when vulnerabilities that have historically affected the community emerged at the same time: including food and

[9] Community member, Caquetá, 2023

economic insecurity, conflicts, restrictions on freedoms, and the limited presence of the state in promoting local development and access to services. Although these vulnerabilities have been present in the history of the community, they were present at different intensities and at different times. This situation, in which so many vulnerabilities intersected at the same time, has shaped the narratives among community members about the effects that the pandemic has had on their territories and their families.

For example, one person underlined how they were forced to trade-off the disease threat against the worse threat of not having enough food for the family: 'I'll die working on my land because that's how we eat; it didn't matter anymore if we were sick, we had to work'.[10] After the pandemic, the deepened economic difficulties then led some community members in San Jeronimo and Shankivironi to rent their land (*chacras*) to people from outside, particularly migrants from the Andes. This has generated inter-ethnic conflicts, exacerbated by instances in which the newcomers planted monocrops such as pineapple or ginger that were regarded as damaging to the soil. Wider socio-political uncertainties also affected the area. Three men died in 2022 in the local city of Pichanaki during mass political protests against Dina Boluarte's government that occurred in Peru during the final stages of the pandemic (Ulfe et al., 2024). The protests were fuelled in part by forms of decision-making

[10] Community member, San Jerónimo, 2024

and social restrictions during the pandemic that echoed the authoritarianism, militarization and curfew measures from the period of the armed conflict.

Equivalent interconnection of historical and structural vulnerabilities was manifest in Caquetá. An account written by three young community members highlighted the connections between the legacy of conflict and the impacts of the pandemic: 'With the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the impacts generated by the armed conflict in our region have deepened: risks to life, distrust of others and of State institutions, the destruction of community ties and fear, were some of these' (Yara et al., 2023: 9).

For many young people, the pre-existing digital divide severely limited access to virtual education during the lockdowns due to inadequate connectivity, lack of devices, and insufficient pedagogical support, deepening the pre-existing educational exclusion in rural areas. Indeed, a common metaphor in people's narratives about the pandemic experience was that of a freezing or paralysis of time – bringing especially initiatives designed to counter past injustices to a standstill. The restrictions associated with the pandemic, for example, stalled some of the conflict restitution processes: 'The organization was inactive for two years, and that caused the reparation processes with the institutions to move more slowly'.[11]

[11] Community member, Caquetá, 2023

Similarly, women who had been displaced by conflict described how the COVID-19 crisis deepened unemployment and reignited their demand for access to land:

> We're not asking for a large amount of land, but we do want at least two hectares each — something we can obtain in order to have decent housing, to work on productive projects, to have food …. COVID affected us so much that she who had a tamale business lost it. She hasn't been able to recover, because unemployment continues, and everything is harder now.[12]

From discussions with women about the roots of gender-based violence, we heard testimonies that strongly demonstrate the deep-seated interconnections of risk that were magnified by the pandemic. The stories shared by women in Caquetá reveal a web of pre-existing inequalities intensified by multiple forms of violence – domestic, sexual, psychological, and structural. These forms of violence, deeply normalized, are sustained by fear, shame, silence and the lack of institutional support: 'That's the fear, it's terrible. And I think that's why I endured so much, out of fear of speaking out'.[13] At the same time, individual experiences of violence are embedded in broader structural violence linked to the armed conflict, institutional corruption, and state neglect. Women describe how the conflict affected their territories, bodies, and families, often forcing them into displacement and extreme decisions to protect

[12] Community member, Florencia, 2023

[13] Community member, Caquetá, 2023

their loved ones. Deep-seated distrust of authorities, the political instrumentalization of their needs, and the precariousness of available support have only deepened historical vulnerabilities. The ongoing and evolving daily resistance of these women is thus a powerful expression of dignity in the face of a system that has repeatedly failed them.

The dynamics revealed in how communities were and are responding to the interconnecting problems they face. These dynamics are heightened and modified by the pandemic crisis and are another key element we need to consider in interrogating the meaning of recovery.

In the Junín communities, in a context in which the State did not show immediate reaction to the pandemic and provided few economic and technical resources (Pesantes and Gianella, 2020), a common discourse emerged about the need to recover traditional knowledge in the use of medicinal plants and where to obtain them. One person's testimony reveals how this happened:

> The day COVID appeared they did not know where to bring the medicinal plants from. That is when some of them reflected, they began to search …. In the lower part [of the community] there are no forests, and what did they do?

> They began to look for the medicinal plants that are found in the higher lands, as well as here, where there are small patches of forest.[14]

There has also been internal debate about the best strategies for recovery and the appropriate way to develop their community. Prior to the pandemic, the community had found in tourism a way to generate income and this activity had been assumed as the activity that would promote local development. However, the pandemic impacts showed that tourism is an inherently fragile and unsustainable economic base, which led to agriculture and small animal husbandry being seen as the appropriate development model for the community. Moreover, development has changed its meaning, no longer understood only as an improvement of the family economy, but as something that also sustains the community in times of violence and crisis (Ulfe et al., 2025). This paradigm shift has generated some tensions among the inhabitants of San Jeronimo in which, on the one hand, one group thinks that tourism should be abandoned and return to agriculture and, on the other hand, that tourism should be resumed as an economic activity.

For the community-based organizations in Caquetá, there was an emphasis on efforts to reconstruct community practices based on solidarity, collective care and shared leadership. Particular importance was again placed on the recovery of traditional knowledge, such as the use of medicinal plants, as well as food

[14] Community member, Shankivironi, 2024

sovereignty, and the valorization of forest products —efforts promoted by local organizations like Fusión Tropical. One such initiative has been to promote the traditional use of the *canangucha* palm, seen by those who advocate the project as a means of integrating memory, environment, and community organization into an activity that helps reclaim the rights and dignity of conflict-affected communities. 'Food sovereignty is what comes from the canangucha; there are desserts, cakes, breads, yogurt was made, juices too, and from the canangucha peel we made purines for the pigs, chickens, and dogs, and also used it to make facial creams'.[15] 'It's not like others who pay employees, but rather we all work together. We all work equally. The goal is to use these fruits that nature gave us, and we are part of it'.[16]

Many of the young people that we worked with in Caquetá indicated that the pandemic catalyzed recovery processes focused on reclaiming traditional practices, strengthening family ties, and overcoming isolation-related behaviors generated by the fear of contagion —all contributing to the revitalization of the social, cultural, and environmental fabric. Young people also highlighted meaningful lessons learned during lockdown, such as the importance of health, family, and a renewed appreciation for everyday life. Within the communities we met young people who have been highly active in youth citizenship groups, campaigning for rights,

[15] Community member, Caquetá, 2023

[16] Community member, Caquetá, 2023

inclusion and commitment to the peace process, and supporting the wellbeing of other young people in the area, including through creative initiatives such as peace murals. As one young activist described in a written account:

> We young people from La Montañita have learnt, from the many experiences of violence that we have lived through, the need to come together, to collectivize our struggles and demands, to build our own agendas immersed in scenarios of leadership and political participation … We have found ourselves amidst lyrics, sounds, dances, artistic and culinary expressions (Botache, 2023: 15).

## Critical discussion – Reflecting on recovery

The preceding accounts describe aspects of how our study communities experienced life before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In most of these discussions we did not explicitly encourage people to consider an a priori concept of recovery, because we wanted people's narratives about the long-term effects and responses to emerge from their own ideas. However, in expressing their values, priorities and concerns for life after the pandemic, our project participants enable us to piece together a set of viewpoints that reflect critically on what a post-crisis 'recovery' might mean in practice.

It is crucial to understand the wider context of people's lives and how it interconnected with the pandemic. From the outset of this research work, it was

clear that to speak with people only about the pandemic was neither feasible nor appropriate. Recognition of the interconnection of crises and the structural roots of vulnerability were inherent in how our study participants described the situation they face, and impels us not to look at recovery merely as a linear process of rebound from a singular impactful event (Cretney and White, 2024).

For the communities of San Jerónimo and Shankivironi, the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understood as an isolated time of crisis from which independent recovery strategies might emerge. Its effects, and the responses to it, are the sum of different injustices, pressures and forms of violence that the communities have faced throughout their history. In Florencia and La Montanita, there can be almost no in-depth discussion of impacts and responses to the pandemic without considering its crisis antecedents, especially the effects of conflict, displacement and fear, and how these continue to shape how communities' function. We therefore have to conceive of recovery in relation to intersecting crises and pressures that extend far beyond the timeline of disruptions caused by the pandemic (Mosurska et al., 2023). For many populations, Latin America's experience with COVID-19 exposed and intensified longstanding economic vulnerabilities, deep social inequalities, political polarization, and health system fragilities (e.g. Ramírez de la Cruz et al., 2020; Torres-Favela and Luna, 2025; Valencia et al., 2021). Indeed, many lower-income and socio-politically marginalised groups face such a convergence of vulnerabilities, often stemming from colonial histories, that theirs is arguably a chronic state of

insecurity. As the UN Roadmap referred to earlier notes: 'The COVID-19 crisis has exposed stark global inequities, fragilities and unsustainable practices that pre-date this pandemic and have intensified its impact' (United Nations 2020: 8). Logically, then, these forces will continue to influence and constrain any process of recovery (Leach et al., 2020).

Such a perspective also challenges any simple, linear cause-and-effect model of recovery. Perhaps inevitably, there is a meaning inherent within how the word 'recovery' is used by international agencies that represents a crisis as a moment of disruption of normality that society is now seeking to overcome. But does that match how it is understood on the ground? Vulnerability and response to a crisis is not something that appears only in relation to that crisis event. As a socially variable characteristic, but one generally heightened through the types of economic, cultural and political marginalization experienced by the study participants, vulnerability is embedded in society, historically and structurally – ie it is the 'normality' (Wisner et al., 2004). As Alcántara-Ayala et al. (2021: 2) put it: 'The pandemic has revealed that what was "normal" is the source of vulnerability and exposure'. An alternative rationale therefore is to see crises as inherent within society, rather than superimposed on it, because it is deep-rooted in pre-existing social structures, broadly-defined, that generally create the endemic conditions in which a problem situation turns into a crisis (Dimitrakou and Ren, 2025; Vigh, 2008).

Moreover, even the idea of a defined period of disruption of normality is also flawed. A multi-faceted crisis such as the pandemic disrupts things over an extended, but also variable period of time (for different social groups/populations). When does it start, when does it end—and who for? And what if aspects of the underlying 'normality' also fundamentally shift for some people, such as sale of landholdings in San Jeronimo or the loss of schooling years in La Montanita? Hence, people tended to describe to us a desire for change as a long-term, continuous and collective process—one rooted in ongoing aspirations from the past but often modified by the experiences of the pandemic. Recovery is therefore a generalized notion, not tied to the decline of COVID-19 and the end of lockdowns.

Alongside this critique of recovery as a simple, impact-and-rebound process, lies a wider conception of the values and outcomes that might constitute 'recovery' of the wellbeing of communities (Few et al., 2021; Carmenta et al, in press). This includes solutions to the everyday struggles people face in their lives and livelihoods, as well as greater resilience to extreme events. In both the country contexts or our studies, it includes processes of revitalization and restoration—healing of trauma, mending of the social fabric, and strengthening of connections with nature and traditional knowledge. Indeed, on many occasions where the word was explicitly used, it was in relation to recovery (*recuperación*) as the return of something historically-rooted such as traditional medicine, communal care, or collective memory, rather than people's recovery from a specific societal crisis. This articulation, focussing on

cultural recovery as one positive effect of the pandemic, is an interpretation that shifted the framing to 'recovery of' rather than 'recovery from', with traditional knowledge seen as a source of crisis resilience (Minguez Garcia, 2021).

Conceptions of recovery therefore tended to embody principles of solidarity, reconnection and collective action. At the centre is the hope that through finding spaces for expression, marginalised communities can go beyond recovery and toward transformation of the situations they face.

In Junín, project participants tended to configure the pandemic as a new crisis that drew together pre-existing vulnerabilities, and one that both communities assumed they must respond to themselves because they cannot rely on sufficient support from the State. The communities are still discussing and thinking about strategies to move on from the pandemic, drawing from broader perspectives shaped by long-term experiences of injustices and resilience to them. As we have seen in the re-evaluations of tourism as a livelihood support strategy, it would be naïve to assume everyone in the communities necessarily shares the same views—there are different recovery priorities expressed, as well as contrasting narratives about vulnerability. For example, in both San Jerónimo and Shankivironi we found alternative narratives about the health effects of the pandemic and how the communities coped. It was argued by some that COVID-19 did not cause widespread sickness, connecting with a narrative that shows the community as a strong and resilient one,

in which previous histories of violence have prepared them to face situations of danger and crisis. Others, however, did point to significant health effects, emphasizing that the communities are not prepared to face this type of crisis and, on the contrary, are in need of external help. It was important to note how these parallel narratives were circulating and being actively discussed in the communities, contributing to a process whereby the communities were seeking to build a common discourse on their experiences and situation.

In Caquetá, most project participants conceived of recovery as a process in which community building and collective action are fundamental. The effects of the pandemic were woven into the broader backcloth of conflict and displacement. Overcoming violence and vulnerability is not addressed solely through individual experience, but rather as a collective exercise involving the reconstruction of the social fabric, the recovery of ancestral knowledge and the re-signification of pain. Forgiveness holds a central place as a strategy for healing and as a means to break cycles of suffering, while *juntanzas* (gatherings) serve as spaces for listening, organization and empowerment. Among young people, for example, we found conceptions of recovery rooted in subjective, affective, and collective processes. Recovery involves rebuilding self-esteem, a process intertwined with the reactivation of family and community bonds, as well as the reclaiming of everyday practices—such as working the land or caring for the environment—that function as forms of healing and territorial rootedness in response to the emotional toll of

confinement. At the same time, some young people we worked with view recovery as an opportunity to influence their situation: participating in elections, creating spaces for expression and remembrance, building mutual support networks, and generating alternatives to historically exclusionary dynamics.

Challenges to power relations are therefore also inherent in these grassroots conceptions. Indeed, some critics assert that if ideas of recovery are situated within an uncontested logic of capitalism then they will inherently reproduce successive crises (Cretney, 2017; Klein, 2007). According to Slater (2014: 3): 'A critical theory of recovery uncovers an important contradiction in neoliberal domination. At the same time as neoliberals create crises, they also position neoliberal reform as the sole medium of recovery'.

But the very disruption that crisis brings can conversely be seen as a pivotal opportunity at least to challenge the status quo (Mosurska et al., 2021; Slater, 2014). In fact, the idea of change, not simply reversion to a previous state, is how the goal of recovery tends to be articulated within multilateral agencies—not with language that refers to challenging hegemony, of course, but certainly with a rhetoric that questions 'business-as-usual'. Indeed, returning to the UN roadmap, we can see the call for research efforts to 'reimagine societies using a human rights lens and initiate the transformative changes needed' (United Nations, 2020: 8).

In order for that to happen, many authors argue that the locus of agency in crisis recovery and resilience-building has to shift toward the grassroots, or at least toward more equalized community-state relations (Slater, 2014; Stark and Taylor, 2014). What is not always fully acknowledged in some literatures is that the mechanisms, capacities and structures for this already exist in many communities that have long faced multiple aspects of precarity and marginality. The key in framing research with communities on recovery, we argue is to understand and support the fact that they have and do continuously find channels, to voice their identity and concerns (Few et al., 2021; García-González and Bailey, 2021; Rodríguez, 2011; Wilson and Stewart, 2008), and how this has been reflected in post-pandemic times.

## Conclusion

Through this article, we have sought to provide reflection on what the process of 'recovering' actually entails in a post-pandemic (or post-disaster) situation in which people face multiple risks and other urgent livelihood and wellbeing priorities. We also have sought to explore how critically-engaged, responsive research can enable a more open understanding of this process as conveyed from the grassroots.

From the outset in our discussions, it became evident how simplistic it is to think of the pandemic as some specific event or period of crisis from which an upward recovery trajectory might be expected. Recognising this issue, in previous work on

disasters, some of the authors have used the term 'recovery' to refer not to a process, as such, but to denote a phase in time—the period following the passing of the hazard or triggering event for that crisis. Not only is that semantically awkward, however, but it still underplays the issue of interconnected crises and the ongoing nature of vulnerability. In all the study communities, it was impossible to speak about the impacts of the pandemic and responses to those impacts in isolation from the other threats, concerns and aspirations that people are experiencing. The interconnections are inherent, both materially and symbolically, and the matrix of risks in which they are embedded is largely woven through social structures and histories of injustice that cannot readily be addressed exogenously without fundamental change.

Endogenously, in all the study communities, we learned how a mixture of self-reliance and collective coping has shaped their responses, as well as about the reshaping of debate within communities on strategies for the future. This worked alongside the ongoing recognition of injustices/vulnerabilities, and the possibility that the disruptions of the pandemic may have opened additional spaces for protest and the articulation of demands for external support. However, given the weakness or absence of state support, for many the primary source of resilience remained internal to the household and community.

The narratives around pandemic recovery expressed by many of the people we spoke with in the case studies in Peru and Colombia emerge from lived experiences marked by violence, abandonment, and structural inequality. They emphasize recovery as a collective, emotional, and political process grounded in memory, community bonds, ancestral knowledge, and everyday resistance. This allows us to understand recovery not as a linear or individualized trajectory, but as a multifaceted process that recognizes and restores dignity, reconstitutes collective identities and seeks to confront the dynamics of ongoing marginalization.

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**Acknowledgments:** We owe tremendous gratitude to the many people we worked with in our case study communities in Florencia, La Montañita, San Jerónimo, Shankivironi and in the organization OMIAASEC. Their engagement and enthusiasm was the bedrock for this article, together with the dedicated efforts of the research team members who contributed to data collection at these sites: Victoria Lugo Agudelo, Alejandra López Getial, Shaden Silva Camacho, Bruno Sanstede, Laura Ortiz, Teresa Armijos Burneo, Roxana Vergara, Iris Jave, Ariana Gárate, Andrea Luna, Andrea Segovia, and Roberto Sánchez.

This is an output of the 'Voices of Recovery' project, an international partnership supported by the follow funding organizations in the framework of the

TransAtlantic Platform (http://www.transatlanticplatform.com/): International Development Research Centre (Canada) grant numbers 109835-002 and 109835-003; Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación and Fondo Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) grant number 80740-094-2022; Sao Paulo Research Foundation (Brazil) grant number 2021/07660-2; and Arts and Humanities Research Council (United Kingdom) grant number AH/X001733/1. Universidad de Caldas (HC509; HD538) provided additional support. The opinions expressed in this work do not necessarily represent those of the funding agencies listed here.

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