

How Learners might use the Case Bank

Learners are not expected to investigate every case in equal depth. A suggested inquiry pathway is to:

1. Select one principal case for sustained investigation.
2. Compare it with one case from another region.
3. Determine whether each case represents war, occupation, insurgency, political violence, humanitarian crisis, unresolved division or post-conflict recovery.
4. Construct a timeline using UN documents alongside credible national and local sources.
5. Compare official statements with civilian testimony and lived experience.
6. Examine the historical starting point selected by each source and what that choice includes or erases.
7. Separate confirmed facts, disputed allegations and interpretations.
8. Identify missing communities and underrepresented voices.
9. Test whether the same evidential and ethical standards are being applied to every actor.
10. Develop a Refined Inquiry Question (RIQ) that investigates relationships among causes, actors and systems rather than merely demanding blame.

Worked Case-Bank Inquiry: Colombia and Sierra Leone

This model demonstrates how learners might move through the case bank step by step.

Colombia is the principal case, while **Sierra Leone** provides a purposeful comparison from another region. The objective is not to decide which country suffered more or which peace process was “better.” It is to investigate how different societies attempted to move from organised violence towards sustainable peace—and why ending a war does not automatically remove the conditions that produced it.

1. Select One Principal Case

Principal case: Colombia

Colombia offers a powerful case for examining the difference between **ending a major armed confrontation and constructing positive peace**. Its conflict developed over several decades through the interaction of rural land inequality, political exclusion, guerrilla warfare, paramilitary violence, state military action, forced displacement, kidnapping and the illegal drug economy. The conflict therefore cannot be explained as a simple struggle between the Colombian government and one guerrilla organisation.

The **2016 Final Peace Agreement** between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP significantly transformed the conflict. FARC members laid down their weapons, entered a reintegration process and gained a legal route into political participation. The agreement also created mechanisms for rural reform, truth-seeking, reparations and transitional justice.

However, the agreement did not immediately remove every source of insecurity. Other armed groups remained active, illegal economies continued, state institutions were still weak in some rural territories, and many Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and farming communities continued to experience threats, displacement and competition over land. Colombia consequently allows learners to examine an important peace paradox:

A peace agreement may successfully end one organised conflict while leaving parts of the wider conflict-producing system intact.

The [UN Verification Mission in Colombia](#) provides an official starting point for investigating the agreement and its implementation.

2. Select a Comparative Case from Another Region

Comparative case: Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone experienced a brutal civil war from **1991 to 2002** involving government forces, the Revolutionary United Front, other armed groups and international actors. The conflict was associated with political corruption, weak state institutions, youth marginalisation, competition over diamonds, forced recruitment, displacement and extreme violence against civilians.

After the war, Sierra Leone's peacebuilding process included:

- UN peacekeeping

- Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
- Restoration of state authority
- A Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- The Special Court for Sierra Leone
- Community-level recovery and reconciliation

The [United Nations account of its mission in Sierra Leone](#) explains how peacekeeping was connected with disarmament, elections, state reconstruction and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Why are Colombia and Sierra Leone being compared?

These cases are compared because they share important structural features without being identical. Both experienced prolonged internal armed conflict, severe civilian harm, displacement, recruitment into armed groups, weak state presence in some regions and economies connected to valuable or illegal resources. Both also attempted to move beyond a military ending by combining disarmament with truth, justice, reintegration and institutional reconstruction.

The differences make the comparison even more valuable. Sierra Leone's civil war formally ended in 2002, while Colombia's 2016 agreement ended the principal conflict with FARC-EP but did not include every armed organisation operating in the country. Diamonds played an important role in financing armed power in Sierra Leone; coca cultivation, cocaine trafficking, illegal mining and territorial control have played complex roles in Colombia. Sierra Leone established a Special Court involving international participation, whereas Colombia created its own Special Jurisdiction for Peace within a broader national transitional-justice system.

Learners can therefore investigate a deeper question:

Why can similar peacebuilding tools—disarmament, truth-seeking, justice and reintegration—produce different outcomes when they operate within different political, territorial and economic systems?

The comparison demonstrates that a peacebuilding strategy cannot simply be copied from one country and inserted into another. Its effectiveness depends on the particular conflict system it is intended to transform.

3. Classify Each Situation Carefully

Colombia: Post-conflict transition with continuing armed violence

Colombia may be described as undergoing a **post-agreement transition**, but the phrase “post-conflict country” requires caution. The 2016 agreement ended the main armed confrontation between the state and FARC-EP, but it did not end all political and criminal violence throughout Colombia. Other armed groups continued to compete for territory, resources and control over illegal economies. Some communities therefore experienced national peace as a political achievement while continuing to live with local insecurity.

Calling Colombia simply “a country at war” would ignore the transformation produced by the agreement. Calling it “a peaceful country” would overlook the continuing experiences of communities affected by armed control and displacement. The most accurate classification must therefore acknowledge both **peacebuilding progress and unfinished conflict transformation**.

Sierra Leone: Post-conflict recovery and peace consolidation

Sierra Leone is more accurately classified as a **post-conflict recovery case** because its civil war formally ended in 2002, large-scale disarmament occurred and the UN peacekeeping mission completed its mandate. Nevertheless, ending the war did not erase poverty, trauma, institutional weakness, youth exclusion or the social consequences of violence.

The classification helps learners understand that “post-conflict” does not mean that a society has returned to its earlier condition or achieved complete justice. It means that organised warfare has ended and the society is attempting to prevent recurrence while rebuilding institutions, relationships and public trust.

What does the comparison reveal?

Analytical question	Colombia	Sierra Leone
Did a major armed conflict formally end?	Yes, the state–FARC conflict was transformed by the 2016 agreement.	Yes, the civil war formally ended in 2002.
Did all armed violence disappear?	No. Other armed actors and territorial conflicts continued.	Large-scale warfare ended, although social and political vulnerabilities remained.
Was disarmament used?	Yes, principally for FARC-EP members.	Yes, across the post-war disarmament process.
Was truth-seeking included?	Yes, through Colombia’s Truth Commission.	Yes, through Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
Was transitional justice included?	Yes, through the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.	Yes, through the Special Court for Sierra Leone.
Did formal peace immediately create positive peace?	No. Rural inequality, insecurity and illegal economies remained important.	No. Poverty, trauma, inequality and weak institutions required continuing attention.

The classification exercise teaches learners that **war, peace and post-conflict recovery are not simple opposites**. A society may move between them unevenly, with different regions and communities experiencing different realities at the same time.

4. Construct a Timeline from Multiple Sources

A timeline is not merely a list of dates. It reveals **which causes developed first, which events changed the direction of the conflict and which conditions continued after the peace agreement**. Learners might construct the following initial timeline and then verify and expand it using UN documents, national institutions and local sources.

Colombia

Before 1964: Unequal land ownership, rural poverty, political exclusion and partisan violence create conditions of instability.

1964: FARC emerges as a guerrilla organisation with Marxist influences and a stated focus on rural inequality and political change.

1980s–1990s: The conflict becomes increasingly complex. Guerrilla organisations, paramilitary groups, state forces and drug-trafficking networks compete for power, territory and resources.

1990s–2000s: Kidnapping, forced displacement, attacks on civilians, child recruitment, extrajudicial killings and other violations affect communities across the country.

2012: Formal negotiations begin between the Colombian government and FARC-EP.

2016: An initial agreement is rejected in a national referendum. A revised Final Peace Agreement is signed on **24 November 2016** and approved by Congress.

2017 onwards: FARC-EP disarmament, political participation and reintegration begin. Transitional-justice and truth-seeking institutions start their work.

Post-2016: Implementation advances, but continuing violence, illegal economies, land disputes and weak state presence obstruct peace in some territories.

Sierra Leone

Before 1991: Corruption, inequality, weak public institutions, youth marginalisation and unequal access to economic opportunities contribute to instability.

1991: The Revolutionary United Front launches an armed rebellion, beginning the civil war.

1990s: The conflict expands through coups, changing alliances, exploitation of diamonds, forced recruitment and widespread violence against civilians.

1999: The Lomé Peace Agreement is signed, but serious challenges to its implementation remain.

1999–2000: The UN peacekeeping mission expands its role in stabilisation and disarmament.

2002: The war is formally declared over.

Post-2002: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Special Court, reintegration programmes, elections and institutional reforms contribute to post-war recovery.

Why does the timeline matter?

The timeline prevents learners from treating the peace agreement as if it appeared suddenly or solved everything immediately. It makes three distinct periods visible:

Conditions that produced conflict → events that sustained conflict → structures that survived the conflict

It also reveals that peacebuilding begins before a signature and continues long after one.

5. Compare Official Accounts with Civilian Testimony

Official sources are essential because they provide information about agreements, mandates, laws, implementation targets, ceasefires, institutional reforms and verified developments. However, an official account often views peace from the level of the state, an international organisation or a national programme.

Civilian testimony shows how those policies were experienced in particular communities.

In Colombia, an official account may report that FARC-EP disarmed, former combatants entered reintegration programmes and new transitional-justice institutions were established. These are significant peacebuilding achievements. Yet testimony from an Indigenous leader, rural woman, displaced farmer or former child recruit may reveal that armed control, threats, land insecurity or fear continued within a particular locality.

In Sierra Leone, an official account may document successful disarmament, elections and the restoration of state authority. Testimony from survivors may reveal continuing trauma, social stigma, economic hardship or tension surrounding the return of former combatants.

Neither source automatically invalidates the other. They may be describing peace at different levels:

- The official source explains what changed **institutionally**.
- Civilian testimony reveals what changed—or failed to change—**experientially**.
- Local reporting shows how peace differs **territorially**.
- Historical evidence explains why the difficulties exist **structurally**.

The learner therefore asks:

If an agreement exists nationally but insecurity continues locally, which account describes the “real” peace?

The most defensible answer may be that both accounts contain part of the reality. A rigorous inquiry must explain their relationship rather than selecting one and dismissing the other.

6. Examine Where Each Source Begins the Story

Every narrative begins somewhere, and that starting point quietly shapes the explanation that follows.

A source beginning Colombia's story in **2016** is likely to focus on negotiation, disarmament and peace implementation. It may present Colombia principally as a peacebuilding achievement.

A source beginning in **1964** may present the conflict as a struggle between the Colombian state and FARC. This starting point makes guerrilla warfare central but may understate the earlier land inequality and political exclusion from which the conflict developed.

A source beginning with the growth of the **drug economy and paramilitary organisations** may emphasise criminal financing, territorial control and violence against civilians.

A source beginning with the experiences of **Indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities** may reveal a longer history of land dispossession, marginalisation and weak state protection.

The same scrutiny applies to Sierra Leone. Beginning in **1991** makes the RUF rebellion the apparent origin of the war. Beginning earlier reveals corruption, institutional decline, youth exclusion and unequal distribution of resource wealth. Beginning in **2002** presents the country mainly as a post-conflict success and may push the causes and lived consequences of the war outside the frame.

Learners might therefore annotate each source with three questions:

1. **Where does this source begin the history?**
2. **What explanation becomes convincing because it begins there?**
3. **Which earlier condition, actor or community becomes less visible?**

This does not mean that every source is dishonest. A source must begin somewhere.

Epistemic responsibility lies in recognising what that choice makes visible and what it leaves outside the frame.

7. Separate Facts, Allegations and Interpretations

Conflict narratives become dangerous when confirmed facts, disputed allegations and interpretations are presented as though they possess the same evidential status.

Type of statement	Colombia example	How the learner treats it
Confirmed fact	The revised Final Peace Agreement was signed on 24 November 2016.	Verify through the agreement, UN records and official documentation.
Confirmed fact requiring context	FARC-EP laid down its weapons and became a legal political organisation.	Accept the event while investigating how complete and effective reintegration was.
Reported allegation	A particular armed group carried out a recent attack or displacement.	Identify who made the allegation and seek independent corroboration before attribution.
Interpretation	The Colombian peace process was successful.	Ask how “success” is defined, measured, located and timed.
Counter-interpretation	The peace process failed because violence continued.	Test whether continuing violence necessarily means that the agreement achieved nothing.
Causal claim	Illegal economies caused post-agreement violence.	Investigate how illegal economies interacted with territory, armed groups, state absence and community vulnerability.

The same discipline applies in Sierra Leone. The formal end of the civil war is a fact. The claim that the country achieved reconciliation is an interpretation requiring evidence about trust, justice, reintegration, memory and social repair.

A learner may use the following language:

- **The document confirms...**
- **The witness reports...**
- **The organisation alleges...**

- **The available evidence suggests...**
- **One interpretation is...**
- **This causal claim remains uncertain because...**

This language does not weaken the inquiry. It makes the inquiry more honest and precise.

8. Search for Missing and Underrepresented Voices

A peace process may be presented as a negotiation between governments, military leaders and armed organisations. Yet those most affected by the conflict may have had the least power over the agreement or its implementation.

In Colombia, missing or underrepresented voices might include:

- Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities
- Rural women
- Displaced families
- Victims of kidnapping or enforced disappearance
- Survivors of sexual violence
- Children recruited into armed organisations
- Former combatants attempting civilian reintegration
- Social leaders and human-rights defenders
- Communities living in areas controlled by successor or competing armed groups

In Sierra Leone, learners might seek the experiences of:

- Child soldiers and children affected by war
- Women and girls who survived sexual violence
- Amputees and other survivors of physical violence
- Rural communities near diamond-producing areas
- Former combatants returning to communities
- Families of missing or killed civilians

- Young people excluded from economic and political opportunity
- Community reconciliation workers

The inclusion of these voices changes the knowledge claim. Without them, the inquiry may conclude that peace was achieved because institutions were established. With them, the learner may recognise that institutional peace and lived peace do not always develop at the same speed.

However, testimony must never be treated as emotional decoration. The learner examines who recorded it, how it was translated or edited, whether informed consent was obtained, whether the witness could speak safely and whether one person's experience is being presented as representative of an entire community.

9. Apply the Same Ethical and Evidential Standards to Every Actor

Conflict inquiry becomes unreliable when learners demand strong evidence for claims that challenge their preferred side but accept weak evidence for accusations against the opposing side.

In the Colombia inquiry, the learner might ask:

- Do I require corroboration for alleged abuses by FARC-EP but accept allegations against state forces without verification—or the reverse?
- Do I condemn kidnapping, forced recruitment, attacks on civilians and unlawful killing regardless of the actor responsible?
- Do I distinguish between a government, a military institution, an armed organisation, an individual member and the civilians associated with none of them?
- Am I explaining why an armed group gained support without turning that explanation into a justification for violence?
- Am I recognising differences in legal authority and power without assuming that power automatically proves guilt or innocence?
- Am I using the suffering of one community to dismiss the suffering of another?

Equal ethical scrutiny does **not** mean claiming that every actor possessed equal power, committed identical acts or bears equal responsibility. That would create false equivalence. It

means that the same core standards—evidence, civilian protection, human dignity and accountability—are used consistently.

The learner's task is therefore not to produce a morally neutral account. It is to make moral judgement **evidentially disciplined, contextually informed and consistently applied**.

10. Develop a Refined Inquiry Question

A weak question might ask:

Who destroyed peace in Colombia?

This question assumes that peace previously existed, imagines that one actor destroyed it and directs the inquiry towards accusation before the evidence has been examined.

Another weak question might ask:

Was the Colombian peace agreement successful?

Although more balanced, this question encourages a simple yes-or-no answer. It does not specify whose experience, which location, what dimension of peace or which timeframe will be investigated.

A more focused question could be:

To what extent has Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement improved security for rural communities?

This is stronger because it identifies an agreement, an outcome and a population. However, it still needs to investigate the relationships producing different outcomes.

A fully refined systems RIQ might be:

How have rural inequality, incomplete state presence, illicit economies and competition among armed groups interacted to limit the experience of peace among Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and farming communities since Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement?

This question is powerful because it identifies:

- **The timeframe:** since the 2016 agreement
- **The affected communities:** Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and farming communities
- **The outcome:** their lived experience of peace

- **The interacting factors:** inequality, state presence, illicit economies and armed competition
- **The analytical purpose:** explaining relationships rather than locating a single villain

A comparative extension could ask:

How did differences in armed-group participation, resource economies and state reconstruction shape post-conflict peacebuilding in Colombia and Sierra Leone?

The inquiry does not remove responsibility from individuals or institutions. Instead, it investigates responsibility more rigorously by examining the **conditions, incentives, institutions and relationships through which violence is enabled or peace is obstructed.**

The Enduring Realisation

A signed agreement can close a war at the negotiating table without closing the systems that reproduce insecurity on the ground. To understand whether peace is becoming real, learners must connect official progress with history, structures and the everyday experiences of affected communities.