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The Colombian armed forces classify illegal armed groups in three categories: *Grupo Armado Organizado* (GAO, Organised Armed Group), which are groups that emerged after the demobilisation of the AUC, 158 as well as other major armed groups such as the ELN or the Gulf Clan (AGC/EGC).159 GAO is the main figure of armed group in Colombia, meaning the State recognises it as an organised structure with capacity for territorial control, but does not recognise the political nature of the group.160 *Grupo Delictivo Organizado* (GDO, Organised Criminal Group), organised criminal groups with transnational reach dedicated to illicit activities such as drug trafficking; and *Grupos de Delincuencia Común Organizada* (GDCO, Criminal Groups), groups dedicated to criminal activities such as thefts, street-level drug trafficking, homicides, and extortion.161

FIP created a graphical illustration of the mutation and evolution of organised crime in Colombia since the 1980s (see below).162 FIP explained that links between the different generations of organised crime groups have transformed these organisations, creating a 'criminal learning process' that has altered how they operate. Hierarchical, centralised, and personality-driven structures like the large cartels no longer exist. Today, they are more like federations, and in some cases, networks often operating through alliances or subcontracting with other groups to avoid detection. There is no single leader; tasks are compartmentalised and distributed to prevent the capture of one individual from disrupting the business. Criminal networks today operate in a fragmented, flexible, and decentralised way, allowing rapid adaptation to state actions. The networked model of organised crime involves multiple actors with varying territorial reach—national, regional, local, or micro-local—who collaborate in drug trafficking, illegal mining, smuggling, extortion, and human trafficking; while maintaining their operational autonomy and collaborating indirectly with international cartels.163

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Figure 2: Evolution of armed groups and criminal organisations in Colombia164

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  Colombia, PNC, Sistema Nacional de Lucha contra el Crimen Organizado, n.d., url, pp. 15-21

- 159

EL PAIS, El ultimátum del ELN al Gobierno se cumple sin una salida a la vista, 23 August 2023, url

- 160

  Indepaz, El acuerdo entre el Gobierno y el Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia: ¿un paso hacia la paz o un riesgo de impunidad?, 19 September 2025, url

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  Colombia, PNC, Sistema Nacional de Lucha contra el Crimen Organizado, n.d., url, pp. 15-21

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  FIP and El Diálogo, Colombia, Mutaciones del crimen organizado, September 2025, url, pp. 9-11

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  FIP and El Diálogo, Colombia, Mutaciones del crimen organizado, September 2025, url, pp. 9-11

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  FIP and El Diálogo, Colombia, Mutaciones del crimen organizado, September 2025, url, p. 9

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