

FOCUS ON RESILIENCE AND TRANSFORMATION: ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF PEACE

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Abstract

Contemporary peace architecture is based on three pillars: peacebuilding, civil initiatives, and peace processes. As analyzed in current research, these three pillars do not operate in isolation but rather acquire their true meaning through situated praxis, especially in complex contexts such as Colombia. This interconnection strengthens the academic theoretical corpus and proposes a strategic roadmap for institutions and territories. By recognizing the strength of social initiatives in Colombia, we see that this axis is capable of energizing and sustaining other long-term pacification efforts. Academic work, such as that of La Salle University, is a vital support for social transformation.

Keywords : peace, peacebuilding, peace initiatives, peace processes, Colombia.

Resumen

La arquitectura de la paz contemporánea se fundamenta en una tríada esencial: la construcción de paz, las iniciativas civiles y los procesos de paz. Según se analiza en el acumulado investigativo actual, estos tres pilares no operan de forma aislada, sino que adquieren su verdadero sentido a través de la praxis situada, especialmente en contextos complejos como el colombiano. Esta interconexión no solo busca fortalecer el corpus teórico académico, sino que propone una hoja de ruta estratégica para instituciones y territorios. Al reconocer la robustez de las iniciativas sociales en Colombia, se establece que este eje es el motor capaz de dinamizar y sostener otros esfuerzos de pacificación a largo plazo, integrando la labor académica —como la de la Universidad de La Salle— como un soporte vital para la transformación social.

Palabras clave : paz, construcción de paz, iniciativas de paz, procesos de paz, Colombia.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research within the Master's Degree program in Peace, Development, and Conflict Resolution at the University of Pamplona in Colombia underscores the relevance of peacebuilding as an emerging discipline with a significant transformative impact. Unlike purely theoretical approaches, this field finds its validity in practice, confronting structural skepticism and materializing concrete possibilities for social change.

This approach is articulated through two dynamic axes: civil initiatives, which have flourished in Colombia over the past six decades, and peace processes, which are tools for nonviolent intervention in armed conflicts. Since Belisario Betancur's administration in 1982, Colombia has developed a historical understanding of negotiation. Combined with the strength of civil society, this knowledge enables the country to transition from a narrative focused solely on violence to a proactive and optimistic vision of its national reality.

Description of the research

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CATEGORIES AND VARIABLES

Table 1: Definition of categories and variables

CATEGORIES	VARIABLES
Representations and conceptions of peace:	Definitions of peace. Concepts associated with peace. Cultural and social interpretations of peace.
Factors that influence peace interpretations:	Political factors. Socioeconomic factors. Cultural factors. Historical factors.
Contribution of each branch of government to the promotion of peace:	Specific actions of each branch. Implemented programs and policies. Allocated resources.
Communication and collaboration between branches of government:	Communication channels. Levels of collaboration. Obstacles to collaboration.
Perspectives and visions on peace in each legislative branch:	Political ideologies. Legislative objectives. Conflict resolution approaches.
Impact of decisions, laws and policies on the consolidation of a peaceful environment:	Positive effects. Negative effects. Areas for improvement.
Role of the legislature in promoting peace and conflict resolution:	Relevant legislation. Conflict resolution mechanisms. Coherence between discourse and legislative action.

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2: Steps according to Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

Step	Description
Objectives	The general objective and the specific objectives aimed at the analysis of the social interpretations of peace in Pamplona are defined.
PAR methodology	Once PAR was chosen as a methodology, emphasis is placed on work phases, especially in the diagnosis phase.
Importance of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Branches	To contextualize the importance of interpretations of peace in these institutions to understand social and political dynamics.
Active participation of those involved	Integrate the active participation of citizens, community leaders, and government officials into the research process.
Focus groups	Actively collaborate with representatives of government branches and use focus groups to gain direct perspectives.
Implementation and Reflection Sessions	Planned activities are carried out with active participation, facilitating reflection and dialogue sessions to deepen interpretations.
Technical and social impact of diagnostics	The reality is technically described, contextual factors evaluating/analyzing the problem situation, considering the perspective of those involved.
Data analysis	Qualitative data analysis is carried out, identifying patterns, recurring themes and discrepancies in peace interpretations.

Source: Own elaboration.

Violence and its context. Colombia's history is defined by a persistent duality: the coexistence of multiple forms of violence and a resilient capacity for peacebuilding (Hernández Delgado, 2012; Rettberg, 2017). This structural contradiction reveals a scenario in which the entrenched nature of armed conflict demands urgent transformation, yet significant opportunities for pacification also emerge (Rettberg and Quiroga, 2017).

Characterization of violence. Historically, violence has been used in this country as a means to capture power and silence dissent (Sánchez Gómez, 1991). However, evidence suggests that violence does not solve conflicts; rather, it dehumanizes and postpones their resolution (López Martínez, 2017). Colombia's spectrum of violence is multidimensional, ranging from structural (poverty and exclusion) to direct (armed conflict and drug trafficking) dimensions. This has consolidated a cycle of victimization that is difficult to break (Commission for Studies on Violence, 1987; Deas and Gaitán, 1995).

The state of the negotiated solution. Despite the conflict's deterioration and its severe impact on civil society (National Center for Historical Memory, 2013), Colombia has achieved milestones in negotiated solutions, such as the agreements of the 1990s and the 2016 pact with the FARC-EP. However, the current reality is described as a strategic "limbo," a gray area where neither total war nor absolute peace prevails due to the absence of a comprehensive resolution involving all armed actors (Hernández Delgado, 2018).

Imperfect Peaces and Transitions in Colombia. The imperfect peace approach, proposed by Allen et al. (2022), redefines peace as a processual, unfinished, and constantly improving reality, rather than an idyllic state of absolute harmony or total absence of conflict. From this perspective, peace is built in everyday life and often coexists with violent dynamics, manifesting itself through the peaceful resolution of disputes and the promotion of human well-being (Bouvier, 2009).

The Colombian context and grassroots initiatives. Over the past five decades, Colombia has witnessed a wide array of peacebuilding initiatives that challenge the notion that society is inextricably bound to violence. These experiences include:

- **Nonviolent resistances** and constituent municipal assemblies.
- Victims, women's and youth **organisations** acting as agents of change.
- **Peace laboratories** and persistent social movements despite the ups and downs of the conflict.

Transitions and pacifist empowerment. Transitions to peace are central to this landscape. The victims, motivated by the desire to prevent others from suffering the same tragedies, have transitioned from their pain to an active role as peacebuilders. On the other hand, ex-combatants from various insurgent groups, such as the M-19, EPL, and FARC-EP, have transitioned from armed struggle to democratic participation and the establishment of NGOs dedicated to peace research (National Center for Historical Memory, 2013).

The milestone of the agreement with the FARC-EP.

The 2016 agreement with the FARC-EP stands out as the most significant peace event in recent history, ending the longest-running insurgency on the continent. This agreement has opened windows of opportunity:

1. **Structural transformation:** Address the causes that generate conflict in the post-agreement stage.
2. **Reconciliation:** Strengthen the work of institutions such as the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP).
3. **Social dialogue:** Promote "pacifist empowerment" and constructive political agreements, following the line of Lederach (2008).

Despite the persistence of violence in various forms, which poses an enormous challenge, the accumulation of lessons learned and the strength of civil initiatives constitute a fundamental legacy of peace for the country's future.

THEORY

Peacebuilding. The concept of peace has evolved from an idealistic vision of absolute harmony to an approach of imperfect peace. Originally proposed by Muñoz (2001), this perspective recognizes that peace is an ongoing reality that coexists with various forms of violence. In Colombia, peace is manifested through nonviolent conflict resolution and a daily commitment to human well-being, challenging the idea that the country is inextricably tied to war.

The Imperfect Peace Approach. Peace should not be understood as an absolute state of harmony or the total eradication of conflict because such perfection is contrary to human nature. Instead, Muñoz (2001) coined the term "imperfect peace," which proposes a processual and dynamic vision of peace. This vision is built daily and persists even in environments permeated by violence. This perspective is validated when societies peacefully manage their disputes and foster common well-being through the articulation of collective experiences.

Meaning and scope of peacebuilding. Although there are no universal criteria by which to measure its impact or effectiveness, peacebuilding is defined as a positive and hopeful academic category. It is articulated through various dimensions:

- **Engineering of social change:** It implies moving from destructive violence based on fear to a social commitment characterized by mutual respect and relational dignity.
- **Multifaceted process:** Requires the participation of political, humanitarian, and security actors in long-term efforts to strengthen local capacities for conflict management.
- **Structural transformation:** Its central objective is to intervene in the root causes of conflict to turn structures of violence into pillars of peace and sustainable development.
- **Innovation and rupture:** It represents the ability to generate new realities that challenge traditional molds and deterministic visions of violence.

The heritage of peace in Colombia. Contrary to the narrative of a nation condemned to violence, Colombia has a robust accumulation of peace experiences documented over the past five decades. This "heritage" includes:

- **Civil initiatives:** Non-violent resistance, constituent assemblies and peace laboratories promoted mostly in rural sectors by victims, women and youth organizations.
- **Negotiated solutions:** Historical processes that began in 1982 with Belisario Betancur and that have allowed the demobilization of various insurgent and paramilitary groups.
- **Pacifist empowerment:** Meaningful transitions where victims become agents of change in order to prevent others from suffering victimizing events.

The Process with the FARC-EP and the current challenges. The 2016 final agreement with the FARC-EP is considered the most significant milestone in recent history, as it ended the longest-running insurgency on the continent. This agreement has paved the way for national reconciliation and is supported by institutions such as the Truth Commission and the JEP. However, the persistence of various types of violence remains an urgent, massive challenge for Colombian society.

Analysis of civil peace initiatives: nature and meanings. Civil peace initiatives are collective processes that emerge from civil society, sometimes with the support of religious institutions. Their central purpose is to construct peace through nonviolent methods by transforming conflict into scenarios of dialogue, protection of basic rights, and constructive agreements.

The question of the name: how do they define themselves?

The naming of these experiences is not accidental; It reflects its essence and its objectives:

- **Territories of Peace:** They focus on the geographical space where they are developed.
- **Peace Communities:** They highlight social organization and joint action, clarifying that "community" resides in the bond between people, regardless of whether or not they share a physical boundary.
- **Associations:** They emphasize the shared identity (peasants, women, youth).
- **Names by Intentionality:** Terms such as "self-determination" or "Constituent Assembly" underline the search for autonomy, dignity and the creation of new forms of political participation and management of the public.

Academic perspective and typologies

From the research field, they have been classified under concepts such as "peace zones" or "socially-based initiatives". The latter are characterized by:

- **Origin:** They arise from critical needs caused by direct or structural violence.
- **Protagonists:** They are directly driven by the affected social sectors (the "base").
- **Potential:** They leverage local capacities to generate "pacifist empowerment."

Purposes and dynamics

Regardless of their name, these initiatives share a common roadmap to **imperfect peace** (processes in constant improvement):

1. **Prevention and management:** Preventing violence from escalating and managing conflicts peacefully.

2. **Transition:** Moving from confrontational relationships to dynamics of cooperation and reconciliation.
3. **Resistance and mediation:** To act as mediators or exercise nonviolent resistance against armed actors or oppressive powers.

Uniqueness and complexity

Each peace process is unique and cannot be repeated. While previous experiences provide theoretical and practical references, there are no exact academic formulas or models that can be replicated from one context to another. The complexity of each process is proportional to the conflict it is trying to resolve, making them exercises of high uncertainty.

Negotiation occurs amidst conflict.

A common feature is negotiating without preconditions, which implies that dialogue occurs while hostilities continue. This model often generates skepticism in civil society because talks do not immediately stop violence. For example, in South Africa, historically, it has been shown that a ceasefire is usually the consequence of the final agreement, not the starting point.

Political will as a driving force

Overcoming obstacles and neutralizing the "saboteurs" requires the genuine commitment of the parties involved. Without this commitment, reaching a definitive agreement in the face of crises is nearly impossible.

Trends and preferred models

Preference for a negotiated solution: In recent decades, political resolution has overtaken military settlement as the main way to end internal conflicts. Cooperative approach: Experts agree that models based on cooperative negotiation and progressive trust building are more effective in achieving mutual benefits.

Education and citizen participation

Peace education is an essential strategic tool. It helps legitimize the process in the eyes of civil society and creates a "shield" against those who try to derail the dialogues. It also facilitates the future implementation of agreements.

Peace processes are long-term efforts. The negotiation stage can last more than a decade, and the post-agreement phase requires at least as much time as the duration of the armed conflict for true consolidation.

The Post-Agreement: A New Beginning

It is a common misconception that the signing of peace ends violence instantaneously. The final agreement is only the starting point for sustained peacebuilding efforts that seek to transform the structural causes of conflict.

Conclusions

The heritage and the future of peace in Colombia

Colombia is in a historical duality: on the one hand, deep-rooted violence and, on the other, a *growing universe of citizen initiatives* and lessons accumulated during decades of search for peace.

1. The Concept of "Imperfect Peace"

Rather than seeing the flaws, it is necessary to adopt an epistemological turn based on *imperfect peace*. This approach does not define peace as something defective, but as an *unfinished, constant and perfectible reality*. It is imperative to empower peace through language and practice, recognizing that Colombia has a "heritage of peace" that must be made visible.

2. Peacebuilding as a Priority Axis

Peacebuilding is not an isolated event, but a robust process supported by more than 80 years of academic studies. This field offers the theoretical and practical tools to:

- Transform internal armed conflicts.
- Closing historical cycles of violence.
- To promote an *intelligent optimism* that values negotiation as the most effective way of solution.

3. The Role of Civil Society and Academia

Peacework is based on an essential triad: *civil initiatives, negotiation processes and peacebuilding*. This model is applied in educational institutions (such as La Salle University) under two dimensions:

- **Internal dimension:** Training and transformation of the academic community itself.
- **External dimension:** Direct impact on society, the region and the world.

4. Strategic objectives of the work for peace

The ultimate goal is to generate a structural change that allows:

- **Preventing and unlearning violence:** Moving from destructive confrontation to constructive socio-political agreements.
- **Replace hatred with cooperation:** Replace the dynamics of violence with peaceful relations.
- **Energize academia:** Use research, training, and university extension to nurture peace education and document the country's history of peace.

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