

Original Article

# Armed conflict, peace, and occupational therapy in Colombia: paths and challenges<sup>1</sup>

*Conflito armado, paz e terapia ocupacional na Colômbia: caminhos e desafios*

*Conflicto armado, paz y terapia ocupacional en Colombia: recorridos y desafíos*

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## **Abstract**

Colombia experiences a long-running armed conflict, with more than nine million registered victims and profound damage to people, communities, and society. The article covers three topics. First, a brief contextualization of the Colombian armed conflict and some of its impacts. Secondly, based on documentary sources, it attempts to trace how Colombian occupational therapy has approached the armed conflict. It identifies three stages: prudent indifference, slow awakening, and recognition of ethical-political responsibility. Finally, it presents some challenges for the professional contribution to peacebuilding in Colombia, such as expanding and strengthening the profession to reach the territories most affected by the conflict, improving occupational therapists' training and practice to respond to the complexity of the country's situation, and reflecting on the objectives and ethical implications of professional actions for the victims, ex-combatants or communities affected by the conflict.

**Keywords:** Armed Conflicts, Professional Practice, Human Rights Abuses, Social Occupational Therapy.

## **Resumo**

Colômbia vive um conflito armado de longa duração, com mais de nove milhões de vítimas registradas e profundos danos na vida de pessoas, comunidades e na própria sociedade. O artigo abrange três tópicos, primeiro, uma breve contextualização sobre o conflito armado colombiano e alguns dos seus impactos.

<sup>1</sup> This text is based on the author's speech presented on November 11th, 2022, in the V Social Occupational Therapy International Symposia, UFSCar, São Carlos, SP, Brazil.

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Na segunda parte, a partir de fontes documentais, tenta-se traçar as rotas das aproximações da terapia ocupacional colombiana ao conflito armado e identificam-se três momentos: prudente indiferença, despertar lento e reconhecimento da responsabilidade ético-política. Por fim, apresentam-se alguns desafios sobre a contribuição profissional à construção de paz na Colômbia, entre eles, a expansão e o fortalecimento da profissão para chegar até os territórios mais afetados pelo conflito, o aprimoramento da formação de terapeutas ocupacionais e de suas práticas para responder à complexidade da situação do país e a reflexão sobre os objetivos e as implicações éticas da ação profissional com vítimas, ex-combatentes ou comunidades afetadas pelo conflito.

**Palavras-chave:** Conflitos Armados, Prática Profissional, Violações dos Direitos Humanos, Terapia Ocupacional Social.

### **Resumen**

Colombia vive un conflicto armado de larga duración, con más de nueve millones de víctimas registradas y daños profundos en la vida de personas, comunidades y en la sociedad misma. El artículo abarca tres temas: primero, una breve contextualización sobre el conflicto armado colombiano y algunos de sus impactos. En la segunda parte, a partir de fuentes documentales, se intentan trazar los recorridos de la aproximación de la terapia ocupacional colombiana al conflicto armado. Se identifican tres momentos: prudente indiferencia, despertar lento y reconocimiento de la responsabilidad ético-política. Finalmente, se presentan algunos desafíos para contribuir como profesión a la construcción de paz en Colombia, entre ellos, la expansión y el fortalecimiento de la profesión para llegar a los territorios más afectados por el conflicto; el mejoramiento de la formación y de la práctica para responder a la complejidad de la situación del país, y la reflexión sobre los objetivos y las implicaciones éticas de las acciones profesionales con víctimas, excombatientes o comunidades afectadas por el conflicto.

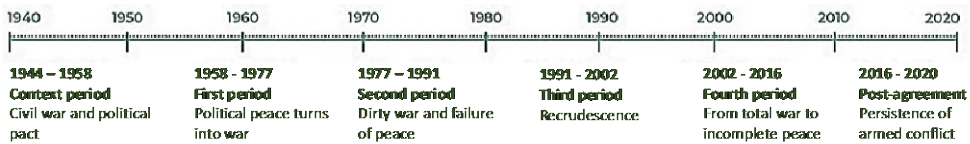
**Palabras-clave:** Conflictos Armados, Práctica Profesional, Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos, Terapia Ocupacional Social.

## **Introduction**

This article refers to the processes and reflections on armed conflict and peacebuilding as Colombian occupational therapists. It will cover three topics: first, a brief contextualization of the Colombian armed conflict; second, some paths for our professional approach to the conflict; and finally, some ideas that I consider important for contributing to peacebuilding in Colombia.

## **A Necessary Contextualization**

The Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, an institution created by the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's (FARC-EP) guerrilla, proposes the historical contextualization illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Proposal for the periodization of the Colombian armed conflict by the Truth Commission.

**Source:** Comisión de la Verdad (2022i).

Although this periodization is not free from controversy, it allows us to have the keys to understanding a complex process. One of them is its long duration, of at least 60 years. Even so, we can say that Colombia has a history of successive civil wars related to land distribution, power relations between elites and less favored social classes, violence to resolve political or ideological disputes, and the development of strategies for the social control of populations, among other elements (Fajardo, 2015; González, 2016; Sánchez, 2001).

Some milestones in that history are, first, the creation of the guerrillas in Colombia in the 1960s: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) in 1965, the National Liberation Army (ELN) in 1962, the People's Army of Liberation (EPL) in 1967 and the April 19 Movement (M-19) in 1970 (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

Then, in the 1980s, paramilitary groups were created as a response by civilians to fight the guerrillas. These groups were born under an anti-communist ideology and, sometimes, were allies of the State military forces (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

In 1990, the peace agreement between the State and the M-19, which, in addition to the demobilization of this guerrilla, led to the reform of the Colombian Constitution in 1991 (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e). Between 2003 and 2006, more than 30,000 paramilitaries of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) were demobilized.

In 2012, talks between the Government and the FARC-EP began, leading to the signing of the Peace Agreement in November 2016 (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e). Finally, President Gustavo Petro's government is advancing on the Total Peace proposal, seeking to move forward with talks with the ELN guerrilla, suspended in 2018, and with other illegal groups.

In addition to these facts, I want to highlight the most recent periods, especially the conflict recrudescence, barely twenty years ago, strongly influencing the current social situation. In this regard, the Comisión de la Verdad (2022d) reports that 75% of the victims of the conflict occurred between 1996 and 2008, the majority being civilians<sup>2</sup>.

According to official sources, Colombia has 9,379,858 victims (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2022), nearly 20% of the country's population. However, it is important to clarify that before the 1990s, the country did not systematically record victims (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022d, 2022f). The official records distinguish 15 victimizing acts<sup>3</sup>. I will focus on two examples: forced displacement and forced recruitment.

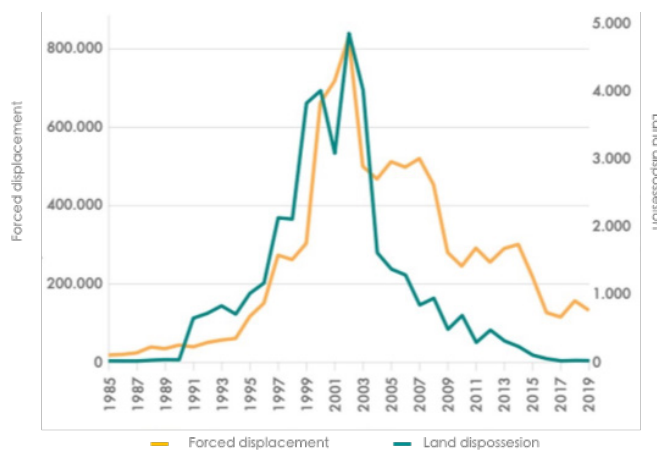
<sup>2</sup> According to the Comisión de la Verdad (2022c), close to 90% of the victims of the Colombian armed conflict are civilians.

<sup>3</sup> Lockdown; psychological personal injuries; bodily injuries; loss of movable and immovable properties; forced abandonment or dispossession of land; involvement of children and adolescents in activities related to armed groups; torture; kidnapping; antipersonnel mines, unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices; homicide; forced displacement; forced

Colombia currently has more than 8,300,000 victims of forced displacement. The Final Report of the Commission refers to:

Forced displacement, in fact, is the form of violence that has impacted the largest number of victims in the history of armed conflict. As of January 2022, the RUV [Single Record of Victims] reported 8,510,295 people forcibly displaced from their homes. In 2022, this is equivalent to almost the entire population of a country like Switzerland, a little more than the population of Paraguay and almost twice that of Panama. This statistic in Colombia means that approximately one in six people have had to leave home due to violence. (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022g, p. 111)

As Figure 2 shows, most forced displacements occurred in the late 1990s and peaked between 2001 and 2003.



**Figure 2.** Victims of forced displacement and land dispossession in Colombia (1985 - 2019).

**Source:** Comisión de la Verdad (2022f, p. 457).

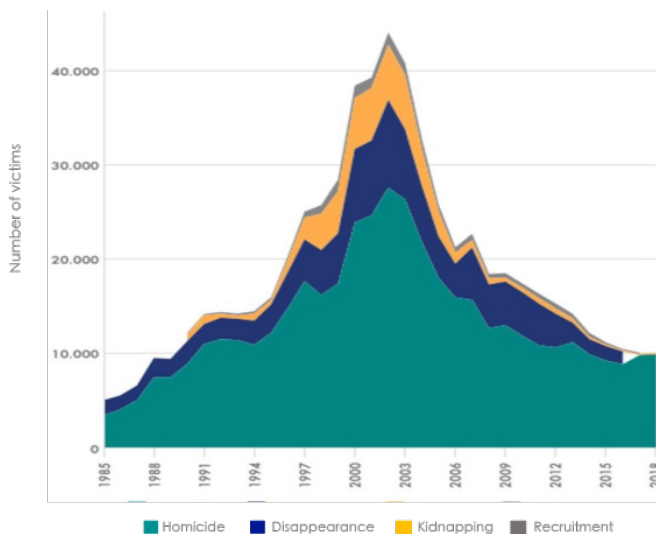
Most victims of forced displacement are impoverished people; women, peasants, and Black or Indigenous peoples. For them, leaving their territory is losing their community, culture, customs, ways of life, and subsistence. Most of them arrived, even today, to cities where the ways of life are different and frequently hostile. Many people have suffered several forced displacements, to the point of being unable to settle anywhere and fleeing war or armed actors for most of their lives (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022a; 2022f; 2022h). Thus, beyond the often insufficient or inadequate institutional responses, the victims frequently lack social support networks or face many difficulties building them. After all, “it was about winning the war by controlling the social fabric” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022d, p. 123).

Another victimizing example is forced recruitment. I am speaking, especially, of processes in which girls and boys were separated from their families to form part of

disappearance; crimes against freedom and sexual integrity during armed conflicts; threat; terrorist act / attacks / combats / confrontations / siege (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2022).

guerrillas or paramilitary groups. However, also, children and youth who, after arriving at State institutions -because they managed to escape from the illegal groups or were rescued by the State in military operations- were used as informants for the military forces or even handed over to paramilitaries groups (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022h). Although this State practice has become illegal since the late 1990s<sup>4</sup>, it allows us to see how State-institutions sometimes become spaces for re-victimization. In fact, reports from the United Nations System on the human rights situation in Colombia speak of the ongoing and systematic use of boys and girls as informants for the military forces in the last twenty years (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022h).

Figure 3 shows the number of victims of different events between 1985 and 2018. Forced recruitment, in gray, reaches the highest values and, like displacement, peaked in the early 2000s.



**Figure 3.** Victims of homicide, forced disappearance, kidnapping, and forced recruitment in Colombia (1985 - 2019). **Source:** Comisión de la Verdad (2022f, p. 985).

Additionally, frequently the families of boys and girls who were recruited or at risk of being recruited had to flee their territories, either to avoid recruitment or because a boy or girl fled and returned home so that the whole family became persecuted. For this reason, the two situations often converge (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022g, 2022h). In some cases, these boys and girls were seduced or tricked into joining illegal groups; others were forcibly taken from their homes or handed over by their families to guerrillas or paramilitaries. Most lived in rural areas, were part of impoverished families, and had no other alternative (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022g, 2022h). It is a common story that, in the same family, one of the children was in a guerrilla and another in a paramilitary group or the army.

<sup>4</sup> In Colombia, Law 418/1997 already prohibited the recruitment of minors under 18 years of age and created provisions for the protection and care of children who were victims of the conflict. Subsequently, the Childhood and Adolescence Code (Law 1098/2006) established the State's duty to protect minors in the conflict (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1997, 2006).

Forced recruitment allowed –and even currently allows– illegal groups to have cheap labor for housework, carrying messages, or scraping coca leaves. Sometimes, boys and girls receive training and are forced to kill, recruit other minors, care for kidnapped people, etc. (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022h). Thus, for example, those who remained in the illegal groups and managed to survive at the beginning of the 21st century, today are adults whose lives are marked by that history. Their culture, community, and rules of coexistence are those of the illegal group. These situations not only have a psychosocial impact<sup>5</sup> on their lives but also on individuals, families, communities, and even populations excluded from their daily micro-social environments, from the places that society generally expects them to occupy (i.e., the school), who face difficulties for their social integration in the territories or the communities of arrival and for whom coherent social responses are required.

### Paths in our Professional Approach to Armed Conflict

Speaking of the paths of occupational therapists in Colombia facing the reality of a country in conflict, I identify three stages. It should be clarified that this is only a proposal that emerged as I explored from some sources and, therefore, requires further study.

I call the first stage *prudent indifference*. The opening of occupational therapy school programs in Colombia occurred in the second half of the sixties, the same decade in which the guerrillas were founded. The justification for establishing rehabilitation programs at the National University of Colombia, where the first occupational therapy program in the country was created, already spoke of the high demand for services derived from violence (Rodríguez et al., 2016a). However, at that time, the first national occupational therapy conferences and articles published in the *Revista Acción / Ocupación Humana* (Action / Human Occupation Journal)<sup>6</sup>, did not reference occupational therapists' experiences working with victims or armed actors nor account for reflections on the conflict or our role in this reality.

I speak of prudent indifference because times were too difficult, and taking a position could have been dangerous. In addition, armed confrontations were more frequent in rural areas, while the growth of the cities and poverty lines were fed by internal migration due to the conflict. The internal enemy discourse, the communism threat, the numerous human rights violations, and the country's alignment with the United States policies, among other factors, created an atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and silencing (Ahumada, 2007; Marín, 2017).

Finally, I consider that the biomedical approach in working with people with physical and mental disabilities and the classification of the programs as rehabilitation technicians (Rodríguez et al., 2016a; Zapata, 1994) also limited and justified other struggles as priorities for the Colombian occupational therapy.

The second stage is, for me, a *slow awakening*. Since the mid-1980s, due to terrorist attacks by drug cartels and internal migration resulting from forced displacement, it was

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<sup>5</sup> Defined by the Comisión de la Verdad (2022c) as: "Emotional, behavioral and thought consequences generated in people, families, communities and in society due to the conflict. From the psychosocial point of view, these impacts can be manifested through traumas, crises, and mourning and must be addressed as part of the reconstruction of the social fabric".

<sup>6</sup> Occupational therapy scientific journal of the Colombian Association / College of Occupational Therapy. At first, the name of the journal was *Acción* (Action), but in 1987 it changed to *Ocupación Humana* (Human Occupation).

too difficult to be indifferent to the reality in cities. Some articles in the Human Occupation Journal already spoke of occupational therapists' participation as members of interdisciplinary teams, with communities victims of forced displacement in urban territories (Rodríguez, 1989, 1995; Gómez et al., 1999). Additionally, the effects of the conflict on the mental health of individuals and communities began to be discussed as a topic of interest and work for occupational therapists (Méndez, 1999; Peñas, 2000; Santacruz, 2006; Tobón, 2004); likewise, calls were made to the profession to respond to the effects of violence and the social reality of the country (Caicedo, 1997a; 1997b; González, 2000; Rozo, 2006; Troncoso, 1991).

In the late 1990s, the work of Patricia Cuéllar is exemplary. She “participated as an occupational therapist in the interdisciplinary team that guided the occupational conversion of former Sandinista guerrillas into members of the regular armed forces or State or government officials” (Cuéllar, 2000, p. 24) in Nicaragua in the 1980s. She later returned to the country to finish her professional training at the National University of Colombia, where she completed a proposal for the reinsertion of ex-combatants as her capstone project (Cuéllar, 1999; 2000). This proposal arose while a peace negotiation process with the FARC-EP was underway, which ended unsuccessfully in 2002<sup>7</sup>.

The Realizing Occupational Performance model (Trujillo, 1995), proposed by a group of professors from the National University of Colombia, and its use in different fields opened doors to getting involved with complex social realities, such as the demobilization of illegal armed groups (Cuéllar, 1999; 2000), the neoliberal reforms of the State and their influence on workers<sup>8</sup> (Cerón, 1997), among others. These were isolated experiences initially, but they multiplied and challenged our knowledge.

The intensification of war at the beginning of the 21st century seems to coincide with a general decrease in research on armed conflict (Fernández & Duarte, 2021). However, at the same time, the reality forced the State to recognize the numerous human rights violations that were taking place and to demand that, just as it invested in the war, measures be taken to repair the damage. Some of the norms that today's institutional programs are based on emerged from this, having occupational therapists among victim care teams<sup>9</sup>.

With this background and with a new opening of peace talks with the FARC-EP in 2012, an atmosphere of hope opened the space for numerous social mobilizations around the construction of peace, the recognition of the existence of a conflict, with all its complexity, and its effects on people's lives.

Research (Albarracín & Contreras, 2017; Fernández, 2019; Fernández & Duarte, 2021; Gómez et al., 2017; Jiménez et al., 2019; Peñas et al., 2015, 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2016b; Satizabal et al., 2021; Uribe et al., 2016), academic practices (Larrota et al., 2015), conversations<sup>10</sup>, reflections (Caballero, 2016; Castillo & Varón, 2016; García, 2019; Melo &

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<sup>7</sup> Process known as the *Dialogues in Caguan or El Caguan*, between 1999 and 2002. This process not only failed, but the conflict in this period intensified (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022i).

<sup>8</sup> At the National University of Colombia, especially the "Occupational Performance Reorganization Program", directed by Professor Martha Torres Carvajal, whose target audience were workers laid off in the 1990s in the "modernization process" of the State. This program was the main reference of Cuéllar's (1999; 2000) proposal.

<sup>9</sup> Mainly, the Victims Law (Law 1448/2011), as well as the decisions of the Constitutional Court in the development of said law (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> In the XVI Colombian Congress of Occupational Therapy, held in the same year of the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP, one of the main topics was the post-agreement scenario. Also in 2016 and later, in 2019, it was the central theme of the occupational therapist day celebrations in Colombia.

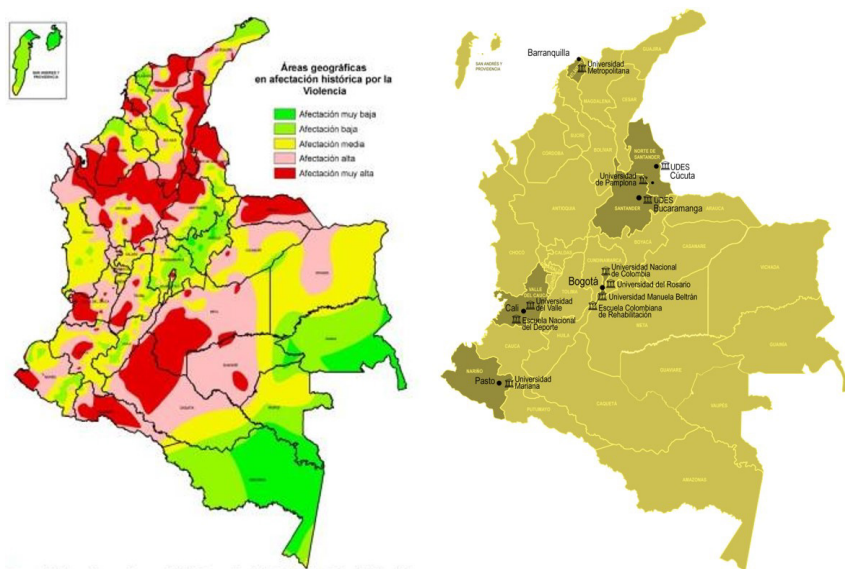
García, 2021; Olarte, 2016; Ospina, 2019; Rodríguez, 2016; Rojas, 2017; Rubio, 2016; Talero, 2019), university extension projects and actions with the participation of occupational therapists (Hernández et al., 2016; Rojas et al., 2020; Universidad del Valle, 2021), contributions to the work of the Truth Commission (Fernández et al., 2021; Jiménez et al., 2020), in addition to the work of occupational therapists in political settings (Cerón, 2019), direct service to victims (Cerón, 2016; García et al., 2019; Larrota, 2016; Larrota et al., 2015; Sepúlveda & Valbuena, 2019), ex-combatants (Satizabal & Aguilar, 2019), and accompaniment to communities (Chasoy, 2016; Vega et al., 2019), among other experiences that I indeed could not trace, is what I call the *recognition of our ethical and political responsibility* with the armed conflict and its consequences.

Despite the suspension and setbacks in compliance with the Peace Agreement in recent years, I believe that strong seeds of social conscience remain.

### About some Current Challenges

Even in this atmosphere of hope, we are going through a challenging time. The recognition of the effects of our conflict has also been helpful for this.

For example, in Figure 4, the map on the left shows in colors the territories affected by the conflict between 1986 and 2015. Despite all being affected, red and pink areas show the most affected territories. Meanwhile, the map on the right shows the distribution of occupational therapist training programs in the country. In addition to being few, only twelve so far, they are concentrated in the main cities and do not reach the territories most affected by the conflict.



**Figure 4.** Typology of municipalities and regions affected by the armed conflict (1986-2015) versus spatial distribution of undergraduate courses in occupational therapy in Colombia.

**Sources:** Salas-Salazar, 2016 (left); Duarte, 2019 (right)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The map does not include the program of the María Cano University Foundation, reopened in 2022, in Medellín.



Although we do not have precise data, the available information shows that, in the distribution of occupational therapists in the country, the situation is similar to that of the academic programs (Duarte, 2019).

In addition to the necessary academic-professional expansion and the strengthening of the profession to have political incidence and occupy our role as occupational therapists in Colombia's peacebuilding, we have other challenges from my point of view.

One of them is understanding the conflict's complexity, its consequences on people's lives, and peacebuilding as a renewed form of coexistence and repair of the social fabric. To face it, we need improvements in professional training that allow equally complex understandings and approaches, as well as reflective practices, dialogues, and questions in Colombia and abroad. This is essential to strengthen and stress professional action and institutional policies and programs.

For example, it is worth asking ourselves, what are the purposes of therapeutic-occupational actions when working with victims, communities affected by war, or ex-combatants? Accordingly, which approaches or perspectives are relevant? The approaches probably differ if the objective is to reduce the psychosocial impact, facilitate inclusion (educational, labor, etc.), or restore/guarantee access to rights and citizenship. Likewise, the theoretical and methodological referents that will enable to address the accomplishment of one objective will differ. These approaches are not exclusive but refer to different forms of professional action.

Other dialogues and reflections on the ethical implications of actions with affected individuals, communities, or actors involved in the conflict are necessary. These echo questions about the fragility of the processes of insertion and establishment of social ties today (Souza & Lussi, 2022) and about the medicalization of social life (Malfitano, 2016); also, the political, institutional, and economic interests and the processes of normalization, reproduction of the *status quo* or adaptation that underlie some interventions and programs (Galheigo, 2016; Palacios, 2017).

All the above leads us to the discussions about the social function of the occupational therapist that founded the construction of Brazilian social occupational therapy (Lopes, 2016). Given the magnitude of the challenge posed by the construction of peace in Colombia and assuming the urgency of solving the structural causes that determine the persistence of the conflict, as proposed by the Peace Agreement, questioning our role as a profession and professionals is relevant and a priority.

## **Acknowledgements**

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