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The role of Transformative Action Research in territorial peace building: Insights for New Area Studies

Iokiñe Rodríguez, Cristina Sala Valdés, Nohora Isabel Barros Navarro, John Jairo Uribe Sarmiento, María del Pilar Salamanca Santos, Santiago Andrés Padilla Quintero and Teresa Armijos Burneo.

Abstract:

War and peace have been extensively researched in Colombia over the past decades. However, little is said about the role that research can play as a driver of change in the transition from war to peace when research is carried out with those who have been part of the dynamics of the conflict or have found themselves in the middle of the crossfire. In this article, we discuss the experience of the "School, Territory and Post-Conflict: Grounding a Local Peace Culture in South Tolima, Colombia" project working with eight community organisations between 2018 and 2022 studying their experiences building peace during the armed conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government, and after the 2016 peace agreement. We discuss the transdisciplinary journey of the project and of transformations we have witnessed as a result with the hope that the lessons learned can inform ongoing discussions about how to widen further the research and methodological frontiers of New Areas Studies and beyond.

Keywords: transformative action research, bottom-up peace building, re-signifying peace, Colombia, Peace Accord, armed conflict, territorial peacebuilding



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Introduction:

New Area Studies is moving away from traditional interpretations of the field as narrow geographic and regional specialization (Lambert, 1990: 712), towards an understanding of peoples, cultures and places comprehensively and comparatively in an era of rapid change (Hodgett and James, 2018). This is evidenced in the increasing recognition of the intersection between the fields of international relations, peace studies, history, politics, sociology, economies, cultures, languages, the environment and geography across specific regions. Yet discussions about the methodological innovations that can help enrich context-based research through the involvement of institutions, actors and their goals, are still largely incipient. This is particularly the case for transdisciplinary approaches that help to make visible how place is experienced and re-signified at the local level in contexts of war or post-conflict scenarios.

This article offers this insight through an exploration of the impacts of a transformative-action research project carried out in Colombia between 2018 and 2022 to enhance the transformative power of the communities in favour of territorial and situated peacebuilding.

War and peace have been extensively researched in Colombia over the past few decades. This has a lot to do with the fact that the armed conflict is among one of the longest at an international level. Also, the fact that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas have an unparalleled longevity in the continent. This has led to Colombia becoming a sort of research laboratory that has fed a wide range of both analytical and theoretical perspectives that have sought to explain the reason for this long conflict, as well as all kinds of approaches for peace formation as local, regional and international process.

Colombia has also stood out due to the proliferation of peacebuilding initiatives that have emerged in recent decades at local level, which have also been the subject of great research interest (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2011). In addition, since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the FARC and the



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National government, a new arena has opened for understanding the dynamics of the transition from war to peace and from which new research interests have emerged (Estrada, 2019).

However, despite the wide range of research topics on the armed conflict and peacebuilding in Colombia, little is said about the role that research can play as a driver of change in the transition from war to peace when research is carried out with those who have been part of the dynamics of the conflict or have found themselves in the middle of the crossfire.

In this article, we discuss the experience of *Proyecto Escuela, Territorio y Posconflicto* (“School, Territory and Post-Conflict: Grounding a Local Peace Culture in South-Tolima, Colombia”) working with community organisations between 2018 and 2022 studying their experiences building peace in the midst of conflict.

We discuss the transdisciplinary journey of the project and of transformations we have witnessed as a result with the hope that the lessons learned can inform ongoing discussions about how to widen further the research and methodological frontiers of New Areas Studies and beyond.

The article is divided as follows. In the first section we discuss some conceptual elements that help understand how we define territorial peacebuilding and the role of Transformative Action Research in this process. In the second section, we explain how we conceptualised Transformative Action Research in the “School, Territory and Post-conflict” project. In the third section, we present in greater detail the methods developed in the project to assist organisations in carrying out their own research process. In the fourth section, we analyse the contributions that the research process has made to the organisations, and we close in the fifth section with some final reflections on the long-term impacts of the project.

1. Key concepts for Transformative Action Research in local peacebuilding

One of the key contributions of the Colombian peace agreement of 2016 was the concept of territorial peace introduced by Sergio Jaramillo (2014), the commissioner in charge of the peace process with the FARC during Juan Manuel Santos’ government. The innovative nature of this concept lay in seeing



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peacebuilding as a process that supports new initiatives and institutions in organising territorial development and enforcing the equal constitutional rights of all citizens.

Among the new ways of approaching peacebuilding, the following stand out:

- Decentring the armed conflict and recognising it as a territorial issue.
- Making explicit the necessity for implementing democracy in the development process as an integral way of recovering from the armed conflict.
- Recognising the need to mobilise rural communities to construct, through planning, a joint notion of development and raising the foundations of state institutions.

However, in essence, this was a statist approach based on the construction and consolidation of State territoriality and institutions through: a) determining the best use and distribution of territorial space, b) recovering the relations between the nation and its entities and units of territorial management, c) consolidating decentralisation and territorial autonomy, d) creating and consolidating regions, electoral circles, provinces and metropolitan areas, e) formulating national, regional and local territorial plans and f) recovering the territories damaged by the war (Borja 2016).

Furthermore, the focus on peacebuilding by respecting the constitutional rights of citizens and constructing more equitable democratic institutions, primarily addresses two forms of violence present in the armed conflict: direct violence and structural violence. However, this precludes another form of violence which is related to the more invisible dynamics of exclusion and domination that have historically prevented the integration of local perspectives and knowledge into the development and territorial planning process: cultural or epistemic violence.

While direct violence refers to violent physical and psychological acts intentionally directed against people, structural violence refers to political, economic and social systems that uphold mechanisms of exploitation, repression or exclusion (Galtung,

1969). Cultural or epistemic violence, for their part, legitimise the other two forms of violence through the imposition, often invisible, of value and belief systems that exclude or violate the physical, moral or cultural integrity of certain social groups by undermining their own value or belief systems (Galtung, 1990).

This last form of violence is conveyed in the dominant development model as a homogenous discourse and worldview, and the cultural and identity changes that have been taking place because of modernisation, constructing knowledge and educational policies that have resulted in the erosion or fragmentation of worldviews and local knowledge (Santos, 2010; Walsh, 2007). In many cases, because of this process, local knowledge becomes invisible or hidden as a form of cultural protection or out of simple ethnic shame. The lack of attention to this form of violence and especially to an in-depth analysis of the national development model and its effects on the conditions of inequality and wealth in the country, was one of the points questioned by the social movements of the peace agreement of 2016 (Salcedo, 2015).

A peacebuilding strategy that does not address cultural or epistemic violence runs the risk of reproducing or regenerating new forms of violence, as is happening in different regions of the country with the advancement of extractive activities and the assassination of leaders and ex-combatants after the peace agreement was signed (Salazar et al, 2018).

Lasting territorial peace requires, in addition to the efforts carried out by the State Institutions to strengthen territorial control and development, processes that help to build greater epistemic or cognitive justice from the ground, in the way that peace itself is defined and conceptualised. In other words, it is essential to generate processes that help *resignify territorial peacebuilding* at local level, helping to strengthen both the agency and sense of local relative responsibility (Moix 2020), and the viewpoints and world beliefs, the importance of nature and the knowledge systems that the war and State policies have made invisible.

Galtung's concept of Positive Cultural Peace (1990) provides important contributions in this regard as it speaks to the importance of recognising the diversity of world perspectives and interpretations, accepting and respecting

difference, adopting the principle of unity in diversity among all forms of human and non-human life. This implies, as Arturo Escobar would say, thinking about peace outside the categories of modernity and instead as a design for the autonomy and liberation of mother earth (Escobar, 2016) and from a diversity of perspectives.

This implies *resignifying the territory* beyond spatial planning and the construction of State institutions by recognising the historical presence of those living in different territories and their sense of *place*, and helping them reconnect to their territories and envision alternative futures to those of violence.

At the local level, territorial peacebuilding requires processes that help to strengthen local peace initiatives that are already underway in many parts of the country and often remain invisible, to enhance the transformative power of the communities in favour of territorial and situated peacebuilding.

Transformative Action Research (TAR) can play an important role in this process due to its focus on the co-construction of social knowledge generated from research experiences “planted” in the sensitivity of social subjects and subjectivities (Zuluaga de Prato, 2012).

What distinguishes TAR from other forms of participatory research (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1992; Latorre, 2003) is its focus on “recreating dynamic possibilities for knowledge and dialogued learning generated from critical reflection; from the context, from a hologrammatic (micro-macro) perspective, a social perspective, from reflexivity, complex recursiveness (not cause-effect), the value of collective work and from an encompassing vision of social reality, knowledge and action” (Zuluaga de Prato, 2012). It is in essence a flexible, dialogical and dynamic way of conducting research in response to the expression of the community’s willingness and determination towards self-autonomy and balance of power. Research is in this way a tool at the service of the community to help articulate, make visible and strengthen local knowledge, experiences and visions of peacebuilding.

2. Doing Transformative Action Research in southern Tolima: methodology for researching peacebuilding



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The “School, Territory and Post-Conflict” project is a participatory research project aimed at supporting sustainable peace in southern Tolima, collaborating with teachers, students and members of community organisations from the Ataco, Chaparral, Planadas and Rioblanco municipalities. Teachers from a total of eight schools (two from each municipality) and leaders of eight community organisations participated as co-researchers, which brings the total research team to more than 100 people, between researchers from the coordinating team (from the University of Ibagué, the University of East Anglia and Eureka Educativa), teachers and leaders.

The ultimate goal of the project was to help generate proposals from the school or community spaces that could help create or consolidate territorial peacebuilding processes at local level. The project was conceived on the basis of two main topics: on the one hand, school life and the armed conflict and, on the other, the construction of a shared vision of the future from a cultural and territorial perspective. The project was also approached from two peacebuilding perspectives: one that asks how the conflict impacted the school and what transformations it brought about in the school environment, and another that asks how community organisations built peace in the midst of conflict.

In this text we focus on the methodologies that we have developed to answer the second research question: how do organisations build peace in the midst of conflict? The answer to the first research question is addressed by Lozano et al in a separate publication (Lozano et al 2023).

Southern Tolima has multiple local organisational forms that preserve peace as a yearning for the future. The eight community organisations that were a part of the project as co-researchers are an example of this diversity. Some of them are coffee associations, men’s, women’s and mixed; there are youth organisations, women’s organisations and environmental organisations. Some organisations had a long history and others were more novel. Some organisations even had to curb their trajectory due to the increased intensity of the conflict.

In particular, work was carried out in Chaparral with the Chaparral Women’s Network for Peace, Aprovocal and Asocalarama; in Ataco with Asproicol and Ascafesagrado; in Planadas with Fupapt and in Río Blanco with ASOMETH and the



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Herrera Youth Group (see Photo 1). Some of these organisations were already working together on productive aspects, such as the coffee associations Aprovocal (a pioneer project in Tolima of indigenous Pijao coffee producers) and Asocalarama (a men’s coffee association). Also, ASOMETH (an association of entrepreneurial and working women from Herrera) and the Herrera Youth Group had been meeting since 2018 with the aim of recovering the memory of the elders of Herrera. The coffee organisations of Asproicol and Ascafesagrado in El Paujil begun to meet on the basis of this project.

For the researchers of the “School, Territory and Post-Conflict“ project, researching peace at local level meant setting out on a path to make visible the extraordinary experiences of civil resistance, collective care for life, thus calling for the peacebuilding capacities emanating from the power of community strength to be recognised. This is an ethical, political, supportive, self-care, dedicated, intercultural, creative “thinking and feeling” commitment.



Photo 1: The co-researchers from the community organisation (photo Iokiñe Rodríguez)

We call this approach “ethical” because the discussion and reflection of collective life projects is rooted in the perspectives of local actors; this is what gives momentum and strength to politics in their regions. We call it “political” because it creates space for peace in a world where conflict and violence span across all environments. It is also a “thinking and feeling” approach because it pushes back against traditional research techniques, allowing an open-minded attitude towards emotions, knowledge and methods from local communities whilst still maintaining dialogue with academic knowledge, so as to avoid causing epistemic violence in the research process. Given that armed conflict dynamics are still present in the territories (albeit not with the same intensity), this is also a collective approach, and about “self-care”. Therefore, this way of doing research must be open to modifying its language and references along the way to avoid situations that put the safety of the co-research team at risk.



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It could also be described as “dedicated”, as its main focus is building knowledge that contributes towards processes of liberation, justice and social equality and thus seeks to build knowledge that is both pertinent and useful for the communities in reaffirming their social and political endeavours. We call it “intercultural” because, starting from an acknowledgement of the historical asymmetries in the building of knowledge (Walsh, 2005), the act of communicating knowledge between different learning systems can be found both as part of the framework and as the final goal of our research. Our work is committed to maintaining a “creative” attitude, which can be seen in our way of building knowledge, which transcends traditional rational methods and delves into other artistic forms such as fine art, sewing and weaving, theatre, museum exhibits, photography and videography, the use of Lego to build prototypes, and, during the pandemic, webinars.

We opted to use a diverse array of participatory methodologies that allow for fluid dialogue and a safe environment in which we are able to assess any concerns. In this process, the challenge is for the external researcher to create pertinent conversations that are based on current affairs and allow them to be moderated mostly by the communities themselves.

Essentially, we proposed an “undisciplined” approach to the research process, by which we mean questioning the relationship between the researcher and their research with the goal of “transitioning to research without a fixed objective” (Colectivo Situaciones 2002, in Haber, 2011: 17). This also implies that our research lacks a research question (since, if there is no fixed objective, it cannot be assumed that there would be a question to answer). “Undisciplined research makes an opportunity out of a research question, a reason to reflect upon ourselves and objectively reveal our true natures as beings living in the world. This isn’t done in such a way that this concept of ‘ourselves’ becomes our new research objective, but rather so that we can recognise the dynamics that we already find ourselves in” (Haber, 2011: 18). This process breaks down the power hierarchies that have been established since the creation of Western colonial science (Santos, 2010) to be able to start a discussion with “the Other” to help us to create endogenous peace processes.

These conversations and discourses allowed us to create a space for reflection in which we could envision the positive transformation of local political culture, and in which community concerns are allowed to emerge, and in turn become the foundation for our political intervention in said communities. In this way, using a variety of research methods, we mapped out a path for our understanding of local resistance and their peacebuilding amid conflict.

3. Methods to resignify and facilitate local territorial peacebuilding

To enhance the transformative effects of the research, two different methods were used: a) researching and discussing territorial peace, and b) raising awareness of perspectives on local territorial peace (for a detailed account of the project consult Rodriguez et al 2023).

3.1 Researching and discussing territorial peace at local level

In order to research peacebuilding methods at local level, three types of research findings have been developed:

In-situ workshops in communities

These were organised in each municipality, in different “*corregimientos*” or “*veredas*” (parishes), where we worked in spaces provided by the community (homes, organisation headquarters, the community garden centre, etc.). The organisations’ interests and research proposals emerged from these intimate spaces. A total of eight in-situ workshops were developed with different methodologies to help systematically organise, critically analyse, and make sense of the different ways in which peace is being built at local level in southern Tolima. The methods used were adapted to each organisation, according to its own forms of peacebuilding, and chosen methods for research, reflection, empowerment and raising awareness.

Life pathways: All organisations began their research process by making a personal life path. This path allowed them to reflect on their personal, family, and organisational life trajectory, their achievements as well as potential future challenges. Young or old, leaders and community members reflect on questions such as who am I? Who was I? Where am I? How did I get here? Where am I headed?



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Participation mapping: in Risalda, Herrera and Paujil (see photo 2) this method allowed us to revisit communal areas in these territories and rename them after the people that give them life, stories of the past, legacies of their ancestors, dreams for the future, or what makes them feel proud (such as their rich natural environment and cultural heritage).

Collective stories: Using mainly oral history, each organisation explored their reasons for being; the difficulties or challenges that led to their collective organisation, their political aspirations, and what they learnt during their journey.

Communication campaigns: Focusing on a series of collective concerns, the campaigns that took place in Paujil and Risalda allowed us to either inquire into and gain a deeper understanding of the core values that are the backbone of community life and allowed habitants to maintain firm collective ties, or to reflect on which values are necessary to create a strong and active community.

Timelines: This method raised awareness of the techniques used by Fupapt and the Chaparral Women’s Network for Peace. These timelines created discussions which allowed us to order, highlight and analyse each step taken by the two organisations at municipal, regional, and national level.

Mapping the body: The women’s organisations that took part in the project employed this method as a way of recognising their bodies and their land as a place for vindication and resistance, where memories are stored, and dreams, wishes and frustrations arise.

Community photography: This method was used to understand and delve deeper into the importance of the key concepts that have been emerging and shedding light on the different processes that the organisations were moving forwards in Risalda, Herrera, Paujil and Planadas. Different concepts such as environmental peace, alternative childhoods, leadership, and coexistence were translated into photos of the territories.

Participatory videos: The pandemic stopped the participatory videos from following their usual course and instead they were converted into a collective process which was supported remotely by the coordinating team. This was a process that allowed

both organisations from Herrera, Fupapt and the Chaparral Women’s Network for Peace to reflect together on the story they want to tell and how they want to tell it. This process, which underwent reflection, planning, filming and editing stages, started a search for meaning and connected the present to the past and the future. From this, resignifying processes that had been slowly growing from previous methods blossomed (see photo 3).

Writing and narrating an “institutional memory”: Collective writing workshops were organised to devise timelines. During these sessions, the Chaparral Women’s Network for Peace reflected on key points such as; its historical and political process, the important figures in the story, what changes had taken place over the years, and the organisation’s collective achievements, etc. These reflections would eventually comprise the chapters of the network’s book. (see photos 4 and 5).



Photo 2: Participatory map of Risalda (Photo by Cristina Sala)



Photo 3: Members of the Fupapt organisation filming witness accounts of the territorial peacebuilding carried out in Planadas (Photo by Mauro Cardona)



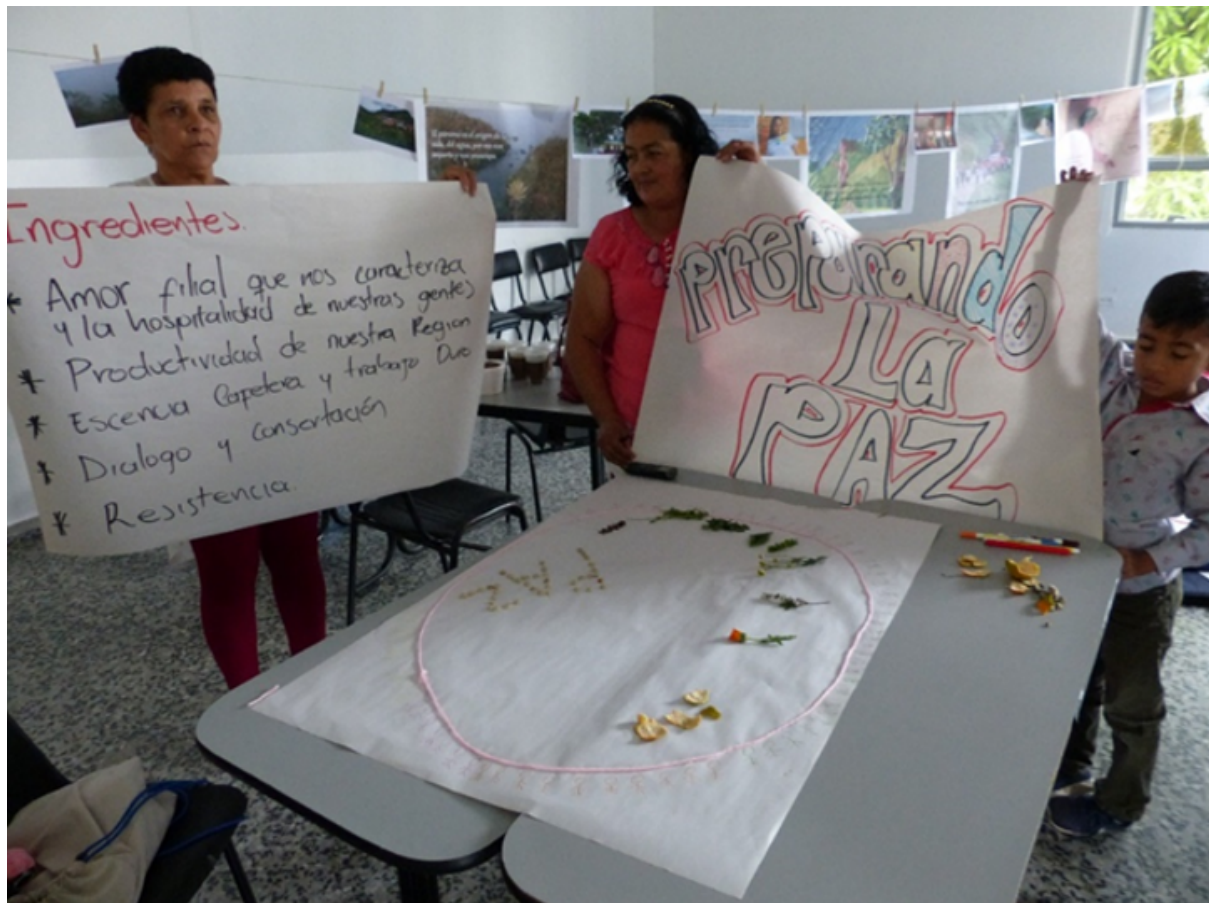


Photos 4 and 5: Members of the Chaparral Women’s Network for Peace in the workshop on narrating and writing their “institutional memory”. (Photos by Mauro Cardona)

Discussion workshops between organisations:

Classrooms of thought: “Thinking and feeling the territory”, “Education for integrating peace” and “New citizenships”: These workshops were held as a preamble to General Workshop 2. The purpose was twofold, on the one hand, to reflect on the issues that had arisen in the fieldwork and, on the other, to prepare a presentation to share with the teachers. It was a proposal relating to reflection, revolution, and kinesics, influenced by the different senses. Different feelings came together, and organisations were then able to provide a collective sample of the worldviews of their resistance. Using discussion and reflection, they were able to address not only that which is self-evident, but also the implied symbolism and even that which goes unsaid. The co-researchers made collective and individual murals, made exhibitions, recorded themselves on video, designed workshops to be held in schools, etc. (See Photo 6).

Photo 6: Members of Asumeht during the “Thinking and Feeling Peace” workshop.
(Photo by Iokiñe Rodríguez)



Peace visions workshop: This workshop sought to bring attention to the need to visualise collective territory as a space for building diverse and interconnected peace whilst also allowing communal reflection where organisations can review their own work. The different organisations were at the centre of a day of intense reflection and creativity where they analysed different peacebuilding activities connected to the places where they live and work.

Transformative Power workshop: In this workshop, the eight organisations from southern Tolima discussed the dominant transformative powers that are present in the territory and impacting peacebuilding efforts within communities. The meeting was governed by the idea that, as organisations, they had the means and power to bring about change. This is a communal force that talks of concepts beyond simple resistance; it talks of communal imagination, experiences, and hopes for southern

Tolima. Tools such as human statues and theatre of the Oppressed were used on the day as a means to reflect on the concepts of war and peace and the different power dynamics that the organisations have found themselves in both during the armed conflict and since the signing of the peace agreement (see photos 7 and 8).



Photo 7: Performing Theatre of the Oppressed to discuss different types of power in war and peace (Photo by Iokiñe Rodríguez)



Photo 8: Presenting the results of group work on the different transformative powers of organisations in southern Tolima (Photo by Iokiñe Rodríguez)

A series of virtual conversations "Let's Share Dreams and Peace": this space for conversation was structured into five sessions: (1) "Peace and the Environment", (2) "Peace and Women", (3) "Peace and Coffee", (4) "Peace and Culture" and (5) "Peace and Research". Due to the pandemic, face to face meetings were limited. These virtual conversations (see photo 9) allowed the entire research team to explore what they had learnt during the research process. Depending on the session, different organisations shared their experiences with territorial peacebuilding and the knowledge derived from the research process.



Photo 9: Session 1: "Peace and the Environment", with the participation of Jeferson Rodríguez (Fupapt), Julieth, Katerine Escobar (Herrera Juvenil) Nohora Barros (University of Ibagué) and Teresa Armijos (University of East Anglia). (Photo by Iokiñe Rodríguez)

Workshops between organisations and teachers:

The general workshops between teachers and organisations were designed to introduce the research processes that were carried out locally and to generate dialogues of knowledge between organisations, teachers, and the coordinating research team. In total, three two-day general workshops were held with all the

project co-researchers. The topics were as follows: a) Researching Conflict and Peace, b) the Territory We Experience and c) Building Sustainable Peace from the Territory. In the three workshops, museum exhibitions and various reflective dynamics were used to promote the discussion of knowledge between teachers and organisations about their life experiences with armed conflict and peacebuilding.

At the end of the project, and as a result of the last general workshop, there were seven proposals that summarised the vision that the school teams and organisations had about strategies for sustainable peacebuilding in their territories. (See Box 1).

Project against violence towards girls and boys. Chaparral, Manuel Murillo Toro School and the Chaparral Women's Network for Peace
 Valuable women: transforming lives. La Risalda, Chaparral, La Risalda School, Aprovocal and Asocalarama.
 Cultural evening: the fabric of thought. Rioblanco, Francisco Julián Olaya School, San Rafael School, Asomeht and Herrera Juvenil.
 Weaving and cooking like grandma. Rioblanco, Francisco Julián Olaya School, San Rafael School, Asomeht y Herrera Juvenil.
 Planadas municipality: my birthplace, my entire heart. Planadas, Santo Domingo Savio School and Fupapt.
 Peace culture training from the perspective of producing coffee, art, and play. Ataco, Santiago Pérez School and Asproicol.
 Building educational environments. Ataco, Martin Pomala School and Ascafesagrado.

Box 1: Proposals prepared by teachers and organisations of the Municipalities of Ataco, Chaparral, Planadas and Rioblanco for joint peacebuilding efforts.

3.2. *Giving visibility to local perspectives of territorial peace*

Since the beginning of the research, a commitment was made to the organisations to generate outputs that will help raise awareness of the different peacebuilding processes locally generated, as well as their visions for peace and the desired future for southern Tolima. These outputs were:

Talking maps: Talking maps are methodological instruments that allow the organisation and communication of information from the social and communal environment, through the diagramming of past, present, and future scenarios on territorial maps. Using photographs and video cameras, the community leaders of



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Asomeht and Herrera Juvenil (*in the municipality of Rioblanco*), Asproicol y Ascafesgrado (*in the municipality of Ataco*) and Ascoalarama and Aprovocal (*in the municipality of Chaparral*) collected information about the historical and cultural heritage of their territories and their visions of the future, which were systemised into interactive digital maps that are publicly available for use in schools or by the organisations themselves.

Co-authored books: Although creative writing has been incorporated as a recognised research method in different fields for over a decade, including research into peace (Harper, 2008; Vass et al, 2008; Clark, 2019), collaborative creative writing is still in its infancy.

This project is innovative in its use of collaborative creative writing as a method of action research. As part of the project, four collaborative books that cover the different aspects of the investigation process are being produced, with the aim of revitalising local knowledge and identity, and strengthening the sense of belonging in southern Tolima.

- *Construyendo paz desde el Sur del Tolima (Peacebuilding from southern Tolima)*, created with children, teachers and all of the organisations
- *La Paz con manos y rostro de mujer (Peace with the hands and face of women)*, made by la Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz.
- *La fuerza comunitaria y la construcción de paz (Community strength and peacebuilding)* Comprised of two booklets, one made by Asproicol and Ascafesgrado (*municipality of Ataco*) and the other Asocalarama and Aprovocal (*municipality of Risalda*).

A typical dress: The “School, Territory and Post-Conflict” project was also innovative in incorporating artistic research methodologies that were proposed by the communities themselves. The reenactment of community history through the process of weaving and the reconstruction of a typical dress was a proposal used by Herrera Juvenil and Asomeht, from Herrera, Rioblanco. (See photos 10, 11 and 12)



Photos 10, 11 and 12: Members of Asometh show the prototype of the dress to the co-researchers of the project and a representative from MinCiencias (the Colombian Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation) during the museum



Participatory videos: Participatory videos are part of a new global trend in action research (Shaw 2012, White 2003), as part of investigative approaches that look to promote social change. Peacebuilding is one of these approaches (Rodríguez and Inturias 2016; Bau, 2014). Participatory videos are known for their ability to stimulate local reflection and communication as part of a more extensive

investigative effort, in a similar way to other research methods that use art such as “The Theatre of the Oppressed” (Boal, 1993). They are created entirely by members of the community through a process that includes learning by doing, participatory analysis (through the use of a variety of participative evaluative tools to help create the story), creating a storyline and filming, screening and editing. In our project, we are using participatory videos to give a platform to local leaders to speak on the two main research topics, but also to encourage intercultural exchange, intergroup dialogues, and coexistence for peacebuilding during the research process and beyond. Different groups were formed by each organisation to capture a story, demonstrating their experiences and perspectives on peacebuilding. We have produced a total of three participatory videos:

- Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la paz (Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace): “¡Tejiendo lazos... tejiendo futuro! Memoria de la Red de Mujeres Chaparralunas por la Paz” (“Weaving ties... Weaving the future! Memory of the Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace”)
- Asomeht-Herrera Juvenil: “Bordando nuestra memoria. Herrerunos constructores de paz” (“Embroidering our memory. Herrerunos, builders of peace”)
- Fupapt: “La paz desde una perspectiva ambiental. El trabajo de Fupapt en Planadas, Tolima” (“Peace from an environmental perspective. The work of Fupapt in Planadas, Tolima”)

Below, we present some of the preliminary results that have thus far shaped these methods of research for the strengthening of both territorial and local peace.

4. Contributions of Transformative Action Research: learning along the way

The project has been a space for learning, and this is the value I see in it: an opportunity where it is not only the territories and people who have to turn to academia, but also you, the academics and persons working within these spaces, who can come and reach out to the territories to access to these collaborative ways of learning where we learn by doing. I also find creating these new forms of learning very interesting.

These are the words of one of our community co-researchers and director of Fupapt, Jeferson Rodríguez. This quote is from one of our virtual discussions “*Compartamos Sueños y Paces*” (“Let’s Share Dreams and Peace”), which were designed to reflect on and discuss the organisations’ peacebuilding processes, and the contribution of the “School, Territory and Post-Conflict” Project, to these processes. These comments effectively capture the essence of the project as an investigation based on the community researchers’ own experiences. Likewise, the comments also express the value of the investigation as a mutual learning process, where people learn by doing together. They also reflect the value of the Transformative Action Research process in creating change whilst it is ongoing as opposed to waiting for the results to be published to generate change. In addition, the mutual openness in terms of emotions of the academics and the organisations involved in the research process, has been an intrinsic part of the co-construction of the knowledge process. All of this is part of the ethical, political, thinking and feeling, solidarity and self-care, committed, intercultural and playful-aesthetic qualities of the project.

More specifically and based on comments made by the community co-researchers throughout the project, the outputs generated, and conversations that were had on social media and throughout the webinars, we can affirm that the reflective learning spaces created by the research have made an important contribution thus far. This is apparent in two senses: a) in the resignification of the peacebuilding process and b) in the strengthening of the peacebuilding processes implemented by the organisations.

a) Resignifying peacebuilding

From listeners to agents of change in the post-conflict period

A first dimension in which we see a significant resignification process within the project is through the emergence of agency of change as part of the new social and political climate that facilitated the peace agreement. Given that the protagonists of the peace agreement were the State and FARC, and that the peacebuilding policy was generated by the State, in the beginning there was a strong feeling amongst the communities that peace was being built from the outside. However, this opinion began to change when those communities took notice of the different ways in which

the organisations had brought peace to territories amid conflict, as expressed in the following testimony:

In the Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace, we accomplished these fifteen years of survival and of resisting in the territory without leaving it. We lived many years with a low profile, while we were training ourselves, enrolling in primary and secondary studies. Now, as professionals, we participate in public policies related to the role of women, prevention of violence against women and we occupy public spaces of participation. It is a story of ups and downs, and peacebuilding amidst violence (Dagmar Lucía Hernández, extract from the participatory video from the Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace, “School, Territory and Post-conflict Project”).

In some cases, community involvement only began to be valued as part of a local peacebuilding agenda because of the reflective processes incited by the project:

I never imagined that by making an organisation to cultivate coffee I was building peace (Cristina Noguera, Ascafesagrado. Comment from the General Workshop 2, July 2020).

Interestingly, this is a learning experience also expressed by the teachers that also participated as co-researchers, who became familiar with the initiatives developed by the organisations and reflected on their own efforts of peacebuilding in the educational environments.

We always thought that peace policies came from outside and that they were like miraculous recipes for all our community to change and work to perfection. In other words, something coming from outside to fix something that they don’t even know. The fixing has to start at home and must emerge from ourselves. Education institutions are in a transformation process considering its social, economic and natural context. They are generating practices and a safe environment for children, youth and adolescents to develop their life projects inside the territory. They help rebuild the social fabric to avoid armed conflict from repeating by sharing how armed conflict was born, exercised and finalised as a life learning to transform us as active subjects of peace (Kip Wilson, teacher at the Planadas municipality,



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Educational Institution Santo Domingo de Planas, campus El Silencio. Comment from the General Workshop 3, July 2020).

This new definition does not negate the importance of the peace agreement, nor the role of the state and other parties in the construction of new institutionalality, but rather implies its value as an opportunity to enhance and strengthen the processes and dreams that already existed latently or silently in the communities themselves:

Peace is a challenge because it is built daily. Peace treaties are very different. Those peace agreements have given us the opportunity of greater participation, have given us the possibility of building collectively, of associating ourselves and we see things that we lack, but we have the optimism that we can do it, that the great change starts from us. We build peace from within us. For example, we see the Territorially Focused Development Programmes (TFDP). Those TFDPs emerge from the political will of each government at the time, but within our territories we are building, we are forming, we are agents of change, because we are the ones being called to generate this change from our own territory. Throughout this peace agreement, we have been able to start transforming ourselves, to abandon this role of housewives and become leaders who strengthen our organisational processes (Martha Cardona, Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).

An interesting finding is that the increased sense of local agency of change has incited an appropriation of post-conflict, not so much as a state project, but a community project:

For me, post-conflict is made by each one of us, not a government. If you consider Colombia’s history, no government has worried about our right to live in peace. You don’t know how graceful it is to live in post-conflict and have the hope that some day there will be a perfect peace. I have an eight-year-old son and a six-month-old baby and it gives me great joy that they won’t live what I lived: distress, fear and terror, anguish, my biggest dream being frustrated. The worst thing is that I normalised war to the degree that I became incredulous of peace. The government is not helping us at all, but we now know what it is to live and have peace in our territory and we won’t let them take away that which



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we have dreamt of (Alixé Ulcúe, Asomeht. Facebook conversation, October 21st, 2019).

A greater recognition of local agency in the peacebuilding process logically brings a new meaning to peace itself, with a focus on the construction of a resilient social fabric, new values and a new vision of the future where young people have a place within their own territory and are not marginalised, as has been the norm with armed conflict, characterised by its centrifugal force of expulsion towards younger generations:

Peace is the fabric that is made day by day, and not necessarily like an agreement between the State and an armed group. It is built in parallel with the change of values and meanings (Alixé Ulcúe, Asomeht. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).

Peace has brought the possibility for us to express ourselves without fear in any field. Peace has also brought for us young people, a belonging to the territory that we didn’t have before due to the fear through our parents, that they would suddenly send us to study elsewhere, or fear from ourselves, as it was complex to stay in the territory due to the same thing. All of this has brought a change in the stigmatisation of our town, which has generated new visions of our territory, not only for us but also for other people who want to learn from it and who used to have a negative concept of it (Julieth, Katerine Escobar, Herrera Youth Group. Webinar 1 extract: “Natural environment and Peace”).

Resignifying the identity of los Tolimenses:

A second dimension where we have seen significantly resignifications as a result of the research project is related to the identity of the co-researchers. This resulted from diverse processes developed during the research for cultural rejuvenation and recovery, fostering reconnection to the territory, all of which had been silenced by the war.

This project has allowed us to recover what war took away from us, to rescue what is ours, our past and identity were erased with war, rescuing our own

knowledges, medicinal plants, our history (Alixé Ulcúe, Asomeht, Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).

For me, this research process has been beautiful because at the personal level, it has allowed me to realise things about my community that I was not aware of. For example, people who used to be important leaders, who contributed great things to our wellbeing and that I did not know of. Learn of the places that are important for ecology, for the community’s wellbeing, in general and in relation to the natural environment, learn of the histories of impact made by important people that I have not heard of. I talked to them, but I didn’t have in-depth knowledge of what they experienced throughout their life. Each of the things that we did in relation to cartography, the drawings, the trainings, the dialogues when sharing these experiences in those encounters that are thoroughly needed. It was amazing to experience this (Héctor Enover Yate, Asocalarama, Webinar 3 extract: “Coffee and Peace”).

Perhaps, however, the most valuable part of the research process, in terms of resignification of identity, was the opportunity to develop cultural revitalization agendas among the youth in accordance with the interests of the organisations themselves. Thus, whilst some organisations preferred to revisit their own identity and past experiences through more academic methods such as social cartography and talking maps, other organisations such as Asomeht and Herrera Juvenil did this through the reconstruction of a typical dress (see Photo 13). This process of reconstructing the identity and the past of *los Herrerunos* involved embroidery by the women of Asomeht, as well as an intergenerational dialogue between the youngest and oldest members of the Herrera Juvenil association:

Through the dress we are remembering what happened and what currently exists in the territory. Each drawing for us tells a story. For example, people who did not know of the *arrieros* and how it was that we came to be here. There are other stories like the “tree of life” and the “tree of the heron”, which makes reference to the hospitality of the people of Herrera. We also have stories of displacement and of our return and about what peace means for us. The typical dress as a peace symbol also allows us to share with children that there are other ways to use their free time, for example, a

dance, creating art, painting, and knitting. This makes our young people fall in love with our environment, our natural environment. As long as our young people are connected with the idea of protecting the environment, that makes peace (Alixé Ulcúe, Asomeht. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).



Photo 13: Final version of the Herrera dress (see photos 10, 11, and 12 for a preliminary version of the dress)

The project also opened the possibility for youth organisations to rethink and resignify themselves in accordance with the objectives pursued by emerging organisations, with a focus on new agendas and priority themes for peacebuilding, such as environmental issues:

With this research project, we started to talk about Alternative Youth and of Environmental Peace. These perspectives offer us the possibility of think of ourselves from within, but also to have a vision from outside the organisation. When we all see everyone, and not only Fupapt’s members, but other organisations in the municipality that are also doing important work. It is not just us anymore. There are many other organisations who are producing and who also start to develop an environmental sense. All of this generates an opportunity to build peace. Not just peace within people’s

harmony, the inexistence of armed conflict, but environmental peace which we see as those actions that we do, living in the territory and that don't generate negative impact, such as ecological tourism and clean agricultural production. This is how these two concepts of Alternative Youth and of Environmental Peace emerge from Planadas. (Jeferson Rodríguez, Webinar 1 extract: “Natural Environment and Peace”).

Resignifying the territory

A third dimension of resignification significantly impacted by the project, and derived from the previous two, is the resignification of the territory.

When my participation in this marvellous project started, I decided to focus my life on how to build the territory. The most splendid thing of how we start to build peace is from that foundation, from the sense of belonging that each one of us carries within and how we can affirm our descendants through time so that sense of belonging can become even more wonderful. May people fight more every day for the territory. True peace exists where we can emerge and have opportunities within our territories. (Héctor Enover, Asocalarama, Webinar 3 extract: “Coffee and Peace”).

When envisaging a different future, the strengthening of a sense of belonging as well as reconnecting with the territory have provided important takeaways.

The project has been a paramount opportunity because it has brought the possibility to envision ourselves. First, by identifying every one of the things we have, and that we have acquired one way or the other in this associativity process: the way in which we have transformed ourselves and the ways in which these processes where we have been beneficiaries have improved us. We are transforming the whole coffee culture process and now we are focusing more on that and on how to rebuild and see what went wrong and what went well, and how to amend certain things so that we don't make the same mistakes. (Héctor Enover Yate, Asocalarama. Webinar 3 extract: “Coffee and Peace”).



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As a result, the resignification of not only the past, but also of the possible future of southern Tolima, has begun, especially for younger generations.

The most important message that I have for young people is that a life project can start anywhere, and specially from our territories, and not only in the cities as sometimes we are made to believe (Héctor Enover Yate, Asocalarama. Webinar 3 extract: “Coffee and Peace”).

During this process of territorial resignification, environmental issues came up as a common agenda for the future of each of the organisations, not exclusively for those who include an environmental agenda in their guiding principles, like Fupapt.

The environmental topic has not been foreign to conflict. If we analyse the origins of conflict and we add the existing non-conformity, there was also an environmental matter with the campesinado theme. If we are going to create a peace agenda, the natural environment has to go hand in hand. It was in the rurality where there has been more suffering and where armed conflict had and has numerous consequences. Now that there are development plans, let's take advantage of all these themes in this context to achieve these environmental initiatives within the public agenda and in the peacebuilding agenda. This is something that we would not be able to even contemplate leaving to the side or to minimise the natural environment's action within peacebuilding. Peace is like a synonym of natural environment. Colombia is still the second most megadiverse country in the world and in the south with our hydric wealth, these are things that we cannot untie from. (Jeferson Rodríguez, Fupapt. Webinar 1 extract: “Natural Environment and Peace”).

In particular, water and the importance of protecting southern Tolima's water sources emerged as a central theme within the agenda for territorial peacebuilding in the future.

b) Strengthening of peacebuilding processes

Upon reflection of the findings, the community researchers indicate that in addition to the resignification processes that have taken place, the research has made an



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important contribution to the consolidation of their peacebuilding processes in various ways.

In the four municipalities, we feel that we are linked together through the natural environment, we are connected by the Saldaña river, we are tied by the will of defending our rights to water... rights that we feel are uniting, and that can take us to knit a union amongst everyone to build peace. (Julieth Katherine Escobar, Herrera Youth Group. Comment from the General Workshop 2, July 2019).

We have decided that we are going to launch a campaign to reject plastic, because all of it is going to the hydric basins and our water sources are being damaged. As a territory, we have to be conscious that without water we couldn't live anywhere because water is life. We have to teach our children that water is life. Let's not harm the hydric basins and subterranean water because we dispose of a lot of paper and plastic into the hydric sources. I would say that to protect our territories we should take care firstly of our water sources. (Cristina Mosquera, Ascafesagrado. Webinar 3 extract: “Coffee and Peace”).

Strengthening human capabilities

The research offered a new space for reflective learning, self-evaluation and the systematisation of the experiences and trajectories of the organisations. This, in addition to its importance for the reconstruction of the historical memory of the organisations, has been of great value in allowing to flourish the human capabilities of the organisation's members, which had previously remained latent due to the armed conflict,

What we have discovered has greatly surprised us, not only because we come from this conflict, from fear, from threats. When we analyse it, we surprise ourselves with what we have been capable to do as women and advise a group of young people. Until now, we have not had a look at our trajectory's past and what we have been able to make. As women, we feared machismo culture, which was heightened by armed conflict. I am really surprised about what we managed to do. I have also been surprised of the capacity that the project's researchers and

teachers have to awake all those capacities in us. They have set goals without telling us, without intending to. We have discovered these goals and that has awakened us and we would love to continue researching to continue looking at all the things we have done and accomplished. Why? Because once we started all these tasks and work that we have been doing, it feels as if we cannot stop. People now look for us as leaders and ask for advice. We are committed to our people and our territory that will not let us stop the work we have started and with the knowledge that we have as part of the project... The project has strengthened us with the learnings and experiences that we have lived. With your training, advice and companionship, you have given us strength to follow on. (María Esilda Ramírez, Asomeht. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).

The project has been a learning experience that has helped us compile our experience in these 16 years of work in the territory. Sometimes we do things, and we do not reflect on our past or how we managed to get to where we are now. It is through this project that we have managed to achieve that. From the Women’s Network, we have rebuilt our past and remember the recognition of many women that have been part of this organisation. (Martha Cardona, Chaparraluna’s Women Network for Peace. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).

Strengthening the existing processes

Another important takeaway has been the value of the situated research in strengthening the ongoing processes of the organisations.

The research process was something completely new to us. It was very satisfying to feel that we can participate in a research project and not to have someone analysing us and making conclusions. Instead, that we could contribute to this research for everyone to build and comprehend our territory, the real problematics we have and where we want to advance. That research process has helped us generate an understanding of ourselves by using the methodological tools that universities have provided. In that way, we can be able to use that awareness as a tool that pursues us to start acting within our organisations. I believe that this research process will contribute to our future as we will be able to take out very relevant conclusions. In



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this way, we can take these as drivers to actions regarding where our organisations are positioned within the territory, what type of incidence we should develop and where should we start. We now have something consolidated; our organisations. I believe this project is something that have hugely added to us as people and as an organisation. (Jeferson Rodríguez, Fupapt. Webinar 5 extract: “Research and Peace”).

Strengthening of the sense of dignity

Additionally, we see that support for dedicated research which makes a helpful and relevant contribution to organisations is not only important for strengthening of the organisations’ own processes, but also for the strengthening of a sense of dignity among their members:

What is the result of this type of research? That we are the protagonists. For the first time we can see what is developed. For example, in the participatory videos and maps, we tell [the story]. (Jeferson Rodríguez, Fupapt. Webinar 5 extract: “Research and Peace”).

Strengthening ties and networks with other organisations

The organisations also mention the important contribution of the research in helping to strengthen the local social fabric for peacebuilding through all the processes of dialogue and exchange developed between them and the teacher members of the project.

The project has also helped us to interact with other organisations. We managed to learn about the work they develop within their territory. It has also helped us learn about their fights and everything they have achieved through their collective work. It has been a formidable experience. We are thankful to this project, “School, Territory and Post-conflict”, that allowed us to share, learn and strengthen that leadership and that teamwork. We also thank all the colleagues from other organisations who have shared their life stories which help us grow. This has been a process of personal and collective growth. (Martha Cardona, Chaparralunas’ Women Network for Peace. Webinar 2 extract: “Woman and Peace”).



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5. Final reflections

The results of the “School, Territory and Post-Conflict” project thus far indicate that Transformative Action Research can indeed play an important role in enhancing power of the communities in favour of territorial and situated peacebuilding. This is demonstrated in the post-conflict, peace, identities and territories resignification processes described above. These processes were created by the co-researchers as they investigated how peace had been built amid the conflict. It is also evident in the processes of learning, the construction of dialogues of knowledge, the strengthening of dignity and self-esteem, and the construction of social fabrics that were developed during the research. However, the long-term impact that the project can have for the consolidation of territorial peace will only become apparent once the organisations bring the project’s teachings and outputs into dialogues fostered within state institutions and civil society. This will in turn allow the formation and consolidation of the organisation’s agendas for local peacebuilding.

Lasting peace in southern Tolima, like in most of Colombia, continues to be an ongoing process that depends not only on the efforts of community organisations, but on the state’s own political, economic, and social agenda, as well as the future and present reconfiguration of the powers of the armed groups that exist in the country.

Despite the significant progress made since 2016 in the consolidation of a peace agenda, there are still significant challenges ahead. This is evident in an increase in common crime and drug consumption among younger generations in South Tolima, and a fear of new development projects that are being planned without due consultation with communities. In this context, consolidating a counter-narrative of peace that helps to bring visibility to and strengthen the transformative power of community organisations will continue to be imperative in ensuring lasting peace.

Beyond the contributions to peacebuilding, the project has shown that transformative-action research can also have important contribution in terms of knowledge production. Transdisciplinary and intercultural research when grounded at the local level, as in the case of the “School, Territory and Post-Conflict” project, allows for novel knowledge to flourish through endogenous research process and



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self-reflection, otherwise ignored or limited in traditional research approached. For new area studies, this serves as an example of how transdisciplinarity can help strengthen a local sense of place even in contexts of serve and prolonged violence.

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