

Challenges and opportunities of peacebuilding in Colombia

Desafíos y oportunidades de la construcción de la paz en Colombia

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Abstract

This article explores the key elements for achieving lasting peace in Colombia, emphasizing the importance of addressing social inequalities and factors affecting vulnerable communities and victims of armed conflict. Through a literature review across databases, peacebuilding practices are identified, such as strengthening historical memory and implementing restorative justice. The article also considers approaches like “story listening,” which promotes healing and strengthens affected communities. Local initiatives, such as community sports, serve as tools to foster resilience and inclusion in areas with limited state presence. Finally, the analysis considers how the inclusion of ex-combatants and a balanced approach to justice (combining reconciliation with accountability) can help build a safer and fairer environment. Overall, these approaches suggest that a lasting peace depends on inclusive social reconstruction, which addresses both the emotional well-being of victims and the strengthening of community foundations in the post-conflict context.

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Keywords

Armed conflict; Peace process; Social inclusion; Historical memory; Restorative justice; Conciliation; Peacebuilding; Political divisions; Community reconciliation; Economic productivity; Lasting peace.

Resumen

Este artículo explora los elementos claves para alcanzar una paz duradera en Colombia, teniendo en cuenta la importancia de abordar las desigualdades sociales y todo aquello que afecte a las comunidades vulnerables y víctimas del conflicto armado. A través de una revisión de literatura en bases de datos, se identifican las prácticas para la construcción de paz, como el fortalecimiento de la memoria histórica y el uso de la justicia restaurativa. Asimismo, el artículo tiene en cuenta enfoques como el “story listening”, que promueve la sanación y el fortalecimiento de las comunidades afectadas. Iniciativas locales como el deporte comunitario se prestan como herramienta para fomentar la resiliencia e inclusión en áreas con baja presencia del estado. Por último, se analiza cómo la inclusión de excombatientes y una justicia equilibrada tanto con una reconciliación como con un castigo pueden ayudar a construir un entorno más seguro y justo. En términos generales, dichos enfoques indican que una paz duradera depende de una reconstrucción social inclusiva, que considere tanto el bienestar emocional de las víctimas como el fortalecimiento de las bases comunitarias en el contexto postconflicto.

Palabras clave

Conflicto armado; Proceso de paz; Inclusión social; Memoria histórica; Justicia restaurativa; Conciliación; Construcción de paz; Divisiones políticas; Reconciliación comunitaria; Productividad económica; Paz duradera.



Introduction

Violent conflicts represent one of the greatest challenges to the well-being of societies, both locally and globally. These conflicts extend beyond the areas or individuals directly affected, transforming into broader social, economic, and cultural issues. For instance, in Colombia, there are 9,804,387 individuals recognized as victims and included in the Victim's Registry (Registro Único de Víctimas (RUV), 2017). These victims are classified across various categories, including gender, ethnicity, and disability. Regarding gender, approximately 49.97% are men and 50.2% are women. In terms of ethnic affiliation, 12.7% are Afro-Colombians and 4.1% are indigenous. Therefore, peacebuilding must be founded on the absence of violence, alongside a process that encompasses social justice, as well as cultural, economic, and social reconciliation and restoration.

This article makes a significant contribution to peace studies by addressing a gap in the literature: the identification of barriers that obstruct peace processes, such as political and economic interests and the influence of violent actors. For instance, Ríos Sierra (2023) provides a detailed analysis of various peace initiatives in Colombia, closely examining the obstacles that emerge during negotiations and the political and social factors that shaped the success or failure of each peace process. Moreover, the study highlights the roles played by political elites, armed groups, and sabotage actors in these dynamics.

The construction of the article identifies opportunities and tools that can strengthen the creation of peace agreements. It is also of significant importance, as it was developed through diverse perspectives and methodologies, such as the use of advanced databases (Scopus, Web of Science–WoS). Ultimately, an article of this nature helps raise awareness of more comprehensive peace approaches aimed at achieving meaningful change.

Methodology

This article was developed using a qualitative documentary review approach, following the guidelines of authors such as Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2020) most of whom emphasize that a systematic literature review allows for a critical and exhaustive analysis from validated academic sources. To search for information and prepare this article, databases were used to identify the most significant barriers to peacebuilding and the opportunities to overcome these obstacles. The initial databases used were Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). To identify the most relevant published articles on this topic, an exhaustive search was conducted using keywords, as shown in Table 1. Countries in which armed conflicts have occurred or are ongoing were also taken into account.

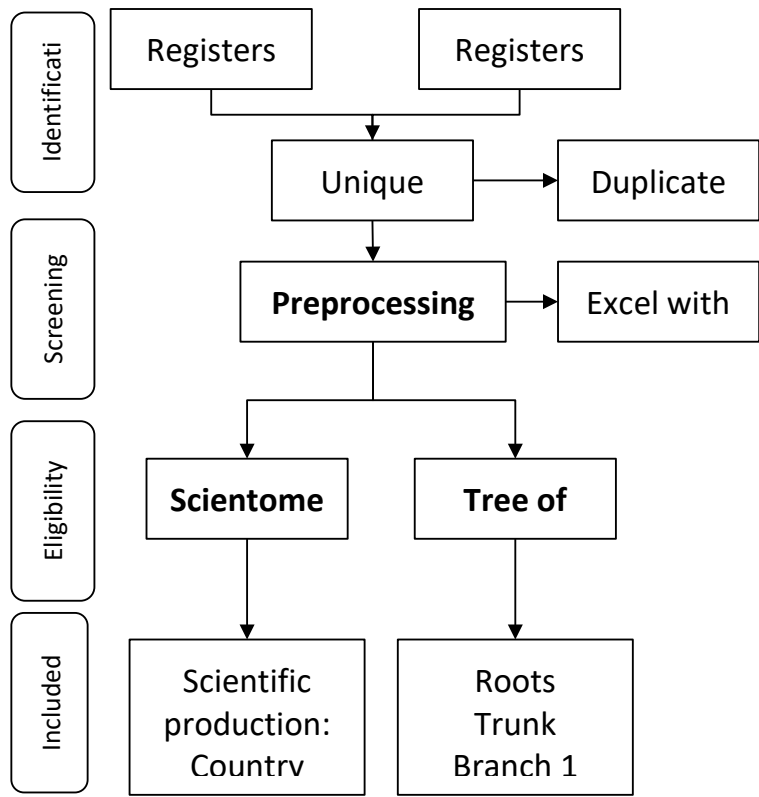


Table 1. Search parameters used in both databases

Parameter	Web of Science	Scopus
Range	2002-2024	
Date	October 30, 2024	
Document Type	Paper, book, article.	
Words	("conflict resolution" OR "peacebuilding" OR "peace construction" OR "peace processes" OR "transitional justice" OR "restorative justice" OR "community resilience" OR "violence prevention" OR "conflict transformation" OR "structural violence") AND ("peace" OR "conflict" OR "war" OR "violence" OR "olombia")	
Results	138	230
Total (Wos+Scopus)	304	

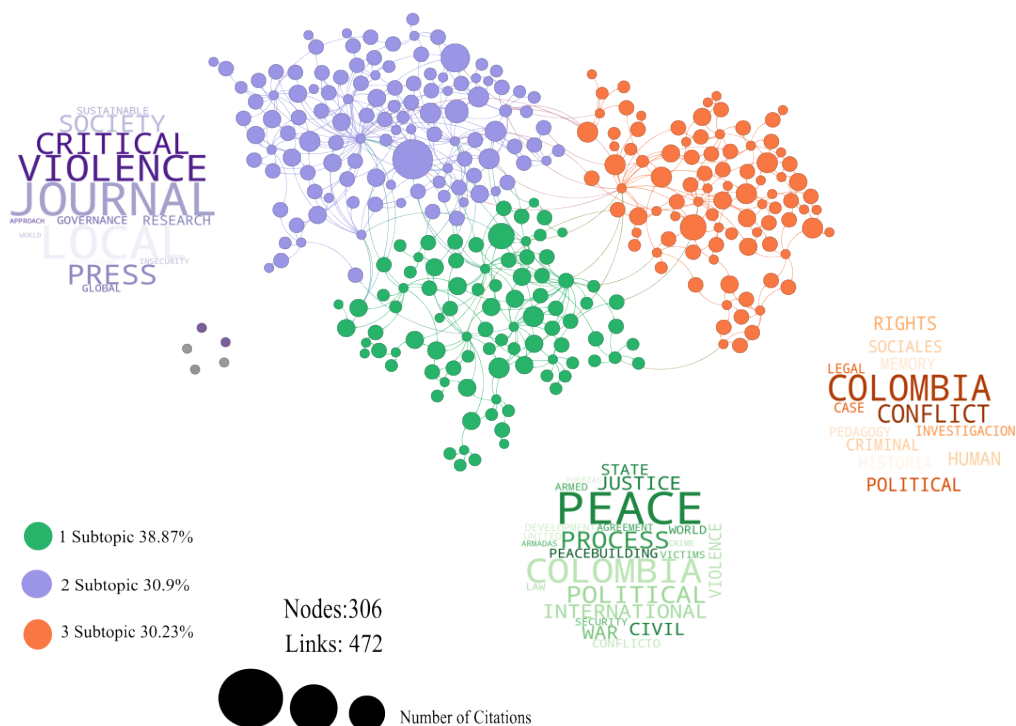
After obtaining the data, it was used to search the second database, which was ToS . This search generated a tree structure with a root, trunk, and branches. Each of these parts represents a different element: the root signifies the most cited articles, the trunk represents the articles that cite those in the root, and the branches correspond to other related sources. Based on the information from this tree structure, a detailed investigation was conducted into each component, focusing on the most prominent articles identified.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart



We also utilized Gephi, which allowed us to visualize the bibliographic networks of the articles obtained from the database. This provided both a visual and quantitative perspective on the state of research regarding peace processes in Colombia. Additionally, it facilitated the identification of collaborations and key approaches within the field.

Figure 2. Citation network on peacebuilding articles and the barriers that conflict creates



Results

Tree of Science

Roots

Galtung (1996) establishes a fundamental distinction between two types of violence: personal violence and structural violence. Personal violence refers to direct harm inflicted upon an individual, such as physical assaults, whereas structural violence pertains to systemic inequalities that impede the development of specific groups. Similarly, Collier (*Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, n.d.) suggests that achieving lasting peace requires not only the resolution of conflicts but also the promotion of economic and social growth.

Given that poverty and unemployment contribute to the resurgence and persistence of civil wars, as these conditions facilitate the recruitment of individuals into armed groups, Galtung (1996) highlights ideas, theories, and perspectives that underpin his views in peace studies. He further asserts that peace studies can be developed into a distinct discipline aimed at achieving peace. In his analysis, Galtung notes that the presence of conflict does not necessarily imply the absence of peace, as peace is lost when conflict escalates into violence.

Stedman (1997) argues that achieving peace after a war is extremely complex and risky. This is because groups emerge that oppose the creation of peace agreements, believing that peace goes against their interests, and they resort to violence to undermine the peace process. This situation puts leaders in a vulnerable position, weakening their ability to maintain peace. On the other hand, (Matanock & Garbiras-Díaz, 2018). Considering concessions: A survey experiment on the Colombian peace process. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 35(6), 637-655) conduct a study of the various partial efforts made to achieve peace in Colombia.

However, alongside this, one can perceive the ambivalence of political power influences aimed at hindering the progress of these processes, thereby seeking to maintain their control over economic and political power, as well as their privileges.

These attitudes and behaviors complicate the effective implementation of a peace process. On the other hand, (Maher & Thomson, 2018) analyze the central causes of violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups and how their actions can sabotage and obstruct the implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia. The article highlights that, despite the previous agreement signed for the periods between 2003-2006, new groups or dissidents have emerged, leading to an intensification of violence and an expansion of territorial control. This has resulted in forced displacements and has hindered the restitution of lands.

Lederach (*The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, n.d.) explores the importance of incorporating ethics into peacebuilding processes. He argues that ethics are essential in conflict resolution and peace promotion, as they expand the vision and creativity of a society capable of living in tranquility and peace. Similarly, Paris (Paris, 2014) analyzes the challenges and strategies involved after the cessation of civil conflict, asserting that lasting peace is not achieved merely through the signing of agreements to end the conflict. Instead, it must be an inclusive process in which various institutions contribute what is necessary to reach agreements and solutions that offer durable outcomes for all parties involved. Additionally, (Mancera, 2014) examines different cases of victims of the internal armed conflict, highlighting the causes and consequences of this affliction. The report calls for the reconstruction of historical memory, truth to heal wounds, justice for the victims, and comprehensive reparations for the resilient or surviving victims of the internal armed conflict. It also emphasizes the need for guarantees of non-repetition to prevent future occurrences of events that cause irreparable harm.

Trunk

Ríos & Cairo (2018) analyze the context of the peace agreement signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas, considering various perspectives and addressing both supporting and opposing viewpoints.

The national government envisions the strengthening of democracy by considering the participation of populations affected by the violence caused by the armed conflict. However, the opposition argues that including former combatants in the political sphere may undermine the legitimacy of the state. This division of opinions and analyses can significantly influence the success or failure of the implementation of the peace agreements in Colombia. For their part, (Maher & Thomson, 2018) investigate the central causes of violence perpetrated by illegal armed groups and how their actions can sabotage the implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia. Despite previous agreements (2003-2006), new groups or dissidents have emerged, intensifying violence and expanding territorial control, which has led to forced displacements and hindered land restitution efforts. This situation has restricted the political and social participation of former guerrilla members, who constantly feel unsafe. It also highlights that criminal gangs continue to fuel the conflict, jeopardizing peace both in the short and long term.

BRANCH 1: Inequalities, Memory, and Community Participation

Some studies focus their analysis on a qualitative study conducted in the Ciudad Bolívar area of Bogotá D.C., exploring adolescent pregnancy among populations affected by the armed conflict (Maher & Thomson, 2018; Wallis et al., 2024). The study examines how social inequalities influence poor decision-making, impacting their lives and leading to situations of suffering. Similarly, (Gillooly, 2023) investigates the inclusion of women in the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC (2012-2016), highlighting how women were marginalized in this process.

Both articles focus on the inequalities and marginalization of specific groups within the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, highlighting how these factors impact their well-being and participation in peacebuilding processes.

Estrada Rodríguez (2022) addresses the construction of historical memory through community-driven efforts, a process that strengthens the community by preserving its history and maintaining social cohesion, to foster lasting peace and enable future claims to their rights. Charles & Fowler-Watt (2022) explore “story listening” as an innovative methodology used with former combatant youth in peacebuilding processes. This approach allows young people to share their stories in an environment where they are heard, fostering group reflection. On the other hand, other studies conduct an analysis that uses community sports as a tool to promote unity and local governance in areas with limited government

presence (Charles & Fowler-Watt, 2022; Restrepo & Núñez, 2024). Through a qualitative analysis, the authors offer a series of recommendations for the government to support local initiatives in peacebuilding, to strengthen resilience and trust in post-conflict processes.

BRANCH 2: Collective Memory and Restorative Justice

Gomez (2019) argues that building collective memory is essential for the reconstruction of society and the promotion of effective reconciliation practices. This initiative, led by victims, seeks to contribute to ensuring that fundamental rights are not violated in the future while fostering peace, reconciliation, and justice. In this context, the implementation of restorative justice after the conflict becomes a crucial mechanism for achieving these goals.

Carpanelli (2017) asserts that flexible justice agreements have been implemented to promote reconciliation; however, justice still upholds punitive sanctions for crimes committed, within the framework of alternative justice principles. Similarly, Suarez (Suarez, 2022) analyzes the attribution of responsibilities for acts committed against victims of the armed conflict. Suarez highlights that the data used in this analysis were derived from testimonies provided by the victims themselves.

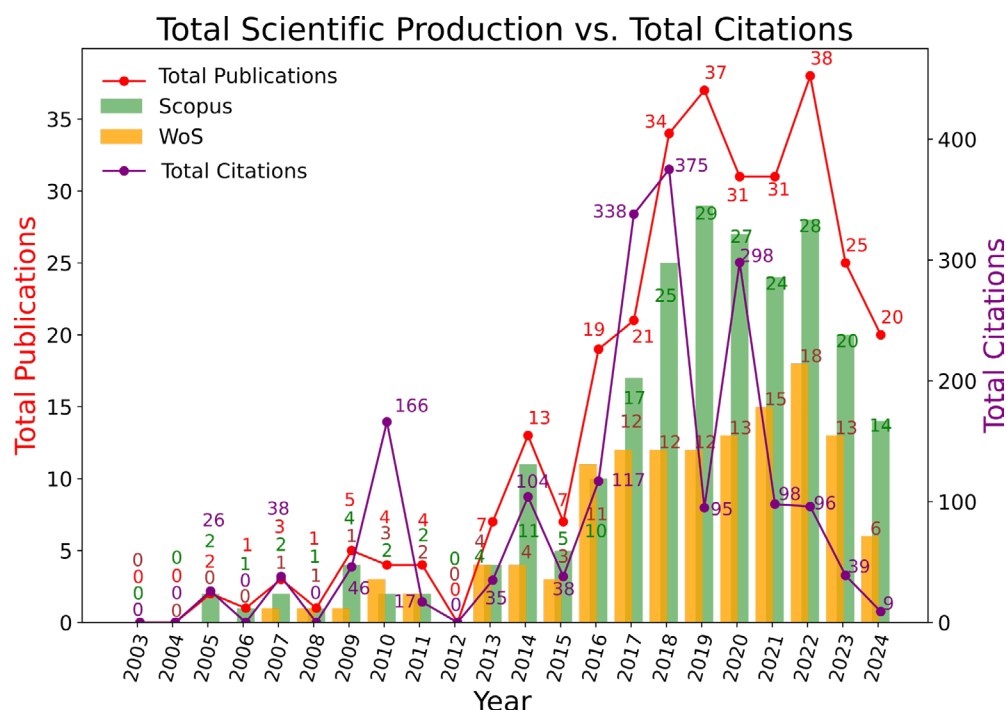
BRANCH 3: Productivity, Gender, and Political Divisions

Other examines the relationship between economic productivity and land restitution in the context of the armed conflict through the analysis of two comics (Suarez, 2022; Tutkal, 2022). The study cautions against blindly trusting narratives on these topics, as not all are clear or accurate in legitimizing peace processes. Similarly, (Parada, 2022) highlights that despite the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, political, economic, and social divisions have hindered significant progress, largely due to opposition-led disruptions. Furthermore, Pabón & Aguirre (2021) points out that although the agreement was signed in 2016, the lack of inclusion of gender and sexual diversity perspectives contributed to the failure of the peace plebiscite, underscoring the consequences of these omissions.

Scientometric Analysis

Figure 3 illustrates the scientific production of peacebuilding in Colombia from 2003 to 2024, including topics related to inclusion, reconciliation, and the reconstruction of Colombian memory. The figure accurately depicts academic output in WoS (orange bar) and Scopus (green bar). Additionally, it displays the total number of unique publications across WoS and Scopus (red line) and the total citations in both databases (purple line). Overall, the growth during this period was 11.41%.

Figure 3. Yearly comparison of total scientific production and citations in Scopus and WoS (2003-2024)



Period 1–Beginning (2005–2014) 23.12%

Scientific production during the period from 2005 to 2014 showed a growth of 23.12%. It was observed that the majority of the output was concentrated in the Scopus database, with a smaller proportion in Web of Science (WoS), due to the absence of publications in certain years, such as 2005 and 2006. Furthermore, a peak in citations was noted in 2010, which can be attributed to the publications of García (García-Godos & Lid, 2010), where the context of transitional justice and the mechanisms necessary for achieving lasting peace were discussed.

Period 2–Growth (2014–2019): 23.27%

This period was marked by an increase in scientific production, with a growth rate of 23.27% between 2014 and 2019. Peace negotiations began in 2012, but it was not until 2016 that the peace agreement was signed in Colombia, which is considered a key factor in the rise of both article citations and publications. The year 2018 saw the highest peak in citations (within the 2005-2024 period), with the article by Matanock & Garbiras-Díaz (2018) being the most cited, with over 40 citations. This article examines how the participation of former members of illegal armed groups can generate disagreements and reduce public support for peace processes.



Period 3–Stability (2019-2024) 13.09%

During this period, there was a 13.09% increase in scientific production, indicating a stable trend in productivity. Citations decreased in 2019 but showed a significant rise in 2020, creating a peak that, although not surpassing that of 2018, marked a noticeable difference. The article that most contributed to this peak was (Miklian & Bickel, 2018), which analyzes, through interviews and studies, how companies can contribute to peace processes and local development through various projects. The authors emphasize coffee as a peace-oriented project, specifically highlighting the “Footprints for Peace (FOP)” project by the National Federation of Coffee Growers. It is stated that the goal of this project was to improve living conditions in regions affected by conflict, which justifies the relevance given to it by the authors.

Regarding publications, these continued to grow steadily, with a notable output exceeding 20 in recent years, particularly in the Scopus database.

Country Analysis

The academic output of the countries allowed for the identification and analysis of how knowledge about conflict and peacebuilding is developed and distributed, what specific contributions each country makes, and how this can be improved to strengthen research. Table 2 presents three variables to analyze the academic productivity of each country. The first is measured by the number of articles published by a country. The second is the impact, calculated by the number of citations received by all articles from a country. The third measure is based on the quality of the Scimago quartiles. Considering the above, Colombia is the leading country in academic production on this topic, with 125 articles (42.23% of the total). Colombia also leads in the number of cited articles, with 517 citations (34.31% of the total).

Table 2. *Production and citation analysis.*

Country	Production		Citation		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
COLOMBIA	125	42.23%	517	34.31%	21	22	12	11
USUA	55	18.58%	371	24.62%	19	8	3	0
UNITED KINGDOM	30	10.14%	174	11.55%	12	6	3	0
SPAIN	29	9.8%	48	3.05%	1	6	3	1
GERMANY	11	3.72%	67	4.45%	4	1	0	0
BELGIUM	6	2.03%	12	0.8%	2	1	0	0
AUSTRALIA	4	1.35%	77	5.11%	0	1	0	0
ITALY	3	1.01%	0	0%	1	0	0	0
NORWAY	3	1.01%	106	7.03%	1	2	0	0
SOUTH AFRICA	3	1.01%	9	0.6%	0	1	2	0

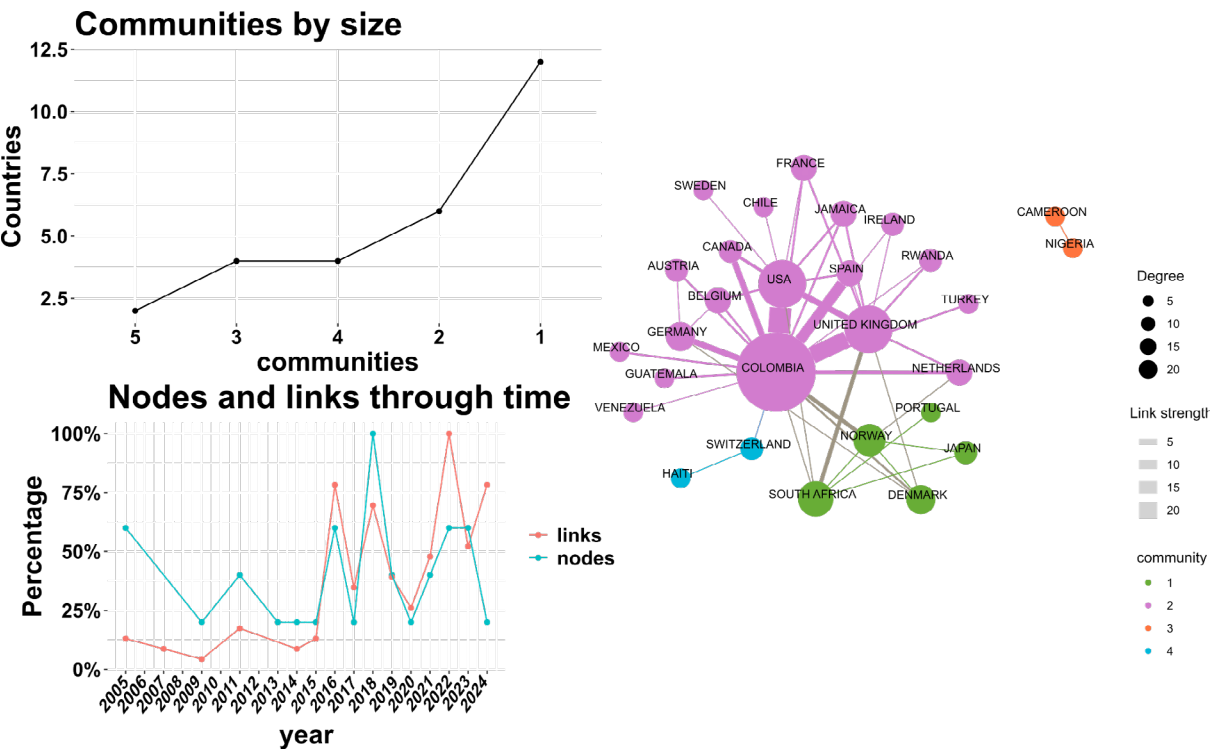
The table displays citations across journals, highlighting three key references. One of the most cited articles in Colombia is by Fairey et al. (2024), who, through the use of photovoice, identifies four ways to contribute to peace in general. First, it is essential to seek inner peace, focusing on internal healing. Second, the construction of territorial identity must be prioritized. Third, it is crucial to share the events with future generations through photographs, stories, and other elements. Finally, peace can be built through actions aimed at improving the surrounding environment and fostering lasting peace.

Regarding, *Colombian Youths' Reasoning About Retributive and Restorative Justice in the 2016 Peace Accord: Associations with Belief Systems of Trust* (Restrepo, 2019) in the USA, the study highlights the importance of considering the perspectives of young people on justice processes in peacebuilding, reparation, and potential solutions following a conflict. Similarly, from the United Kingdom, Charles and Fowler-Watt (2022) present the methodology they employed in their research, which they called "active listening." This approach was applied to survivors from the Nasa Indigenous community in Colombia, blending their cultural traditions through oral transmission of experiences with inner healing to facilitate their reintegration into their community.

The following figure (Figure 3) illustrates the collaboration between countries and the number of communities by size, represented through nodes and links over time.

There are four communities in Figure 3. The first (green) is led by South Africa and Norway, the second (sky magenta) by Colombia, the USA, and the United Kingdom, the third (orange) by Cameroon and Nigeria, and the fourth (blue) by Haiti and Switzerland. Some articles from Colombia have collaborated with the United Kingdom. For instance, an analysis of how the international norms of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) interact with national laws in Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). The study also compares the divergences and convergences between the two legal systems. On one hand, the divergent areas identify three different aspects where the JEP deviates from international norms. On the other hand, it examines how, in recent cases, the JEP has tended to adopt international standards (Arévalo-Ramírez & Martini, 2022).

Figure 3. Global collaboration network among countries in scientific research



Journal Analysis

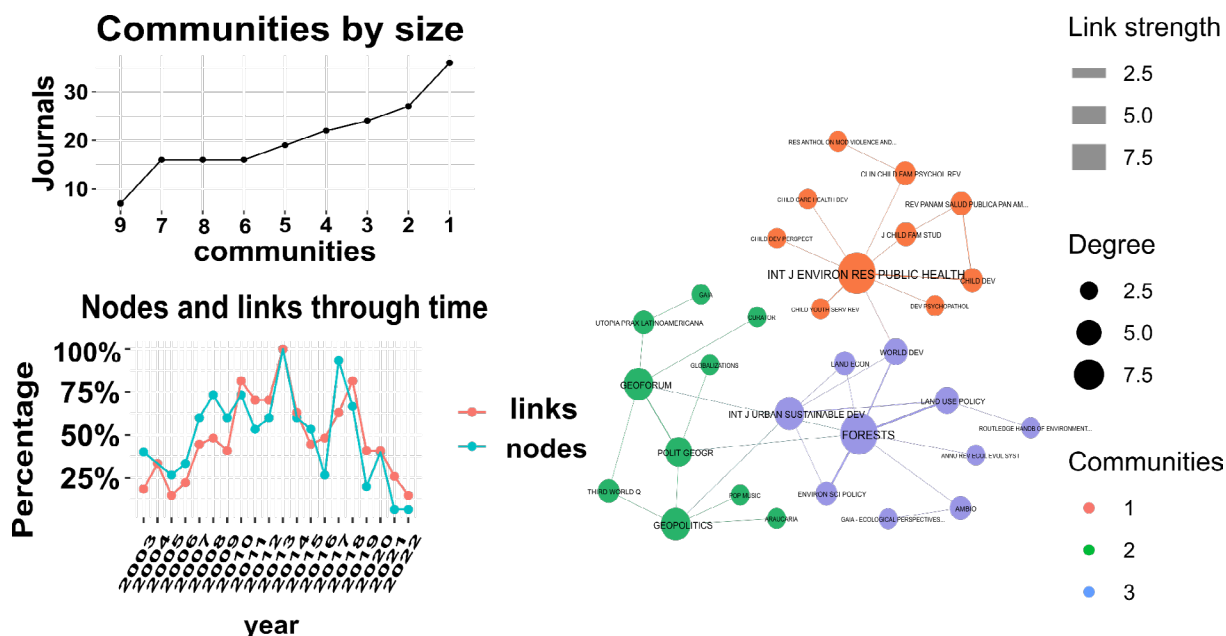
Table 3 presents the ten journals with the highest scientific production in peacebuilding and its barriers, along with the H-index and Scimago quartile. The journal with the most publications was Peacebuilding. The most cited article in this journal is that of Larkin and Rudolf (2024), which analyzes how to rebuild post-conflict cities after episodes of traumatic violence and forced displacement. The article also examines how violence affects the identity and sense of belonging of the residents, generating divided memories and less local support. Additionally, it proposes that the recovery of affected communities should balance the restoration of cultural heritage to revive traditions of coexistence with the recognition of their past.

Table 3. Top journals by scientific production about peacebuilding and its barriers with impact factor, H- index, and Scimago quartile distribution

Journal	WoS	Scopus	Impact Factor	H Index	Quantile
Juridicas Cuc	5	2	0.338	5	Q2
Peacebuilding	6	5	0.304	12	Q2
As War Ends: What Colombia Can Tell Us About The Sustainability Of	0	6	-	-	-
Análisis Político	0	5	0.236	10	Q1
Ciudad Paz-Ando	5	0'	-	-	-
Derecho Penal Y Criminología	4	0	-	-	-
Juridicas	0	4	0.126	5	Q4
Revista Cidob D'afers Internacionals	0	4	0.288	12	Q2
The Colombian Peace Agreement: A Multidisciplinary Assessment	0	4	-	-	-
Conflict Management And Peace Science	1	3	1.031	51	Q1

Figure 4 illustrates the citation network among journals, highlighting three main groups. Group number 1 (orange), led by *INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AND PUBLIC HEALTH*; group number 2 (green), consisting of *GEOFORUM*, *GEOPOLITICS*, and *POLIT GEOGR*; and finally, group number 3 (lilac), led by *FOREST*.

Figure 4. Citation network among journals highlighting collaborative communities





Autor Collaboration Network

Table 4 presents the ten most prominent researchers in the field of peacebuilding and its barriers. Among these authors, notable figures include K. Ambos, with three articles indexed in Scopus and a total of three publications. His most cited work is Ambos (2010), which has garnered 27 citations. This article focuses on the specific context of Colombia to evaluate how transitional justice mechanisms, such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), align with international accountability standards.

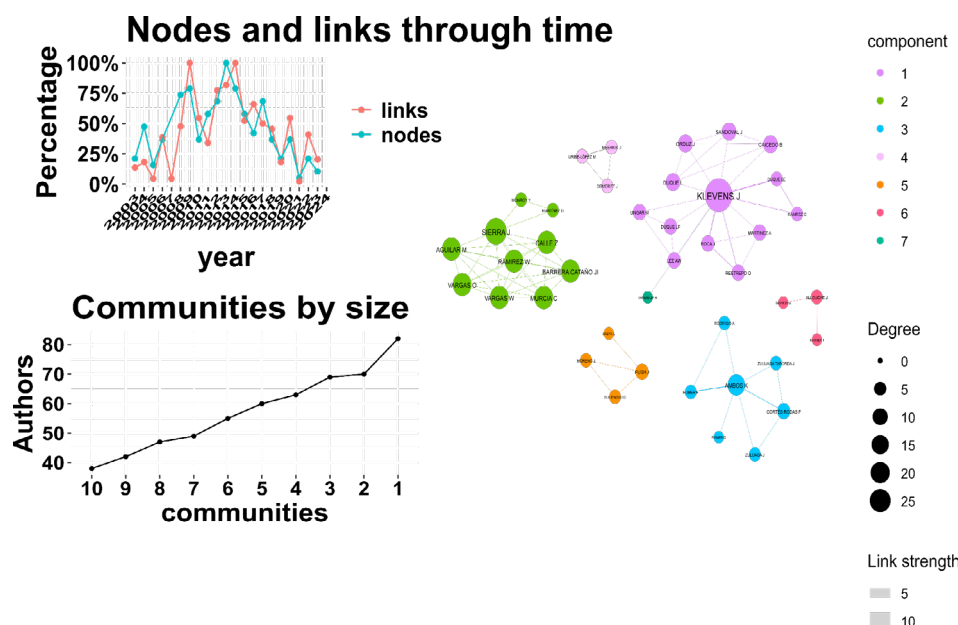
The most recent publication by Ambos & Aboueldahab (2021) has received one citation. This work examines command responsibility, a central and controversial topic in Colombia’s peace process. This concept holds significant relevance as it serves to adjudicate serious crimes committed during the armed conflict, directly influencing the criminal liability of key perpetrators and the legitimacy of the transitional justice system.

Table 4. *Top researchers in peacebuilding and its barriers by Total articles*

Authors_total	Total Articles*
AMBOS K	3
CLARK J	3
DEMERITT J	3
GOMEZ C	3
KLEVENS J	3
OTERO R	3
PUGH J	3
SIERRA J	3
VALENCIA J	3
ALLOUCHE J	3

Figure 5 shows the scientific collaboration network among the various researchers cited in Table 4. In this network, seven distinct components can be identified.

Figure 5. Analysis of top researchers in peacebuilding and its barriers, collaborative communities, and link strength



Conclusions

This article highlights the importance of understanding peace as a concept that extends beyond the absence of both direct and structural violence. Through a literature review grounded in data from Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Tree of Science (ToS), the initial findings of this study indicate that building a lasting peace requires not only the elimination of direct violence but also addressing structural inequalities and fostering social and economic development. Furthermore, moral engagement, historical memory, and justice emphasized in this first section, are essential to breaking cycles of violence and creating the opportunity for a more inclusive and equitable future.

This article also highlights the challenges faced by the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, particularly in terms of political legality and security. Additionally, diverse perspectives emerge: some view the process as a democratic opportunity, while others fear that the inclusion of former combatants in the peace agreement could undermine the state's legitimacy and affect the agreement's success. These barriers underscore the need for a comprehensive and sustained approach to strengthening peace in Colombia.

Furthermore, three main perspectives on the subject were identified. The first argues that achieving peace agreements requires addressing the inequalities and exclusions that affect the most vulnerable communities, particularly those victimized by the armed conflict. Equally important is the creation of spaces for memory and active listening, as well as the promotion of community governance initiatives, such as community sports, to safeguard history and foster community resilience.

The second perspective emphasizes that building a lasting peace after a conflict necessitates the creation of a collective memory led by the victims, which helps prevent future human rights violations. Additionally, a restorative justice approach is essential, balancing the penalization of crimes with efforts to promote social restoration.

The third perspective argues that addressing a peace process in Colombia requires tackling significant challenges. These include economic narratives that can delegitimize peace, political divisions that have hindered the signing of various peace agreements, and the lack of inclusivity. Ultimately, achieving lasting peace demands the active participation of all victimized groups, fostering reconstruction efforts that integrate emotional well-being and the development of inclusive and equitable organizations within the post-conflict context.

Among the limitations identified in this study is the handling of analytical tools. At times, difficulties arose when working with the various platforms utilized for the analysis.

For future research, this article will serve as a bibliographic reference available to students, victims, and the general population interested in the challenges faced by this group and potential solutions aimed at building lasting peace. Additionally, it provides a foundation for further bibliographic exploration and deeper investigations into this critical topic.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any commercial institution or association of any kind.

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