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MASTER THESIS

Empowerment of local peacebuilding actors in a post-conflict landscape

–

A case study of Colombia

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Statutory Declaration

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Abstract

With the signature of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the insurgent FARC in 2016, a period of post-conflict peacebuilding activities began. However, the peace on paper has not been realized in all parts of the country, where violence, homicides and displacement keep on being present. Critics argue that the modest success from liberal peacebuilding approaches come from neglecting local characteristics (Naucke, 2017). Hence the research will concentrate on the agency of local peacebuilding actors, particularly NGOs. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the needs and absences these actors face regarding peacebuilding and human security. The data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with local NGOs working in different contexts of peacebuilding in Colombia.

Research Proposal

Discussions on the local turn with regards to peacebuilding are not new. The inclusion of the local context, local agencies and capacities have been underlined in conflict resolution and conflict transformation debates for two decades (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). However, there is still a gap in the literature, because liberal peacebuilding scholars predominantly used a top-down approach with a focus on strengthening state institutions (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013: 773-777). If research concentrates on local actors, they play mostly the role of participants in a process that is led externally or top-down. Fewer case studies have investigated the local turn as having agency on its own (Pfaffenholz, 2015). Moreover, there are many academic papers regarding civilian behavior during conflict, yet only a few during post-conflict (Blattman and Miguel 2010: 44). As there has not been much research in this field, this qualitative study wants to explore the agency of local actors in the post conflict landscape of Colombia. It is important to mention that each local peace actor in Colombia has their own experience in their own local contexts. However, they can be united in the need to be understood in their relation to the state as the top-down approach to peacebuilding contrasts the local peace activities.

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Abstract

Globally there is a growing interest in building sustainable peace and preventing countries to relapse into conflict, which requires adequate addressing of country-specific cases. From the global peacebuilding agenda to academic scholars and independent organizations, there is a trend towards supporting local contexts to ensure stable peace. Colombia was chosen as the case of investigation due to recent political developments in the country. Currently it finds itself in the implementation of the 2016 signed peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). As a main argument, I claim that local Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are essential actors in the Colombian peacebuilding process but lack inclusion and attention. Therefore, this study assesses the post-conflict landscape aiming to shed light on the needs and challenges of local NGOs, to become more empowered peacebuilding agents. Through the conduction of semi-structured interviews and the application of thematic analysis, novel and valuable insights into more sustainable peacebuilding are offered, by focusing on the needs of local actors. The main challenges identified within this research are the missing collaboration between civil society actors to establish a shared peacebuilding agenda and insufficient recognition and financial support by the government and international donors. Together with prevailing mistrust, they keep the NGOs from being fully empowered peacebuilding agents. However, despite the challenges, the NGOs proved high potential in peacebuilding, ranging from long-term experience to commitment and persistence. Hence, the results confirm the assumption that NGOs significantly contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia and could do so even more if the identified challenges are resolved.

Keywords

Colombia, Post-Conflict, Peace Agreement, Local Peacebuilding, NGO, Empowerment

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List of Abbreviations

ELN	National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional)
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

Widely known for its violent past, Colombia caught global attention when it implemented a formal peace agreement in 2016, officially ending over five decades of conflicts, between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), a guerrilla group, and the Colombian state (Karl, 2017). While primarily focusing on the establishment of transitional institutions and reforms to build historic memory and justice and peace, the peace-accord failed to consider the work of local Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) building peace from the grassroots. Yet, long before its establishment, local civil society actors, organized in NGOs, started to build peace in Colombia, counting on years of experience in applying peaceful methods to resolve conflict (Rodriguez, 2012). The recently surging violence on human rights leaders (Amnesty International, 2020) reveals a remaining gap in the achievement of durable peace that, bearing in mind the previous success of local actors in peacebuilding, could be filled with stronger participation of NGOs. Thus, the question arises why local NGOs are not more profoundly involved in peacebuilding processes? To answer this question, the research aims to identify what factors are contributing towards the continuing marginalisation of local Colombian NGOs in the peacebuilding process.

The academic peacebuilding literature highlights that peace is more durable if local civil society actors are involved (Jeong, 2005; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2012; Lederach, 1997; Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006; Hancock, 2017). NGOs, especially in Latin America, have been identified as playing a crucial role in building peaceful and inclusive societies from the bottom-up, by addressing the needs of disadvantaged population groups in areas where the state presence is limited (Mitchell & Hancock, 2012). This work draws attention to underexplored elements of post-conflict peace processes. Specifically, it adds to the broader debate on the driving factors in peacebuilding by focusing on the role of local NGOs and their contribution to sustainable peacebuilding, which has not been thoroughly examined by the literature, especially with regards to Colombia. The case of Colombia is particularly interesting, as the country finds itself in a post-conflict situation only recently established through a peace agreement in 2016. This work applies a local approach to peacebuilding for which John Lederach's work is chosen as a theoretical foundation to define peacebuilding. Lederach comprehends local actors, to which local NGOs are counted to, as active peacebuilding agents, with a strong potential to build peace (Lederach, 1995), making it most fitting to research the

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needs and challenges of local NGOs in Colombia which keep them from being empowered peacebuilding actors. In previous peacebuilding literature, the importance of involvement, ownership and agency of local actors has been emphasized (Donais, 2009; Richmond, 2012b; Autesserre, 2014). These authors all refer to forms of empowerment of local actors. This study aims to follow this line of research by outlining empowerment, using the definition of Jo Rowlands (Rowlands, 1995), who understands empowerment as gaining a self-perception of acting and exerting influence (Rowlands, 1995). This lays the theoretical foundation for further analysis, reflecting on the needs of local Colombian NGOs and the challenges that keep them from being empowered. According to Rowlands, collective action based on cooperation rather than competition to achieve goals, and of the socio-political environment are key to become empowered (Rowlands, 1995). In conducting this investigation, the following sub-questions emerge, assessing the needs and challenges of the NGOs.

- How do NGOs construct peacebuilding in daily work with their participants?
- In which ways does the post-conflict situation influence their work?
- How do NGOs perceive their role in the post-conflict peacebuilding situation?
- What is the NGO's self-perception of their impact as peacebuilding agents?
- How are the NGO's relation to other actors?

These questions stand in line with the four key objectives that guide the analysis of this research.

- Assessment of how NGOs apply their peacebuilding approach in the work with disadvantaged population groups. This lays the foundation for understanding which challenges emerge from their work.
- Comprehension how local NGOs perceive their contribution to peacebuilding.
- Evaluation of the impact the post-conflict situation has on their work.
- Exploration of the key needs and challenges of local NGO activities.

Whilst a number of challenges are identified, such as missing collaboration amongst civil society actors and insufficient support and recognition by the government and international donors, which keep the NGOs from being fully empowered, this thesis offers some indications that the local actors can play an influential role in the post-conflict peacebuilding context of Colombia. This underlines the general idea of the academic debate on local peacebuilding that the involvement of local actors is important to sustainable peacebuilding.

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This thesis is structured as follows: Firstly, an overview of the current post-conflict situation in Colombia is given. It is followed by the presentation of the academic discourse on peacebuilding, in which the conflict transformation approach by John Paul Lederach is established as the theoretical foundation of this work. Moreover, literature on the role of NGOs in Colombia and the underlying concept of empowerment by Jo Rowlands is outlined. Before the previously conducted interviews are examined by applying thematic analysis, the methodological choices of the data collection and analysis are presented. The thesis concludes with a final discussion on the topic.

2. Setting the Scene – the Current Post-Conflict Situation in Colombia

The succeeding chapter provides an overview of the current post-accord situation in Colombia, including the ongoing processes and challenges in establishing peace the country currently has to cope with.

In 2016 the internationally backed peace agreement between the Colombian government, led by former president Manuel Santos, and the FARC set an official end to an internal armed conflict that had been ongoing for over five decades. The FARC was formed in the 1960s and has its roots in rural peasant organizations fighting for a more equal distribution of land (Safford & Palacios, 2002). As of today, the peace agreement is often applauded for addressing many of the conflict's root causes (Céspedes-Báez, 2017). Yet, the population's opinion about it splits, as the voting in a plebiscite prior to the accord revealed: the majority of the voters was against the peace agreement (Idler, 2016). According to official United Nations (UN) estimates, armed conflict killed more than 260,000 people between 1985 and 2016 and left more than 8 million victims, who now hope to uncover truth, justice and reparation (United Nations Peacebuilding, n.d.). To live up to the promises of the peace agreement, different institutions were established to create justice and to monitor the implementation process. Yet, following the signature of the peace agreement, Colombia entered an even more difficult post-conflict phase, trying to preserve its newly established peace. Post-conflict societies are often characterized by peacebuilding occurring despite continuing violence, which often produces new violent conflicts (Berents, 2018). Colombia constitutes a vital example in this sense (Gruner, 2017). It is challenged by a current government that is imposing a different agenda than agreed upon in the original peace agreement, slowing down the process (Amnesty International, 2020). According to a report published by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, by April 2019 only 23 percent of the 578 commitments from the peace agreement had been completed (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies et al., 2019). Meanwhile, human rights defenders continue to be targets of attacks because of their work linked to disputes over land rights and resources, mainly in indigenous, Afro-descendant and farmer communities (Frontline Defenders, 2020). These rural territories are often involved in the conflict between remaining armed groups because of economic interest and social control, filling the void the FARC has left (Human Rights Watch, 2018). These groups include the military, paramilitaries, the police, the National Liberation Army (ELN) – an insurgent

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guerrilla and a rising number of insurgent FARC groups (Naucke, 2017). An Amnesty International report states that from the signature of the peace agreement in 2016 up until June 2019, 482 defenders have been killed (Amnesty International, 2020).

It is important to understand the dynamics of the contemporary post-conflict situation in Colombia as they portray the underlying root causes of the conflict, such as social and political exclusion, inequality, violence and mistrust that prevail in the society (Filippidou & O'Brien, 2020). Hence, peacebuilding initiatives need to approach the diverse field of society, politics and the economy to be successful.

3. Understanding the Contemporary Thinking of Peacebuilding

The focus of this chapter lies on outlining the academic literature concerning peacebuilding. Special attention is devoted to the local peacebuilding approach, which is a more recent evolution of the peacebuilding debate, arguing that the incorporation of local actors is key to successful peacebuilding. Based on this understanding the theory of conflict transformation by sociologist John Paul Lederach is selected to define peacebuilding as it comprehends local actors as key peacebuilders. Thus, this chapter is dedicated to understanding particularly the role of local NGOs in the Colombian peacebuilding process. Elaborating on the NGO's potential as local peacebuilding actors, a theory of empowerment based on Jo Rowlands approach is used.

3.1 What is Peacebuilding?

Peacebuilding is one of the many concepts that exist in the academic and international practitioners' discourse used to end conflicts and establish peace (Castañeda, 2014). Since the establishment of the discourse, many actors have added approaches how best to achieve the building of peace (see amongst others Lederach, 1997; Mac Ginty, 2010; Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006; Galtung, 1976). Dependent on the different understandings of peace that exist, stakeholders and activities involved in peacebuilding are defined (Castañeda, 2014). Over time, different processes, such as diplomacy, humanitarian aid, peace negotiations and sometimes even military intervention have been flexibly included in the practical dimensions of the peacebuilding concept (Castañeda, 2014).

The oldest, but still one of the most referred to academic approaches to peacebuilding was developed by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung. He uses an associative approach, tackling not only the ending or absence of conflict ('negative peace') but also its underlying causes ('positive peace') (Galtung, 1976). By defining 'positive peace' as the main aim of peacebuilding (Webel & Galtung, 2007), he established the intellectual roots of today's notion of peacebuilding. However, newer theories building up on Galtung's foundation exist which better fit this research. Another, broadly applied approach amongst practitioners and academic scholars is the one of liberal peacebuilding. Liberal thinking, influenced this concept through core ideas of the rule of law, good governance, promotion of human rights and democracy, economic reforms and privatisation (Mansfield & Snyder, 2007). Promoted by the UN, it

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gained popularity and became widely applied (Hoffman, 2009; Tschirgi, 2004). However, it has been widely criticized for being implemented top-down (Donais, 2009) and dominated by international actors that aim at transforming conflict affected countries into liberal democracies (Paris & Sisk, 2009; Newman et al., 2009; Tadjbakhsh, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2013) Further criticism was directed to the approach's perception of people at a local level primarily as recipients of measures, rather than self-determined actors (Hancock, 2017; Richmond, 2012a; Pouligny, 2005), but also to its mixed results with regards to establishing stable post-conflict institutions (Fortna, 2008; Goldstein, 2011; Gilligan & Sergenti, 2008).

3.2 The Local Turn in Peacebuilding

Emergent from this critique appeared an evolution in the involvement of different actors in peacebuilding. Until the 1990s, research was mostly focused on external actors (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006) with the expectation for peace to trickle down to local scopes (Autesserre, 2010). However, changing the focus from a macro perspective to a micro-level dimension has become a recent trend (Autesserre, 2014), also termed the 'local turn' in peacebuilding literature (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). Despite diverse approaches in methodology and definition, researchers share a common vision, looking at peacebuilding processes beyond international and national paradigms (Autesserre, 2014). This gave rise to local peace initiatives and the participation of various non-state actors such as NGOs, community- and grassroots organizations, individuals and businesses in peacebuilding (Richmond & Carey, 2006).

Hirblinger and Simons summarize that the term 'local' is widely used as a characteristic of local actors, populations, and institutions working from the 'bottom-up' (Hirblinger & Simons, 2015). Autesserre associates it with spatial features, such as places where peacebuilding actors, institutions and practices are located (Autesserre, 2010). This approach underlines the choice of local NGOs as an entity for my research. Yet, the most frequently established meaning of local peacebuilding is the contrasting of local activities, actors and institutions on one side, against international programs, actors and institutions on the other. The latter are often associated with liberal peace paradigms (Chandler, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2010; Paris & Sisk, 2009; Pouligny, 2005). In this frame, the resistance of the local against the neoliberalist and modernist peacebuilding standards is often discussed (Richmond, 2012a; Mac Ginty, 2010; Roberts, 2008; Suhrke, 2007). However, the use of the local depicting 'the otherness' as a defence against western ideals often hints to an oversimplification,

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underestimating the heterogeneity of local actors (Autesserre, 2014). As the understanding of peacebuilding in this thesis takes a local perspective it cannot go around identifying it through this contrast, yet it is not the main emphasis. Other approaches understand the local as linked to being ‘indigenous’, ‘everyday’, or ‘traditional’ (Autesserre, 2010; Richmond, 2012b; Roberts, 2008; Boege et al., 2009; Mac Ginty, 2010; Pouligny, 2005). Yet, this ‘romanticisation’ of the local is pointed out as a shortcoming (Schaefer, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2011). To find a link between both the local and the international in peacebuilding, amongst others, Oliver Richmond researches the proposition of a more inclusive approach. ‘Hybrid peacebuilding’ incorporates both local and international actors in the peacebuilding process, while particularly emphasizing the role of local ones (Richmond, 2015). Nevertheless, by examining the academic literature, it becomes apparent that the agency of local actors as driving peacebuilding forces on the ground does not receive sufficient attention (Hancock, 2017). This represents a persisting gap in scholarly literature on the conceptualizations of peacebuilding.

3.3 Lederach's Approach to Peacebuilding

Having outlined different approaches and views of local peacebuilding, the approach by Lederach described in the following has been chosen as the definition of peacebuilding and theoretical foundation as it best outlines the NGO's role as peacebuilding actors and concentrates on the local perspective of peacebuilding.

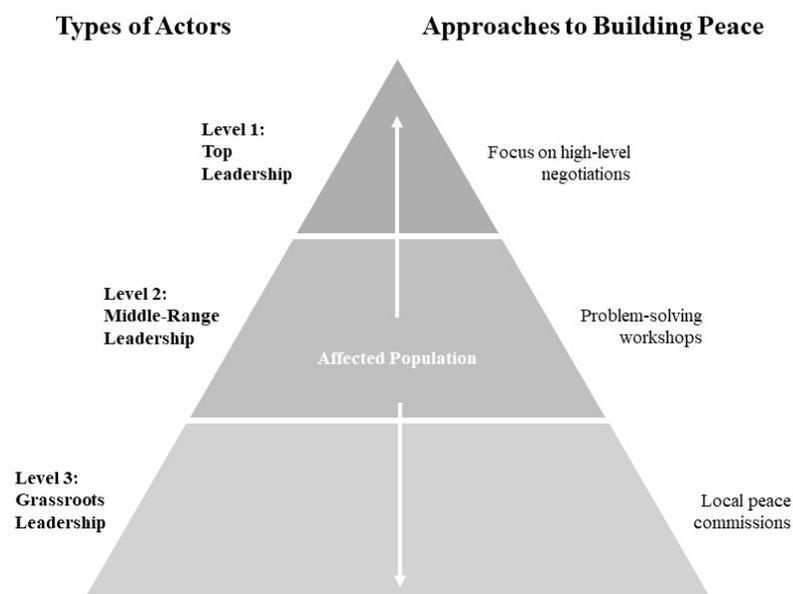
The transformation of a conflict is a primary goal of peacebuilding. Lederach's work on conflict transformation, is seen as one of the most comprehensive statements to date (Miall, 2004). With his theory he builds up on the approach of Galtung who sees peacebuilding as tackling the root causes of a conflict (Lederach, 1995), however, developing it further to include local relations. Lederach understands conflict transformation as a dynamic social construct incorporating a variety of activities that aim to establish peaceful relationships (Lederach, 1995). Lederach's framework for peacebuilding includes certain key elements such as maintaining a wide concept of conflict and peacebuilding that has room to both legitimise and encourage multiple roles and different tasks relevant to the evolution of conflict. Further, the opportunities for a transformation should be set out on a personal and systemic level to increase justice, reduce violence and restore relationships. This holistic view of conflict transformation which pursues social empowerment of individuals and communities should be

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understood as a way of life and commitment, rather than a technique, outcome or result (Lederach, 1997). In addition, the approach comprehends the local as an active peacebuilding agent, with the potential to build peace rooted in the traditional culture, region or community (Lederach, 1995). Therefore, a deep knowledge of the culture and the conflict setting are mandatory to grasp the ways in which a society handles conflict to create a new infrastructure for empowerment and recognition of underprivileged groups. As Reimann states, considering Lederach's theory - the underlying assumption is that a potential for peacebuilding already exists in the specific region or community (Reimann, 2004). Lederach's pyramidal model of peacebuilding (see Figure 1; Lederach, 1997: 39) outlines the categorization of society into three types of actors and levels of peacebuilding which can be approached by different peacebuilding strategies: 1) top leadership, 2) middle-range and 3) grassroots. The top leadership, consisting of military, political and religious leaders can be reached by outcome-oriented negotiations at state level. Middle-range leadership involving intellectuals, humanitarian and social leaders, can be accessed through problem-solving workshops. The third level can be addressed by a diversity of activities, as it involves the majority of society. The pyramidal shape represents the increasingly affected population. For Lederach, however, is it key to focus on the empowerment of mid-level actors as they can influence peacebuilding on both the national and grassroots level (Lederach, 1997). Being well connected to networks, mid-level actors can play a crucial role in creating peaceful relationships. In his opinion, this ability gives them the greatest peacebuilding potential (Lederach, 1997). Viewing peacebuilding as a long-term process of conflict transformation taking its strength from locally rooted practices best promoted by mid-range actors suits the exploration of the perceived needs and challenges of local NGOs in Colombia.

Figure 1

Lederach's Levels of Peacebuilding and Referring Types of Actors



Note. Adapted from *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, by Lederach J. P., 1997: 39.

3.4 The Role of NGOs in Colombia

Currently, various non-state actors, including NGOs, are increasingly involved in different peacebuilding activities (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2006). Additionally, the growing literature in this field argues that more involvement of civil society actors has a positive impact on long-lasting peace, making settlements less likely to fail and conflict less likely to reemerge (Bouvier, 2009; Paris, 2004; Nilsson, 2012).

Colombia has a vibrant network of NGOs as part of the civil society, which have been doing significant peacebuilding locally, at the sources of conflict (Abozaglo, 2009). Yet, to this point, little research has been dedicated to the role and work of local NGOs in the Colombian

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post-conflict peacebuilding context. Existing studies are often focusing on civil society actors in peacebuilding in general. For instance, Bouvier contributes to the ongoing debate on peacebuilding in the country by pointing out the role of the Catholic Church, indigenous movements or women's movements, providing an overview of previous peace negotiations (Bouvier, 2009). Yet, the entity of NGOs does not receive further attention. More up-to-date research has been conducted by Idler et al.; Gruner; Hancock and Naucke, who address the roles and activities of grassroot organizations during and after the peace accord (Idler et al., 2015; Gruner, 2017; Hancock, 2017; Naucke, 2017). However, their focus is on particular cases of peace communities or peace zones in Colombia. Closest to my research are the studies of Erlingsson and Abozaglo (Erlingsson, 2013; Abozaglo, 2009). Erlingsson, using a qualitative research design, analyses the impact of civil society in general on the peacebuilding process in Colombia, affirming that peacebuilding must be adapted to the local realities and requires an active participation from both the government and civil society. Abozaglo examines the role of NGOs in the Colombian peacebuilding process, concluding that by building a greater solidity amongst NGOs, they could play a leading role in constructing a peacebuilding agenda and actively participate in peacebuilding negotiations (Abozaglo, 2009). However, the research dates back to before the peace agreement, indicating a need for more up to date investigation of the post-conflict period. In general, despite the shift of the academic debate towards considering the local sphere in post-conflict peacebuilding, local actors are not present in current literature. NGOs and their work in this context are particularly neglected. This gap became noticeable in the case study conducted for the purpose of this thesis, of Colombia, a post-conflict society that finds itself in the process of building peace.

3.5 Empowerment of NGOs

The 'local turn' in peacebuilding has changed the focus of academic work and the practice of the international sphere towards recognizing local actors as key parts of the peacebuilding process (Jeong, 2005; Paffenholz, 2010; Richmond, 2012b; Thiessen, 2011).

However, few case studies have recognized local actors as having their own agency in the field of international peacebuilding concepts and not just playing a receptive role of receiving support (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). Among the ones who did are Richmond and Mac Ginty (Mac Ginty, 2011, 2014; Richmond, 2012b). While Richmond focuses on the resistance of the local against the international, Mac Ginty concentrates his research around the

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term of 'local ownership', incorporating the idea how the involvement of domestic actors in both the design and implementation of political processes can contribute to successful peacebuilding. This concept understands the involvement of local actors as a form of empowerment. Yet it does not specifically use the term. In the Colombian context the 'local agency' is researched for instance by Hancock and Naucke who examine 'peace zones' as a method to empower local agents in peacebuilding projects (Hancock, 2017; Naucke, 2017).

In line with the previous literature, this study outlines the agency of the local Colombian NGOs by using Jo Rowlands definition of empowerment, establishing it as a theoretical concept to best represent a possible form of empowerment for NGOs as local peacebuilding actors. Overall, the concepts serve the ambition of the study to listen to the voice of local actors, to identify their needs and challenges and develop a better understanding of the things to improve on in order to build a more sustainable peace. Recently, feminist interpretations of empowerment lead to a broader understanding of the concept (Rowlands, 1995). Looking at the dynamics of oppression and understanding the idea of having 'power over' someone, has an effect on the participation of less powerful groups to engage in formal and informal decisions as well as their self-perception to act and exert influence. For Rowlands, empowerment thus incorporates more than just access but must include the process of transformation of self-perception to understand itself as a competent and authorized actor (Rowlands, 1995). When interpreted this way, empowerment has three dimensions: personal, close relationships and collective. On the personal level it encompasses self-awareness, confidence and capacity. On the second level, empowerment contains the development of skills needed to negotiate and influence the nature of relationships. Thirdly, it entails working together to achieve a broader impact than one entity would have alone - collective action based on cooperation rather than competition. Collective action might have a local focus at village or neighbourhood level or an institutional one, for instance on national networks (Rowlands, 1995). In summary, empowerment can be understood as participation in the actions of others to achieve goals, gain access to resources, and develop a critical understanding of the socio-political environment. The definition of empowerment lays an important foundation for the further analysis in reflecting on the needs and challenges of the local Colombian NGOs

4. Case Selection

The following section reviews the criteria for Colombia as a case selection. Further, it highlights the selection criteria for interviewed NGOs as the entity of research. This research offers concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge, providing new insights and opening up new directions for further research. A case study is a suitable research design to achieve this goal (Sudhakar et al., 2008). The case of Colombia is particularly interesting because the recently settled peace agreement is perceived as one of the most comprehensive ones currently existing. The incorporated reforms focus on a wide range of thematic areas that give root to the conflict, such as unequal land distribution, gender issues and ethnicity (Heinzekehr, 2020). This sets great hope in the achievement of the accord.

However, the Colombian case is engrained in a vast complexity of socioeconomic inequality which has devastating effects on the population (González, 2004; Lopez, 2011). More than any other Latin American country, Colombia is renowned for its association with violence that is deeply rooted in its society due to many years of conflict (Karl, 2017). Particularly in rural areas, there are ongoing traces of forced displacement, impunity, political crimes, drug trafficking and human rights abuse (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2009). Currently, the country finds itself in the post-accord implementation period, monitored by the international community. This monitoring has led to a plethora of well documented available data on the process, which is estimated to take over a decade (Caribe Afirmativo Corporation, 2017). Yet, building peace admits prevailing violence raises many challenges for the country which are in need of further investigation. Main actors involved in the process of peacebuilding are the Colombian government, the FARC, international organizations and transitional institutions. Moreover, civil society actors such as NGOs, churches, social movements and community-based organisations participate (Pfeiffer, 2015).

As countries frequently return to conflict after signing a peace agreement, fostering micro-level improvements along with structural developments is crucial (Jeong, 2005). Despite widespread violence, the Colombian civil society is surprisingly one of the most vibrant ones in Latin America (Lefebvre, 2017) with a far-reaching history of grassroots organisations addressing the aftereffects of armed conflict (Rodríguez, 2011). However, not only after but during the conflict, local peacebuilding initiatives have been taking place (Rodriguez, 2012). The daily peacebuilding work of civil society actors mainly takes place in areas with lacking

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state presence (Mitchell & Hancock, 2012). One of the civil society actors are NGOs, which have long played an important role in reaching out to vulnerable people, even before the peace agreement, giving them a crucial peacebuilding role (Lefebvre, 2017).

Given their previous engagement in peacebuilding, few studies have researched the entity of NGOs (García-Durán, 2004; McDonald, 1997). With their networking potential and well-established practices, they have not been involved in the peacebuilding process or negotiations, nor have they been influential enough to express a common agenda amongst civil society actors (Abozaglo, 2009). In the Colombian context, the discussion around the impact of NGOs on peacebuilding has been fairly limited. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask if and how local Colombian NGOs can be a viable force of peacebuilding in the post-conflict setting, and, in particular what their needs and challenges are to be more empowered in this context.

5. Data and Research Design

A qualitative analysis involving semi-structured interviews has been conducted for the purpose of this thesis to better grasp the needs and challenges of NGOs involved in peacebuilding in the post-conflict landscape of Colombia. The focus lies on local Colombian NGOs that work together with conflict affected disadvantaged parts of the population such as women, Afro-Colombians and the youth in general. In the following section the methodological choices will be outlined and explained. This thesis conducts a thematic analysis based on semi-structured interviews. In addition, data triangulation assists the contextualizing of the data attained and verifies the given information. First, the data collection will be described. Then, the selection of the sample will be explained, before outlining the method of thematic analysis used to examine the data.

5.1 Data Collection

The data collected for this research is based on seven semi-structured interviews with leading representatives of six local Colombia NGOs (two interviewees belonged to the same NGO). Purposive sampling was applied, determining the number of interviews by the level of theoretical saturation. The NGOs were mostly selected from the online platform *peaceinsight*¹ and through personal contacts. Additionally, the snowballing method was employed, which means that the social networks of participants with whom interviews had already been conducted was used to reach further participants. The interviews conducted via the online platform *Zoom* throughout March 2021 were mostly held in Spanish and lasted approximately one hour each.

Semi-structured interviews assist the contextualization of real-world events and incorporate the knowledge of informed observers on the needs, challenges and shared beliefs on peacebuilding of local NGOs in Colombia. As there is a high level of reflection and involvement of NGOs in peace initiatives in Colombia, they grant in-depth insights into

¹ Peace Insight Organizations in Peacebuilding in Colombia.
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/conflicts/colombia/internationals/?location=colombia&theme=peacebuilding>

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working structures and knowledge that have a far reaching and profound impact. The best way to reach a deeper understanding of the self-perception of NGOs challenges and needs was through the conduction of interviews, as they are usually not accessible to the outside. The research investigates how NGOs can be more empowered in their work as local peacebuilding actors, based on the perception of their needs. Therefore, in-depth interviews are most suitable to reach an understanding of the matter because the NGOs themselves are best equipped to judge this. The conducted interviews exhibit insightful observations which contribute to a larger discussion on relevant aspects of the Colombian peacebuilding process and the role NGOs play within it. The findings were recorded by applying several protection mechanisms to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees. To guarantee anonymity, all personal information including the name of the NGOs were omitted. As the post-conflict situation in Colombia a sensitive topic, subjects are to be protected, thus, the transcripts of the interviews were enclosed. While conducting the interviews, importance was placed on being aware of the role as a researcher and the influence it might have on the context. As a research subject the entity of NGOs was chosen because it covers various matters relevant to this research. Firstly, they are deeply involved in the ongoing post-conflict situation, working on the ground with population groups such as women, Afro-Colombians, youth and rural farmers that have been left most vulnerable by the armed conflict and continue to be deprived. NGOs frequently take the role of building peace where other actors such as the government are not present. Their work dedicated to peacebuilding has long-term established local roots, making them important agents to drive change. Hence, understanding the needs and challenges of NGOs working in the field of peacebuilding in Colombia's post-conflict society provides valuable insights into the role of NGOs in peacebuilding and their needs to empower their work. This will lead to an added value for the academic debate on local peacebuilding actors. Different selection criteria were applied to better portray a diverse image of the NGO's role and work in the context of peacebuilding in Colombia. This is of importance for making assumptions across the different cases later on. Primary, only NGOs with local roots, and direct involvement in the peacebuilding process in Colombia were selected. Being embedded in the local culture allows for a better understanding of and involvement in the context, which is coherent with the arguments of the academic literature on local peacebuilding. As Colombia is a pluriverse country, greatly varying in geographic, ethnic and cultural dimensions, NGOs working in different geographical locations were selected to best represent a diverse picture of the society.

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Thus, aside from NGOs with their headquarters in the capital, Bogotá, organizations working in more remote conflict affected areas such as the Pacific- and the Caribbean Coast, were elected to be interviewed. Moreover, the focus was set on reaching a diverse representation of participants affected by the armed conflict. Therefore, NGOs collaborating with most conflict affected population groups were chosen to be interviewed. In all cases the NGOs were actively working in the field of peacebuilding, leading to insights spanning over more than ten years and incorporating the change from armed conflict, to the peace agreement in 2016, and the current postaccord implementation. This large time span paints a picture of the field which increases the capacity for unprecedented insights into the NGOs role in peacebuilding. To conclude, using the data collected during the interviews, this work presents new observations outlining the needs of local NGOs involved in the Colombian peacebuilding process and contributes to a larger debate on the involvement of local NGOs in the Colombian peacebuilding process.

5.2 Data Analysis

The analysis uses a qualitative approach incorporating semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is a method that lends itself particularly well to the undertaking research as it is well-suited to capture latent contents, essential for examining key topics across the cases of the different NGOs. Further, the design of this analysis used data triangulation to resolve problems of bias (Blaikie, 1991) expecting to achieve a higher degree of validity in the conclusions.

In practice, the first step was to create a dataset made up of semi-structured interviews, gathered and transcribed with the software *Sonix*. To maximise the richness of the data and elucidate the interviewees' interpretations of needs and challenges as well as the role of NGOs in post-conflict Colombia, thematic analysis then was applied to the transcripts with the help of the software *Atlas.ti*. The coding proceeded with the review of the interviews and identification of codes, reflecting information emergent from the data as well as potential answers to the research questions. Afterwards, the codes were subsumed in broader themes using a mind mapping technique to create a model that visualises the relationships between codes and themes. Each topic was further examined, reflected and validated by going back and forth in the data, to reach a sound understanding of the participants' perceptions regarding their work in peacebuilding. The interviewees' identities are disclosed as they come from well-established Colombian NGOs working in a conflict sensitive topic. Giving further information

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about their personalities has the danger to reveal their character, which is why they are referred to as Interviewee 1-7 in the analysis. The following key themes and describing codes were identified, capturing the most important elements of the needs and challenges of NGOs. The codes are written in italic. In the theme regarding the construction of peacebuilding, the NGOs faced challenges in '*Long-term trust building*' which relates partly to the general '*Mistrust*' incorporated in the social fabric of Colombia's society, and to the aspect that a lack of '*Stable funding*' restricts their activity together with the challenge of paying adequate '*Salaries for their employees*'. The theme concerning their self-perceived role in the sphere of civil society and in relation to other actors such as the government, international donors or civil society organizations, revealed the challenge to overcome '*Scepticism*' and '*Competition*', next to the '*Wish for more collaboration*' with all actors. Further, the need of their '*Peacebuilding practices to be recognized*' as part of the whole peace process and to be supported, emerged. The current post-conflict situation, which was identified as another theme, constrained their work through '*Surging violence*', '*Disappointment*' and '*Polarization*'. Yet, also showed the strong '*Commitment*' and persistence the NGOs have. Moreover, the '*COVID-19*' pandemic was mentioned as a main challenge, requiring better access to technology to maintain personal contact with their participants. The quotes used to underline the narrative of the participants are originally in Spanish but were translated to English for a better understanding and flow of the thesis. In the translation process special care has been taken to preserve the original meaning, hence the original quotes were not attached.

A combination of an inductive and deductive approach with the predominance of inductive was chosen to encompass the development of a framework based on the data. Next to previously defined questions and research objectives, partly attaining knowledge inductively allows for a deeper understanding of the context without pre-assumptions being made (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach leaves space for themes emerging from the data which was especially important as the information obtained by NGOs could not be fully anticipated through previous studies, due to the highly sensitive nature of post-conflict settings and to the very recent occurrence of events. Thematic analysis is complemented through the use of a latent approach, which examines the underlying ideas and assumptions that shape the content of the data going beyond semantics. Using the latent approach suits this research as it gives more space for interpretation of the themes. This is necessary to be able to find connections between the NGOs. Additionally, a constructivist view is applied. Therefore, the meaning and

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experience of the NGOs as understood as socially constructed rather than inherent with individuals (Burr, 1995). Examining the self-perception of different sized NGOs working in distinctive geographical areas, social constructivism is used to understand and combine a multiplicity of perspectives that ultimately enrich our understanding and allow for new outcomes emergent from the data.

6. Analytical Framework

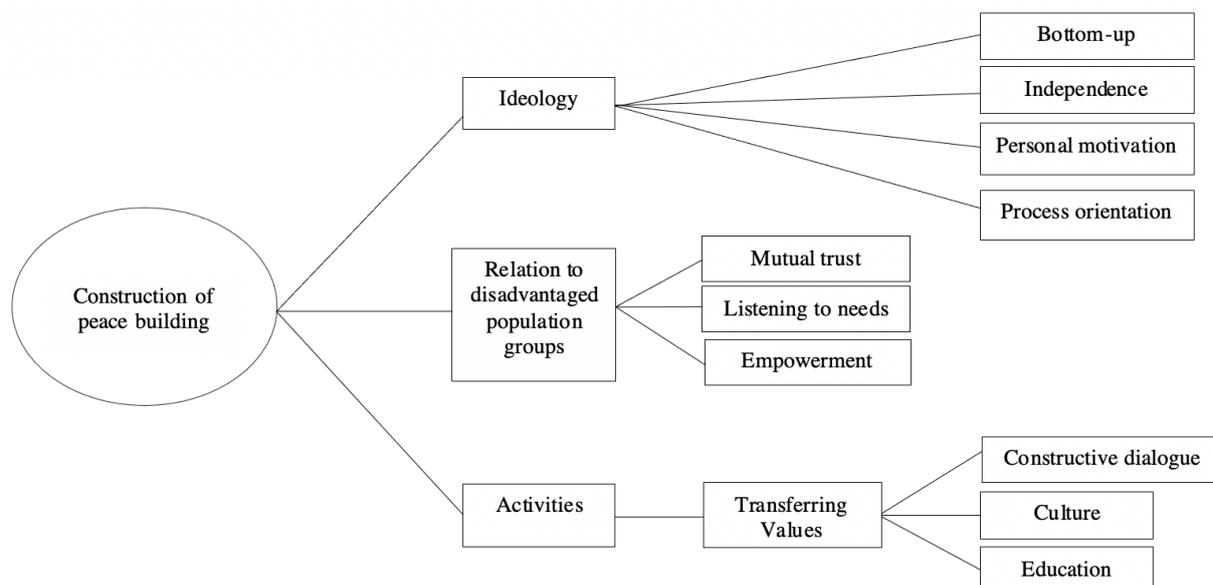
As previously highlighted in the literature review, the underlying cause of this research is the often-missing perspective on local actors in peacebuilding, understanding them as independent and empowered agents. Applied to the case of Colombia, the assumption supporting this study is that local NGOs play an important role in peacebuilding, however, they lack inclusion in the peacebuilding process as valuable actors. Consequently, the analysis focuses on understanding the current challenges and needs of local Colombian NGOs that keep them from being more empowered peacebuilding actors, moving along the four key objectives previously defined and explained in the introduction. The analysis highlights key themes and codes that have been identified in the data, matching them with the key objectives to call attention to the needs and challenges of the NGOs and their self-perceived role in the post-conflict peacebuilding process.

6.1 The Construction of Peacebuilding

The following section looks at the construction of peacebuilding by NGOs in response to the first objective. It unravels not only how the NGOs conduct their work with different disadvantaged population groups but also reveals their ideology of peacebuilding. This lays the foundation for understanding which challenges emerge from their work. Three different themes could be identified which outline the NGO's perspective on the construction of peacebuilding: '*Ideology*', '*Relation to disadvantaged population groups*' and '*Activities*'. To better grasp the relation of the themes and the emerging codes, Figure 2 provides a visualised aid.

Figure 2

Coding of the ‘Construction of Peacebuilding’



The theme ‘**Ideology**’ outlines the understanding on the concept of peacebuilding by the NGOs, which varied only in a few aspects between the respondents of the different organizations. Amongst others, they underlined the incorporation of values responsible for a harmonious living: *“The construction of peace goes hand in hand with the construction of democracy, the construction of equity, social justice, better living conditions for the people, respect and recognition”* (Interviewee 4)²³, Further, the understanding of peacebuilding on a personal level was emphasized: *“When you can humanize the other, you know, and you open those ways for dialogue, that's how peacebuilding happens”* (Interviewee 1). One participant highlighted the values of collaboration and mutual respect to establish peace in the relationships between the people: *“The understanding that in you there is me, and in me there is you, and that we are both responsible two make this effort”* (Interviewee 3). An interesting insight was shared by a participant from another NGO who connected peacebuilding to a spiritual approach: *“We’re all part of everything. We're part of each other, we're part of*

² The Interviewees are referred to with numbers, reaching from one to seven. This is done to disclose their identities. For further explication see chapter 5.2 on data analysis.

³ The quotes are translated from Spanish to English. In the translation process special care has been taken to preserve the original meaning, thus the original quotes were not attached.

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community and we're part of nature. And we have to see that connectedness” (Interviewee 1). From the different ideas a shared understanding emerged, focusing on peacebuilding in relationships in a local dimension. One respondent added that the local population needs more awareness that they can have a saying in what peacebuilding should be: *“Romanticizing peace, romanticizing that when the agreement is signed there will be no more problems and we are all going to live embraced and in tranquility, no. Peace goes beyond that, it is a way for conflicts not to be made invisible, but to be processed through a mechanism other than violence. And I believe that this has not been explained to the population, we have not recognized some spaces where peace can be built from the local level and we have not put them at the center of the political debate” (Interviewee 7).*

The code ‘Bottom-up’ was established as the NGOs shared an interconnection in their perspectives that peacebuilding needs to incorporate the transformation of relationships, mindsets and feelings of the citizens: *“I believe that peace building is to be able to generate skills to promote the idea that the other is not an enemy and that thinking differently does not mean to be bad. And that it is possible that we may not agree and that we are not going to agree, but that the valuable thing is to be able to talk about it without the need for fights, violence, or conflict, which is what we have had throughout all our history” (Interviewee 6).*

The code ‘Independence’ aims to underline the NGO's perception of themselves in the construction of peace. Commitment and persistence are shared values in their work: *“Fundamentally, we are a propositional organization and we do not do mainly opposition, we make constructive proposals, proposals for the generation of ideas, of cultural transformation, of political revindication” (Interviewee 4).* Throughout the interviews some respondents were opposing my semantic use of concepts such as ‘post-conflict’ or the ‘construction of peace’. They did so, by using different semantic expressions to explain their ideas and ideology. One of the questioned participants explained that he uses the term ‘cultivation’ of peace instead of ‘construction’: *“Well, I talk more about cultivation of peace, because construction...it sounds to me like artifice, like something set up, like something very functional, physical. I like to use the term ‘peace cultivation’ instead, because when you talk about peace cultivation you are talking about seeds, you have to look for the land, you have to prepare it, you have to use it, put your hands on, sow and then water it. So, this has to be close to the culture of the people as well” (Interviewee 2).* This showed deep roots in the local context in which they work, delimiting themselves from mainstream peacebuilding concepts.

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'Personal motivation' was used as a code as it was mentioned as a key driver of their work. Many respondents had a personal history or experience to share, where they felt the inclination to dedicate their life to build peace: *"I was born in the same place where Tirofijo, the famous leader of the FARC was born. We are from the same village and my family was somehow linked to him. I was very young, but then I was fortunate enough to live for ten years in the area, which is a sanctuary for FARC guerrillas, which was the area of Caquetá and Putumayo in Colombia. (...) And I'm telling you this because later in recent years, when I was able to work in that region of Caquetá and Putumayo, it was very useful for me to have met him and to say that I was from that village to help solve many problems in the region and, above all, to rescue many children from the guerrilla groups"* (Interviewee 3). Since all of the respondents carry a leading position in their organizations, they have many years of work experience in the field leading back to constant dedication. One participant outlined his motivation as follows: *"Becoming a person and a society that every day wakes up, thinking about that we have to do something for peace. That's what I'm dedicated to. (...) How can we improve this country and how can we improve the world?"* (Interviewee 4).

The NGO's ideology regarding the construction of peacebuilding was coded as *'Process orientation'*, as a trend was noticeable in the NGO's self-perception of their work, diverging from results-oriented projects, to rather being process oriented and long-term. One participant described it as 'the work of ants': *"So it's not like, oh, we're gonna have a three-year project and in three years we're going to do all these amazing things. No, it all is this very, it's like the work of ants. It's long-term, very grassroots"* (Interviewee 1). The long-term vision of building peace in the relationships between people goes along with a perception that all interviewees agreed on: in order to build peace everyone has to be included. The following quote was chosen to underline this view: *"I think that everyone should participate. And the aim is that there is massive participation since everyone should participate, from their sector, from their perspective, in such a way that they feel that they built it all together. When something is established, it should be said that we did it. We should not say that this person did it, or that this NGO did not help, etc., but that the people are satisfied to say we did it"* (Interviewee 2). Another participant stressed the responsibility of the current generation towards the next one to build peace, emphasizing the long-term nature of peacebuilding: *"We have an obligation (...) those of us who have generated this culture of violence. And we must continue to insist in*

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order to be able to hand over to new generations an environment which is more conducive to peace” (Interviewee 4).

With respect to the second theme **‘Relation to disadvantaged population groups’** the NGOs generally work together with the most vulnerable populations in areas greatly affected by conflict and violence: *“We think it is also important to respond to the most deprived people. (...) all our programs are always in the most difficult places in the cities and the departments and regions in Colombia” (Interviewee 3).* Foremost rural peasants, women, Afro communities, indigenous, youth and victims of conflict are in focus. The code *‘Mutual trust’* was chosen as the NGOs underlined it as the basic component to establish any relationship. A close engagement with the communities needs a deep understanding of the socio-cultural context, to establish trust: *“So one of the needs is how we manage to get people to have confidence. For that we open spaces where we say that there is a reunion of equals in disagreement, that is to say, spaces of dialogue of equals who are in disagreement, who are affected” (Interviewee 2).*

The code *‘Listening to needs’* aims to underline the shared vision of the NGOs to connect to their beneficiaries. Helping the communities to define and achieve their necessities, has the underlying vision that their understanding is key to create peace and the strength and potential to achieve it is inherent with them: *“They are capable of transforming their territory without the need for a third party to come in and develop their territory. You show them that the power of change resides within them, that is an important element of empowerment” (Interviewee 6).*

The code *‘Empowerment’* was identified as the NGOs mentioned that they want to help the people discovering their potential themselves as it already resides within them: *“Like the big goal is to create a civil society that's empowered, trained, knows the laws, so that this organized civil society can basically interact with government to get their needs met. And when government doesn't listen to be able to do nonviolent direct action, but basically it's all about creating a strong civil society” (Interviewee 1).* To create awareness and inform the people of their rights is a main component to it. An interviewee added an interesting perspective that understands the empowerment as self-reflection: *“We want our interventions to change people's behavior so that they can better manage their conflict, so they can talk, dialogue and come to an agreement” (Interviewee 6).*

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The theme ‘**Activities**’ demonstrates that the NGOs make use of activities to transfer values of peace. A strong convergence in the type of activities was visible. The activities were coded as ‘*Constructive dialogue*’, ‘*Culture*’ and ‘*Education*’. Through the establishment of the code ‘*Constructive dialogue*’, the activity is outlined, and how trust is built up between opposing parties. This is understood as a key value to transform relationships and establish a peaceful environment of mutual respect. One respondent outlined how the NGO establishes dialogues to generate a better understanding of the other person: *“If we enable spaces to understand each other's intentions, we will save ourselves a lot of conflicts on different issues. (...) So what we do here is to touch on more everyday issues to show that the idea of reconciliation does not depend on a political agreement. In the end the idea of reconciliation is more like a social agreement that is being built”* (Interviewee 6).

As the majority of the NGOs uses ‘*Culture*’ in form of art, dance, music, and sports to transform the people's mindsets and build peace it was established as a code. *“It's not enough just for people to have food and a roof and the material things. But it's like people need beauty. Human beings need art. They need beauty. They need culture to feed their spirits”* (Interviewee 1). Another respondent emphasized the strength culture inherits to create transformation: *“Strengthening these cultural aspects also means helping these people improve their quality of life and improve the quality of life of their environment. And culture has a very powerful force for transforming societies”* (Interviewee 5). The following example outlines how art is used as a vehicle for reconciliation and dialogue by one of the NGOs: *“We've done murals with women, victims of sexual violence by armed actors. (...) But the mural, it wasn't about painting a mural, the mural was a vehicle for them to come together and talk to the amount that they wanted to about what had happened and to see that they weren't alone. (...). And this one woman said, she said with each stroke of the brush, I feel like some of my pain is going away. You know, that's really powerful”* (Interviewee 1).

Further, the code ‘*Education*’ outlines the transfer the pedagogy of peace consisting of peaceful communication showcased the understanding of the NGOs to transform the thinking of the people towards peace: *“The construction of a pedagogical and cultural action to transform society's thinking and feelings towards peace. The area of communications for peace, which seeks to generate scenarios of encounter and communication and fundamentally these two elements are very important for peace”* (Interviewee 4). Through the different activities the NGOs take the role of assisting, listening and empowering the people they work

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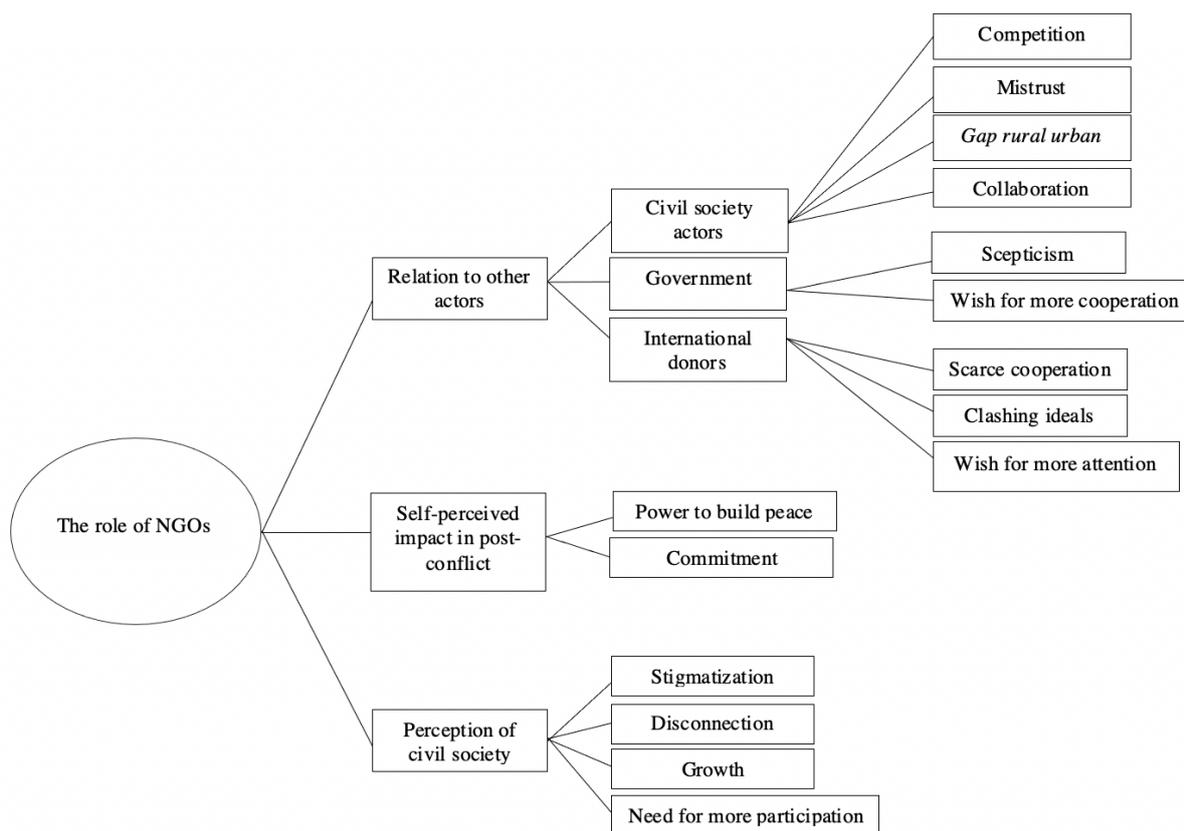
with. Reconciliation, forgiveness, mutual respect, openness and especially trust are important values transferred through the activities.

6.2 The Role of NGOs

Another key objective was to comprehend the NGOs role and impact in the peacebuilding process in Colombia, particularly regarding their relations to the government, civil society actors and international donors. Further, the aim was to understand their role within the Colombian civil society and perception of the latter. The themes '*Relation to other actors*', '*Self-perceived impact in the post-conflict situation*' and '*Perception of civil society*' are described in the following part. Figure 3 explains the different codes which describe the themes.

Figure 3

Coding of 'The Role of NGOs'



The first theme regards the '**Relation to other actors**' involved in peacebuilding, which are the government, other civil society actors and international donor. In the relationship to other

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civil society actors, the NGOs share a common perception. The codes, *'Competition'*, *'Mistrust'*, *'Gap rural urban'* and *'Collaboration'* intent to describe this relationship. The relation to **'Civil Society Actors'** on one hand was characterized by *'Competition'* and *'Mistrust'*, which are mutually dependent and form a vicious circle: *"Because there is mistrust, (...) everyone creates an NGO. So, we have a lot of NGOs and a lot of organizations, and everyone is looking for projects to create an inflow of resources. So, one has to be careful, not to become the competition of the other. Because when one is the competition of the other, then there is no more rapprochement"* (Interviewee 2). Additionally, one participant mentioned mistrust was created through unfair practices and corruption: *"There is a demonization of NGOs because there are many people, even some members of the government who create organizations to take resources from the government and do nothing for the citizenry. Then, they close the doors to us because there are other people who make a living from that"* (Interviewee 5).

The code *'Gap rural urban'* which inductively emerged from the data refers to the perception of a dissimilarity between rural and urban NGOs. It was predominantly mentioned by NGOs located in rural conflict-prone areas. They pointed out that NGOs in Bogotá experience another reality of the post-conflict, making it rather challenging to collaborate with them: *"In Bogotá, the groups think that Bogotá is everything and that they can speak for all the victims, whether you're from the Guajira or the Amazon or the Pacific coast. So it's like there's this huge disconnect between the groups in Bogotá and the groups in the rest of the country"* (Interviewee 1). Yet, also a respondent from an NGOs in the capital mentioned the distinction: *"Here in Colombia, the issue of inequality is a photograph. The main cities may be very similar to a developed economy, but those in the rural territories affected by the conflict have conditions very similar to those of any poor country"* (Interviewee 6).

On the other hand, the code of *'Collaboration'* was established to elaborate the relation to other civil society actors. Collaboration was consistently perceived as a crucial requirement to their work. All NGOs explained that they were exerting effort to create networks with other civil society actors to exchange ideas and support each other. Despite mistrust and competition, many interviewees gave examples of their already established collaborations, being of formal and informal nature: *"We always coordinate with other sectors of civil society, almost all peace-building organizations. But fundamentally also with the networks of human rights organizations, in a complementary exercise of those who build peace by defending human*

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rights and those who defend human rights as an exercise for peace building. There is a complementarity, each one from their own specialization” (Interviewee 4). Coordinated activities such as forums, dialogues, festivals or theme weeks, together with other civil society actors were mentioned. One respondent talked about their annual festival: “At the Festival of Reconciliation it's groups from all of the 15 municipalities of [name of area] that participate. And they send people from their community-organizations and they help organize it. There's a cultural aspect with music and dance and all the cultural manifestations, and also armed actors” (Interviewee 1).

The second surfacing theme on the perception on the relationship with the current **‘Government’** is generally spiked by challenges which became apparent in all narratives, besides one. The codes of *‘Scepticism’* and *‘Wish for more cooperation’* were chosen to outline this theme. The code *‘Scepticism’* was established as the NGOs shared the perception that the relation to the government was characterized by mistrust, reservation and ignorance. One of the NGO's leaders presented an insightful case: *“We believe that the government does not listen, that in spite of our efforts, of the call for attention, of the recommendations, it does not take them on board. We have been building a policy for the promotion and defense of human rights, as is the obligation of the Colombian State. That strategic alliance with the Government was broken. Civil society organizations left because there were no guarantees for the construction of this public policy (...). And the government preferred to maintain communication with economic sectors, with the unions and break with this strategic alliance that we had built in previous years” (Interviewee 4). The mistrust, was mentioned to come from both sides: “Once again there is distrust both from people in government towards civil society and from civil society towards people in government” (Interviewee 2). Another point of view by a participant outlined the missing attention the government dedicates to the work of NGOs: “If an organization does not account for the problems that the population is experiencing, then its objective seems meaningless. Most of the time the national government does not pay attention to the organizations because it is a way of recognizing that it is doing a bad job or that it is not paying attention to things it should pay attention to. (...) I think they [the organization] are there, to recognize the problems. And usually that generates that the relations between organizations and the government of the day are not the best” (Interviewee 7).*

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Despite emerging difficulties in the relationship with the government, the NGOs expressed the *'Wish for cooperation'*: *"It is important to work with the government, but many times the government does not think it should work with us. (...). We believe that it is important to prepare to work towards the government and that we should work with the government. And we do our best and we indicate to the people that the government is not the enemy. The government is an institution, a legal institution that we have to learn to manage so that we can work better"* (Interviewee 2). Amongst rather negative perceptions of the relation to the Colombian government, one NGO affirmed a long-term positive relationship, however, their awareness became apparent that it is rather uncommon: *"I must say that luckily we have been fortunate and have always found the support of the government itself. therefore, we participated a lot in national and international calls for proposals"* (Interviewee 3).

The third theme in terms of relation to other actors incorporates the relationship with **'International donors'**, which is coded through *'Scarce cooperation'*, *'Clashing ideals'* and *'Wish for more attention'*. The NGO's illustrations in this relation are mixed. Despite the majority having established cooperation's, all mentioned the scarcity of opportunities. Thus, the code of *'Scarce cooperation'* emerged. The picture revealed a better chance for NGOs in urban areas to have a cooperation with international donors, as an NGO leader from a rural area outlined: *"Here in this region, little by little we have been receiving donations, two international donors, but there are almost none. (...) it is difficult to obtain these resources because, on the one hand, they already have their own organized people with whom they work, they have a series of very, very, very precise requirements. So that makes it difficult to work with them"* (Interviewee 2). Additionally, another respondent explained that the scarcity emerges from the many NGOs competing for one project: *"In the end, development and international cooperation becomes an industry with available resources and resources that work like a market, with supply and demand. So, I feel that in Colombia there is a lot of demand for a supply that is very limited to Colombia"* (Interviewee 6).

The code *'Clashing ideals'* was introduced summarising the challenge to match the NGO's perspectives of peacebuilding with the requirements of the donors: *"In general, I find the relationship with international donors difficult. I think international donors have a defined agenda, very clear expected results and are rarely open to learning. They are very result-oriented"* (Interviewee 6).

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The code *'Wish for more attention'* integrates the shared opinion on the neglect of peacebuilding as a topic to call the attention of donors: *"In the last few years [Colombia] entered the list of OECD countries. This means that it is no longer seen as a poor country. Then, a lot of international cooperation aid leaves the country, because that's how international cooperation works, and many resources begin to focus on other issues. So it's like the Peace Budget is starting to become smaller"* (Interviewee 6). Furthermore, one NGO elaborated that they felt neglected by international organizations: *"Unfortunately, international cooperation, is decided only to support the Colombian state, that is, to dedicate most of the economic resources for peacebuilding to the state. And society, and organizations like ours have felt unprotected"* (Interviewee 4).

The theme pertaining to the **'Self-perceived impact in the post-conflict situation'** contains the codes *'Power to build peace'* and *'Commitment'*. The code *'Power to build peace'* highlights the NGOs self-perception as being powerful peacebuilding actors: *"When you support these rural communities in their business ideas and you are facilitating concrete opportunities for them to work (...) I believe that the impact is powerful (...) Let's say that they are able to transform their territory without the need for a third party to develop their territory. In other words, you show them that the power to change lies with them and that is an important empowerment issue"* (Interviewee 6).

Moreover, the NGOs remark that their persistent engagement changed the discourse on peacebuilding. The code *'Commitment'* highlights this perception: *"I believe that we have achieved many things, one of them is that today Colombia is discussing the need to build peace. (...). Today in the Colombian society, many consider that they were deeply wrong in terms of not decisively supporting the peace agreement and many are convinced of the need to follow this path, this road to peace. I believe that this is an achievement of the organizations that we have persisted in the peace issue and that we have committed ourselves"* (Interviewee 4).

The **'Perception of civil society'** was taken as a theme outlining the role of NGOs as this sphere is their framework of action. The perception of it diverged largely among the NGOs, leading to the codes of *'Stigmatization'*, *'Disconnection'*, *'Growth'* and *'Need for more participation'*. The first code *'Stigmatization'* shows the perceived neglect of civil society actors, mistaking their work and its importance. The following quote shows that the way to build peace, either with military intervention or a peaceful dialogue, seems to be a disputed

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topic in the Colombian society: *“We are very limited in the sense that there continues to be stigmatization, stigmatization by the State, by the government, and also by very strong social, political and economic sectors in Colombia. These are accusations about our role. We are still being singled out as friends of illegal armed groups, as their defenders. They do not consider our task important, but well, that has been normal from the people who believe in war and who believe in violence and who constantly violate human rights. So, we are used to it. It affects us, but we continue with our work”* (Interviewee 4).

The code of ‘Disconnection’ was established as the NGOs perceive the destroyed trust and social fabric as characteristic of the civil society: *“I don't think it is connected. One of the things that we see even just here in [name of the area], is there's I mean, it's not a really big area and yet there's like over a thousand community organizations. So, you could say, wow, that's really great to all this community organizations, but what that also means is that no one trusts anyone. Because I don't trust any of you, I have to create my own organization. And so it's a huge reflection on the amount of the how the social fabric was destroyed and the trust was destroyed. So it's all very egotistical (...) it's very fractured even here and on the national level, (...) You don't see big platforms of civil society”* (Interviewee 1). A second opinion supported this: *“I believe that there is no collaborative work among civil society organizations and there is no work articulated in a network. I feel that the paradigm or the vision is that we have to compete for resources and since there are fewer resources, competition is stronger”* (Interviewee 6).

Conversely, other respondents, had a more positive perception of civil society. The code ‘Growth’ subsumes the underlying wish and the NGOs awareness about their power: *“Personally I think that in Colombia civil society is growing, the strength of civil society is becoming more and more expressive. I think that civil society in Colombia is understanding that the need we have, to make changes, we can no longer do it violently with the guerrillas. We have had guerrillas for more than 60 years. We are understanding that we have to dialogue, and that we have to conform ourselves more as groups, as societies. I notice a lot of growth of black organizations, of women's organizations, of youth organizations, of organizations of all kinds in Colombia. And then the civil capital, the social capital in Colombia, is growing more and more and it is thanks, unfortunately, to all this violence and pain we have had, that the civil society has been gaining a lot of strength”* (Interviewee 3). Further, a distinct participant mentioned the deep roots of the civil society in creating peace: *“The idea of this first phase is*

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to show that in Colombia, whether or not there are formal or more political peace agreements, civil society and grassroots communities have been organizing themselves and have had a history of peace initiatives for many years” (Interviewee 6). Another interesting point was coming up from a different participant: “When you realize that there are other organizations throughout the global south that have similar struggles, you feel accompanied and that allows you to be motivated to move forward with much more interest” (Interviewee 7).

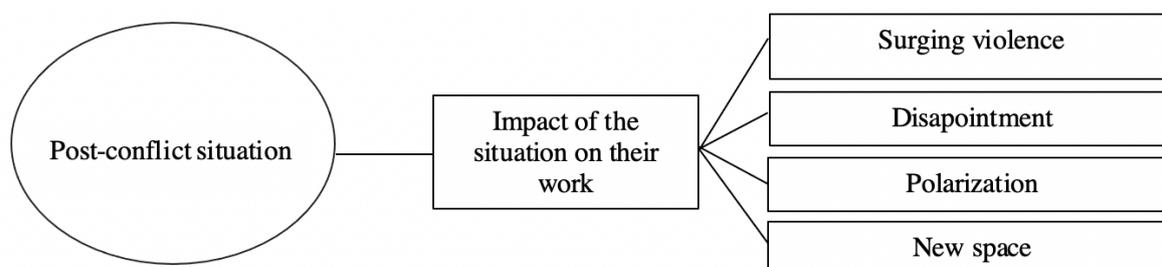
The ‘Need for more participation’ was incorporated as a fourth code regarding the perception of the Colombian civil society. A lack of participation was identified as a challenge obstructing the unfolding of the civil societies potential to build peace: “In general, we believe that this route of supporting civil society must be taken up again, that we, civil society, are also a guarantor of this peace agreement. And we are not going to give up in the construction of the same” (Interviewee 4).

6.3 The Post-Conflict Situation

The third objective was to gain a better understanding how the current post-conflict situation influences the work of local NGOs in Colombia. Thus, the next paragraph outlines the challenges and impacts the post-conflict situation poses for the NGOs. From the interviews it became clear that there is a dissatisfaction with the current government and its implementation of the peace accord. As the NGOs support the implementation of the peace agreement, not living up to the expectations from side of the government was criticized by all respondents. The main codes identified describing the impact of the post-conflict situation on the local NGOs are ‘Surging violence’, ‘Polarization’ ‘Disappointment’ and ‘New space’ (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Coding of ‘The Post-Conflict Situation’



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The first code ‘*Surging violence*’ refers to the general perception of the NGOs, characterizing the recent post-conflict period. However, mainly NGOs in rural areas mentioned it as direct threat to their work: *“Right now, we’re also having a lot of security obstacles. This was an area where we were very proud that, well, social leaders were getting killed in other parts of the country. It wasn’t happening here. This place was very safe until recently. And now there have been some death threats of social leaders here. And people now say that there are armed groups again. It’s really hard to know because there’s so many rumors, so it’s very hard to know what’s fact and what’s fiction”* (Interviewee 1). Another respondent explained that the surging violence has migrated to the daily life: *“I think that the same causes that existed before the agreement continue to be repeated. They are the same causes that continue to dynamize violence in the context of [name of city]. To give you an example, with respect to robberies, modalities have appeared that were not seen three or two years ago. (...), nowadays people do not feel safe in the street. [Name of city] had another type of violence that obeyed to specific actors such as self-defense groups, guerrillas, and public prisoners, but nowadays violence has migrated. To the citizenry (...) So since the signing of the agreement it has worsened, at least for [name of city]”* (Interviewee 5).

‘*Disappointment*’ was selected as a second code as it was reflected in all the narratives of the NGOs referring to the current post-conflict situation. However, the disappointment does not diminish the NGO's self-perception and ambition in building peace. On the contrary, it seems to strengthen their ambition and commitment: *“There is a conviction of the importance of peace in some regions, despite the lack of compliance and the resurgence of armed groups in the region (...). There is a willingness to continue working for peace. Unfortunately, there have already been many murders up until today, in addition to a thousand social leaders in the territory, since the signing of the peace agreement. This is affecting the conviction and will of the people to work for peace. That is why we continue to insist on calling the attention of the Colombian State to protect and guarantee the actions of the communities, ethnic, territorial and political organizations in the region”* (Interviewee 4).

The impact of the post-conflict situation on their work was additionally coded through ‘*Polarization*’, as a trend was visible in the answers of the respondents showing a dichotomy in the population's opinion regarding the peace agreement. This polarization emerges from the voting in the plebiscite prior to the agreement and splits between non-violent peacebuilding in contrast to military intervention. This effects the NGOs work which is associated with non-

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violent peacebuilding: *“I think that was a mistake, asking people to vote for the agreement, and then the 'no' vote won. And that the peace agreement continued. Because there is a large percentage of Colombians who feel defrauded and feel a high level of distrust. I believe that in the end this generated the polarization in which we find ourselves. The idea of the defenders of peace and the enemies of peace is not like yes and no. I do not believe that there are enemies of peace. I believe that there are groups that are interested in reaching peace in other ways. Surely, there are people who think that it was easier to reach peace by military means, for example”* (Interviewee 6). In this polarized society the NGOs try to maintain their neutrality and line of work, delimiting themselves from belonging to a side: *“Because we have tried as much as possible to maintain ourselves, that is, to be believers in peace, but not to be spokespersons for the signatories, nor for the national government, nor for the FARC, nor for the armed groups, but rather a civil society organization that believes that it is necessary to resolve conflicts through non-violent means. This is our concept of peace and the implementation of transitional justice”* (Interviewee 7).

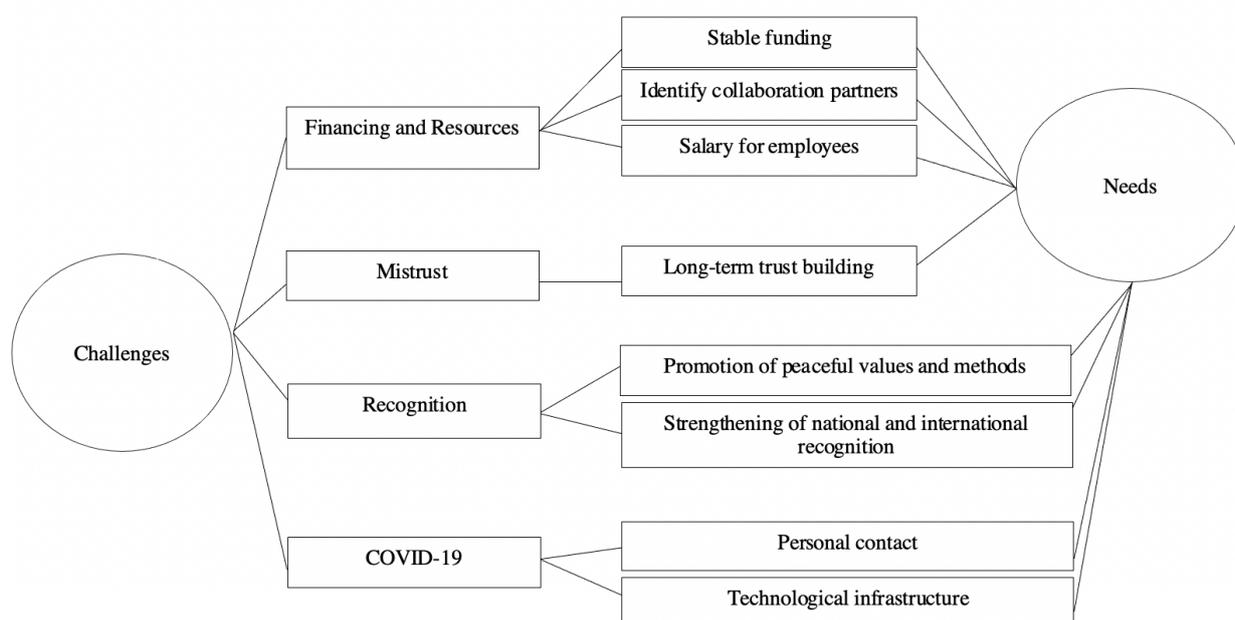
The code of ‘New Space’ was established to show that some of the respondents perceived the emergence of new opportunities through the implementation of the peace agreement: *“I believe that the organization has a new space in which to work thanks to the implementation of the agreement, a space in which to advocate. However, it was a space that already existed. But this space becomes wider when you create the system. In other words, when you create the integral system, the problems are not theorizing about a possible agreement, but recognizing the existing agreement and from there starting to work on implementation issues. I think that is what changed”* (Interviewee 7). Additionally, another respondent underlined the gained physical working space that supports the established space for a new discourse: *“Getting to these areas that were hardest hit by the conflict - before you couldn't go there. Before, they were areas that were immersed in the conflict or that were dominated by criminal structures and it was simply much more difficult to go there. Or it was much more difficult for their citizens to develop businesses or to develop enterprises. So, what has changed are the job possibilities. The possible keys to arrive with a new discourse, to support, to work calmly, so that these communities can also suddenly think of new ideas”* (Interviewee 6).

6.4 The Main Challenges and Needs in Building Peace

The last of the four objectives aims at understanding the NGO's needs and challenges, in connection to their impact and contribution to peacebuilding. Four different challenges were identified: *'Financing and Resources'*, *'Mistrust'*, *'Recognition'*, and *'COVID-19'*. Figure 5 illustrates the codes used to classify the needs emergent from the challenges, which, simultaneously part of the challenges.

Figure 5

Coding of 'The Main Challenges and Needs in Building Peace'



The first challenge was identified as **'Financing and Resources'**, which has four different codes presenting the needs evolving, namely: *'Stable funding'*, *'Identify collaboration partners'* and *'Salary for employees'*. The need coded as *'Stable funding'* constitutes a main challenge shared by all respondents: *"There's so much we could be doing if we had more resources (...), I mean, it's like you don't build trust on the first date. It's this long-term process. (...) And so for this FARC commander to say the only reason we're here is because we trust [name of the organization], that's so powerful and we could do so much more of that, if we had more financial resources. We could take more people. We could have more of these dialogues"* (Interviewee 4). Another NGO worker underlined the lack of financial resources by explaining

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that the approach to building peace, being long-term and time intensive, needs adequate resources, which often remains unrecognized by donors: *“We need to bring it to the attention of our partners, to the organizations in the territory, that our task is a very long-term cultural task of modifying social and political behaviors. Well, it does not attract much attention in terms of economic funding, but it is a task that must be continued”* (Interviewee 4). Another reason for the financial challenge was seen in a shift of attention towards more urgent topics: *“Mainly financial sustainability, economic resources, is a very big challenge for my work and for the social sector, for peace building. Because the funding interests are placed elsewhere at the moment: environment, economic recovery from the pandemic, humanitarian aid for Venezuelan migrants who are arriving in Colombia. So, the availability of resources for peacebuilding efforts is limited”* (Interviewee 6). Resulting from this challenge is the need for a more stable funding which goes along with the necessity to understand that peacebuilding is a process requiring long-term support.

Further, the code *‘Identify collaboration partners’* was established. This need emerges from the challenge of competition between the NGOs and other civil society actors (see *‘The Role of NGOs’*). One of the respondents stated that unequal demand and supply of international projects leads to competition between the NGOs to receive funding: *“An organization like ours can apply for 63 projects a year and out of those 63 it gets one, right? the rate of your success on those proposals is very low”* (Interviewee 6). Thus, the need to find collaboration partners on the international level to assure the funding and reduce the competition emerged.

Moreover, the code *‘Salary for employees’* was established, as many NGOs mentioned that the majority of their workers receive inadequate salaries to their workload or cannot be regularly employed in the first place. One of the respondents elaborated: *“This is a movement that has more than 99 percent, I would say most of its people, who are there are volunteers. Today, at the head of the movement there are three people who receive a salary, a constant payment for working for peace. The rest of the people are volunteers. So we have to convince them and we have to convince them, maintain their alliance and renew commitments and so you have to be always very innovative”* (Interviewee 4). Another interviewee added: *“They have really low salaries. I mean, it's ridiculous, if you compare even what our director earns, if you compare it, it's ridiculous. I mean, basically, people are almost volunteers. And yet, our staff would go out, leave at 5:00 in the morning, go to the top of these mountains, have to hike or take a motorcycle on these muddy roads or ride a donkey to get to these communities to*

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have meeting” (Interviewee 1). Out of this challenge originates the need of the NGOs to have the financial resources to pay adequate salaries to their employees.

As mentioned in previous chapters, the theme of **‘Mistrust’** challenges the relation between the NGOs and other civil society actors, as well as the government. One of the questioned NGO employees gave an example that reflects the deep intrenchment of mistrust in the social fabric in Colombia: *“When you enter Facebook today you can see the polarization and the comments and threats, that one cannot express their view because they threaten you on Twitter as they threaten social leaders. You have to understand that the problem is not only in the armed actors or in the citizenship, it is in our hearts” (Interviewee 5).* It is thus a crucial requirement for peacebuilding to create confidence: *“One characteristic of these communities is mistrust. They mistrust each other, they mistrust the state, they have mistrust of everything. And as long as there is mistrust, there cannot be interaction to have long-term projects. So one of the needs is, how do we get people to have confidence” (Interviewee 2).* Further, mistrust potentially demotivates their participants, which hampers the NGO's work: *“So the challenge is how to get the majority of people to participate. Because sometimes there is a risk, there is distrust, there is fatigue and there are people who are apathetic” (Interviewee 2).* As mistrust is challenging the discourse of the local Colombian NGOs, they need to work on trust building in the long run for successful peacebuilding.

‘Recognition’ on a national as well as international level is perceived by NGOs as a challenge. Especially the missing acknowledgement of the NGO's peacebuilding practices, revealed their vulnerability they felt in this topic. The feeling not to be taken into account in their work by the national government, and even experiencing stigmatization can have an impact on the further course of their motivation and engagement as peacebuilding actors. The codes *‘Promotion of peaceful values and methods’* and *‘Strengthening of national and international recognition’* underline the need for the NGOs practices of peacebuilding to be recognized and promoted: *“I believe that in terms of peace building, the country requires the recognition of these processes of construction from below. Because in the communities where this is known, it was possible to cease hostilities and even beyond the cessation of hostilities, to limit conflicts in a non-violent manner” (Interviewee 7).*

Another important challenge trending in the NGO's opinion are the recent effects of the **‘COVID-19’** pandemic. Referring to this theme are the codes of *‘Personal contact’* and

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'Technological infrastructure'. For the code *'Personal contact'* a quote was chosen to elaborate that a face-to-face connection to their beneficiaries is crucial for the NGO's work: *"A fundamental challenge at this time is how we adapt to the pandemic. When we do not have the presence of all the groups (...). Our work is very much in the heart of the people. It is how to combine and how to overcome this need of physical encounter"* (Interviewee 3). Another participant mentioned that maintaining contacts through networks is important as well: *"You find that many civil society organizations start to close because they don't find resources available for their work, which can be worrying because there are many organizations that have years of work with very robust methodologies and with a series of incredible learning, but I feel that this is lost a bit because there is no network"* (Interviewee 6).

The code *'Technological infrastructure'* underlines the need for more support in infrastructure and capacity regarding technology: *"The pandemic has also generated some important challenges in the direct work with the communities and has made us see that Internet connection, for example, which is a basic thing, is not so easy in many areas of the country where the technology gap is very high, it is not so easy to have these processes as rural people, because access is difficult (...) Well, imagine if it is impossible to see each other and a person cannot connect to a video call, it is much more difficult"* (Interviewee 6). The COVID-19 pandemic had recent effects on the NGO's work, confronting them with new challenges in their work of peacebuilding. Therefore, the needs for more technological support and personal contact emerge as crucial requirements to continue their work.

7. Discussion of the Findings and Conclusion

Building up on the thematic analysis of the interviews, this discussion aims to highlight the key findings, to answer the research question concerning the current challenges and needs of local Colombian NGOs, and what keeps them from being empowered peacebuilding actors. Furthermore, the results are interpreted, and the assumption, that, although local Colombian NGOs play an important role in peacebuilding, they lack inclusion in the peacebuilding process as valuable actors, is discussed. Afterwards, the results are related to the scholarly work surveyed in the literature review, highlighting new insights and possible consequences for theory and practice. A concluding paragraph outlines the limitations of the study and the potential opening for further research.

Starting with the summary of the key findings, the sub-research questions are matched with the key objectives and answered in order of the latter. Therefore, the results are presented and interpreted in the following part. The aim of the first key objective was to establish how local NGOs construct peacebuilding, with a particular focus on their relationships with conflict-affected population groups. The sub-question concerning this objective was ‘How do NGOs construct peacebuilding in the daily work with their participants?’. This objective is significant in developing a thorough understanding of the way NGOs operate as peacebuilding actors, which is later related back to the challenges and needs emerging from it. The respondents unitedly had a non-violent approach to peacebuilding, characterised by a general understanding, incorporating social values such as democracy and equality, but also values related to spirituality and ethics such as connectedness and mutual understanding. The NGOs shared a common perception in constructing peace from the bottom-up, focused on creating peaceful relationships. Moreover, the NGOs consider themselves as independent actors, constructing their methodology and activities themselves, with their motivation primarily derived from their personal involvement or experience of the conflict. They also share the perception of peacebuilding as a long-term, constantly evolving process, which does not rely on a clearly defined objective or resolution. The data suggests that the NGOs mainly work with conflict-affected population groups in the most rural and vulnerable areas of the country. Important in the relation with their participants are the establishment of mutual trust and close listening to their needs. The NGOs see this as crucial to provide support in empowering the people's potential. For the creation of peace, a convergence in the NGO's use of activities was

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visible, ranging from a cultural nature, including art, dance, music, and sports, to education and the establishment of constructive dialogues. The activities are used to transfer values of peace such as reconciliation, and trust. Particularly trust was mentioned as the most vital value to non-violently establish peaceful relations. This analysis supports the theory by Lederach as he understands peacebuilding pursuing the transformation of relationships, and discourses of conflict, incorporating social empowerment of communities as a way of life, and commitment rather than an outcome or result (Lederach, 1997). The NGOs emphasize their work in building peaceful relationships between their participants, creating constructive dialogues to shape the discourse of conflict towards a more peaceful encounter and mutual understanding. Perceiving their work as a long-term commitment which is focused on progress, instead of being outcome oriented also demonstrates a correspondence between the research and theory. In addition, the results indicate that the local NGOs perceive themselves as empowered in their peacebuilding work. As defined in chapter 3. 5, empowerment can be understood as process of transformation towards the self-awareness of being a competent actor including confidence and capacity (Rowlands, 1995). The presentation of their working practices and understanding of themselves as peacebuilding actors certainly confirms a self-awareness on their competence and peacebuilding capacity.

Secondly, the study aimed at assessing how local NGOs perceive their contribution to peacebuilding, posing the sub-questions how the relation to other actors is constituted and what the self-perception of their impact as peacebuilding agents is. Summarizing the main findings, it can be stated that the NGO's relations to other peacebuilding actors in the Colombian post-conflict situation such as the government, other civil society organization and international donors are on the one hand characterized by already established networks and the wish for more cooperation, and on the other hand by mistrust, competition, scepticism and clashing ideals. The connection to other civil society actors was especially described as competitive because of many existing organizations which thus compete for limited resources such as donor support or projects. Mistrust which has been established over many years of armed conflict was named as a main factor for the existence of many organizations. Relations with the government were perceived as difficult and characterized by scepticism and mistrust on both sides. Some NGOs had successful collaborations with the government, however, showed awareness that this might be the exceptional case. Despite the challenging relation the NGOs expressed the wish for more cooperation. In terms of international donors, the findings indicate

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a scarce landscape of cooperation, leading to competition. Further, the NGOs and the international donors had different approaches to peacebuilding which complicated their collaboration. While the NGOs rather understand peacebuilding as process oriented, international donors were mentioned to be more focused on results and compliance with their methodologies. Relating to this, the NGOs wished for more attention of their practices. The NGOs consistently understand themselves as powerful and committed peacebuilding agents. Yet, when asked about their understanding of the Colombian civil society, they felt stigmatized by the population and the government for their non-violent approach to peacebuilding which is commonly associated with an approximation to the guerilla. Relating to that, a lack of participation by the civil society in the implementation of the peace accord was perceived, which was mentioned as a limiting factor to the unfolding of civil societies' potential to build peace. Correlating the studies' findings to Lederach's theory, they support his idea that middle-range actors take a crucial role in creating peaceful relationships because they can relate to both, the grassroots and leadership level. In the examined case of Colombian, NGOs maintained relations in both directions, however, while their connection to the grassroots level seemed well established, the one to the leadership was confronted by mistrust, ignorance and scepticism. The data on the perception of the NGOs impact and contribution can be discussed with regards to the 'relational level' of empowerment by Rowlands, which she understands as the development of skills needed to negotiate and influence the nature of relationships (Rowlands, 1995). Supplementary, the definition of empowerment incorporates the understanding of power relations of involved actors and the gaining of awareness about own interests in relation to those of others. Concerning this definition, the results indicate that the local NGOs in the Colombian post-conflict context are aware of their interests and how these relate to the ones of other actors involved in the Colombian peacebuilding process. However, the power relations in Colombia are complex and as the data suggests, the NGOs only have limited skills to negotiate and influence relationships because of prevailing hurdles such as mistrust and competition that keep them from establishing more stable alliances and networks. Hence, they cannot be regarded as fully empowered in this sense.

The third objective is heading for an evaluation of the impact from the post-conflict situation on their work and the challenges it brings. The belonging sub-questions aim to examine how NGOs perceive their role in the post-conflict peacebuilding situation and in how the post-conflict situation influences their work. Answering to the question in which ways the

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post-conflict situation impacts their work, mixed perceptions were revealed by the analysis. Particularly rural NGOs felt the surging violence impacting their work in the sense that some reunions cannot take place anymore and the uncertainty complicates further planning of activities. A latent trend in the opinions was visible that disappointment about the implementation of the peace agreement paradoxically is empowering and strengthening their work. Despite persisting structural problems and their criticism, the NGOs are insisting on the importance of peacebuilding from the grassroots. Further, they perceive the polarization of the population around the question how to reach peace – by violent or non-violent methods – that has emerged since the plebiscite for the peace agreement, as impactful on their work. This discussion coerces them to clarify their position and agenda, which seems a burden to their activities. On the contrary, some respondents shared the view that the post-conflict situation created new working spaces, not only regarding the discourse and narrative, but also physical space of territories where it is now safe to work. Hence, in the post-conflict situation the NGOs feel empowered to continue with non-violent peacebuilding from the bottom-up. Lederach's framework for peacebuilding includes the transformation of a conflict which means moving towards a peaceful environment by transforming relationships, and discourses of conflict (Lederach, 1997). In the context of Colombia, local NGOs use a peacebuilding approach that focuses on transforming the relationships and mindsets of the people from the grassroots sharing the perception that this has the greatest effect transforming the discourse. Regarding the NGO's work in the post-conflict situation linked to the definition of empowerment, which entails the achievement of working together to achieve a broader impact than one entity would have alone, the results demonstrate a lack of empowerment. In the post-conflict situation polarization and disappointment seem to concern the NGOs, which on the one hand reveals their motivation and strength they have to stay committed in their task. On the other hand, this underlines the division of the different actors in their views and approaches, making a collaboration amongst them rather challenging.

The fourth objective has a more general perspective which aims to answer the main research question – which challenges and needs local Colombian NGOs face that keep them from being empowered peacebuilding actors. Therefore, the previously discussed findings of the key objectives are also considered. The data suggests that key needs and challenges of local Colombian NGOs lay within long-term trust building relating to prevailing mistrust in all relations of the NGOs. Also, a lack of funding could be identified as a main challenge,

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restricting the unfolding of the NGO's full potential in developing peacebuilding activities. The need for stable funding also concerns the challenge to adequately pay their employees. The results further indicate that the NGO's self-perceived role in civil society and in relation to other peacebuilding actors, incorporates competition which diminishes the effectiveness of their work, creating an uncollaborative climate. The need for more cooperative relationships with all actors was articulated. In alignment to this, the NGOs emphasized their need to be recognized as part of the whole peace process and to be supported on both a national and international level. Reflecting on the current post-conflict situation, surging violence, and disappointment regarding the implementation of the peace agreement challenges the NGO's work and the need for support in their role emerged. The study also demonstrates a correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and rising challenges for the local Colombian NGOs. Emphasis was put on the access to technology, for both the NGOs and their beneficiaries, to maintain personal contact and carry on their work.

Overall, the results are in line with the assumption underlying this research, that NGOs are essential actors in peacebuilding on the local level in the Colombian context. Their broad scope of roles inherent in their work ranges from educating about peaceful practices, connecting people in constructive dialogues to help them understand each other's perspectives, creating awareness about their rights and opportunities. Particularly the empowerment and strengthening of capacity of the most vulnerable population groups for instance women and farmers, by giving those a voice who have been extremely affected by the armed conflict and consequently marginalized is key. However, the local NGOs lack inclusion in the national peacebuilding agenda and attention of their work. The findings show that challenges such as the recognition of their peacebuilding practices persist, which keep them from being fully empowered as peacebuilding actors. Thus, despite applying similar methods of peacebuilding, the interviewed NGOs have not been able to establish an agenda that connects them, uniting their efforts in a shared strategy. Despite the articulation of feeling unprotected, stigmatized and polarized in their work, the emerging wish for more collaboration demonstrates the persistence and commitment of the NGOs to peacebuilding, underlining the importance and potential they could have as empowered peacebuilding actors. This strong resistance despite all the challenges underlines the dedication and motivation of the NGOs to build peace. The NGOs approach to peacebuilding is mostly concordant with Lederach's theory of conflict transformation, however, diverges in some respects. Seeking to transform relationships and

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narratives of the conflict in relationships through activities was a shared approach of the NGOs. Through their immanent context understanding and experience they have developed the infrastructure for empowerment and recognition of otherwise underprivileged population groups. Further, they take an active role in local peacebuilding, understanding it as a commitment and way of life. However, despite having a similar approach to peacebuilding, the local Colombian NGOs do not share a common agenda to work on the transformation of conflict towards one vision of peacebuilding, as Lederach suggest (Lederach, 1997). Additionally, his theory understands mid-level actors as having a crucial role in creating peaceful relationships because of their agile position in between the leadership and grassroots level. The findings of this study show, however, that while the NGOs maintain close relationships to the grassroots level, the top-actors connection is limited. Through ignorance from side of the government towards the articulation of the society's problems, combined with mutual mistrust of each other's peacebuilding practices, a scepticism has spread that affects the top-actors connection. The NGO's narrative also criticised the government's pursue of a liberal peace approach, including their alliance with large companies and the lack of support on the implementation of the peace accord, disregarding the local population's issues. This contrasts Lederach's model, which sees the potential of mid-level actors particularly in their neutral position and ability to represent different interests because they are respected by the people and know about their necessities, which key leadership actors can benefit from. Their network to a wide range of actors, also in opposition to the government, makes them valuable partners to top-actors in transforming the relations of enemies (Lederach, 1997). In the Colombian case it seems that the government is reluctant to make use of this support. From side of the NGOs the wish for more collaboration was articulated, yet, a reserved attitude was latently communicated, at least towards the current government. Relating the findings to the theoretical approach of empowerment, the NGOs perceive themselves as powerful peacebuilding actors with high dedication and motivation to serve the process and rich experience and success stories to be presented. Yet, they are not able to fully unfold this power because of the missing support and recognition by top level actors. Further, the results can be connected to the academic discussion on local peacebuilding. The NGO's expression of the wish for more collaboration and need for stable funding by international organizations supports Oliver Richmond's research regarding a more hybrid approach to peacebuilding which incorporates a local and international perspective as they can benefit each other. However, it should be key to

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protect the NGO's vision and approach to peacebuilding. Richmond and Mac Ginty argue that the liberal approach to peacebuilding, which was applied in the implementation of the Colombian peace agreement, is overlooking local actors in peacebuilding processes (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2012). The feeling of not being recognized and feeling unprotected articulated by the NGOs, corresponds to their research, however their commitment and conviction of being powerful in their work should also be considered. The local against the neoliberalist peacebuilding standards is often discussed in literature (Richmond, 2012a; Mac Ginty, 2010; Suhrke, 2007), yet, as Autesserre states, the opposing ideals of liberal and local peace should not be oversimplified as they otherwise undermine the heterogeneity of local actors (Autesserre, 2014). The case of Colombia showed the opposition of the NGOs towards the approach to peacebuilding by top-level actors such as the government but also international donors, but as this research represents a constructivist multi-layered vision of the reality by the NGOs, simplifying them to make a statement would undermine their diversity. Additionally, the results support the study of Abozaglo, who examined the role of NGOs in Colombia and stated the need for more collaboration between them to successfully influence the peace agenda and have a stronger weight in decision making processes also on the national level (Abozaglo, 2009). As her research dates back to before the peace agreement, the findings give a more up-to-date perspective on the post-conflict situation, confirming that the need for more collaboration still persists.

Considering the results on a practical level, the following implications emerge: When considering how to move on in the peacebuilding agenda in Colombia, regarding the implementation of the peace agreement in particular, NGOs should be taken into account. The interviews showed that the local Colombian NGOs perceive themselves as capable actors in peacebuilding with established methodologies and years of experience working closely together with conflict affected population groups in rural areas where little state presence exist. This gives them the possibility to support the implementation of the peace agreement on a local level which is more difficult for the government to reach. Despite existing challenges, the NGOs have broadly contributed to peacebuilding from the bottom-up, sometimes in collaboration with other civil society organizations, as their narrative outlines. However, it became clear that they need more recognition and support to unfold their full potential. As the NGOs mentioned, they have great hopes in the new government to dedicate more efforts to implement the accord. This could open new possibilities for collaboration and support.

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Regarding this study, certain limitations arose. In its nature, the characteristic of the qualitative research limits the generalizability of the results. However, the results of this qualitative research are very valuable as they provide an in-depth vision on the entity of NGOs in the Colombian post-conflict. They could be joined by future studies applying a mixed method approach to complement them with statistical data. Because of their involvement in the conflict, the subjectivity of interviewees needs to be mentioned. However, as this thesis applies a constructivist approach it is not looking for an objective truth but instead aims to present a complex multi-layered reality which is perceived by different actors from different points of view. The sample selection of this research depicts a wide range of local NGOs which find themselves in different locations of the country and are specialised in the work of peacebuilding with various disadvantaged population groups. Including further geographical areas and focus groups would certainly add interesting insights. Future research could add to this study, by considering the views of the population, the government or international organizations, to get a perspective on other realities of the post-conflict situation, adding to the NGO's narratives. A comparative country analysis, using a second case to compare it to Colombia could additionally add valuable insights. As the relationships to other civil society actors were challenged by mistrust and competition but also successful collaborations were mentioned, further studies should examine the successful ones to draw conclusions for building a common agenda of peacebuilding by the NGOs in the future. Saturation of data was not ultimately reached with regards to the relation between NGOs and international donors. Hence, future research could contribute interesting perspectives how a successful collaboration could be established incorporating the different approaches to peacebuilding. Inductively emerging from the interviews was a difference between the rural and urban NGOs in their work of peacebuilding, which would be stimulating to explore in future studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: *Model of the Confidentiality Agreement.*

Formato de consentimiento informado para entrevista

Empoderamiento de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales locales enfocadas en la
construcción de paz, desde el entorno del posconflicto en Colombia

PALACKY UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC

Departamento de Desarrollo y Ciencias del Medio Ambiente

Investigadora: Jessica Malinowski

Información para participantes

Gracias por considerar participar en este estudio que se llevará a cabo desde/a partir de marzo. La presente hoja de información describe el propósito del estudio y proporciona una descripción tanto de su participación como de sus derechos como participante.

1. ¿De qué se trata esta investigación?

La presente investigación tiene como fin estudiar la labor de las ONGs locales que trabajan para la construcción de paz en medio del contexto del postconflicto colombiano después de los Acuerdos de Paz. El objetivo de esta investigación es entender los retos y necesidades a los cuales una ONG se enfrenta en el momento de trabajar por la construcción de paz.

2. ¿Debe usted hacer parte de esta investigación?

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Su participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. Usted no tiene que participar si no lo desea. En el caso contrario que usted decida participar, Yo, Jessica Malinowski, le pediré que firme un formato de consentimiento informado, el cual usted podrá firmar y devolver antes de empezar con la entrevista.

3. ¿Cuál será su participación?

Su participación será requerida en una entrevista que indagará sobre su experiencia trabajando en una ONG para la construcción de paz en Colombia. La entrevista tiene un estimado de duración de aproximadamente una hora y se realizará a través de plataformas digitales como Zoom / Skype. Es importante mencionar que para mí investigación resulta fundamental poder recordar con el mayor detalle posible la información que me fue compartida por usted, motivo por el cual la entrevista será grabada y transcrita. A continuación, encontrará más información sobre la confidencialidad de los datos.

4. ¿Cómo retirarse del estudio?

En el caso en el que usted decida cambiar de opinión, puede retirarse de la investigación en cualquier momento que lo considere pertinente, sin necesidad de brindar explicación alguna. Si durante la entrevista alguna pregunta lo hace sentir incómodo, no es necesario que conteste. Retirarse de la investigación no lo afectará a usted de ninguna manera. En el caso usted decida retirarse, Yo, Jessica Malinowski, no retendré la información que usted me habrá proporcionado hasta el momento, a menos de que usted me autorice a hacerlo.

5. ¿Para qué será usada su información?

La información que usted decida proporcionarme será usada para la investigación de tesis de maestría. La información y sus datos personales se harán anónimos en el documento final. La tesis de mi maestría será cargada en la plataforma digital del Departamento de Desarrollo y Ciencias del Medio Ambiente de la Universidad Palacky en República Checa.

6. ¿Se mantendrá la confidencialidad de su participación y mis datos? ¿Será anonimizado?

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Los registros de esta investigación se mantendrán en el mayor nivel de confidencialidad posible. Solo mi supervisor de tesis y yo, Jessica Malinowski, tendremos acceso a los archivos transcritos y de audio que resulten de estas entrevistas. Sus datos serán anonimizados (Es decir, su nombre no será utilizado en ningún informe o publicación que resulte de este estudio). Todos los archivos digitales, transcripciones y resúmenes que sean elaborados recibirán códigos y se almacenarán por separado de cualquier nombre u otra identificación directa de los participantes. Cualquier copia impresa de la información de este estudio se mantendrá en archivos bloqueados en todo momento.

7. ¿Qué sucede si usted tiene alguna pregunta o queja?

En el caso en el que usted tenga alguna pregunta sobre este estudio, comuníquese con la investigadora, Jessica Malinowski, al correo jessica-malinowski@web.de.

Si usted desea participar en esta investigación, firme este documento y por favor envíelo de vuelta a mi correo electrónico (jessica-malinowski@web.de) o puede simplemente enviarme su consentimiento en un correo electrónico.

Al firmar este documento, acepto que:

1. Participo voluntariamente en este proyecto. Entiendo que participar no es una obligación y puedo detener la entrevista en cualquier momento;
2. La entrevista transcrita o extractos de la misma pueden usarse tal como se describe anteriormente en este mismo documento;
3. He leído el presente formulario de consentimiento de la entrevista;
4. No espero recibir ningún beneficio o pago por mi participación en la investigación;
5. He podido hacer cualquier pregunta con respecto a la investigación y entiendo que soy libre de contactar a la investigadora con cualquier pregunta que me pueda surgir en el futuro.

Firma del participante, fecha

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Appendix 2. Interview Questions.

Starting the interview: General questions about the participants

1. Could you quickly introduce yourself
 - a. *Where are you from?*
 - b. *What is your job about?*

PART I: Background – How do NGOs work

2. What was the motivation for the organization to start its work?
3. Which is the specific goal of your organization you want to reach?
 - a. *How do you want to achieve it? strategy?*
4. What are the characteristics of the people you work with?
 - a. *Why is especially this group in your focus? (find out about characteristics)*
 - b. *What are their primary needs?*
 - c. *Could you tell me a bit more how this looks in practice? How you approach them and work together with them?*

PART II: Perception of their work in peacebuilding – Which role do NGOs take in peacebuilding?

5. When you think about your work, could you tell me how you perceive the influence/ impact it has?
 - a. *Could you name me some of the areas where you think your influence is being felt most?*
 - b. *Could you tell me a bit more how this looks in practice?*
 - c. *Where would you like to create more impact?*
6. For the work you do - where do you take the inspiration from?
 - a. *Do you develop your ideas and projects yourself or search for orientation in national or international guidelines or work together with other organizations?*
7. What are values you perceive as most important in your work?
8. What does peacebuilding mean to you personally?
9. In an ideal world, who should participate in creating peace?

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10. How do you perceive the space of civil society in Colombia?
 - a. *What characterizes the space?*
11. What is your relationship with other actors?
 - a. *Where do you see yourself as an NGO compared to other actors? (collaboration, competition?) Which are the NGOs you relate with?*
 - b. *How is the collaboration set with international organizations/ donors?*
 - c. *What is your perception of the relation between NGOs and the government?*

PART III: Challenges in peacebuilding – For empowerment of local agency

12. Could you name me some of the areas in which you are currently facing challenges in?
 - a. *What are the challenges in the work with your participants? (connecting to them)*
13. If you could, in which areas do you wish to get more support? (From whom?)

PART IV: Impact of the post-conflict time on the work of NGOs (perceptions)

14. How do you perceive the current post-conflict situation after the signing of the peace agreement?
 - a. *How do you relate to it?*
 - b. *What were your first steps as an organization after the signing of the peace agreement?*
 - c. *Did the agreement have an impact on the context your participants are facing? Which changes from prior to post agreement did you notice?*
 - d. *How do you experience your work since the signing of the peace agreement? what has changed for you in particular (Work with participants, your strategies, different values, more work?)*
 - e. *How do you relate to these changes?*
15. How do you perceive your role as an NGO in the current post-conflict situation?
16. When you imagine Colombia in 10 years' time – how do you see it in relation to the building of peace?