

# Decolonising design in peacebuilding contexts



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*This paper explores how transdisciplinary design approaches can contribute to peacebuilding. Ways of decolonising workshops to create trust and ensure sensitizing, dialogic and meaningful experiences for participants, to enable them to envision interethnic and intercultural forms of being and becoming, are discussed. The participants were indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants living in northern Cauca, Colombia, an area prioritized for peacebuilding. Challenges faced included: integrating written and oral forms of communication; revising and deconstructing the design tools; and overcoming colonized notions of time and futures. We argue that transdisciplinary design methods and interventions have the potential to contribute to peacebuilding but need to be constantly decolonised and consider what the future means for communities affected by conflict.*

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Design is going through a paradigm shift whereby the shared beliefs according to which it functions and its very foundations, both in theory and practice, are being questioned. Although the role and scope of the designer have long been discussed (Papanek, 1985), it is only relatively recently that design has accepted responsibility for its direct impact on the world, including social structures (Escobar, 2017, 2018; Fry, 1999, 2011; Maze, 2019). Progressive design approaches can be broadly grouped under

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the umbrellas of Social Innovation (Manzini, 2015), and the more recent Transition Design and Critical Design (Irwin, 2015). These understandings of design, however, remain primarily theoretical, with impact on ‘real world’ practice still in an infant stage, as widespread neoliberal paradigms result in resistance to new ‘ways of doing things’. This raises the question: How best to create positive design experiences where they are most needed, such as in contexts shaped by violence, precarity, poverty or dispossession?

With few exceptions, there is limited knowledge on the role of design within peacebuilding processes (Miklian & Hoelscher, 2018). This paper makes an important contribution to the literature by addressing the following questions: Which forms of design generate dialogic and meaningful experiences for participants in peacebuilding processes? How can design contribute to envisioning plural forms of being and becoming in peacebuilding situations? In which ways can designers avoid reproducing neo-colonial, state-centred, Eurocentric design frameworks in communities struggling with peacebuilding uncertainties? How can design workshops become transformative experiences that empower interethnic and intercultural communities to envision different peacemaking processes?

In this paper we analyse our experiences of conducting design workshops in the context of peacebuilding in Colombia. After decades of civil war and violence, a Peace Agreement was signed by the Colombian government and FARC-EP in 2016. This agreement adopts a territorial approach that recognizes the economic, cultural and social needs of communities, with the aim of generating socio-environmental sustainability and peace through the active participation of citizens (Acuerdo Final, 2016). As part of a wider project on territorial peacebuilding, workshops were organised for indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants from three municipalities in northern Cauca, Colombia, a region severely affected by armed conflict that is currently engaged in peacebuilding. Our analysis draws on ethnographic participant observation, group discussions, dialogic conversations, interactive activities, graphic creations, poetic composition and ritualized bodily interactions from the workshops.

The first part of the paper highlights critical and decolonial approaches to design. Subsequently, we present our methodological approach and experiences from two workshop types, highlighting their preparation, design and facilitation. In the discussion we focus on key challenges faced while attempting to decolonise the workshops, including integrating written and oral forms of communication, revising and deconstructing the design tools, and overcoming colonized notions of time and futures, before concluding on how design interventions can contribute to peacebuilding.

## *1 Decolonising design*

Although commercial mainstream design continues to be primarily concerned with designing everyday artefacts, recognition is growing that design can contribute to sustainable development transitions by moving beyond technical and product-centric focussed solutions towards large-scale system level changes (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy, 2016; Cooper, 2019). Acting as facilitators and catalysers of multidisciplinary processes of transition (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Thackara, 2006), designers can support communities in innovative ways to improve their lives and environment. Focussing on the quality of interactions and the overall experience, alongside more inclusive, meaningful and transdisciplinary ways of operating, adds greater social value and frames design within holistic sustainability considerations (Irwin, 2015). This is important given claims that design is a political anthropocentric project, ontologically implicated in the making of unsustainable futures (Fry, 2011).

As critical designers argue, design is always ideological, shaped by the values, modes of seeing and world views of designers (Fry, 2011; Lloyd, 2019; Malpass, 2013). Even critical perspectives, however, have been challenged for reproducing colonial prescriptive views on what people should aspire to imagine or change (Escobar, 2017, 2018; Light, 2018; Prado de & Martins, 2014; Schultz et al., 2018; Tlostanova, 2017; Tunstall, 2013). Colonial precepts are implicit in design's notion of time (understood as a linear process) and in the concept of future as something that is ahead, which can be shaped and anticipated. Decolonial design perspectives show how class, racial, gender and spatial privileges constantly shape design processes (Prado de & Martins, 2014). As Escobar argues, designers need to incorporate diverse temporalities, heterogenous communities and pluriverse visions, and acknowledge 'design's relation to histories of colonialism and imperialism, its functioning within the modern/colonial matrix of power, the geopolitics of knowledge (Eurocentrism), racism, and patriarchal capitalist colonial modernity' (Escobar, 2018, p. 140).

Scholars of the Decolonising Design Group propose differentiating between design that devalues human and non-human natures, from design that facilitates alternative modes of being and becoming (Schultz et al., 2018). Decolonising design highlights the need to think beyond modernity to challenge how design naturalizes artificiality, warning that designers, with their tools and mapping techniques, face the danger of 'unmapping plurality' (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 85). Rather than fitting comfortably within existing ways of thinking and institutions, designers should reject academic colonial frameworks that focus on prescriptions oriented to problem-solving solutions and engage in processes of un-learning and re-learning (Schultz et al., 2018). As Tlostanova claims, decolonial design needs to move beyond mere participatory perspectives to create 'a design grounded in the economy of happiness, meaning, first

of all, an emotionally and spiritually plentiful and fulfilling life, rather than individual material success and ruthless competition with others for this success' (Tlostanova, 2017, p. 5). Designers' positionalities often go unacknowledged, even though they influence the design process in profound ways, from the identification and framing of the problem through to the type of solutions envisioned (Irwin, 2015; Maze, 2019; Schultz et al., 2018). Throughout this paper, we examine how our value systems and positionalities shaped the processes of creating and facilitating the workshops, and how our attempts at decolonising faced multiple political, gendered, ethno-racial, class and age challenges, as well as opportunities.

## 2 *Developing peacebuilding design methodologies*

The workshops were developed by a multidisciplinary team of designers, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists and popular educators based in Colombia and the UK. The overall aim of the project was to understand and strengthen the organizational capacities of communities in the municipalities of Miranda, Corinto and Buenos Aires in relation to the implementation of the Peace Agreement (Acuerdo Final, 2016). Project members co-created and implemented a certified Diploma from the University of Valle, Cali on 'Territorial Planning for Peacebuilding', which targeted indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants from the three study areas. Importantly, the local researchers already had well established relationships of trust with the selected communities. Prior to the workshops, public meetings were held in the three municipalities to discuss the content of the Diploma, during which the criteria for selection of participants were mutually agreed.

The Department of Cauca has long been affected by violence. Its colonial past includes the violent process of enslavement of indigenous people and Afrodescendants, who were forced off the flat and better connected agricultural areas of the Cauca river valley into the hills by the *hacienda* farming model introduced by creole (*criollo*) elites (Taussig, 1978). During the 20th century, the expansion of the sugarcane industry resulted in new cycles of dispossession of traditional means of life for the local rural population (Vélez-Torres et al., 2019). This century was also a period of salient, indigenous, Afrodescendant and peasant resistance, with important organizations emerging, including *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (CRIC), *Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca* (ACIN), *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia* (ANUC) and *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (PCN)<sup>1</sup> (LeGrand, 2016). Since the 1980s, the drug trafficking economy has added complexity to land access and disputes over territorial control between various armed actors (Acevedo, 2014). The process of laying down arms by M-19 guerrillas in 1990 generated hope for change, followed more recently by the Peace Agreement with FARC-EP guerrillas.

It was in this context that our workshops aimed to facilitate dialogic interactions among actors who share experiences of violence but have different, sometimes clashing, territorial projects and practices. Acting as the opening activities of the Diploma, the project team developed design-led workshops that sought to foster the mutual sensitization and recognition of who the participants are, revealing their similarities and differences, paving the way for envisioning collective and inclusive territorial projects for well-being. By moving away from problem-solving approaches, the workshops facilitated a process of sensitization (Light, 2018) that allows participants to recognize and create alternative ways of imagining, being and becoming within their territories. Integrating knowledge, skills and experiences from our respective disciplines, the workshops sought to assemble transdisciplinary ways of doing design in a context shaped by violence, economic inequity and structural racism.

### *2.1 Designing peacebuilding workshops*

For over 60 years, policy makers, researchers and social actors have been designing and implementing a wide range of methodologies in order to manage, understand and transform conflict to contribute to peacemaking. Michael Lund (2001) outlined a wide range of tools for managing conflict and supporting peacebuilding processes, identifying workshops as a common technique for conflict transformation. Such workshops are designed to create safe spaces where participants can express their concerns, motivations and fears, and create collaborative relationships. Although there are many different kinds of peacebuilding workshops, including ‘problem-solving’ (Kelman, 2015), ‘sustained dialogue’ (Saunders, 2009) and ‘change lab’ (Senge et al., 2004) workshops, they adopt a similar rationalist orientation and focus on finding solutions to conflict. While top-down peacebuilding approaches have been widely criticized (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mac Ginty 2015), even newly launched bottom-up peacebuilding strategies continue to be conceived and led from northern, white, literate and Eurocentric rationales and institutions.

We attempted to deal with these shortcomings in two ways. First, by acknowledging the long-term struggles of social organizations, recognizing their land issues, productivity and inter-cultural dialogue. Second, by starting with their shared notions of territoriality, life and visions for territorial planning to build peace. Consequently, we focussed attention away from conflict towards envisioning alternative ways of building territories. A range of participatory methods and activities were incorporated into our design perspectives. Appreciative Inquiry approaches, which concentrate on imagination and encourage participants to consider ‘What might be?’ (Bojer et al., 2006, p. 10), were articulated with co-design participatory tools, including Community Canvas activities and templates (Community Canvas, 2017), stakeholder maps, and Design for Happiness cards (Escobar-Tello, 2016). Intercultural-identity methods (Nagle, 2014; Schirch, 2005) that focus on the experience of building

shared identities among actors engaged in conflict, who hold different cultural values, perceptions and communication practices, were also included. Brief ritual activities were incorporated into the workshops to allow participants to communicate in alternative forms. We remained aware, however, that rituals may be problematic as they can reify hierarchies and create tensions among participants who have different cultural and religious backgrounds (Schirch, 2005).

Social cartography methods, in which participants produce graphic representations of people, infrastructures, social relations, conflicts, natural resources and production activities, were also included (Bastidas & Gonzales, 2009; Habegger & Mancila, 2006). These methods have proven to be effective in uncovering and envisioning unforeseen linkages between spaces, bodies, environments and emotions. Artistic practices, involving drawing, song and poetry composition, were incorporated into the workshops to provide participants with space to express and share their perspectives, opinions, feelings and ideas, and listen to alternative points of view. Overall, our aim was for participants to communicate through different media (written, oral, bodily, graphic) in order to initiate a process of sensitization so they could start to know and trust each other. We aimed to articulate these participatory methods from a decolonising perspective, trying as far as possible to deconstruct and critically question the presence and reproduction of colonial categories, interactions, epistemologies and ontological positions.

Two types of workshops were developed (see Table 1), both of which were day-long events. The first workshops, entitled ‘Knowing and recognizing ourselves

**Table 1 Workshop structure and activities.**

<i>Preparation</i>	<i>Workshop 1</i>	<i>Review meetings</i>	<i>Workshop 2</i>	<i>Evaluation meetings</i>
Community visits to inform about project	Introduction	Summarize information from workshops	Introduction	Assessment of experiences and outcomes
Invitation of participants	Identity	Reassess communication strategies	Revision and presentation of workshop summaries	Identification of colonizing effects
Selecting relevant topics from Community Canvas	Rituals and traditions	Adjust visual material	Visualize common purposes	Discussion on data sharing and storage
Revising questions and Design for Happiness cards	Lived and emotional experiences	Re-evaluate security	Sustainable needs and aspirations	Analysis and writing strategy
Logistics and budgeting	Mapping actors		Imagining futures	Media interviews
	Needs, barriers and actions		Closure: mapping projects on territories	
	Closure: song/poem presentation			

in the territory’, were conducted at the University of Valle with indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants from across the three territories. Our goal was to ensure that participants could interact in a trusting dialogic space in order to identify their common (and different) goals, projects, barriers and actions. It was crucial that participants, especially those who had been threatened by armed groups or were victims of violence, could dialogue in a secure space to imagine a future without the potential censorship and surveillance of other groups. In these first workshops, the following questions were explored: Who we are as a collective? What are our purposes, goals and values? What are our needs and aspirations? Which barriers do we face and what actions could be taken? Which organizations and institutions could support our actions?

The second workshop type, entitled ‘Imagining and territorializing peaceful futures’, was conducted in the three study territories. Participants were brought together in a community space in order to promote creative encounters for imagining and designing alternative collective and decolonised notions of futures (Fry, 2011). The main questions guiding these workshops were: What if the existing barriers were removed? How can we draw on our common experiences and knowledge to create alternative holistic futures in alignment with the peace process? How can we imagine a sustainable future where everyone can participate with respect and dignity? What kinds of resources and actions do we need in order to achieve these goals?

During the workshops we asked for consent to record discussions, indicating that at any moment participants could stop the recording (which did happen on occasion) or ask for their interventions to be erased. A small box was placed on each table where participants could write anonymous comments that they did not otherwise feel comfortable making.

## *2.2 Workshop participants*

Based on previous ethnographic fieldwork conducted in northern Cauca, the research team was aware of the colonial, cultural, gendered, ethno-racial, class and political differences within local populations. Due to the rich history of the region, indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants and peasants have shared but different experiences of violence and their political, cultural and economic responses to oppression and war have differed significantly (Jimeno et al., 2011; Oslender, 2008). Thus, we were conscious that these populations could not be treated as homogenous victims of war in terms of their ethno-racial and gendered experiences, a point that has been incorporated into the territorial peacebuilding framework in Colombia (Cairo et al., 2018).

Beyond decolonising the category of ‘victim’, we also faced the challenge of critically problematising the ethno-racial categories that are widely adopted.

Organizing workshops for indigenous, Afrodescendant and peasant peoples has become the normalized practice of multicultural development programmes, which tend to unproblematically use these categories as if they correspond to objectified and stable entities. Such categories, however, are deeply racialized and create hierarchies of superiority and inferiority that are constantly produced and reproduced by capitalist, western, patriarchal, colonial/modern institutions (Grosfoguel, 2016). Instead, we drew on critical race theory and Latin American decolonial approaches. The former recognize racial and ethnic differences as shifting social constructions with concrete political and material effects (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017), whilst the latter understand social categories as the product of the colonial/modern racial and gendered matrix of power (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007).

Several field visits were made to the territories where open-invitation general assemblies were called, during which information was provided about the Diploma. Participants identified as members of indigenous Cabildos,<sup>2</sup> peasant associations, black organizations or associations of former FARC-EP guerrillas. Being part of a social organization inevitably evokes relational categories, which are a product of long-term historical processes and memories of struggle against the state and global forces. Despite their inescapable coloniality, these categories express meaningful intentions to undo, disobey and de-link from the colonial matrix of power and its promise of economic growth, development and financial prosperity (Mignolo, 2007). Although we engaged with various social organizations, we remained constantly aware of their colonising, overlapping, non-essentialising and non-discrete boundaries. For example, some members of indigenous Cabildos and Afrodescendant organizations considered themselves to also be peasants or excombatants and vice-versa.

The identity of excombatants was unique as it emerged in the context of the demobilization of FARC-EP forces after the Peace Agreement, whereby former combatants sought spaces of inclusion within the territories. Although some expressed a preference for the terms ‘reincorporated’ (*reincorporados*) or ‘former guerrillas’ (*exguerrilleros*), we use the term ‘excombatants’ here as there was no unanimous agreement on one term. As well as including participants with varying status and roles within their respective organizations in the workshops, we aimed for an equal representation of women and men and to cover a wide age range.

### 2.3 *Workshop facilitators*

The researchers who acted as the facilitating team were diverse in terms of their gender, ethnic, racial, class, age and academic experience. Some were urban-based academics from Colombia and the UK trained in design, geography, education, anthropology and social work. The UK-based team members were a

diverse range of nationals (including a Colombian and Venezuelan), most of whom have research experience from Colombia but were new to the region. The Colombian academics have long-term participatory action research experiences from the territories and strong connections with community leaders. The research team was supported by Colombian students from a Master's programme on Sustainable Development, who have detailed ethnographic knowledge of the local social organizations. All the facilitators from Colombia had a deep understanding of the communities and the security situation, which was key to the workshops' success. The entire team shared the common purpose of promoting peacebuilding in Colombia and commitments to support processes of social change from below.

### *3 Workshop 1: knowing and recognizing ourselves in the territory*

The first set of workshops were conducted in a classroom at the University of Valle. For most participants this was the first time they had access to a formal university education experience, which they valued greatly. A total of 88 participants took part, with a similar number in each of the four workshops. The workshops were structured into five main parts co-designed by the research team using bottom-up participatory methods and tools sensitive to the context we were working in (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Hussain et al., 2012). The methods included territorial-body mapping, community song composition, graphic representation and drawing on the Community Canvas guidebook (Community Canvas, 2017). Considerable time was spent revising and translating the categories, questions and visual devices to decolonise these tools so they could enhance the process of sensitization based on trust and cultural proximity.

The workshop opened with a welcoming that involved culturally appropriate interactions. With the indigenous peoples, for example, a ritual practice 'opening the paths' was used, whereby all participants and facilitators formed a circle and a local leader holding her authority-baton with coloured ribbons opened by calling for a harmonious and respectful encounter. *Chirrinche* (herb-flavoured sugarcane liquor) was circulated, with some participants pouring a trickle onto the ground as an offering. Participants were invited to introduce themselves by saying their name and indicating an activity they identify with, such as dance, soccer, painting etc. The facilitators then highlighted how participants should express their ideas spontaneously but respectfully during the workshop, and the importance of listening carefully and not criticizing the opinions of others. We also explained how the tables of around six to eight participants would be encouraged to write a few lines summarising their discussions after each activity, which at the end of the workshop would become a poem, story or song.

The first set of questions explored identities. Participants were invited to identify who they are by describing which elements characterize them as individuals and as a collective group, and how they communicate their identities to others. This activity provided participants the opportunity to unsettle identity categories and discuss what it means to be a member of an indigenous Cabildo, black organization/movement, peasant association or an excombatant settlement. Sitting around tables together with at least one facilitator, participants were asked to write or draw their ideas on colourful post-its, which were then placed on a large template. For some, the discussions of identity were fluid and involved little debate. Members of Afrodescendant organisations in Buenos Aires indicated that they were reborn (*renacientes*), while indigenous leaders from Miranda identified as speakers of Nasayuwe and protectors of Mother Earth. Others shared more spontaneous descriptors based on personal or subjective positions, such as 'I am a worker' or 'I am an AfroColombian woman'. The excombatants found the topic of identity difficult to articulate given the recent change in their status, hence their answers tended to be short. Indigenous participants often used the post-its to draw actions, scenes, objects and landscape features. Other drawings focused on elements of cosmogony, such as representing two mountains linked by a rainbow or depicting the three spaces of Nasa life: spiritual, underground and earth. Graphic expression and texts served as interconnected mediums for expressing both individual and collective ideas.

The second set of questions focused on rituals and traditions, reflecting on whether these were organized 'from-below' in community assemblies or 'top-down' by state institutions. These questions were easily addressed by all participants, who described their various rituals and traditions with pride, joy and laughter. This activity provided space for the evocation of cosmological and spiritual values, and for sharing perspectives on the ways in which communities have protected their own onto-epistemological views. For instance, some participants explained in detail their ritual cycles and symbols, and how they need to respect non-human beings, such as Mother Earth, and their ancestral spirits in order to protect their territories. Other participants narrated how they use magical spells to make their tracks disappear or gain protection when followed by armed actors. These interventions were not treated as exotic narratives but rather were recognised as legitimate and relational understandings of the multiple actors, social relations and pluriverses shaping life within the territories.

In the third activity, participants presented their lived and emotional experiences through drawing, using coloured pens and pencils, tissue paper, glue, yarn, etc. Switching to a different mode of communication allowed participants to express symbolic and affective meanings within their territories. Young women and men easily engaged in the process, experimenting with various materials, shapes, colours and textures, while participants of advanced

age tended to draw depictions of their communities using pencils. Laughing, one participant commented, ‘This is like being in preschool again!’ Others remained in silence, focused on sketching and colouring. Many pictures depicted mountains, rivers, roads, trees, animals, garden plots, houses and people. Other drawings were abstract and represented hearts, bodily shapes, sun, hands and doves (see [Figure 1](#)).

After a break, the drawings were displayed on the classroom wall and participants were invited to explain their meanings to the rest of the group. This facilitated the articulation of their imagined futures and collective concerns, which led to interesting discussions. A peasant woman in her forties explained how:

In our municipality we dream of a university that will have easy access for our youth so they will have the opportunity to study and strengthen their professional life ... We need and dream of a collection centre (*centro de acopio*) so we can bring all the things that are produced on our farms. ... We also dream of having a headquarters for our peasant organization, which will help us invite people (*compañeros*) from other municipalities .... We dream of a paved road, which would help us to access the rural villages.

These dreams were concrete and linked to ‘modern development’ ideologies and the need to find ways of engaging more effectively with agricultural markets. As [De la Cadena \(2004\)](#) argues, modernity and development are linked in complex ways. Development desires do not necessarily contradict ancestral knowledges, nor do they imply mere market consumption, instead development can be interpreted as ‘a promise that was not kept’ ([De Vries, 2015](#),



Figure 1 Participants drawing during Workshop 1

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p. 74). Local actors did not see development as an alternative for building peace, rather they constantly framed their dreams of *buen vivir* (good living) in relation to the possibility of strengthening their territorial autonomy.

Another middle-aged peasant woman drew a sun surrounded by mountains. Her drawing expressed intimacy as well as concrete concerns about the effects of multinationals in the region:

These are my two mountain ranges (cordilleras) and these are some rivers. I placed some [red] crosses on them because this is what is in danger ... We have a lot of water and we have a lot of riches but the multinationals have their eyes on it and this can bring many tears [indicated on the drawing].

Other participants centred their drawings and narratives on their household experiences and cultural cosmologies. An indigenous young woman depicted a Nasa *tulpa*, i.e. a sacred fire pit composed of three stones. She explained that the *tulpa* is where Nasa culture is maintained and preserved; it is where families tell stories, cook together and women bury their children's umbilical cords to keep them tied to their land. This drawing activity allowed participants to delink their dreams, emotions and future projects from colonial modernity images and projects.

The fourth activity involved the construction of a map of actors. Participants identified the actors - families, institutions, organizations, NGOs, companies, armed and religious groups -that influence their territories. The degree of influence of each actor was recorded, following which participants described the nature of their relationship using pre-selected options (alliance, solidarity, dialogue, tension, conflict and violence) but with the possibility of adding others. 'Abandonment' was a relationship added in this way. This activity was one of the most challenging to implement as participants became anxious about the sensitive content emerging, especially where actors were labelled as violent or conflictive.

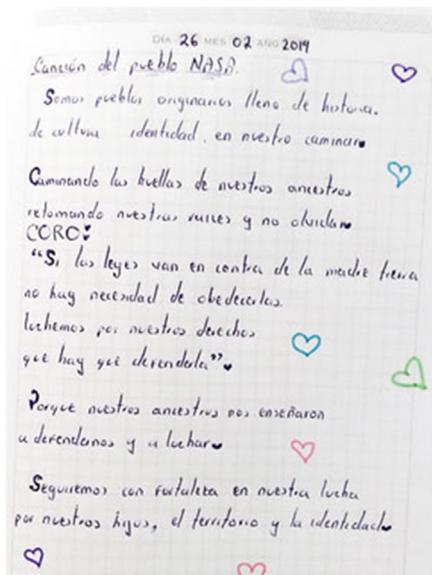
The fifth activity consisted of recognizing and valuing participants' collective needs, barriers and actions. This was another challenging activity as during the previous year many participants had spent considerable time attending meetings convened by the Agency for the Renovation of the Territory (*Agencia de Renovación del Territorio*) in order to indicate and prioritize their community's demands. The high expectations among community members generated by these previous meetings had not been fulfilled at the time of the workshops.

The workshop was closed with the presentation of the songs and poems composed by each table. This proved to be a positive way of ending, with participants proud of what they had produced and interested in the presentations of others. The quality was both impressive and informative (see [Figure 2](#)).

## 4 Workshop 2: imagining and territorializing peaceful futures

The second type of workshop was conducted in the municipalities of Buenos Aires, Corinto and Miranda, where the participants lived. A total of 90 participants took part with around 30 attending each workshop. The first of these workshops was held in Buenos Aires, where for decades families have been displaced by violence and community leaders have been threatened and even assassinated. For security reasons, the workshop location had to change several times and the former high-rank excombatants who attended were protected by state-allocated security guards. The workshop was conducted in the premises of an abandoned bar/restaurant, which had no electricity, narrow slats for windows and only very small tables. Despite these challenges, with some improvisation it was possible to conduct all of the activities with engaged participants.

The second workshop took place in Miranda, the morning after several young people had been murdered in the community. The workshop thus started with a minute's silence to honour the victims, following which several leaders shared their thoughts on the disturbing incident. Participants agreed the workshop should go ahead but understandably the mood was rather subdued. The workshop was held in the Youth Community Centre, a large meeting room with high ceilings, electricity, tables and chairs, surrounded by a grassy area. Despite the favourable physical conditions, we faced ethical challenges given



### Translation to English "Song of the Nasa indigenous people"

We are native people full of history  
Of culture, identity in our footpath

Walking on the footprints of our ancestors  
Returning to our roots and not forgetting

*Chorus*  
"If the laws go against mother earth  
There is no need to obey them  
Let's fight for our rights  
We must protect it [mother earth]"

Because our ancestors taught us  
To defend ourselves and to fight

We will continue with strength in our struggle  
For our children, our territory, and identity

Figure 2 Song from Workshop 1

the timing: How could we ask participants to engage in creative processes and suspend their fears and concerns in order to imagine utopian futures?

The third workshop in Corinto was also conducted in a community centre, which had an open-sided structure and high ceilings, electricity, tables and chairs. The local Peasant Guard (*Guardia Campesina*) maintained a presence to ensure the safety of participants. As these workshops held in the three study communities illustrate, having a safe and appropriate space for envisioning and creating new futures cannot be guaranteed in communities that have struggled against violence for decades. The intersections between design and privilege became clearly palpable in this peacebuilding conjuncture.

The workshops were structured into four main parts (see [Table 1](#)). Following an ice-breaker, each 'group' (indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants) was provided with a three-page summary of the first workshop findings written by the research team, which they had the opportunity to revise. A nominated speaker for each 'group' then read out the summaries of their respective aims. The indigenous peoples identified autonomy, which is a crucial design concept among communities that struggle against extractivism, accumulation and dispossession ([Escobar, 2017](#)). Afrodescendants focused on the importance of their planes de vida (community life plans) and the need to access intercultural education and health services. Peasants emphasized achieving legal recognition as subjects with special rights and access to education, while the excombatants mentioned security, inclusion and education. All the 'groups' stressed peace and access to land.

The aim of the second activity was to enable participants to visualize and sense how, despite their differences and unique experiences, they are all connected through common purposes. The participants stood in a large circle and were invited to take hold of yarns of different colours representing the common goals they had identified, including peace, land, education and unity. Once a participant had grasped the yarn, they threw the bundle to someone else who had indicated they agreed with that goal. This generated a degree of amusement; for example, a man who was holding black yarn representing land called out, 'Who wants more land? You over there have enough, you are accumulating! [Laughter]'. A woman then commented, 'Land is black because it is mourning (*la tierra esta de luto*)'. Another man suggested, 'Let's pick white for peace. Only the rich won't grab peace! [Laughter]'.

By the end of this process, a large coloured web had been created, which participants were asked to gently pull towards themselves. By feeling the tension in the yarn, they became aware of their interconnectedness and could appreciate through a sensorial experience how tightly their purposes and bodies were entangled and interdependent ([Light, 2018](#)). A facilitator then started pulling on the yarns with greater intensity asking the participants, 'What do

you think will happen if I keep pulling these threads in this direction?’ Some responded, ‘It will break ... we will fall’. The facilitator remarked, ‘Can you see we are all connected. If someone pulls in one direction the others will resist’. Another facilitator added, ‘Land is limited, there is just one bundle but we can share it. Maybe it is time to stop pulling from one side or the other and instead start thinking about working together’. This strategy of weaving and placing bodily tension across the threads enabled participants to visualize, feel and reflect on their common purposes and interconnectedness.

After sensing their common goals, for the third activity we ensured that each table consisted of at least one member from each ‘group’. Participants were invited to review their needs and aspirations through sustainability lenses and recognize their relational connections within the territories. An approach to sustainability was presented based around economic, environmental, social and cultural pillars, integrating notions of universal happiness,<sup>3</sup> good living, low material consumption, satisfying basic needs, supporting collective sensibilities and strengthening small-scale activities (Escobar-Tello, 2016). Participants were encouraged to consider how their own understandings of sustainability and happiness may be similar or differ from this approach in their community life plans and cosmologies. These reflections promoted community centric, ecological/earth respect and culturally sensitive modes of being, as a way of acknowledging their autonomous ways of doing design (Escobar, 2017).

In the fourth activity, participants brainstormed new ideas and visions for transitioning towards their collective goals and life projects. They were guided by the following questions: How could we find different paths? What if we could resolve X or Y barrier? What would need to happen to achieve X or Y goal? The importance of suspending judgments and trusting the process was emphasized, though this was clearly challenging for some participants. In Miranda, one table indicated that if peace was achieved there would be, ‘No more murdered leaders. All would have land for producing and there would be unity and harmony, as well as education for all’. Another table stated that with peace, ‘Youth would not be forcibly enrolled [in armed groups], and work and unity would increase’. One table claimed that, ‘There would be more state investment in infrastructure, which would activate the tourist economy and education’. While another table argued that with the implementation of the Peace Agreement, ‘There would be true social equality and a better future would be guaranteed in all respects’.

Participants in Buenos Aires indicated that if the Peace Agreement was implemented they would, ‘Experience harmony and unity in our territories, as well as better ways of living and achieving economic growth’. One table stated that they would, ‘Have more freedom and war would end since no one would feed it’, whilst another pointed out that, ‘Our leaders would have confidence and

tranquillity, and children would have a healthy mentality'. One participant wrote on a post-it, 'We would have a life with dignity and basic needs would be met, which is the origin of conflict'. In Corinto, participants similarly imagined peaceful futures. They indicated that if the Peace Agreement was implemented, 'Tranquillity would return to our communities and equality would prevail'. Others pointed out that, 'Violence would diminish and intercultural communities would achieve autonomy, equilibrium and social justice'. Some expressed that peace and unity might allow access to land and support the 'Liberation of Mother Earth'.

Following these speculative exercises, participants were exposed to the Design for Happiness tool (Escobar-Tello, 2016), with the aim of stimulating new ideas and ways of thinking and materializing their visions for a shared future. This tool, developed in a UK context, was adapted for a rural, interethnic peacebuilding setting. It consists of nine sets of picture cards, which correspond to happiness and sustainable lifestyles, including 'High social interaction' and 'Low material consumption'. Each table was handed one set of cards, which they used to contemplate and reflect on how these could potentially enhance or re-shape their visions of their futures, before receiving another set to consider. Some participants studied the images and incorporated the themes into their proposals, many took photos of the cards using their cell-phones, while others contemplated the cards in silence.

Many of the final visions presented were linked to the formation of cooperatives, commercial centres and development plans. In Miranda, an Intercultural Coordination Table (*Mesa de Coordinación Intercultural*), with specific pillars for addressing security, environment, health, autonomous education and religion, was suggested. Another table envisioned an organizational space where crafts, medicinal products, natural juices and dairy products would be produced, named 'Multi-activity Cooperative for Peace' (*Cooperativa Multiactiva La Paz – COPAZ*). After using the cards, participants proposed more specific goals, such as: continuous learning, love, respect, honesty, credibility, trust, solidarity, equality for all and environmental protection. In Corinto, participants suggested the purchase of land under the coordination of an Intercultural Directive Council, which would: engage in topographic studies; build roads, electrification and irrigation systems; and promote good agroecological practices. In Buenos Aires, the formation of an Interethnic Guard composed of indigenous, Afrodescendant and peasant guards that would ensure security in the region by establishing control points and effective communication strategies was proposed.

While the above activity was taking place, two volunteers were invited to draw their territory on a large sheet of paper so the visions could be placed in an interwoven manner. Typically, the drawings consisted of a mountain chain, rivers, roads, houses and bridges. Each table then presented their projects,

locating them on the drawing using coloured stickers and buttons to visualize how their projects could be spatially interconnected. For example, participants envisioned how an Intercultural Guard could protect the roads and in turn help the cooperatives transport their agricultural produce to larger community collection centres. This activity thus raised awareness of how indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, peasants and excombatants can co-exist within their territory, their shared needs and actions for peacebuilding, and their ability to all assert themselves in this common space. The facilitators closed the workshop by encouraging participants to visualize alternative ways of living in peace and dignity within their territories.

### *5 Decolonising the design process: walking the talk*

During the entire process of developing the transdisciplinary design workshops, the research team engaged in discussions regarding the colonial, epistemological, ontological and political implications of our methodology, approaches and positionalities. From the project's inception, we attempted to confront our implicit and explicit colonising, anthropocentric and academic ideologies with 'reflexivity, responsiveness and sensitivity' (Akama, 2017, p.83). Following Escobar (2017), we reflected on: How could we stop reproducing functionalist, oppressive, modern and western colonial traps? How could research fatigue be avoided and instead transformative, situated learning experiences for local communities be created? Were we putting some participants in danger by registering sensitive information in the fragile context of peacebuilding? The validity of our 'group' categories, the gendered effects of the activities and the concrete risks of moving excombatants away from their protected zones were all discussed.

One debate we engaged in was how to define the territories and their boundaries, including the need to unsettle modern bio-cartographical distinctions between the Central and the Western Cordilleras, municipalities and departments, mountains and plains, and rural and urban. Building on knowledge shared by indigenous leaders, we recognized non-modern visions of the territories as being lived, relational, pluri-dimensional spaces deeply imbricated with human bodies and non-human beings. We also debated the limitations of our academic language and ideologies on 'future-making', and how attempts to prevent cultural imperialism could deny alternative forms of 'modernity-making'. Within the team, we were committed to resolving any differences and creating flexible and respectful encounters with community members. The process of developing and implementing the workshops in a decolonising manner, however, faced numerous challenges, three of which are discussed here.

First, a key challenge was the integration of written and oral forms of communication within the workshops. Following social design methods, we

encouraged participants to write their ideas on coloured post-its, which were placed on large templates allowing us to combine heterogeneous perspectives and opinions in one place. We could have tape-recorded participants' interventions, or written down their statements ourselves, but the objective was to allow everyone to have a voice and feel empowered through the process. Not all community members, however, felt comfortable writing. Asking people who may value oral over written forms of communication to write, reproduces modern epistemologies of knowledge inscription and can create hierarchies between participants with/without access to formal education. Despite these doubts, the use of post-its was well received and generated new forms of interaction between participants. In the few cases where participants did not feel comfortable writing, someone else on the table wrote the comments on their behalf. As anyone could add a post-it, even those who felt less able to verbally express their opinions in public could participate. This method also reduced the dominance of social leaders who might otherwise monopolize group discussions.

A second decolonising challenge involved revising and deconstructing the design tools, including templates, stakeholder maps, and Design for Happiness cards. Focussing here on the latter, we were aware of the need to redesign some of the cards for our particular setting - the rural, intercultural and violent context of peacebuilding in northern Cauca. Each image was critically analysed and debated, as we sought ones that could evoke ideas or resonate with participants' cultural values and symbolic meanings. From orthodox anthropological perspectives, the images should be culturally pertinent and contextually situated in order to produce intimacy and closeness, as well as a sense of autonomy from the dogmas of modernity and the colonizing narratives of development. Yet from a design perspective, strangeness and uncertainty are required to produce curiosity and creative shifts that can mobilize new ideas. While we aimed to prevent the reproduction of colonial modern ideologies, there was a risk of reproducing paternalizing positions that promote 'tradition' and 'authenticity' as the best ways to engage with the future. For example, were we inappropriately assuming that the participants did not know how to critically appropriate and transform modernity and futuristic peacebuilding premises on their own terms? Were we falling into the trap of neoliberal thinking that sees the future as something necessarily new?

The third challenge concerned notions of time and futures. Since timescales and temporal concepts are culturally and politically constructed (Hodges, 2008; Munn, 1992), and there are a 'multiplicity of ways one can relate to time in different cultures and situations' (Light, 2018, p. 149), design researchers need to critically revise their own notions of temporality. One way forward is to analyse diverse narratives of change instead of searching for futuristic images that reproduce neoliberal ideologies of growth, progress, dystopia or globalism (Wittmayer et al., 2019). The workshops' structure

tied to our western perceptions of the economy of time, however, remained a colonising force as participants were rushed to complete activities, compromising the envisioning of new futures. Moreover, by choosing to focus on time we inevitably reproduced the colonial modern logic of dissecting and separating social, cosmological, ecological, economic and spiritual realms.

## *6 Concluding comments*

As the design workshops analysed here have shown, what appears to be moderate innovation could in fact represent significant creative manoeuvres in the context of peacebuilding. The possibility of living without fear is a critical innovative process that can be overlooked by our modern western fascination with seeking progress or creating something ultimately marketable. In peacebuilding situations, innovation involves the political praxis of embracing projects of communitarian autonomy (Escobar, 2017; Fry, 2011) and producing alternative imaginations and actions delinked from dominant, individualistic and technocratic ideologies and practices. In communities that have long been shaped by a history of violence, dispossession and uncertainty, the future is not necessarily new but something familiar to be recovered, protected and cherished. For Nasa people, the future is seen in relation to the past, hence, involves recovering and preserving their lost dignity, culture and autonomy. Future transdisciplinary interventions should critically address, decolonise and question further what we mean by innovation.

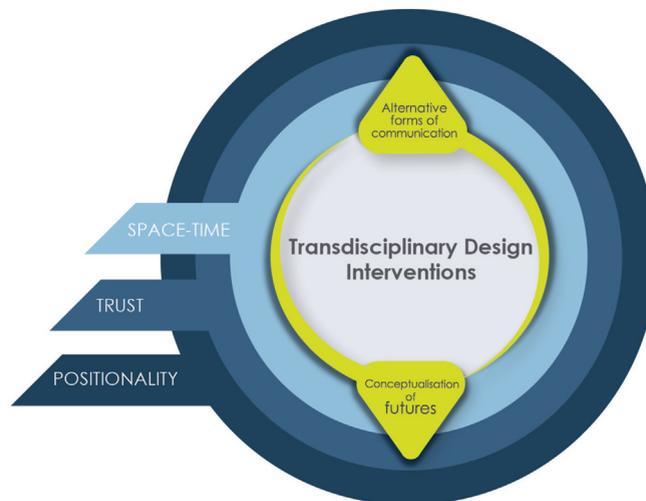
Design interventions, processes and methods need to be conceptually decolonised in contexts of peacebuilding. It is important to be aware of the temporal ontology implied in our practice, our liberal concepts of peacebuilding, and what the future means for communities affected by conflict. We must also suspend our liberal critiques against essentialism, which tend to judge the assertion of ‘tradition’ as a mere strategic action. Instead of ‘new futures’, people affected by violence may need space to imagine transitions to life and dignity in the present. The assemblage of transdisciplinary design interventions in the workshops discussed here, allowed participants to engage in a gradual process of sensitization, enabling them to imagine the co-existence of interethnic and intercultural collective life projects within their territories.

The workshops, however, were not without limitations, in particular the lack of attention paid to structural violence. Peacebuilding is a long-term process, that by no means ends with workshops like those discussed here. One way in which we attempted to contribute to peacebuilding was through the creation of ‘community personas’ that were planned as an ‘exit strategy’ (Meroni et al., 2013) and a way of systematizing and devolving findings to the participants and their wider communities in an accessible manner. By basing the community personas on the participants’ verbal interventions, writing and drawings, we ensured that their visual ‘voices’ are embedded in the returned material.

The personas, therefore, offer an accessible tool, which communities can hopefully use to assist in engaging with state and non-state institutions.

The nature of places shaped by insecurity and precarity show that designers must find ways of embracing alternative time concepts and ontologies. By adopting a critical, decolonial design approach, this paper has highlighted the potential and limits of transdisciplinary design methodologies in peacebuilding situations shaped by uncertainty. A key component of designing in such contexts is to become critically aware of our positionalities, privileges and the anthropocentric, modernity logic shaping our research practice and conceptual frameworks. Transdisciplinary research teams need to create spaces where actors can be creative and safely sensitize each other to facilitate envisioning autonomous, common relational life projects. [Figure 3](#) proposes our vision for approaching such interventions in peacebuilding contexts.

Design practice in relation to peacebuilding needs to be positioned within broader decolonising, critical understandings that unsettle social categories and encompass positionality, trust and time-space considerations throughout all research stages. Importantly, at every step, methods and activities should be critically revised to ensure a sense of trust develops among all participants. At the centre of this approach lies the assemblage of transdisciplinary design interventions, underpinned by decolonised place-based conceptualizations of futures and the recognition of alternative forms of communication and being. Combined, these allow for the emergence of design practices with the goal of supporting societal transitions to alternative co-sustained forms of living and being in peace. Facilitating such relational approaches to design, however, requires innovative changes to the ways in which western, modern university-



*Figure 3 Framework for decolonising design interventions for transitions towards co-sustained ways of living*

based research is conducted and the mainstream, neoliberal models of funding, monitoring and evaluating impact operate.

### *Declaration of competing interest*

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### *Notes*

1. These are the most salient social organizations of indigenous, Afrodescendant and mestizo peasants in northern Cauca.
2. Cabildos are socio-political organizations for the self-determination of indigenous communities, recognized in the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991.
3. Happiness is defined as a state of deep contentment with one's life, resulting from the combination of feeling positive, life satisfaction and genetics.

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