Chapter 18
Psychology and Human Rights in Colombia: Contributions to Peacebuilding

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Introduction

The human rights (HR) proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of the United Nations (1948) are the international instrument that has set the global objective of respecting and guaranteeing human dignity based on the principles of equality and justice (Valdivieso, 2012).

In the Colombian democracy, HR are conceived as guiding and binding principles that shape the government's actions (López, 2012). However, the complex social and state structures have hindered the formulation and implementation of HR policies in Colombia (Herrera & Taylor, 2014). This context is evident in the existing sociopolitical violence, internal armed conflict, and the rationale of state neglect and exclusion (Sikkink, 2009).

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Armed Conflict in Colombia

Human rights violations in Colombia's recent history have left cultural, political, economic, social, and psychological scars throughout the country (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica [CNMH], 2013). The armed conflict has directly affected more than eight million people (Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2020) through violence against the civilian population such as threats, forced recruitment, disappearances, massacres, killings, and selective executions by multiple actors (e.g., guerrillas, paramilitary groups, state forces, drug trafficking organizations) (CNMH, 2013). Violence has been used systematically to sustain control over the territory in a way that allows land concentration, arms and drug trafficking, and, ultimately, the management of political and economic power both regionally and nationally by a set of elites (Ibáñez & Vélez, 2008).

Since the late twentieth century, peace negotiations were held with some former combatants but with mixed results. Although the demobilization and political participation of some illegal groups were achieved, the lack of institutional and regional support, the resurgence of violent practices, and the political and armed persecution of these new political organizations called into question the State's role as guarantor of human rights of the civilian population and opposing political groups (CNMH, 2018; Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2017).

The many negotiation processes have included multiple transitional justice mechanisms that have had implications for how memory, truth, and reparations for victims have become imperatives. For instance, the Justice and Peace Law 975, that was approved in 2005, established the main formal proceedings of transitional justice (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2005). Among its goals, this law aimed to disarm the paramilitary groups, reintegrate their members into society, and guarantee the rights of truth, justice, and reparation to the victims. This initiative promoted massive demobilization and created a legal framework to prosecute crimes committed by paramilitary groups. However, this law was decried internationally, warning that it would ensure impunity to those responsible for atrocious crimes while failing to offer guarantees to victims (CNMH, 2013; Villa, 2012).

Subsequently, the Victims Law (Law 1448) was passed in 2011, recognizing the damage caused by armed conflict and seeking mechanisms for attention, assistance, and comprehensive reparation to victims. This scenario fostered the negotiations with the FARC-EP guerrilla in 2016 when a historic peace agreement was reached with this group, achieving demobilization processes and political participation for reintegrating members. The peace accords created one of the boldest transitional justice mechanisms that encompassed a new truth commission, a special justice system for peace, and the missing people's search unit. This mechanism put legal and non-legal reparations measures for the conflict's victims at the forefront of the process. Amid a long and complex armed conflict such as the Colombian one, These measures are a hopeful sign of strengthening the commitment to respect human rights in a context of a long and complex armed conflict such as the Colombian one (United Nations, 2018).

Nonetheless, the agreement was forged in a climate of social polarization, with the government of President Iván Duque (2018–2022) and his party repeatedly speaking out against the peace accord and its implementation. Consequently, the annual reports on the first three years of implementation of the peace agreement documented systematic attacks on HR defenders, social and community leaders. The reports also note difficulty in moving forward with the comprehensive reparation to victims in areas affected in the past by the conflict, due to the lack of coverage, monitoring and guarantees in reintegration and restitution services (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019).

Likewise, as of 2019, combat with other illegal groups (ELN guerrillas, paramilitary, and drug trafficking groups) intensified, reactivating terrorist attacks and forcing new displacements. Paramilitary groups have taken center stage with a subsequent increase in victimization statistics related to the control of illicit economies such as drug trafficking, illegal mining, arms trafficking, and commercial extortion which once again impairs the guarantee of human rights (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019).

It is important to emphasize that the victims continue to be mainly civilians in rural areas (e.g., farmers, indigenous people, Afro-descendants) and community social leaders. During 2020, there were 76 massacres, the highest figure since 2014. There were also 73 homicides of former FARC-EP members and 133 murders of HR defenders (United Nations, 2021).

The prolongation of the armed conflict and the multiplicity of actors involved led to deep societal divisions and have weakened the Colombian state's capacity to respond as a guarantor of HR (Amnistía Internacional, 2018). Promoting the non-repetition of these events and the HR protection, generating policies and measures for the reparation of victims at different levels are indispensable conditions for peace construction.

Psychosocial Consequences of Human Rights Violations During the Armed Conflict

Economic, political, legal, environmental, security, and psychosocial factors must be taken into account when analyzing human rights violations in Colombia (Sikkink, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). The context of exclusion, poverty, misery, inequality, the failure to ensure basic security needs, lack of access to health services, and inadequate education resources represent the constant violation of human rights by the Colombian state (Rodríguez, 2004). Moreover, rural inhabitants are the most affected because the war happened in their territory, where there are high levels of poverty and socioeconomic inequality (Naucke, 2017).

Psychology in Colombia has had long participation in community work to mitigate the multiple consequences upon communities and individuals of the armed

conflict and the sustained violation of human rights. Psychologists in non-governmental organizations, various initiatives of universities as well as governmental entities have accompanied these challenging processes. The community-based psychology was shaped by the legacy of psychologists such as Maritza Montero, Ignacio Martín-Baró, and by the inspiring work of Elizabeth Lira. Unfortunately, many of these initiatives have not been reported or have been noted only as part of reports that overshadow their actions and impact. However, their contributions are visible in the community practices and the lives of the people who have participated in such programs. In recent years, several new areas of research have emerged regarding the consequences of the conflict and the processes involved in the long and complex peace process.

The field of psychology has sought to understand, specifically, the consequences of the internal armed conflict and the violation of human rights on individual, inter-personal, intra-, and inter-group dynamics (López-López, 2017, 2020). Research has focused on analyzing (a) the consequences on psychological well-being from exposure to traumatic events; (b) the impact on the coexistence of directly and indirectly affected communities; (c) the dynamics of the persistence of violence by analyzing the role of social agents in the legitimization of violent or peaceful practices; (d) the processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration into civilian life of former combatants; (e) the processes of recognition of harm, justice, and comprehensive reparation to victims; and (f) the disposition towards social reconciliation to achieve a shared future of peaceful coexistence.

Some studies on psychological well-being report that people exposed to traumatic events in the context of armed conflict are more likely to suffer mental health disorders as compared to the general population (Cuartas et al., 2019). Post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety are frequently encountered (Cudris-Torres & Barrios Núñez, 2018; Gaviria et al., 2016; Hewitt et al., 2016). Research has found that minors directly exposed to a conflict are more likely to have aggressive behaviors, externalizing disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder) (Brook et al., 2007; Cuevas & Castro, 2009), or post-traumatic stress disorder (Pérez-Olmos et al., 2005). Moreover, some studies with children suggest that exposure to violence at an early age or during the gestation period can affect physical and brain development, generating negative consequences in intellectual and interpersonal processes (Cuevas & Castro, 2009; Duque, 2017).

In group and community dynamics, some studies report that the armed conflict generates a decrease in the quality of life and a rupture of the family and social fabric (Castañeda et al., 2019; Hewitt et al., 2016). There is evidence that the relocation and displacement experiences generate new vulnerabilities and ongoing instability in family structures (Mootz et al., 2019).

In territories threatened by different armed conflicts, cohesion, support among community members, and participation in collective decision-making processes make communities less likely to be displaced (Krakowski, 2017). There is even evidence of communities that have mitigated violence against them through peaceful resistance measures such as remaining neutral, avoiding threats, and

implementing self-reliance mechanisms to refrain from cooperating with former combatants (Wegner, 2017).

These findings demonstrate that social resources such as trust, cohesion, and solidarity are crucial for the recovery of communities (Krakowski, 2017; Taylor, 2016). There is also evidence of high levels of community resilience, often related to spirituality and religious practices, which have enabled victims to cope and restructure their lives (Hewitt et al., 2016), despite severe conditions of violence.

Regarding the dynamics of persistent violence, broad empirical evidence points to a socio-psychological repertoire shaped by collective beliefs, attitudes, and emotions towards the armed conflict and its actors, which is functional to the members of society to cope with the human and material losses. At the same time, this fosters the continuation of the armed confrontation (López-López et al., 2018).

Likewise, the government discourse concerning the armed conflict has been characterized by a delegitimization of the adversary and legitimization of the use of force (Barreto et al., 2009; Borja-Orozco et al., 2008; López-López et al., 2018). However, some studies also show the transformation of this socio-psychological repertoire in the course of seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict in recent years. Concretely, impact can be seen in calling for hope for peace, the recognition of victims' rights and the structural causes of the conflict, as well as in the absence or reduction of strategies to delegitimize the adversary (López-López et al., 2018; Rincón-Unigarro et al., 2020).

As for the processes of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration into civilian life by former combatants, some studies report that the civilian population has little trust or willingness to coexist and work with former combatants of demobilized armed groups (López-López et al., 2016a, b, 2018). In territories where reintegration processes occurred, Kaplan and Nussio (2018) found that former combatants are more likely to participate in community activities when there is high participation of the civilian community members themselves. These are spaces where former combatants also feel useful in the settlement communities. When people are not involved, former organize in isolation, separated from the community, seeking to protect their families and themselves from the effects of the deeply rooted stigmatization of being identified as former combatants (McFee, 2016).

The processes of recognition of harm, justice, and comprehensive reparation for victims present many challenges to overcome. Many initiatives have emerged to repair the damage caused in the conflict by HR groups, state institutions, and the victims themselves to achieve a stable and lasting peace (Arias, 2018). However, the transitional justice mechanisms to achieve comprehensive reparation by providing guarantees to the victims to overcome social helplessness depend on (a) a national budget, which is often insufficient; (b) operational public institutions, often with limited response capacity; and (c) social and political will, sometimes at odds with these objectives (Arias, 2018; Villa & Insuasty, 2016).

Within this context, it is therefore understandable that some studies find that the victim populations do not believe the promised reparations or trials of the perpetrators will ever come about. They simply mistrust state mechanisms (Castrillón-Guerrero et al., 2018).

Lastly (Bloomfield et al., 2003), several studies confirm that structural challenges must be overcome to foster the disposition towards reconciliation and move forward from a divided past to a shared future of peaceful coexistence in Colombia.

In different countries empirical evidence points to the benefits for the psychological well-being of victims derived from reconciliation scenarios such as improved interpersonal relationships, creation of new social networks, strengthening of social capital, overcoming negative emotions, and feelings towards the perpetrator (Cilliers et al., 2016). However, political reconciliation can also increase depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder, affecting the psychological well-being of victims (Cilliers et al., 2016). Similarly, although forgiveness is personal and does not condition reconciliation, clearly, it can facilitate participation in the construction of a collective future.

The willingness to forgive and reconcile was studied in Colombia in both the victim and the general population. The research has identified a low disposition to forgive and reconcile—in personal terms—although higher among victims, regardless of the existence of remorse among the perpetrators. Studies also found that during 2016, the year of the peace agreement referendum, the willingness to forgive increased when former combatants participated in peace talks with the state or when there are guarantees of non-repetition (López-López et al., 2013, 2016a, b).

Research on the conceptualizations of forgiveness found that both victims and the general population associated the process with a religious context linked to the idea of *divine justice and forgetting offenses*, partly because there is no credibility in the forms of justice provided by the State (Castrillón-Guerrero et al., 2018; Cortés et al., 2016). Reconciliation, however, is a process usually associated with acceptance and resumption of interactions in which the victim and the victimizer may participate (Castrillón-Guerrero et al., 2018; Cortés et al., 2016; López-López et al., 2016a, b).

In peace processes throughout the world different actors have generated transitional mechanisms associated with justice. This underscores the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation processes in truth commissions and the transitional justice mechanisms. However, it is difficult to achieve effectiveness without conditions of non-repetition and reparation, which is the case in many Colombian local contexts (López-López et al., 2016a, b).

Psychosocial Intervention for the Restoration of Human Rights in the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict: A Case Study

Thanks to their activism through collective mobilization, the armed conflict victims achieved visibility in the social and political arena, both nationally and internationally. One of the main demands was effective psychosocial care policies from the State (Villa, 2012). Due to this pressure, and with the support of international organizations, the State created a national program focused on psychosocial intervention

for armed conflict victims through the Law 1448 of 2011 (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2011).

Among the different measures contemplated in Law 1448 was the implementation of the Psychosocial Care and Comprehensive Health Program for Victims of the Conflict (PAPSIVI-acronym in Spanish), as part of the health care and physical, mental, and psychosocial rehabilitation measure (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2011).

The PAPSIVI program has a psychosocial approach, with an ethical commitment, proposing that entities and professionals should recognize the integrality of those who have been victims (Moreno & Díaz, 2016). The aim is to develop comprehensive care services that contribute to the recovery or mitigation of "psychosocial damage, emotional suffering and impacts on the psychological and moral integrity and life project of victims, their families, and communities, as a result of serious human rights violations and breaches of IHL [International Humanitarian Law]" (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social [MinSalud], 2017a, p. 23, 2017b).

This program intends to address the impacts of violence on the victim population throughout the national territory, at the individual, family, and community levels, taking into account a differential approach, the effective participation of different national institutions, and, above all, highlighting the obligation of the Colombian State to guarantee the victims' human rights (MinSalud, 2017a).

Another psychosocial intervention tool developed as a result of Law 1448 was the Emotional Recovery Strategy at Group Level (ERE-G) promoted by the UARIV (2014), which aims to respond to the psychosocial needs of victims through group work, the construction of meanings, emotional self-regulation, and the representation-symbolization of people's suffering.

According to MinSalud (2019), between 2012 and 2018, the government provided psychosocial care to 692,999 conflict victims. Of this number, 490,708 received care through the psychosocial component of PAPSIVI and 202,291 through the UARIV (within the ERE-G framework). However, the number of psychosocial services provided to date is very low for the proposed target under Law 1448 (24%).

Although the rate of perception of improvement and rehabilitation by the beneficiaries of the PAPSIVI and ERE-G initiatives is suggested to be high (MinSalud, 2019), empirical evidence indicates that not all processes are proving to be restorative for the victims and that these initiatives probably require greater caution and investment.

The criticisms of the psychosocial interventions generated from Law 1448 for conflict victims who have had their HR violated, as shown in Fig. 18.1, are due to structural and professional factors that cause adverse effects in the communities (Aranguren-Romero & Rubio-Castro, 2018; Cuartas et al., 2019; Villa, 2016). For instance, the health system does not prioritize psychosocial care and uses hiring schemes that are often outsourced and precarious. Besides, there is a lack of expertise and training in the multiple interventions in communities and individuals carried out by psychologists and social science and health professionals. Figure 18.1 describes some of the challenges faced at the structural and professional levels.
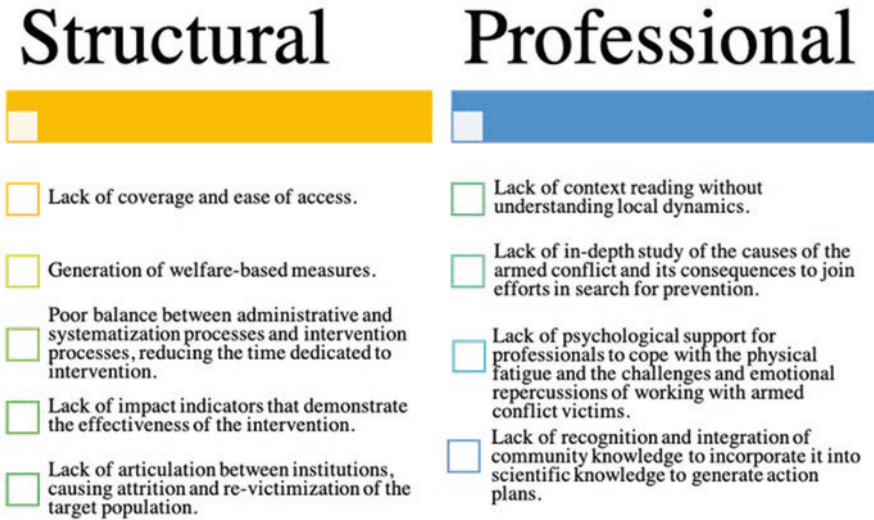
Fig. 18.1 Structural and professional factors

A Multidimensional Perspective for the Promotion of Human Rights in Colombia

To meet the challenge of building peace in Colombia, as we have previously stated, requires prioritizing the appropriation of human rights in the social and political agenda of the country. In other words, systematic efforts must be focused on prevention, promotion, and protection of human rights, as well as monitoring and denouncing human rights violations. Moreover, we must assume a multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspective of research and intervention to understand the various dimensions of actors, violence, consequences, and processes involved in the pursuit of peace and the defense of human rights. In this sense, López-López (2016, 2017, 2020) proposes in his works to consider a multidimensional research and intervention perspective (see Fig. 18.1).

This perspective contemplates eight dimensions in which agendas should be built, as shown in Fig. 18.2. The transformations proposed for each dimension are:

1. *Socioeconomic:* Reduce inequality in the distribution of wealth.
2. *Sociopolitical:* Promote policies aimed at the inclusion of vulnerable groups and social reconciliation scenarios and implement management mechanisms based on dialogue and consensus.
3. *Socio-legal:* Advance towards the respect for human rights and the reduction of impunity through the application of restorative actions.
4. *Safety:* Establish actions and mechanisms aimed at protecting integrity, privacy, and intimacy.
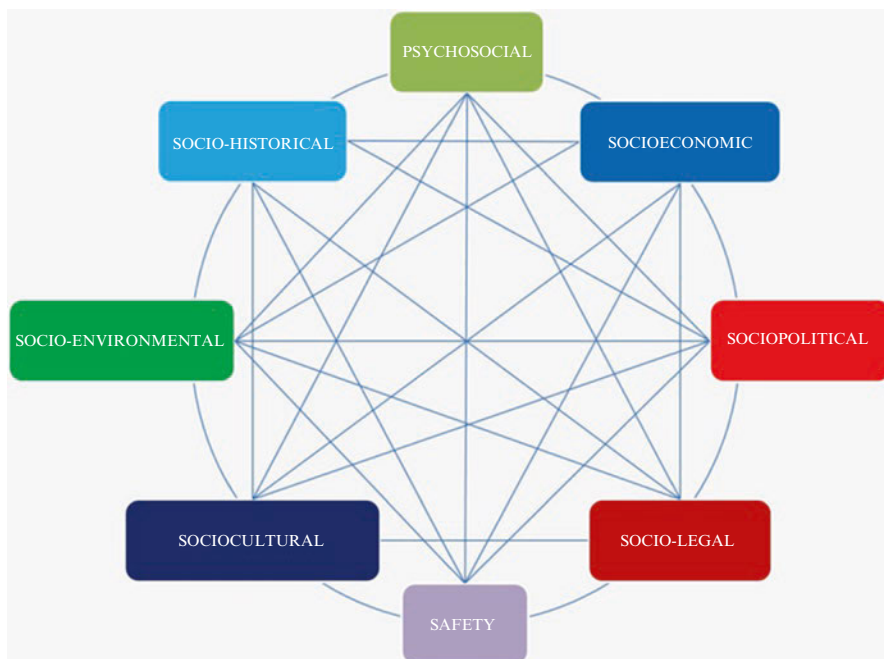
Fig. 18.2 Conflict dimensions. (Adapted from López-López, 2020)

5. *Sociocultural:* Promote practices that encourage tolerance, gender equality, and child-rearing practices and that reject the use of violence and exclusion.
6. *Socio-environmental:* Recognize and transform the environmental crises, the deterioration of natural resources, and violence and move towards economic policies based on sustainable sources and change extractive strategies.
7. *Socio-historical:* Address the communities' experience from a micro- and macro-perspective, taking into account how the socio-historical processes are remembered by the civilian population in the present and the future perspective, thus strengthening collective memory processes.
8. *Psychosocial:* Progress in emotional education processes, reduce asymmetries in interpersonal and inter-group interactions to move towards group cohesion, developing empathy, and giving voice to the communities to advance in the empowerment processes.

Regarding the psychosocial dimension, Fig. 18.3 illustrates an approach based on the identification of a set of actors, violence, consequences, and psychosocial processes. It is an approach that intertwines (a) the ethnic, gender, and developmental differences; (b) experiences of care and community and personal intervention; as well as (c) community and institutional biographies and mediums (López-López, 2020).

This proposed approach understands the psychosocial dimension as a spiral or fabric in which the personal is woven with the relational, the intra- and inter-group,
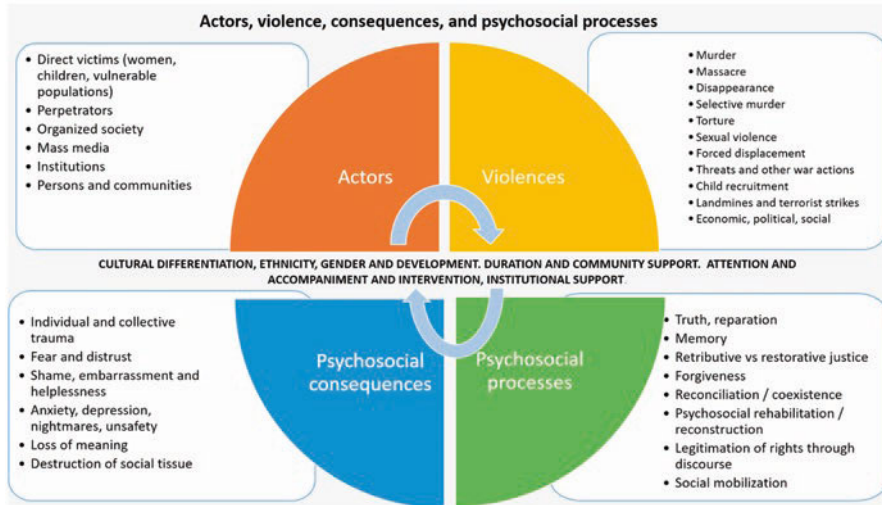
Fig. 18.3 Model for understanding the conflict with its different actors, forms of violence, processes, and psychosocial consequences (López-López, 2020)

and the societal aspects. Within this fabric, biographies and community and social histories are constructed (López-López, 2020). The evidence of the continuous work of psychologists and other professionals with the communities shows the interaction of the psychosocial dimension with the others (political, economic, environmental, legal) and the importance of transitional justice mechanisms, such as clarifying the truth and achieving social reconciliation. It also suggests that only by articulating this whole set of interactions can sustainable peace processes be built (López-López, 2020).

Proposal for the Future to Advance in the Guarantee of Human Rights from Psychology in Colombia

Peacebuilding in Colombia is a highly complex process that requires, as we have previously stated, a dynamic, multidimensional, interdisciplinary perspective that prioritizes human rights over any other process involved in the reconstruction that seeks to lessen the impact of the social and armed conflict. Thus, protecting the rights and the lives of the most vulnerable communities and those who defend and promote them is an urgent matter. The rise in murders of social leaders and human rights defenders and the lack of government commitment to protect them and clarify, capture, and prosecute those responsible, unfortunately, lead to sustained and escalated conflict.

Furthermore, in a context of permanent transition in which the armed confrontation has not stopped, and the State shows that it cannot respond to the constant

violations of human rights, psychology professionals have no alternative but to continue working even in adverse conditions, to contribute to strengthening psychological well-being and the community fabric in the country (Molina, 2017). Therefore, as argued by the multidimensional model of peace proposed by López-López (2016, 2017, 2020), efforts aimed at peacebuilding cannot be limited to a single aspect due to the complexity of the conflict.

The sustained commitment is needed from different social actors, including psychologists, to build, accompany, and install long-term cultural practices of peaceful resistance and care for human rights with communities (López-López et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is necessary to sustain the development of knowledge that allows for understanding and acting in processes associated with the defense of human rights, peacebuilding, and social reconciliation (Velez et al., 2020).

It seems evident that due to the multiple factors that maintain the armed conflict in the Colombian context, there are many challenges that must be addressed to create a setting that guarantees human rights. Therefore, psychology must have a continuous and long-term agenda committed to human rights advocacy that involves psychology as professionals as well as in training and academic research.

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