

# **“The Social Work of Earth, Wind and Fire– Why Intercultural Community Interventions are so central in Peacebuilding**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, intercommunity social work is being revisited as a theoretical and empirical concept, mainly through the patterns of social interventions in times of turmoil, war and conflict. The case studied relates to Colombia with its past and current history of violence, but also emphasizing the active role of social work to prevent conflict and contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful society, as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030. The author is building upon experiences as a guest professor at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, with the contact of the students and faculty at the Department of Social work, as well as 20 years of field experience in international development cooperation in the Latin American context.

*Key words:* intercultural, intercommunity social work, peace-building.

## **Introduction**

Some time ago, when I arrived in Colombia as a guest professor at the Department of Social Work at the Nacional University of Colombia, I was lucky to meet a very nice taxi-driver one of the first days of my visit, in the center of Bogotá. I asked him to drive to my hotel and it didn't take more than 30 seconds when he started to play out his favorite tunes of Salsa on the radio. I really enjoyed it, full of life and joy, so much different to the kind of music that are coming out my country Sweden, even though we have become a first-class of exporter of all kinds of pop music in recent years. I asked him, is this salsa from Colombia?

- No, he answered, this tune is from Puerto Rico. We listened further and he explained all the details about the song, the composer, the band, the meaning of the lyrics etc. After a while, a new song came out.

- This one is from Cali, a town in southern Colombia, he explained. I asked if there were any differences between salsa from Cali and Puerto Rico? Of course, he answered, but when he was going to explain the peculiarities of each style in a master class, we had already arrived at the hotel, so I had to pay him. I thanked him for the good time spent together and the good music he shared with me.

This warm reception, kindness and generous attitude was so typical of the different parts of Colombian society that I received upon my arrival to that country. I became instantly interested in what is typical "Colombian" and the patterns of social work in that context.

In this paper I intend to share some insights of Social Work with a special focus on its international and intercultural dimensions, based on experiences from Colombia, Latin America, my native country Sweden and other parts of the world.

## **Why Colombia and Social Work?**

I came to Colombia as part of "the academic project of pedagogic transformation, support to the academic excellence and constant improvement of curricular programs", invited by the head of department of social work. The task was to deliver some lectures, organize seminars with the faculty of professors and give a key-note lecture in relation to international social work. I was excited over the possibility to travel to Colombia again. My first experiences of this country were in the 1980s and later in the 1990s when I was working in international development cooperation and I had the opportunity to engage in social projects of peacebuilding, support to the displaced and other local and regional projects relating to social and human rights of vulnerable populations in that country. At that time, I realized the importance of some central stakeholders, such as the Catholic church and the ecclesial

institutions, *la Pastoral Social*. I understood the pivotal role of religious institutions in times of turmoil, conflict, civil strife and political polarization. Where did the victims of all sides of the conflict turn to get shelter, comfort and protection? Very often the local parish, religious orders and congregations opened their doors and saved thousands of lives, while other parts of society were fragmented and locked into ideological and political conflicts. As a Swede, I was touched by the recent fragile peace-process, which was also rewarded by the Nobel Peace Award in 2017. Anyhow, now was the time to return to Colombia and to catch up with what going on in that country and particularly in my areas of concern and interest: what could be the role of social work in the current situation and what would be the lessons learnt so far of these processes?

On my last trip to Colombia in 2016 I realized some major achievements in cities like Medellin where the levels of violence had been drastically reduced and where local authorities in close collaboration with stakeholders from civil society and the Church had been able to turn things around, focusing on the culture of death/violence with the common vision of something different and more sustainable for the concerned people of all ages. Colombia shows that it's possible despite all obvious problems and obstacles to reduce the levels of homicide and other related criminal acts from 80-90 deaths per 100 000 citizens in the 1990s to 23 in 2017. The levels are however still very high: my country Sweden has less than 1 death per 100 000 citizens (Avilés, F. T., & Velasco, J. A. 2017; *Dagens nyheter* 180401; *Brottsförebyggande rådet* 2017). As I have worked with similar processes of violence in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East in general, and in particular countries like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, I thought that Colombia could be an example for similar interventions, where hope would be replaced by despair. I believe that Colombia today is where Syria would be in 10-15 years and I would also argue that social work as a profession could play a central role on the micro, meso and macro-levels.

While I was preparing for my trip to Colombia, I was thinking about my 20 years of field experiences with Latin America, which transformed me as a person and a professional. I remember my first contacts with people like Adolfo Perez Esquivel who elaborated the framework of what later became a right-based approach in social intervention. He was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980. I had the chance to receive Dom Helder Câmara, the progressive Brazilian Archbishop of Recife who stated:

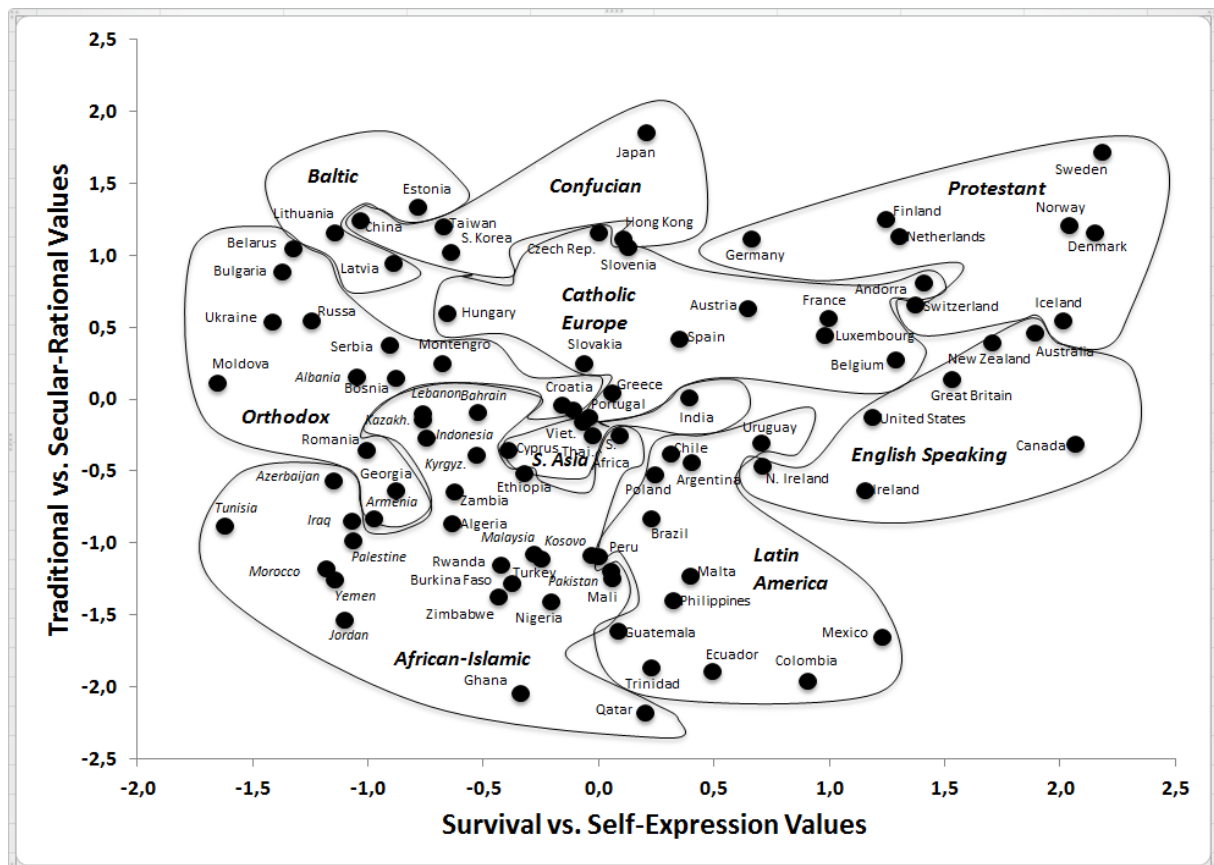
“If I give the poor bread they say I’m a hero, if I ask why they are poor, they say that I’m a communist (Câmara 2009).”

Not only that, he opened his Episcopal palace for the poor and it was no question that he was living “the preferential option for the poor”. Other persons I met and I collaborated with was Cardinal Silva Henriques in Chile, who saved tens of thousands of lives through his foundation “Vicaria de la Solidaridad”, a place for human rights and protection in the centre of Santiago de Chile in his own Casa del Obispado (Aranda2004). I had the privilege to start my first social projects supporting projects in the intersection of social work and law, with a focus on advocacy and popular education. In Argentina, few bishops of the Catholic church were engaged, but there were some outstanding individuals with character and commitment, among them Don Jaime De Nevares from the western province of Neuquén, who received thousands of Chilean migrants (San Sebastián 1997; Verbitsky 2012). . I was able to raise fund from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for his Pastoral de migrantes, that I met as a young social work professional. In 1992, I invited a young director of Pastoral Social Colombia, monsignor Fabio Henao to participate in the 500 years jubilee since Cristófer Columbus came to “America”. We organized seminars where also Nobel laurate Riguberta Menchú (cf. Menchú 1984) from Guatemala participated, a champion for human rights and justice in her country and Latin America. We had the chance to contribute to a reflection of past crimes, colonial patterns and suggestions for a way forward. Msg. Henao got inspired and started a journey of hard work, combining socio-pastoral action with peace-building and justice with a focus to transform Colombia (Bello 2003). Remembering all these past experiences, I was overwhelmed of joy to return to Colombia as a visiting professor at the Nacional University in March 2018. My task was to share my insights on the role of social work as a profession and academic discipline, as a core contributor to sustainable development, as expressed through the SDGs in Agenda 2030 (UN 2015a), linking it to transformative processes of peace and justice, mainly through a right-based approach and holistic social interventions on the individual, community and structural levels. Let’s analyze and see what happened in Colombia.

## **Sociology of religion and social work**

When preparing for my lectures at Universidad Nacional, I was reflecting upon my journey as a social worker in the international and intercultural contexts. One of my earliest findings was the importance of religion and religious institutions in the transmission of core values, especially in times of chaos, turmoil and conflict. That was not something we read about in social work text books in the 1980s and -90s in the post-secular environment of northern

Europe. As a social worker, I came early in contact with the Sociology of religion, which gave me relevant tools for analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of what Durkheim would label “social facts”. Why would the same religious institution act so different when people were oppressed, their rights violated and the whole democratic system were under threat? That was the case in Chile and Argentina during the military rules of the two countries, where the Catholic church could be both supportive of the repressive dictatorial regimes or opposed. In order to understand those processes, it wasn’t enough to relate to different theological positions of dogma and metaphysics, but to understand the underpinning factors leading to how religious authority would exercise their powers in the political and social spheres. Max Weber’s typology of Charismatic, Patriarchal and Rational-legal patterns of authority was an important contribution which enhanced the understanding of power dynamics of religious leaders. One of the most prominent Sociologist of religion, Thorleif Pettersson from Sweden, who also became my supervisor for my doctoral thesis at Uppsala university, initiated the *World Values Survey* in the 1980s, first as a series of national studies on values in the European context, later a more comprehensive global approach, with open and available datasets covering up to 100 countries. Why values and what has that to do with social work? First, we need to understand what kind of values, religious and/or secular that are being transmitted in each society. Combined, the majority norms could also play different roles leading to marginalization of minority groups and/or positions, but also a bonding factor for national and cultural identity. The famous Inglehart cultural map would measure culture through self-expression and survival vs. religious/traditional and secular values, see figure 1 below. When examining the map, Sweden could be considered an extreme when it comes to values (strong on individuality/self-expression and secular values), while Colombia would be part of the typical Latin American pattern of high levels of religious/traditional values and lower levels of self-expression compared to Protestant Europe and the Anglo-Saxon World.



**Figure 1:** Ingelhart Cultural map

When examining Colombia further, comparing to some major Latin American countries and Sweden, Colombia has a 98.5% response rate when it comes to believe in God, while Sweden only has 40.9%:

World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2014						
Believe in: God						
	TOTAL	Country Code				
		Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Sweden
Yes	84,8	91,1	98,4	90,3	98,5	40,9
No	12,6	6,5	1,4	7,3	1,4	50,3
DE,SE,TR:Inapplicable ;						
RU:Inappropriate response;						
SG: Refused; HT: Dropped						
out survey	0,1	0	0	0	0	0,6
No answer	0,7	1,2	0,1	1	0,1	1,6
Don't know	1,7	1,3	0,1	1,4	0,1	6,5
(N)	6,234	1,03	1,486	1	1,512	1,206

**Figure 2:** Believe in God

When the same question was asked to social work students in Sweden and Colombia, the result was the following:

	Colombia (n=18)	Sweden (n=36)
<i>Do you believe in God?</i>		
<i>Yes</i>	61.1%	11.1%
<i>No</i>	16.7%	63.8 %
<i>Not sure</i>	22.2%	25%

**Figure 3:** *Believe in God*, social work students Universidad Nacional de Colombia and Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College. Surveys conducted in March 2018.

These figures are very interesting as they show the different patterns of religious values in Colombia and Sweden, but also the lower levels of beliefs in God by social work students, compared to the national average of the two countries. This leads us to wonder what kind of values that are guiding social work students and professionals in these two countries and at large? A first assumption could conclude that in the case of Colombia, traditional religious values transmitted by the family are central for most of the respondents, even those who state that they don't believe or are not sure. In the case of Swedish respondents, no or limited answers refer to family, and none to religious background, rather the reverse where two respondents refer to atheist or critical-of religion backgrounds. In addition, more rational/scientific arguments against religious beliefs are raised or questions like: how can god exist with so many injustices in the world? In the Colombian survey, religion is emphasized as an important factor in society among all the respondents, which is not the case among the Swedish respondents. The question is thus how these value patterns would influence the social work profession? This was one of the central questions that I raised with the social work students when visiting Colombia and later upon my return to Sweden.

### **Social development, welfare and the arenas of social work**

I was asked to teach in the *pregrado*-levels, i.e. undergraduate students, which in the Colombian case means five years of academic studies, compared to 3-4 years in most

European countries aligned with the Bologna-system of European credits, the so called European Credit Transfer System or ECTS. For two weeks I lectured in the following courses:

- *Projects of Social Development*
- *Social Politics I*
- *Communitarian processes*
- *Family Social Work*
- *Rural Development*
- *Community Social Work*
- *Social Intervention*
- *Religion and Social Work (Group Social Work)*

I structured the lectures in the following way: First an introduction to my perspectives and background as a social worker and sociologist of religion, combined with international social work, international development cooperation and field-work in Latin America, the MENA-region (Middle East and North Africa), but also countries in Africa and Asia. Second, a short background to the Swedish social model and welfare system and what makes it special and what we can learn from what we have achieved - this I will elaborate on later in this paper. Thirdly, I would venture it to the topic of the day (see above) from a theoretical perspective, with examples from the field and linking it with methodological concerns relating to social work. In some sessions we would do some exercises and common reflection, using techniques from Open Space and other participatory methods (source). In essence, my pedagogical method is combining three dimensions of learning and what could be considered common/mutual knowledge-generation:

1. *Theory*: as social workers we need to relate to a conceptual framework which is interdisciplinary in scope and nature. Many social workers would see themselves as practitioners, close to the field with a bottom-up approach, where the meeting with the client is central as the experience-based, more than evidence-based practice. Other behavioral experts, often from biological and medicine background are thus winning ground with what they considered a solid scientific approach, which is becoming a challenge to our discipline and existing social paradigms, that are being questioned. In that regard, we need to revisit our concepts and theories that are marking our social interventions.



2. *Context*: Several of our social work text books have been translated from English and written in a context which is different from the original source. The non-English speaking world needs to adapt and contextualize social work practice in a multi-faceted way. This is also an inductive practice which will generate new knowledge from the field, where scholars and social work practitioners participate with the concerned users, clients and other concerned target groups. We also need to be critical and to examine common practices of social work in different contexts, what is considered as standard, norms and the typical ways of conducting social interventions, both when it comes to statutory social work within governmental agencies and through Civil Society Organisations. In addition, new patterns of social work are also carried out through private corporations, through New Public Management-arrangements, creating new arenas and contexts in many countries around the world.
3. *Tools(box)*. Every professional needs a tool-box, like a carpenter who never would be able to work with the right set of equipment. The same goes for the social workers of today. How do we know that we are utilizing the right kind of analytical tools to address the new (and old) kind of social problems of today? We need to sharpen our tools and adapt them for the challenges that are facing us. If not, other professional groups and disciplines will get “the problem-definition-privilege”. This is already a reality in major social welfare programs, which very often are being designed by economists, auditors, lawyers and political scientists as well as other experts. Social workers tend to be included at a later implementation stage, when budgets already have been allocated and the programs are fixed by political decisions. One important tool for social workers in advocacy in the political arena. The right-based approach in social work needs a whole new range of methods and tools and can be very powerful when applied in the “right” and relevant contexts.

During my two weeks at the Universidad Nacional of Colombia, together with the social work students and faculty at the Department we had the chance to reflect upon an array of topics. Here is a summary, followed by some thoughts and conclusion:

## Culture and Identity: “I am what I do or I am where I come from”

Who am I? This is indeed a difficult question to answer because it relates to different layers of identity, which also in the end will affect the way I view social work, social problems and social change. Again, who am I? I asked the question to the social work students in one class, who wrote their answers on yellow-stickers, anonymously, which later were placed on one of the class-room walls, where we later could read and reflect upon the answers together.

Identities relating to gender, religion, profession and family were the most common. Also existential, such as “human being”, “happy being”, or process-oriented, such as “looking for a meaning”, a “project under construction”, with “hope for the future”, “willingness to change lives” etc. A few related to being “vegetarian, animalist, socialist, feminist and lesbian.” One student showed the multi-dimensional aspects of expressing your identity:

Soy el portador de las historias de mis abuelos, soy la semilla que sembraron mis padres y el hilo tejido de mi barrio. Soy el nieto de desplazados campesinos, el hijo de un contexto heredado de una violencia “inherente”. Soy mi cuna, soy mi manta, soy mis pasos y mi pueblo. Soy artista, malabarista y con el esfero un poeta. Soy NN.

Interesting in this statement is also the belonging to a community of “the displaced” and “farmers” and also giving reference to violence that have been transmitted through generations. All this is expressed as an artist as the whole statement could be read as poetry.

Bernard Lewis is a scholar who has written on the complexities of identities in the Middle Easter and Oriental contexts. His main contribution is about multiple identities, which shouldn't only be restricted to the exotic studies of oriental cultural patterns, but as universal expressions, where identities should change, grow, diminish and be transformed by external pressure, in-group conflicts, civil strife, wars and social change at large (Lewis 2001). Lewis is raising the issue of what he labels an involuntary primary identity”, which is acquired at birth. The dimensions are central:

- “**1. Blood:** The family, the clan, the tribe and developing into the ethnic nation.
- 2. Place:** Often, but not always coinciding with the first and sometimes in conflict with it. Village or neighbourhood, district or quarter, province or city, developing into the country.
- 3. Religious Community:** Often subdivided into sects (ibid).”

The second category is compulsory and relates to citizenship, or to be member of a nation state, which is quite a modern phenomenon. Here the central issue relates to:

“Allegiance to a ruler, the obedience to the sovereign; the head of state or of a department, the governor, the administrator, or the headman of a village (ibid).”

The third voluntary expression of identity is composed by the community of common interests, for instance sport, leisure activities, often organized through civil society groups and associations:

“In modern times, under the influence of the West a new kind of identity is evolving: freely chosen cohesion and loyalty of voluntary associations: Civil Society(ibid).”

Who are you? If you come from a culture where your heritage, group-belonging, extended family and roots play a central role, often through your primary identity, you tend to ask the question: “where do you come from?” when you meet a new person. If you instead would like to emphasize other dimensions of your identity, such as your interests, activities, professional identity and so forth, you tend to ask, “what do you do?” when you meet a new acquaintance. The answers from the Colombian social work students show both ways, with a tendency to identify dimensions relating to the primary identity. The World Values Survey would label that somewhere between “self-expression and survival-values” (see above). The Swedish students would probably have answered differently, as we saw in the example of religious beliefs, where no or little reference were given to the family backgrounds.

### **Bonding and bridging trust -the intercultural approach**

In the class of “procesos comunitarios” we had the chance to reflect upon the role of community interventions with the students. I learned early the importance of community involvement, a participatory approach and the importance of how to enhance community involvement on different levels through my different projects in Latin America. When I later moved to the Middle East I realised that my acquired knowledge and experiences as a social worker didn’t serve as the context was different. I always thought that the role of civil society was the central issue to promote in the processes of social development. I still believe that this is the case. The problem is if the public sector and the State is weakened and fragmented by civil strife, war and conflicts on different levels, we also need to promote arenas for the common good. It is very easy to start to devalue everything that is relating to the State, as the trust is decreasing because of corruption and the lack of transparency. Putnam is differentiating between bonding and bridging trust. In fragmented societies with low levels of trust towards governmental agencies, the trust is established within communities through bonding trust (Putnam 2000). That is the case in several countries in the Middle East, but also in parts of southern Europe where the State is not delivering social services to the citizens and

people in the end need to find alternative solutions. In northern Europe, the trust is higher in relation to the government and the State as the welfare state is delivering social services to its citizens. As a result, the trust patterns are different and is labelled “bridging trust” by Putnam (ibid.). From a social work point of view, this will also affect the kind of social interventions that will be carried out. I realized that the focus on community development and civil society wasn’t just enough in certain contexts where there were patterns of conflict and war. Instead, a focus on intercultural and interreligious community social interventions became a priority to prevent the balkanisation or lebanisation of a State. This is the case in countries like Syria where there is no room for people from different confessional/religious groups to interact, build trust and bonds over community boundaries. I believe that that same reality exists in certain areas of Colombia, which has been ruled by militias and paramilitary groups with low levels of bridging trust and intercommunity collaboration. Through a sustainable peace-process and methods for building reconciliation, step by step, social work interventions can create new public spheres of interaction, but the key is: INTERCOMMUNITY and not community development.

## **We need more Sushi**

A couple of years ago I organised a conference on interreligious dialogue where Prince Hassan of Jordan was a key-note speaker. He is from the Royal Hashemite family related to Prophet Mohammed and as such a respected representative and authority on Islam and related matters. He started his speech asking the audience if we liked sushi? Most people raised their hands and wondered what this had to do with the subject of the conference. Then Prince Hassan raised his voice and stated: “We need more sushi in the Middle East and the world, because we are facing more conflicts and accordingly, Sunnis and Shias need to come together, i.e. SUSHI.” This was years before the war in Syria and the current conflicts between Iran (a Shiite state) and Saudi Arabia (a Sunni state). Prince Hassan saw the need to elaborate a full range of intercultural and interreligious interventions. Another way to express it: it isn’t enough with religious dialogue, We need *diapaxis*, or interaction through praxis and common action. This is also a social intervention method that has been used in different contexts around the world (Diapaxis).

## **Conclusions**

Through the experiences of my colleagues and students at the Universidad Nacional I realised the potential for social work as an academic discipline and profession to contribute to

important processes such as peace-building, reducing levels of violence, which is also described in SDG 16: “to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies (UN 2015b).” Colombia could in that regard be a model for the systematic work through hundreds, if not thousands of community social interventions throughout the country to promote the foundations of a new society. Several colleagues from the Department of Social work have years of experience of the combined efforts of peace-building and social work under times of conflict, violence, drugs and social control. This could also be a growing arena for social work students to design advocacy and right-based approach programs, in close collaboration with local, national and international stakeholders, including International Development Cooperation. I was told that only the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is funding hundreds of projects in Colombia. Maybe we can conclude that the social work of Colombia has been marked by what could be labeled the “The Social Work of Earth, Wind and Fire:”

The social work of:

- **Earth:** increasing patterns of what Putnam would call bonding trust: B. Lewis’ primary identity revisited (blood, religion and soil): In the case of Colombia: social work will promote the return of displaced people to their villages and contribute to bridging trust between communities that in the past were in conflict.
- **Wind:** In times of stormy weather, the Colombian social workers will be prepared through preventive measures on the individual, group and structural levels in order to decrease levels of violence and criminality that will affect vulnerable populations.
- **Fire:** Turmoil, tension, focus on today’s and tomorrow’s emergencies, that in the case of Colombia are both man-made and natural disasters. Social work professions will learn from past experiences and mistakes in peace-building and will also share their experiences and insights with the rest of the world.

The approach taken by several of Colombian social workers could be described as a participative methodological learning-and-action intervention inspired by anthropologists such as Robert Chambers (1994) and Paulo Freire’s “see, judge and act pedagogics (Freire 1996).” That, in combination with the local version of SuSHI through Intercultural community development, stands out as some of the important current and future ingredients of the patterns of social work in Colombia.

So, are things improving in Colombia? Around 40% of the social work students answered, in one of our sessions, that “yes, things have improved since the time of my grand-parents, but the majority thought things have deteriorated or were the same”, see figure below. Maybe one of the most important roles of social work in Colombia would also be to create the foundations for hope, a new culture of life and a better and more sustainable society.

	Colombia (n=40)
<i>Have things improved in your life compared to your grand parents?</i>	
<i>Yes, improved</i>	40%
<i>No, deteriorated</i>	32.5%
<i>The same</i>	27.5%

**Figure 4:** About social development over generations

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